Griffith REVIEW 45
A QUARTERLY OF NEW WRITING & IDEAS

THE WAY WE WORK

Ashley Hay, Gideon Haigh, Mandy Sayer, Rebecca Huntley, Peter Mares, Josephine Rowe, Paddy O'Reilly, Justin Clemens
Praise for Griffith REVIEW

‘Essential reading for each and every one of us.’ Readings

‘A varied, impressive and international cast of authors.’ The Australian

‘Griffith REVIEW is a must-read for anyone with even a passing interest in current affairs, politics, literature and journalism. The timely, engaging writing lavishly justifies the Brisbane-based publication’s reputation as Australia’s best example of its genre.’ The West Australian

‘There is a consistently high standard of writing; all of it well crafted or well argued or well informed, as befits the various genres.’ Sydney Review of Books

‘This quarterly magazine is a reminder of the breadth and talent of Australian writers. Verdict: literary treat.’ Herald Sun

‘Griffith REVIEW editor Julianne Schultz is the ultra-marathoner of Australian cultural life.’ Canberra Times

‘At a time when long form journalism is under threat and the voices in our public debate are often off-puttingly condescending, hectoring and discordant, Griffith REVIEW is the elegant alternative.’ Booktopia Buzz

‘Griffith REVIEW is a consistently good journal. There is some terrific writing on display as well as variety and depth to the issues being grappled with.’ The Age

‘Australia’s most important literary essay magazine.’ Courier-Mail

‘At once comfortable and thought-provoking, edgy and familiar, [it] will draw the reader through its pages.’ Australian Book Review

‘Griffith REVIEW is a wonderful journal. It’s pretty much setting the agenda in Australia and fighting way above its weight… You’re mad if you don’t subscribe.’ Phillip Adams

‘Once again, Griffith REVIEW has produced a stunning volume of excellent work. The pieces are diverse, the stories unique and real. But one thing remains constant – superb writing.’ Weekend Herald (NZ)
SIR SAMUEL GRIFFITH was one of Australia’s great early achievers. Twice the premier of Queensland, that state’s chief justice and the author of its criminal code, he was best known for his pivotal role in drafting agreements that led to Federation, and as the new nation’s first chief justice. He was also an important reformer and legislator, a practical and cautious man of words.

Griffith died in 1920 and is now best remembered in his namesakes: an electorate, a society, a suburb and a university. Ninety-six years after he first proposed establishing a university in Brisbane, Griffith University, the city’s second, was created. His commitment to public debate and ideas, his delight in words and art, and his attachment to active citizenship are recognised by the publication that bears his name.

Like Sir Samuel Griffith, Griffith REVIEW is iconoclastic and non-partisan, with a sceptical eye and a pragmatically reforming heart and a commitment to public discussion. Personal, political and unpredictable, it is Australia’s best conversation.
Griffith REVIEW 45
The Way We Work
Edited by Julianne Schultz
GriffithREVIEW 45

INTRODUCTION
7 More than a job
JULIANNE SCHULTZ: Working for life

ESSAY
10 Adaptation
ASHLEY HAY: A work in progress
34 Arbeit macht frei
GIDEON HAIGH: The end of the assembly line
39 The illusionist’s trick
VIRGINIA LLOYD: Skype in the workplace
44 The choices we make
DAVID PEETZ: A ‘sliding doors’ moment
76 Working late
DARRYL DYMÖCK: Creating encore careers
84 Flying high
MANDY SAYER: The rise and guise of self-funded retirees
117 Working for (bare) life
GERHARD HOFFSTAEDTER: Refugees in the concrete jungle
135 Gods and housework
HAYLEY KATZEN: Do it yourself
146 Not missing in action
LIZ TEMPLE: The enduring penalty of ‘being female’
178 Two men and a picture palace
DMETRI KAKMI: An ode to friendship
186 Beyond the stethoscope
LUCY MAYES: Restoring hope, heart and healing in medicine
204 Applying life’s lessons
JULIE JAMES BAILEY: Challenging a sacred cow

MEMOIR
125 Downstairs in Ethiopia
ANDREW BELK: Famine through the camera lens
170 Cross cultural keys to meaning
GILLIAN BOURAS: Perspiration versus inspiration
228 My life with Bob Dylan
CRAIG MCGREGOR: In five stanzas
241 The clear days
JOSEPHINE ROWE: This writing life

REPORTAGE
59 Bending over backwards
REBECCA HUNTLEY: The janus face of flexibility
103 Refuge without work
PETER MARES: ‘This is a poison, a poison for the life of a person’
159 Disrupting Silicon Beach
KRISTI MANSFIELD: Women entrepreneurs thriving on disruption
FICTION
69 The city circle
    PADDY O’REILLY
94 Blue people
    ADAM NARNST
165 Fit in or f**k off
    ELIZABETH WOODS
198 Ticket-holder number 5
    MELANIE CHENG
216 The teacher
    GREGORY DAY

POEM
134 Aesthetic suicide
    JUSTIN CLEMENS
238 The persistence of February 1st 2012
    JOHN WATSON

PICTURE GALLERY
129 Indifference
    SHAHNA HUDSON

GRIFFITHREVIEW.COM
More great stories are available in When We Were Kings
AS A FREE EBOOK DOWNLOAD AT WWW.GRIFFITHREVIEW.COM

COVER IMAGE:
Text Publishing

Griffith REVIEW gratefully acknowledges the support and generosity of our founding patron, the late Margaret Mittelheuser AM and the ongoing support of Dr Cathryn Mittelheuser AM.
AUSTRALIA WAS ONCE known as the land of the long weekend. It was a snappy catchphrase that, like all the best clichés, embodied enough truth and ambiguity to endure and inspire a book, a film, countless newspaper headings and a few European websites imagining the land down under as a new utopia.

It was, however, not an affirmation, nor praise for a place where the work and life were balanced and certainly not an aspiration. It was not even an ironic dig, like Donald Horne’s conjuring of a lucky country. It was critical of a people and place where things were taken too easily in their stride, where work was constrained by regulation and limited aspiration. A place where when people knocked off work they went home or to the beach or to football or the pub and got on with their lives. In 1978 when Ronald Conway’s book was written, you couldn’t even go shopping when you finished work, because with the exception of one night of late night shopping a week, the doors closed at five on weekdays and noon on Saturday.

What an odd notion, like the chimera of an old dream that can be dimly recalled, a trick of the imagination, was there really such a place...

Across a couple of generations, and in the living memory of anyone over forty-five, the nature, place, regulation and experience of work has profoundly changed.
Australians are now near the top of the list of working hours for those in developed countries; a substantial and growing proportion of people work part-time – not all by choice; unpaid internships are the normal entry path for young people; women are no longer forced to resign when they marry or become pregnant, but the wage gap remains; manufacturing and agricultural jobs have given way to working in services, and now those jobs that don’t actually demand hands on contact are also moving offshore.

When Conway wrote his book, well over half the workforce was in a union, now it is less than a fifth, increasingly low paid women; the expectation that you could start working with one organisation and after moving through a number of different occupations still be there forty or fifty years later was not without foundation; the demarcation between white and blue collar jobs, between those who earned salaries and those on wages, was clear and embedded.

Now the proletariat is giving way to what has been called the precariat, a new class who lack the stability and certainty of regular work or predictable social welfare. Guy Standing has done a Ronald Conway and used this for the title of his new book, and an accompanying volume, A Precariat Manifesto (Bloomsbury, 2014).

TECHNOLOGY AND GLOBALISATION are contributing factors to the profound changes to the way people are working here and elsewhere. The opportunities in the always-on always-connected world are exciting, the ability to move ideas, goods and people around the globe with unprecedented ease transformative, but there are costs.

We are now living through a period of change as great as any in human history – like the move from agriculture to industry, from manufacturing to services, it will play out in ways we can only guess at.

The great transformation of the Australian economy that has unfolded since the 1980s, as a result of deregulation, the agreements between unions, employers and government, the targeted delivery of social benefits, has produced a rich and stable society.

The next stage of this development will be somewhat less predictable, the economic modelling has not reached a consensus, as the response to the Federal Budget and Commission of Audit showed.
After an unprecedented period of growth, of rising incomes and standards of living, of unemployment at historic lows, it is easy to forget that this is the exception not the norm. Most transitions are lumpy, the future is rarely reached by travelling down a well-lit path. Those over forty-five remember what it was like to live in a country which had periodic spikes of unemployment, even billionaire MP Clive Palmer recalled being unemployed for six months after university. There was a period of high unemployment in the mid to late 1970s, in the early 1980s it reached higher highs, then again in the late 1980s and during the recession we had to have in the early 1990s. There was a sense that unemployment, insecurity, closing and collapsing businesses, were normal and the periods of growth and good times were the exception.

THE NEW NORMAL might be more like the old normal, but with a bigger dollop of inequality. Inequality is the new buzzword, between countries and between people. French economist Thomas Picketty has galvanised international discussion about this, and how the way we work and are paid for that work can foster inequality. His book *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* has broken all records for a recent publication by Harvard University Press, topping the Amazon bestselling chart for several weeks. The former academic and now Labor MP for Canberra, Andrew Leigh used a different frame but reached similar conclusions about the rising levels of inequality in his book *Battlers and Billionaires* (Black Inc, 2013), and George Packer’s masterful book *The Unwinding* (Farrar Strauss Giroux, 2013) documented with heartbreaking detail what it feels like to live without a reliable, reasonably paid job, and the consequences for families and cities.

Australia is not America, where millions struggle to make ends meet with inadequate jobs and social support, or one of those European countries where unemployment rates have reached well into double digits and remained there for years, or one of the many countries where work itself may be life threatening. But even here work is changing. It is less secure and less predictable, forcing us to adapt. One thing remains constant, work is essential to economic wellbeing and meaning, so getting it right is important.

23 May 2014
EVERY YEAR, IN first semester, my husband teaches a tertiary course called ‘Biological Adaptation to Climate Change’ to third-year science students in Brisbane. Enrolments have roughly tripled in the time he’s been offering the program, and the students learn about things like the components of climate systems, historical climate change, and the evolutionary consequences of climate change. As part of their assessment, they create a website for the general public about one particular species’ known adaptation to a changing climate. They can choose from organisms including the wombat and Antarctic sphagnum moss – although the polar bear, the arctic fox and the wolverine are the most popular by far.

On the whole, they do a nice job with this assignment – their websites are quite elegant and their texts talk easily about redistribution and altered feeding patterns. They mention new inter-species breeding in the case of the polar bears. They flag changes in a species’ vulnerability or endangered status. They tend to choose strong and engaging images – photographs of their particular organism looking proud, looking resilient and hardy (well, not so much the moss).

It was only after reading through many of these creatures’ stories that something simultaneously obvious and yet revelatory occurred to me: none of these organisms has any choice in the matter of their adaptation. They ‘adapt’
to a changing climate because they have to move further afield to seek their food, or to stay in the temperature zone that particularly suits their being. The body size of some animals has increased; the body size of others has decreased. The times in spring when some plants unfold their leaves or when their flowers bloom; the various phenologies of everything from herbaceous plants to insects and amphibians: these things are already changing. As three biologists from Imperial College, London, wrote in a paper called ‘Adaptation, Plasticity and Extinction in a Changing Climate’: ‘For ectotherms, such as insects and reptiles, thermal adaptation may occur not only through physiological traits governing energy metabolism, but also through behavioural and morphological traits involved in movement between shaded and sunny patches. For many bird species, adaptation to global warming involves adjusting their breeding date so that reproduction coincides with a peak in prey density.’

In *The Sixth Extinction* (Bloomsbury, 2014), Elizabeth Kolbert’s recent book on the mass extinction event currently underway on our planet – and its anthropogenic origins – she describes a long-running investigation of climate change and the distribution of trees in Peru. Across seventeen single-hectare plots – each with a distinct altitude, which gives it a distinct average annual temperature – Miles Silman, a forest ecologist, has been plotting trees’ responses to a changing climate over more than a decade. As the average annual temperature alters, the trees begin to ‘move’, their seeds finding potentially fertile ground further and further from their original habitat.

‘At the very least,’ writes Kolbert, ‘Silman’s work suggests [that] global warming will restructure ecological communities. Different groups of trees will respond differently to warming, and so contemporary associations will break down. New ones will form. In this planet-wide restructuring, some species will thrive. Many plants may in fact benefit from high carbon dioxide levels, since it will be easier for them to obtain the carbon dioxide they need for photosynthesis. Others will fall behind and eventually drop out.’

Kolbert’s account of her visit to this part of the world is lively and engaging, and the rich detail she gives of both Silman’s research and his trees reads like some surreal South American evocation of Shakespeare’s Birnam Wood, literally on the march to Dunsinane. Species by species (and in this biodiversity hot-spot, there are in excess of a thousand different species of tree, some
from genera only just identified by Silman and his students), the trees are migrating. They are adapting. On average, they’re moving two and a half metres each year – on average. Some are hardly shifting at all, but others (the speedsters) are sprinting away by as much as thirty metres.

All of which is imperative, unwitting, unconscious – in the sense of being without consciousness (as trees tend to be) – rather than anything considered.

We are the only species that can monitor the impacts of climate change – on species other than ourselves, let alone ourselves. We are the only species that can quantify and name these things, and climate change itself. We seem to be an effective species in terms of driving it.

We are also the only species that can tell ourselves it isn’t happening.

Recently, this has been troubling me more and more. It’s probably to do with having a five-year-old son, and wondering about his future. It’s probably to do with the government Australia chose last year and its stance on this issue. It’s probably to do with the extreme mood that my rational and scientific husband plunges into every time he reads a new report on this area – from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the World Bank, CSIRO, and so on.

What fascinates me, though, is our human capacity for resilience, for innovation – for adaptation, plain and simple. In my world of words, and my husband’s world of science, a capacity for adaptation, for lateral thinking, for ‘nimbleness’, as we call it, has become more and more imperative. We’re geared to consider new places to be in and new things to do, because we both inhabit working worlds with less and less security and dwindling opportunities for tenure.

We exist in professional landscapes that didn’t exist fifteen years ago, that are still being altered and transformed today, and that are probably all but incomprehensible to our parents’ generation. And to that, we’ve had to adapt.

We work to generate income, but we work for other reasons as well – we have work we relish, work we’re passionate about, work we feel privileged to be able to do. And if the ways we work are incomparably different to the ways our parents worked, this is not a change of our making but a response to a whole swathe of economic and structural changes, as well as our pursuit of our own interests and creativity. In part, it’s the next step in the long march of human occupations from hunter-gathering, through the first farms to the
agricultural revolution and the industrial one and on to this crazily urbanised world that provides the landscape for most of our jobs now. It’s a form of adaptation.

So can we extrapolate this capacity to adapt into other parts of our lives and remind ourselves of how good we are at doing it? What happens if we start to appreciate this skill that we all have, a skill that could surely be deployed against some of the facets of our fragile and fracturing world?

THE ADHERENTS OF denial have always intrigued me. Being married to a biological scientist, I have watched him move – across roughly fifteen years – from a position of relative scientific scepticism to one of deepening gloom. Every February, as his students prepare for the course to begin, he prepares by skimming through the past twelve months’ primary literature in the area, an activity that plunges him into a depression that lasts several weeks. Every February, we have the same conversations about how we thought the world would have come a little further in the passage of the previous year. Every February, we have the same conversations about potential collapse, potential conflict, and the things that humans will do to other humans when they’re ‘up against the wall’, as he puts it. Every February, we wonder what the world itself might be like when our son is our age – right at mid-century, in 2050.

When we started going out, when we started talking about how the world worked and what its future might hold, when we started paying attention to the growing scientific consensus about the anthropogenic causes of a changing climate and the potentially cataclysmic extent of its outcomes – and became part of that consensus ourselves – I had a simple explanation for his frustration with the way the media reported on this story, as if it was split between those for and those against, and as if both sides were equal. ‘Journalism is supposed to represent both sides of a story,’ I said. ‘And science will rarely say there is absolute certainty of anything as a cause or an effect. That sounds like uncertainty to most people. It sounds like there’s an alternative view that needs to be put.’

I held firm (naively, optimistically) that as more and more of the natural world’s systems began to teeter and change – and sometimes fail – the media would present these stories, and everybody would come on board. Changes
would be made. Ways of living would be altered. Old carbon-emitting technologies would go offline; lovely new green and sustainable technologies would come online. A cartoon by Joel Pett published in *USA Today* in December 2009 offset a whiteboard listing everything from energy independence and livable cities to green jobs, renewables and healthy children with someone asking, ‘What if it’s a big hoax and we create a better world for nothing?’ It seemed a complete no-brainer: the process would be managed, rationalism would prevail, and a new and sustainable future would come into being.

And here we are.

‘The trouble with you,’ as my husband says darkly, ‘is you’re too reasonable.’

But that’s only part of the problem. The trouble with me – and the trouble with him – is it’s our job to imagine things. It’s our job to make new things, and tell stories with and about them – sentences in my case; new hypotheses and technologies in his. We’re geared to close our eyes and see something other than what’s in front of us and we’re geared to try to find the way of realising that thing. It’s part of what we each like about what the other does: it’s nifty to have a job that lets you make something novel. We’re geared to deal quite intimately with the unknown. And I wonder if this is another reason it seems so mind-boggling to us that people baulk at considering a future that’s being quite clearly delineated – a world of more extremes, higher sea levels, less biodiversity, depleted oceans, and entirely altered security scenarios, food and otherwise.

In my supermarket recently there’s been a shortage of eggs – never none, but sometimes few. ‘Unforeseen problems in the industry,’ according to a small sign (due to avian flu at a couple of farms). It’s not hard to imagine food security in terms of those signs, scarcity, appearing on more and more shelves. It’s not hard to imagine not quite so much first-world abundance. By 2050, Australia is expected to be a net importer of wheat – our yield will increase in the next decade or so, but its nutritional value will fall, thanks to rising carbon dioxide levels. According to a recent essay by Troy Sternberg published as part of *The Arab Spring and Climate Change* (Centre for Climate and Security, 2013), you could trace a fascinating line between drought in China and the resulting global wheat shortages right around the world to
protest events in Egypt in the winter of 2010–2011 – not in terms of direct cause and effect, but by acknowledging that ‘the consequences of climate change are stressors that can ignite a volatile mix of underlying causes,’ as the introduction to this volume said. By May 2014, one of America’s leading government-funded military research organisations was linking escalating conflict in both Africa and the Middle East to food and water shortages, while projecting further major disruption as a result of rising sea levels and catastrophic weather events. ‘We are actively integrating climate considerations across the full spectrum of our activities to ensure a ready and resilient force,’ said one Pentagon spokesperson.

Close your eyes: it’s not that hard to imagine.

But humans have a funny relationship with the unknown. Some of us love it – particularly when it’s to do with religion. Some of us love it when it’s to do with sailing over a horizon with no idea what’s on the other side. (‘It’s only fully modern humans who start this thing of venturing out on the ocean where you don’t see land,’ the Swedish evolutionary geneticist Svante Pääbo told Elizabeth Kolbert. ‘Part of this is technology…but there is also, I like to think or say, some madness there.’)

Our migration from rural to urban settings; our mega-cities powered by fossil fuels; the divide in humanity between people who have grown healthier – and larger – in the richest societies while those with limited resources struggle to survive: all this feeds into our planet’s current state. (By the middle of this century, the number of people living in urban settings will have almost doubled from its 2009 tally of 3.4 billion to 6.46 billion – and it was only in 2005 that 6.46 billion people was the population of the entire world.) As Richard Donkin writes in his The History of Work (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), even the arrival of computers and the internet ‘is creating a watershed in the way we work as fundamental as that of the industrial revolution and the agrarian revolution 10,000 years ago’. But if the very nature of work has changed so dramatically, with both positive and negative consequences, the ability to respond to these changes has not been evenly distributed. As in every great transition there are winners – those who can better adapt, perhaps – and losers.

It was the physicist, Thomas Kuhn, who coined a phrase to describe our transition from an old set of approaches or underlying assumptions to a new
one: he called it a ‘paradigm shift’. As one Observer journalist described it in marking the fiftieth anniversary of Kuhn’s work, this changed our perception of the movement of science from a ‘steady cumulative “progress” to discontinuities – a set of alternating “normal” and “revolutionary” phases in which communities of specialists in particular fields are plunged into periods of turmoil, uncertainty and angst.’

This makes fascinating reading against surveys on the different public perceptions of climate change and its science. In thinking about the ways our imaginations might begin to accommodate – or adapt to – such a nebulous and vast set of circumstance and information on the science of what’s changing, I found several that suggest that people make decisions based on almost anything other than science itself.

Two 2012 letters to the journal, Nature Climate Change, investigated the mechanics of people’s opinions and perceptions. The first underlined a conflict ‘between different segments of the public whose members are motivated to fit their interpretations of scientific evidence to their competing cultural philosophies’, as opposed to the more usually presumed conflict between scientists and the public. This suggested that simply telling better stories about the science of what’s happening isn’t going to have much impact on these people’s interpretations of what’s going on. The second sought to unpack peoples’ perceptions of how ‘common’ their own view on climate change actually was – whatever it may be. Intriguingly, people felt that their ‘own’ opinion was more common than other people would estimate it to be – while also ‘generally and grossly’ over-estimating doubt among the community at large that climate change was occurring at all. Most importantly, perhaps, this work supported other findings ‘that those with sceptical views towards climate change have less attitudinal certainty about their position…although privately most people think the climate is changing, people of “all” opinions overestimated the prevalence of those rejecting climate change.’ In the parlance of this research, this suggests that ‘pluralistic ignorance’ is in play – which means it’s a situation ‘in which most group members privately reject an opinion but assume incorrectly that most others accept it’.

‘Media research suggests that the journalistic tradition of giving equal weight to both sides of a story and the influence of big-industry opinion,
have led the community to overestimate the number of people who doubt climate change is occurring,’ this letter concluded, ‘and have undermined the scientific consensus surrounding climate change.’

IN 1989, WHEN I began a journalism degree at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst, the University of Queensland (UQ) had just created the country’s first chair in the discipline. Australian journalists had been advocating for their field to be elevated to ‘the status of a profession, with professional ethics and income levels’ since 1917, and they had seen the creation of university courses as a means to this end. It took until 1935 for the first Diploma in Journalism to come into being, with subjects including the history and law of journalism, reporting, proof-reading and paragraph writing – although a Diploma for Journalism had been offered by UQ throughout the 1920s.

In 1989, there were two courses on offer in New South Wales – the one at CSU (which had only been a ‘U’ for about ten minutes, thanks to John Dawkins’ rearrangement of Australia’s forty-six colleges of advanced education into seventeen spanking new universities), and one at the University of Technology, Sydney (itself only a slightly earlier arrival as a fully fledged university). About thirty of us committed to the world of print media in our classrooms in Bathurst; the number at UTS was slightly more. This combined cohort would have delivered a few dozen graduates ripe and raring to enter Australia’s media workforce three years later, at the beginning of 1992.

I was one of the fortunate ones. Before I’d finished my degree I’d secured a cadetship with The Independent Monthly, a gorgeously-designed tabloid-format creature with long-form words inside it, Max Suich at the helm, and John Birmingham (the recent recipient of its Young Writer Award) sleeping on the office floor and pillaging its biscuits. One of the things the magazine prided itself on was its rates which, in 1992, constituted a generous dollar per word.

At a reunion of my graduating class some twenty years later, I discovered that some of my fellow print-media graduates had never worked in the print media – they’d peeled immediately into corporate communications or PR or other professional spaces altogether. As for the very few of us who still were trying to work in this diminishing field, we were now mainly freelance – and extremely lucky to be paid one dollar per word, if we ever were. We talked
about conversations with editors who apologised for the fact that their word rates had to drop – to eighty cents, sixty-five cents, fifty cents per word. We talked about conversations with editors suggesting we might like to write something for free. ‘After all, it’s such splendid exposure.’

We couldn’t think of many professions where rates of pay had gone down – although the Seek Salary Survey across 2012–2013 would later note a 6 per cent decline in salaries across mining, resources and energy, even though mining jobs could ‘still command the highest pay packet’. ‘Only jobs in science and construction had a bigger fall, averaging a decline of 8 per cent each,’ The Australian reported.

But beyond our morphing invoices, the twenty-first century had rapidly remade the world of words in its own cyber-linked, split-second image with journalists also called upon to film their own footage and sub their own copy, to tweet and text their way towards the promised new audiences of social media in a way that made the old twenty-four-hour news cycle seem glacial and arcane – eyes peeled for a column to pitch, a course to teach, a next new way to spin income out of words.

At precisely which time, a personable eighteen-year-old I know was in the first weeks of his journalism course at UQ. In 2012, he was one of three hundred and sixty* first-year students – in one of fourteen institutions offering an undergraduate journalism program.

‘Three hundred and sixty first-years?’ I remember saying to him. ‘You mean across all the arts’ enrolments at UQ?’

‘No, that’s just in journalism,’ he said. ‘We’re learning how to blog.’

His first year of journalistic training, and that twentieth anniversary of my graduation, was the year Australia’s two flagship print concerns, Fairfax and News Limited, announced almost three thousand redundancies. Between them, according to the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, they’d axed one in seven jobs. Most of the people I knew took hefty payouts and moved quite quickly into alternative employment: some at universities; some with corporations; some contracted to write books; some decided it was time to retire; some joined us in the burgeoning pool of freelancers.

In the past ten years or so, whole new professions have sprung up, partly to help people adapt to changes such as these. There are recruitment
consultants, career counselors, change management experts, organisational psychologists and life coaches. There are websites and books and seminars and online courses. Johns Hopkins University has its own two hundred-page ‘job transition guide’ to help its employees (or ex-employees) move from one job to another one (one section asks anyone transitioning to evaluate what they’re eating, how they’re sleeping, and whether or not they surround themselves with ‘positive, encouraging people’). Sometimes their language sounds like the language of a luxuriously-funded investment portfolio: diversify, rebrand, balance your risks and returns, and ‘take stock of your intrinsic assets.’

On bleak days, when the silence in my hotly fought-for room-of-one’s-own is a little too loud and the words that should be pouring forth from somewhere are a little too elusive, I torture myself with how limited a skill set I have. I talk to people about what they do. I make sentences. I make stories. If it’s a day for fiction, I make things up. What else might I possibly do?

Of course work – and who does what where – is always in flux. Celebrating fifty years of its Labour Force Survey in 2011, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reached back to long-gone 1960s workplaces, with their tea ladies and on-the-job smoking, their paucity of part-time or childcare options. Until 1966, women had to leave their commonwealth public service jobs when they got married. ‘In August 1966, nearly half of all employed people in Australia worked in production industries. Fast forward forty-five years and that proportion has halved.’ The most common occupations in 1966 included tradesmen, farmers and fishermen. The most common occupation a half-century later was designated ‘professionals’ – and they accounted for just over a fifth of all workers. As for the graph showing relative blue-collar to white-collar jobs, it suggested a felled X, with a ‘blue’ line diving down towards the horizontal axis while a ‘white’ one soared to the sky.

If the worst comes to the worst, I tell myself as I walk away from whichever unwritten piece has been taunting me and put the kettle on, I could always go and work on the trains. After all, it’s in my blood.

I’VE ALWAYS BEEN intrigued by the progression and occasional heritability of professions: my mother-in-law can precisely delineate the social progress of her father’s family in northern England from an illiterate
plate-layer in Northumberland who could only sign his name with an ‘X’, to a mechanical engineer two generations later who worked out of Ladbroke Grove, made a pile of money doing things for Lord Beaverbrook in WWI and designed one of Britain’s earliest cars, the eponymous ‘Storey’. In the next generation, her own father was a salesman with ‘an endless curiosity for science’. Returning from Changi after the war, his old employer, Pye, was obliged to rehire him – but sending him out to sell things seemed no longer so suitable, nor appealing. Pye had just bought a scientific instrument company, and they gave him the running of it. Off he went and so vastly improved the design of an infrared spectrophotometer that he was presented with a stunning sterling silver replica of the device when he retired and he was awarded an OBE. (These days, the silver sits in our garage, still bearing a little of its Brisbane flood-mud from 2011 – but it’s still a nice sort of artefact to have.) Even better, that same spectrophotometer designer was not only a scientific enthusiast, but also an amateur entomologist. And coincidence or not, it’s arthropods my scientific husband works with – mosquitoes, mainly, at a molecular or genetic level. This doesn’t make for as pretty a collection as the moths his maternal grandfather arranged in specimen drawers – ‘I play with colourless solutions’ is how he undersells his trade – but I like the nods between the two men’s enterprises.

Unless I do pack it in and go and work on the railways, there are fewer obvious correlations between the professions of my forbears and the work I try to do. My paternal grandparents had relatively static working lives – as a railwayman and a railway librarian – but my maternal grandparents were much more about adaptability. They ran a fast-food shop and they took in boarders. My grandfather, who I always imagined as having left Wales to evade this fate, found himself down the mines on the south coast of New South Wales instead. His lungs dusted, he was declared unfit for service in WWII and travelled all over NSW and Queensland in search of alternative work in the following years. My grandmother took on the post round and my grandmother took on secretarial work in solicitors’ offices and doctors’ surgeries and the secretaryship of the Board of Managers of the local Presbyterian church.

My grandmother could probably have taken on the world – in fact, her mother was famous in the family for chaining herself to fences as an early
suffragette and brandishing her umbrella as she remonstrated with a young Winston Churchill. A feisty heritage indeed.

But my grandmother was a wonderful letter-writer, I’m told, and the longer I hold to this friable profession of mine, the more often that heritage is invoked to explain its genesis. I do remember her old-fashioned handwriting covering pages of onion-skin airmail paper; I do remember the very thin board of laminated three-ply that she leaned on as she wrote. I suppose, these days, she’d blog.

What I remember more are the worlds she let me invent – in the house she shared with my grandfather, and in their garden and along the beach at Thirroul. When my parents travelled overseas in 1975, I stayed with my grandparents: they were renovating the western side of their house to bring their toilet inside at the time. As I remember it, all construction and plans for plumbing ceased and I was given the room that would ultimately house the loo to remake and remodel over and over – an over-sized cubby for my six weeks’ stay.

My parents were imaginative creatures too: I could tell you that my mum was an artist, and the fact that she was creative and imaginative would make narrative sense of where I ended up. And my dad was a mechanical engineer, who made up as many worlds and stories for me to play in as my mother. But my favorite story about my father at work was when he was driving from a job in Tennant Creek back to Alice Springs in 1986, when Halley’s Comet was nearby. He stopped the car in the middle of that long, straight road in the middle of the night and got out, looking for the flare of the comet’s tail. I can still remember the way he described the size of the sky, of the stars, of the whole universe – the size of it, the darkness, and the silence – laid out for no one but him. Overwhelmed, he got back in the car and drove on.

He was keen for me to become an engineer for a while, but I think I’d have more likely wanted to be an astronaut on the basis of that story, or perhaps at least an astronomer. Except that, like many people emerging from a basic NSW public high-school education, I suspect, I had no idea what science really was, or how it worked, or that I would have found it fascinating. I pegged myself on the humanities side of the fence, and went off to the low-ranking profession of a journalist – regularly rated right down there with used car
salesmen and real estate agents. My father muttered, underwhelmed, about ‘second-rate professions’. But it occurred to no one that it might be a dying one.

As the Labour Force Survey makes explicit, there’s always been an ebb and flow to lines of work; they’ve always undergone change through advances in new technology, changes in society, changes in supply and demand and that fabled beast, the market. The advent of cheap and reliable alarm clocks must have finished off the callboys and knockers-up (those lads with fists and sticks who used to rouse sleepers – like train guards – to start their shifts on time). And the introduction of septic tanks and municipal sewage systems (and inside toilets) got rid of an historical line of toshers, gongfermors, and nightpan-men in one fell and sanitary swoop.

When I thought about those jobs disappearing, I used to wonder if there was a group in charge of dreaming up new jobs for these displaced employees? And I imagined a kind of Employment HQ – a plexiglass dome, like the place where the world’s somnolence is tallied in Dr Seuss’s Sleep Book. I imagined a system of windows that showed different occupations starting and stopping in different places, and a bunch of people busily brainstorming Potential Occupations for the workers whose particular forms of employment were grinding to a halt. Perhaps this was where the idea of chartered accountants had been born, I thought – as opposed to those I imagined as ‘uncharted’, like vast and mysterious oceans. Perhaps this was where the spark for those suddenly rapacious human resources departments had come from, or all the jobs and industries associated with that similarly rapacious inter-web thing that arrived in the nineties and changed everything for everyone. Perhaps this was the true genesis of Australia’s 1971 decision to legislate the new profession of dental hygienists into being. And perhaps this was where the current hunger for ‘change management specialists’ began, whose irresistible-sounding jobs required them to ‘transition individuals, teams and organisations to a desired future state’.

Could we all do with one of those?

‘You know they make $125 an hour?’ a friend whispered to me on the phone the other day. ‘I’ve done this sort of thing in every job I’ve ever held, but without the piece of paper, the qualification, I can’t even apply for this stuff…’
A ‘desired future state’: that would be one in which there was enough food and water for everyone in the world. That would be one in which the global ecosystems weren’t in a state of collapse. That would be the one where we managed to cap the amount of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere at 450ppm – never mind the pipedream of winding it back to 350ppm that NASA climate scientist James Hansen says is as high as we should go. (We passed 350ppm in 1987 – just four years after the phrase ‘climate change’ had come into use. We passed 400ppm in May 2013. The chair of the International Risk Governance Council has predicted we’ll reach 700ppm by the end of this century.) That would maybe even be the one in which writers, and scientists, could realise their fantasies of funding and/or employment.

Anyone who knows a scientist knows about their ongoing quests for funding, grants and any other reliable source of ‘soft money’ – the pot of money available for funding has increased, but the success rate for grant applications has fallen, and roughly half of all researchers report themselves as not confident they can secure research grants.

But as well as this, researchers are particularly beset by what the ACTU refers to rather gently as ‘insecure jobs’: according to recent statistics from the National Tertiary Education Union, more than four-fifths of research-only academics are employed on limited-term contracts, and nearly a third of all Australian university staff are in a similar situation. Between 1990 and 2005, the number of casuals among university academic staff more than doubled to almost a quarter – the majority of whom ‘seem to resent their position as a disposable section of the workforce’.

A 2011 report on *The Australian Academic Profession in Transition* spells it out in terms of people’s lives: ‘...the prevalence of casual and short-term contracts has, to some extent, undermined the sustainability of the profession. Job insecurity limits people’s capacity to manage their personal finances, make important life plans and to engage properly with their professions.’

The European University Institute puts it rather blandly: ‘Australian universities do not offer tenure track positions any longer,’ creating what some researchers have termed ‘the *post-doctoral treadmill*, a long series of short term contracts that do not guarantee professional advancement or lead to substantive appointments’.
This creates an inversion of what any industry might hold as a reasonable career progression. If you’re employed on a three-, four- or five-year contract, then every few years you essentially reapply for your own job. And while you do that with three, four or five years more experience, you also do it being three, four or five years more expensive. You might also, possibly, be busier with the extra stuff your external life has brought along in the meantime — like partners or children; things that might slow your productivity a smidgen, make you leave work at 6 pm, instead of eight or nine, make you not want to work each weekend. At which point, another academic interested in the job — the younger, hungrier one with a less busy life, a cheaper price tag and a more up-to-the-minute knowledge of the latest cutting-edge approaches — might look highly attractive to your institution. This, for many middle-career researchers, is a real, niggling fear.

But short-term contracts also pose problems for younger researchers: if the increase in such positions continues, suggested one 2009 paper on the subject, ‘it is likely that many young researchers will be discouraged from following an academic career’ — an issue it cited as especially critical in relation to science.

Australia graduates seven thousand PhD students each year, and only one in eight of these actually secures a research job at the end of the process. One line of argument says this means too many PhDs are being graduated; another says that a doctorate also confers skills in project management, analysis and communication that can open up other areas of employment. At last year’s annual Hawke Lecture at the University of South Australia, the Australian Nobel Laureate Elizabeth Blackburn put it into this perspective: when you’ve completed your PhD, she said, ‘you’ve learned resilience and how to deal with failure, because that’s what happens with cutting-edge research. You have to motivate yourself, because your path is not structured. And management consultants love people like this, because they’re so well able to deal with certain things.’

So they’re business skills, life skills, in a sense, as much as the ‘trade ticket’ my husband refers to — which is surely a positive and versatile way of looking at so many graduates. It also sounds like they might have just the toolkit to become those change managers the rest of us so desperately need — and earn more than any research scientist, or writer, would ever dream of earning.
And for all that I’d like my ‘desired future state’ to embrace and celebrate that magical notion of tenure and security. I’d also like it to be one in which climate science was not treated like some optional, kooky belief system but was rather recognised as the best means we have of unraveling and quantifying our world, its present, and its future – and the fine and dedicated work of a whole bunch of scientists who really do know what they’re doing. How very strange that a group of people who ‘understand the science’, as Australian Conservation Foundation President Ian Lowe put it recently, should be labeled ‘as warmists, as if we were members of an obscure religious sect.’ In a recent speech, Australia’s chief scientist, Ian Chubb, commented on people who felt they don’t need to ‘kowtow to experts’ on the subject of climate change. (The ‘people’ in question were some journalists.) ‘I would be pretty sure that when their car breaks down none of them would take it to the fishmonger to get it fixed,’ Chubb said, ‘or even to get an opinion.’

It’s one thing for people to struggle to understand the information presented to them by the language and methodologies of science, let alone accepting or reacting to it. But how much harder to be the people who are undertaking this work, dealing day by day with this deluge of data and analysis – even without the suspicions and antagonisms that tracts of the world’s population seem to bear towards them. Elizabeth Kolbert tells the story of a researcher whose work led to the identification of the causes of the hole in the ozone layer, back in the 1980s. How’s it going, his wife asked him one evening. To which he replied: ‘The work’s going well, but it looks like it might be the end of the world.’

THE CONCEPT OF humans’ innate adaptability – particularly in the first-world context of the myriad demands and requirements of modern life – came to me a few years ago as I considered a half-built piece of IKEA furniture, a fairly incomprehensible sheet of instructions, an allen key, and a sense of mounting frustration. How had it come to pass, I wondered, that this was a world where people were required not only to finance the purchase of their furniture (reasonably enough), but also to be able to transport and construct it as well? Would a professional in their thirties (this was some time ago) three decades before have been expected to do such a thing – or would they have popped into Walton’s in Wollongong, indicated the item of their choice,
and watched a competent and helpful salesperson organise for its purchase, delivery and installation? Was the expectation of all this DIY – albeit with a borrowed car and a deceptively flimsy metallic right angle (a ‘hex’ key as some call it, aptly) – some great triumph for feminism and self-sufficiency? Or was it, rather, some indication that a great number of those sales and delivery and installation people had been outsourced, at best, or retired, at worst, and that we were all now expected to fend for ourselves?

I am now my own banker, my own check-out chick, my own airline check-in operator. I am my own travel agent, my own globally connected merchant, my own cook, bottlewasher and laundress. The goods I consume are frequently constructed in far away factories and shipped around the world for me to buy, yet they just as frequently cost a fraction of what they would if they were produced locally. Countless television programs exist to convince me that I can easily renovate a bathroom and make a complicated and exotic dessert and plant a productive vegetable garden – and I can do this while my maintaining the workload that is the lot of the majority of mothers these days (65 per cent of Australian mothers held full- or part-time employment in 2011, representing a 10 per cent increase over the previous decade) and managing to have the occasional erudite and interactive conversation with my husband. Not to mention my son.

Self-sufficiency is an attribute that crops up in many discussions of the resources we will need to survive under the changed climate of our world – self-sufficiency, resilience, resourcefulness, and a funny hairpin back to a community that has to think locally, as well as globally. To read Bill McKibben’s 2010 *Eaarth* (Black Inc., 2010) was to realise, not just the likelihood of a drastically changed domestic world – in my lifetime, let alone my son’s – it was to realise how few of the survival skills I actually had in hand for the task of navigating its space. I may have grown up watching Richard Briers and Felicity Kendall in *The Good Life*, but I hadn’t realised it might represent my own future in terms of providing food for my family. Perhaps those lifestyle shows that talk about triple-digging and when to sow will prove humanity’s salvation as much as a global seedbank on the far-off Arctic island of Svalbard. As McKibben wrote, ‘Most of us don’t know how to do very much – in your standard collapse scenario, it’s nice to know how to grow wheat.’
I’m not sure I can see much of a role for novelists in this probably not very brave new world, although storytellers are always useful beasts. But I can’t see how you could do without scientists. As Ian Lowe has also said, ‘Scientific knowledge is not just critical to understanding the problems we face; it is crucial to solving them. Even accepting the limitations of scientific knowledge and the human failings of individual scientists, science still gives us our best chance of a desirable future – just as it has given us a much more desirable present.’

I PLAY THIS game with our son when we’re talking sometimes: what would you like to be when you grow up?

‘Run me through some options,’ he says and I rattle across the professions attached to some of the people he knows – teachers, musicians, architects, dentists, lawyers, scientists, sparkies, nurses. ‘I’d like to be a writer,’ he says mostly, ‘because you get to talk to people and you get to tell stories.’

I think he just says that to be polite. In any case, I’m not sure I’d let him – what with those hundreds of journalism students facing probable unemployment when they emerge from their courses, not to mention the stunning shrinkage of everything to do with books, from publishers’ advances and book sales figures to the number of bookshops still standing. In the wake of the 2014 budget, we’ll have to start saving if he’s planning to go tertiary. My husband’s eight years of education – from a bachelor to doctorate – were free, and he rates it as one of the high points of his life that he got to shake Gough Whitlam’s hand and thank him for that. Without Gough, he says, he would never have gone to university. I emerged from an honours degree with around $7,000 in HECS debt and the righteous outrage of having enrolled in the first post-Gough cohort that had to pay. If our son wanted to be a doctor, say, post-budget estimates suggest his fees would have more than quadrupled, from $24,000 to $120,000 and beyond.

No, he is destined to be a merchant banker or a sparky, if we’ve got anything to do with it. Or maybe a plumber.

At five, we can make a joke of this. At five, he can want to be an astronaut or a firefighter – or even, if he insists, a writer. He can want to be anything at all.

‘And science?’ someone asked us. ‘What if he wanted to go into science?’

Well, then there’s everything from publish-or-perish to working hours
to Australia’s lack of secure, long-term jobs; from the low success rate of grant applications to the cut-throat competition for the contracts that are available. We’d probably invoke our parental right to try to change his mind – like my dad’s gently-put objections when I enrolled in journalism.

‘He may not thank you for that,’ they said, and it’s true: he’s a curious kid who wants to discover and understand the world. And maybe he could do either of our jobs beyond the wildest dreams we’ve ever had for ourselves, let alone for him. His working landscape will be just so different again.

In 2050, when Hux is my age now, and I am almost eighty, science tells us that the world will be hotter and wilder; wetter when it’s wet and drier when its dry. The G8 will supposedly have halved its greenhouse emissions and the world’s population will have reached 9.6 billion, having increased almost fourfold over a single century. The coastlines will have changed, and the oceans will be very different to how they are now. Temperatures will have risen by 2 to 3 degrees Celsius, delivering between four and five times as many extreme bushfire days to south-eastern Australia and reducing the area of Australia suitable for producing wine by half. There are even predictions that whole bands of the earth, running through dozens of degrees of latitude, will be virtually uninhabitable – it will be too hot and too humid for people to cool their body temperature naturally through perspiring, my husband explains. ‘They’ll literally cook.’ And whichever Australian city you live in, you’ll already have experienced ‘change earlier than the global average’ – in Sydney in 2038, in Brisbane and Perth in 2042, and in Melbourne and Canberra in 2045.

By 2050, according to one astronomer, air pollution will have made all astronomy undertaken from earth impossible. But Beijing can already give you a sense of this: huge screens broadcast an image of the sun rising, since no one can see it through the fug.

To be honest, we might be better off advocating that our son does take up firefighting, or that he makes an early investment in those paper masks that cautious people wear when there’s a flu going round.

But it’s actually the areas of money and welfare that look set to grow in terms of employment. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics lists thirty-five occupations projected to undergo more than 30 per cent growth in the next decade, these include audiologists, marriage and family therapists, and
genetic counselors. At the top of the list of the fastest growing occupations are ‘personal care aides’ and ‘home-help aides’, representing almost a million new jobs, but there will also be jobs for more than two hundred thousand extra auditors, accountants and personal financial advisers.

‘Go into accounting or healthcare or social assistance,’ Jeff Borland, a labour markets expert from the University of Melbourne suggested in a February 2014 interview. ‘I think it’s a no-brainer that to maintain the current standard of service, there’ll continue to be job growth in healthcare and social assistance.’

Presuming, of course, that we wish to maintain ‘the current standard of service’.

THE HISTORY OF humanity is rich with alternative worlds we’ve imagined for ourselves – utopias, dystopias, and everything in between. Whether they involve other planets, other times, other more local places or a leap into whole other universes, Thomas Suddendorf argues that our skill in imagining and envisaging such things is a vital part of what makes us human – winningly, he calls it an ability for ‘mental time travel’. In The Gap: The Science of What Separates Us from Other Animals (Basic Books, 2013), Suddendorf writes: ‘Mental time travel unlocked a new realm of possibilities for our species. We can hatch plans and make decisions that drastically increase our chances of future survival and reproduction. By foreseeing events we can seize opportunities that lie ahead and take steps to avoid approaching disaster. We can imagine the consequences of what we are going to do before we do it – and berate others for not doing the same. We can also mentally revisit past events, reflect on them, and draw new conclusions…mental time travel radically increases our opportunities to be prepared.’

In addition to which, he argues, our capacity for language gives us the means of transmitting these memories and projections to other people. Our capacity for what he calls ‘mind reading’ gives us the ability to imagine the memories and potentials of other people too.

I’m probably simplifying Suddendorf’s thesis, but I think of these three interlinking strands as representing imagination, narrative and empathy. And if I had to pick any three human qualities that gave me hope about our ability to adapt – or our likelihood to have a promising and sustainable future – I’d
make this my triumvirate. What each speaks of, however, is a capacity for both recall and malleability, for learning lessons and trying alternatives, for a graph-line of experience that turns skywards – onward and upward – rather than bogging down somewhere in inertia and impossibility.

We’ve always been good at imagining apocalyptic futures. There was George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach*. When I was in high school in the ’80s the scenarios we were asked to imagine were mostly post-nuclear, the curriculum terrifying our over-active imaginations with films like *The Day After* (1983) and books like Robert C. O’Brien’s *Z for Zachariah* (1974).

Now, the scenario is environmental, and we react to reports of vast ice storms and pressure cells in comparison to the 2004 film *The Day After Tomorrow*. Perhaps by translating these real-world scenarios into homologues of something from Hollywood, we seek to trick ourselves into thinking that they’re just staged fabrications too. After all, some of the scariest fictional spaces I’ve visited have been those just over the cusp of my own horizon: the not-quite-now of a city like the one in Richard Powers’ *Generosity* (Picador, 2010) was unsettling enough when I read about it two years ago, but its power was amplified exponentially when I recalled it alongside news reports of last winter’s ‘polar vortex’ as it visited North America. It was as if Powers had foretold what was coming. And didn’t those big storm cells look spookily like the made-up ones that Ian Holm gazed at while playing a Scottish scientist freezing to death in *The Day After Tomorrow*?

In another letter published by *Nature Climate Change* in 2012, a team of researchers led by the Center for Climate Change Information at George Mason University in the US went hunting for intersections between personal experience and belief in the reality of global warming. Did observable and experienced climate impacts create educative opportunities, they wondered, or did ‘prior belief certainty shape people’s perceptions…through a process of motivated reasoning’?

What they found was the occurrence of both processes – and, perhaps more intriguingly, ‘that motivated reasoning occurs primarily among people who are already highly engaged in the issue, whereas experiential learning occurs primarily among people who are less engaged in the issue’. This, they
noted, was ‘particularly important given that approximately 75 per cent of American adults currently have low levels of engagement.’

So bring on the ferocity of climate change — or, as George Monbiot argues this whole mess of inexorable processes should now be described, ‘climate breakdown’.

ONE OF THE unexpected advantages of motherhood, I’ve discovered, is all the stuff you get to learn about dinosaurs — their species’ names, their different eras of existence, their weight, their speed, even the size of their feet. As Elizabeth Kolbert has noted, ‘Extinction may be the first scientific idea that kids have to grapple with,’ and that’s certainly true in our house. We have jigsaws, card games, furry dinosaurs, wooden dinosaurs, plastic dinosaurs, dinosaur sticker books, outgrown dino slippers that somehow can’t be handed on and an entire shelf of dino-related literature. What happened to the dinosaurs, you can ask Hux, and he’ll tell you that a big asteroid crashed into Earth and they all died.

All species tend ultimately to extinction, and it’s true we’ve helped an awful lot along their way — from other earlier hominids to giant auks, Tasmanian tigers and an appalling number of frog species. And even if we manage to adapt to the new extremities and uncertainties of our world, its climate, and all its natural systems, we’re still headed that way ourselves. One of the most elegant descriptions in Kolbert’s elegant book is also one of the hardest to grapple with: ‘A hundred million years from now,’ she writes, ‘all that we consider to be the great works of man — the sculptures and the libraries, the monuments and the museums, the cities and the factories — will be compressed into a layer of sediment not much thicker than a cigarette paper.’

That’s some unknown.

I spend part of my professional life — the novelistic part of it, rather than the journalistic one — making things up. I sit here, with a keyboard or a pen, and I invent things: people, places, scenarios, lives, loves and deaths. I imagine how things might be. I try out different components, different catalysts, different endings (trust me, I do). I put characters into terrible predicaments and I sometimes even put them to death. It’s a funny way to make a living, but it’s a great nod to the power of options and creativity. And we can’t have enough reminders of those.
As for extinction, I know I’m part of a professional species that’s almost there itself: I’m endangered, vulnerable, on whatever red list you like. One Canadian careers website spells it out bluntly. Right at the bottom of the Workopolis list of ‘Ten jobs that won’t exist in ten years’: Print journalist.

I’ll report back from the other side of that extinction.

For all the other labels that I live with – being a mother, being a human, being a left-leaning bleeding-heart atheist, being a person who tries to make sense of the world through its stories, being what I take to mean ‘being Australian’, being beset with a reckless imagination – I hope I’m not quite as close to the back door yet. And I do want to make one more rallying cry for us all to rise up and do that thing we all do – adapt.

Adapt.

We deal with changing circumstances every day; we deal with people coming and going; we deal with things rearranged, things rescheduled, things ending and beginning. Sometimes we deal with them better than others, but we know how to make a transition.

It feels a bit ironic to mention it, but this government has been particularly keen to remind us all of this in the context of our working and professional lives. When Joe Hockey recently asked the nation to think about working until we were seventy instead of sixty-five, my husband and I laughed. We have a mortgage that reaches into our seventies – unless we win a lottery in the meantime. And we both work in worlds where people notoriously keep working, salaried or not. Writers (unless they’re Philip Roth) tend to retire when they die: the other week I read a piece by the ninety-three year old Roger Angell in The New Yorker. ‘My work,’ he wrote, ‘I’m still working, or sort of. Reading. The collapsing, grossly insistent world. Stuff I get excited about or depressed about all the time.’

It’s hardly better on the scientific side of the fence: even if you can convince a scientist to retire, you can rarely convince them to stop their research. Some of the busiest researchers I’ve ever met include a ‘retired’ botanist (still showing up for work daily at a state Botanic Gardens; still classifying new species and publishing new papers), a ‘retired’ weevil expert (his downstairs rumpus room full of Australian specimens he was trying to
classify ahead of his own demise), and a ‘retired’ mosquito biologist (who had transferred his entire working life from a lab to a roller-doored shed in his backyard). I’ve always wanted someone to quantify for me the total output of these ‘honorary’ and ‘adjunct’ academics, and how much they contribute to Australia’s fabled ‘knowledge economy’. They do it, of course, for free.

I wanted to finish this essay with some uplifting idea, some clarion call, and that got me thinking about Joe Hockey’s enthusiasm for a workforce that’s willing to embrace change. (This was before I wished I could stop thinking about Joe Hockey altogether, what with the apparent brutality of the budget, and the slightly disturbing revelation that he’d danced to ‘Best Day of My Life’ just before delivering it.) So I started to trawl his speeches for some rousing words that might be repurposed to this end – it’s probably not ethical, but I was desperate to have some positive words to offer up. And I was delighted to find some.

It is, perhaps, the worst kind of appropriation (and way beyond cherry-picking) to borrow sentiments from speeches that deal with things like workplace laws or the future of the South Australian tourism industry and adapt them for my own narrative ends. But how much more possible would the future feel if we ever heard them uttered in this way?

I’d feel better if I heard someone talking to me and my fellow Australians about the importance of ‘the tools they need to adapt and grow’, and have something in mind beyond industrial relations. I’d feel better if I heard someone say, simply, ‘as you well know, it is a question of being flexible enough to adapt to change’ – and they were talking about the future of the world.

* This is a combined total of students commencing a range bachelors of journalism and communication.

References available at www.griffithreview.com

Ashley Hay’s most recent novel, The Railwayman’s Wife (Allen & Unwin, 2014), was longlisted for this year’s Miles Franklin and Kibble awards and won the People’s Choice Prize at the 2014 NSW Premier’s Literary Awards. She is the author of six books including Gum: The Story of Eucalypts (Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002) and Their Champions and Museum (Cambridge University Press, 2004 and 2007), a collaboration with visual artist Robyn Stacey.
‘WHAT YOU NEED to understand is that automotive work is very monotonous.’

I was in a restaurant in Port Melbourne last year with an economist, who was explaining why Australia not only did not need, but should not mourn the end of its century of assembling then making cars for its roads.

The economist, intelligent and affable, was warming to his task: he knew; he had seen things; here, in fact, was an opportunity to relieve Australians of very tedious work, better done by…well…the inference was cheaper, littler, yellower people in countries to the north. Australians would then be part of the brain-powered industries of the future: finance, hospitality, education, healthcare, retail et al.

After years of having my ears dinned with these orthodoxies, I might well have been caught up in the sweep of his general economic argument about volumes, distances and exchange rates had I not come that morning from a factory in the outlying suburbs of Melbourne that manufactured metal components for cars: no fewer than four hundred different kinds made to exacting specifications and tiny tolerances – those flanges, pivots, buttons and handles that one seldom notices, so integral are they into a vehicle’s totality.
The workers were especially proud of one particular manufacture: a structural member from aluminium, featuring more than a hundred tiny welds, on display in the foyer, where it was accorded the reverence one would associate in parliament with a ceremonial mace.

In fact, there was a general sense of good cheer about the place; I told my hosts that I hadn’t seen journalists so happy since…well, actually never. People conversed purposefully, hurrying here and there – and little wonder. I visited the inventory with the shift boss, and saw just two pallets. In forty-five minutes, I was told, there would be forty; in an hour, they would be on their way.

Now I glanced around the restaurant. It was far from full. Barmen awaited orders; waiters stood around listlessly; periodically, one refreshed our glasses of water. Everyone looked neat, freshly laundered and utterly bored. The economist laid out an Australian future relieved of the drudgery entailed by making things. It seemed almost to have arrived. I was only a week or two into my study. There would be more economists and more factories. But from this day forward, the question struck me as ever more pressing: as our work changed, how would it change us?

ECONOMISTS HAVE LONG regarded the shift my companion was describing as an immutable trend. It’s more than thirty years since the Nobel Laureate Wassily Leontief proposed that ‘the role of humans as the most important factor of production is bound to diminish in the same way that the role of horses in agricultural production was first diminished and then eliminated by the introduction of tractors.’ Labour would find more valuable and genteel outlet in the service industries, in all their rich varieties, living out a broadscale version of a family’s progress toward embourgeoisement, one generation’s hard and grimy toil opening educational and employment opportunities for the next, blue collar parents begetting white collar heirs. In some circles, this was more than simply evolution; the rise of the ‘knowledge worker’, ‘symbolic analyst’ and ‘creative class’ was little short of emancipation.

Yet in discussing what they did with workers and managers in the automotive sector over the next couple of months, their satisfactions were blindingly obvious. The average length of a career at Holden was not
seventeen years, and at Toyota twelve years, because of stunted imaginations or cushy conditions: there was the call for engineering of the highest standard and efficiency of the utmost precision; there was continuity and collegiality embedded in the institutional affiliations, solidarity in the occupational relations; perhaps not least, there was immediate and objectively assessable material outcome. When a car dropped off the end of the assembly line, a tester slipped behind the wheel to turn the key, gun the motor, flash the lights and indicators, then steer it round a test track. No matter how often you watched, I was assured, there was always a little tension before and a little relief afterwards.

It was a way of life, too, that was dying even as we discussed it, because the foregoing satisfactions of the complex and varied work were of no account compared to the austere spirit of the economic times. What ways of life would replace it? That remained to be seen – for all the talk of ‘fast-tracking infrastructure plans’ in the Australian and the Australian Financial Review, bastions of the economic clerisy, these remained largely chimerical. And the truth is that when the econocracy talk about ‘work’, what they usually mean is ‘employment’, which is defined chiefly by its opposite: reduction in the headline rate of unemployment being an exhibit in the evidence of ‘sound economic management’. Where economists distinguish between jobs at all, it is mainly by measures of productivity, and rough and ready ones at that. They can ascertain nothing of the lived experience of work, the sort of values it is instilling, the kind of citizens it is creating, the cultures and communities it is shaping. That meant that in the case of the automotive industry, they could offer no sort of account of the social consequences of the dwindling of an industry that had offered dignified labour and a decent standard of living to generations of Australians – the assumption was that people would ‘get by’, as if social change could be instigated and implemented as straightforwardly as a commercial project.

Of course, these arguments are hardly new. As manufacturing in western economies first came under pressure in the 1980s, Amitai Etzioni coined the expression ‘McJob’ to describe the kind of low-pay, low-skill, low-prospect, low-security occupations most abundant in a post-industrial economy. But the expression arguably disserved the reality, defining such jobs too narrowly,
too specifically. You hardly need be part of a burger chain to experience work of the most routinised and insecure kind today; as Robert Skidelsky and Ann Craig argued in *New Statesman* last year, many service industries have been rationalised in ways Adam Smith would recognise as derived directly from his ‘pin factory’ – except not as effectively:

In all services that can be automated, part of every process is delegated to a team that inhabits a separate silo. No team is able to carry out more than its tiny element of the process; as a result, from the first moment you contact a company, you have to choose which team to talk to (‘Press one if you are a business customer; press two if you are a personal customer; press three if you wish you were dead’).

Then, if you have a query that is even slightly complicated, at least the first three people you speak to will probably not be able to help. No one has an overview of how the whole thing works and no one has any power to cut through the undergrowth, because each person is in control of only a tiny patch of the service. As no one person or team knows what anyone else does or who any of the customers are, all information has to be stored centrally; if something is ‘not in the system’ or if the system has broken down, it’s a dead end.

As the call-centre worker has never met you before, he or she will have little sympathy and no relationship to draw on; because they will almost certainly never speak to you again, there is no incentive for them to be helpful if your problem can’t be fixed within the formula. From their perspective, they are having to deal with customers who are irate because of events that the service provider has no control over and no responsibility for.

YOU DO NOT need to be poorly-paid or shorn of prestige to experience the demoralising sensations of infinite replaceability either. In his new book *Young Money* (Grand Central Publishing, 2014), Kevin Roose tracks a year of young graduates turned Wall Street bankers negotiating the post-GFC financial landscape. For some it is the fulfilment of a lifetime’s aspirations; for others it is simply what their grades and intellectual faculties have readied them for – five years ago, banking and finance were absorbing almost a quarter of Ivy League graduates. Roose finds them sinking with each passing month
into states of ‘genuine misery’, experiencing ‘disillusionment, depression and feelings of worthlessness that were deeper and more foundational than simple work frustrations’. By the end of the book, some have toughened up; all, however, are ‘less happy and optimistic, more cynical and calculating’, and inclined to ‘talk about the world in a transactional, economised way…like giant balance sheets.’

Again, what are the social and democratic implications of a generation weaned on work of this kind? Nobody can really say. Partly because it is difficult to quantify and we struggle with anything that cannot be readily reduced to calculation, even of spurious precision. Partly because it sounds like a recommendation of the old – ever suspect in an age of neophilia – and stability, synonymous with inaction to a generation admiring of its self-perceived dynamism. And partly, I suspect, because over the past forty years, beginning probably with the election of the Whitlam government, a division has opened between what we think of chiefly as economic policies (competition, trade, foreign ownership) and as social policies (refugees, culture, drugs, gay marriage). The stress in government has come to fall on the former, albeit always with some sprinkling of the latter for the placation of those who imagine politics still to be a contest of ideas rather than of interests. Yet it is arguable that economic policies are social policies, insofar as those jobs we envision the economy providing have social consequences.

The automotive industry did not simply make cars: it made lives, by helping its workers build families, towns, suburbs and networks of relations. And about this, contra my companion that day last year, there was nothing remotely monotonous.

Gideon Haigh is a journalist. His work has appeared in Griffith REVIEW editions 25, 11, 7 and 5. His book End of the Road, about Australia’s automotive industry, was published in 2013 by Penguin.
VISITING SYDNEY FROM New York before Christmas, I dropped by the office of a client and former colleague. Her employer, a large law firm, recently moved to swanky new premises and she was keen to take me on a tour. As we strolled the eerily quiet corridors, the towering windows, antiseptic surfaces and noiseless elevator doors put me in mind of the inside of a spaceship. At any moment I half-expected the two of us to defy gravity and lift off from the gleaming polished floor.

The cost of maintaining the illusion of worker freedom through extravagant fit-outs seems to grow with every decade. The office’s split-level mezzanine and cafeteria exaggerated the sense of a space–time continuum. Designed as a hub for meetings of all kinds, the mezzanine encourages flexibility of human movement within the larger workplace, which remains tethered to that relic of twentieth century work practices, the billable hour. Looking around, I felt a retrospective pang for the lifestyle extras a corporate job used to afford me. But having ‘consciously uncoupled’ myself as a full-time employee from the corporate workplace eight years earlier, it felt like viewing Earth from deep space.

These days I write grist for my client’s marketing mill from my desk in Brooklyn. But as a freelance writer and editor over here, I’m about as rare
as the common cold. Numerous cafés in my Crown Heights neighborhood have become the home office away from home for many independent workers in today’s ‘knowledge economy’. Hunched at communal benches, wearing oversized headphones and staring into their laptops, these café-offices could be mistaken for call centres. I work from my bedroom, like I did as a student.

Because the majority of my freelancing is for Australian companies and authors, my working life orbits around Skype. Started in 2003 and named for the awkward progeny of ‘sky’ and ‘peer’, Skype facilitates free calls between computers over the internet and provides additional ‘freemium’ services. By opening a Skype credit account, for example, I could dial landlines from my laptop for two Australian cents per minute. For a consumer accustomed to the Rosetta Stone of her monthly Telstra bill, my Skype usage was not only a bargain but straightforward to track.

Super-sizing my Skype account, I acquired a ‘Skype-in’ telephone number for $60 that begins with the Sydney area code and diverts to my laptop for a local call cost to the dialer. I refer to this as my ‘magic number’. Clients enjoy the trick, though neither end of the line – or is it the optic fibre? – has a clue as to how it’s done.

Product consumers are accustomed to the fact that the things they buy are often manufactured at a great geographical distance, but in the service economy this is a recent and transformative change. In a recent blog post for The New Yorker, George Packer described the invisibility of the worker in today’s digital economy. Companies such as Amazon, Google and Facebook are ‘ubiquitous in our lives but with no physical presence or human face,’ he wrote. ‘With work increasingly invisible, it’s much harder to grasp the human effects, the social contours, of the internet economy.’ As one of the lesser stars of that universe, Skype’s workings as a corporation remain a mystery to me as its happy customer, in the same way that the logistics of my virtual office must baffle some of my clients.

For seven years now I have commuted around the world from the comfort of my bedroom-slash-office. (I try not to dwell on the fact that in Sydney I worked out of a dedicated study in my home; living in a New York apartment is all about sacrificing space.) Using Skype I have coached Australian authors living in Kenya, Melbourne, Los Angeles, the Gold Coast,
Sydney and on a remote Queensland farm through writing their respective manuscripts, all of which have been, or soon will be, published.

When I first moved to New York in 2006, I learned that my professional experience beyond the borders of the United States counted for little. Though I found it relatively easy to find a junior-level job, it was immediately obvious that I’d need to earn more to survive. I got in touch with a few friends working for book publishers and large corporations back home and work trickled in. By 2009, with the floor of the global economy having collapsed, I had become dependent on Skype to stay afloat. Happily my physical location in New York proved no impediment to clients based in other parts of the world. A few have stuck with me since the early versions of Skype, when my voice sounded like it was at the end of a tin-can telephone.

**TODAY SKYPE SHAPES** the ‘social contours’ of my professional and personal life. My typical working day splits into three shifts across two time zones. Mornings are for my own writing projects, afternoons for deadline-driven client jobs or errands. The third shift is the trickiest but the most crucial. By now it’s evening in New York, but Australia is only just flipping open its smart phone, arriving at work, checking email. Between three and five times each week I have a Skype meeting, which makes local dinner time a moveable feast.

My parents like to say of people they find incompetent, ‘He wouldn’t know what day it is.’ Competence aside, no one can accuse me of that. My Skype working life demands I stay aware not only of the day, but the time of day in two places at once. I straddle the International Date Line like a time-travelling desk-jockey.

Perhaps all this is evidence of Dutch theorist Erik Veldhoen’s claim that the digital era makes work more independent of time and place. But having cultivated the illusion of access and availability, in another sense I feel chained to my desk, wherever I may roam, a satellite in virtual space.

Veldhoen predicts the end of the physical office environment for the vast majority of ‘knowledge economy’ workers around the world. On his website, where he sets out his vision of what he dubs the New Way of Working, he writes, ‘The one-on-one relationship between the organisational structure
and the building will be abandoned on all fronts.’ Like all good futurists, Veldhoen’s relationship to technology is relentlessly positive, as evidenced by the title of his 2013 book *You-Topia: The Impact of the Digital Revolution on Our Work, Our Life and Our Environment* (Xlibris Corporation, 2013). You-Topia is a tantalising prospect until you start considering the implications for workers’ rights. Or living a version of it yourself.

Back on Earth, where increasing numbers of workers compete for jobs in online content mills and freelance farms, the future of independent work looks less promising. As Nikil Saval writes in *Cubed* (Random House, 2014), his new history of the workplace, ‘The more radical prediction for the future of the office – that it will disappear altogether – might similarly offer either more freedom or only the illusion of it.’

IN THE UNITED States, freelancers workers now constitute anywhere between 20 and 30 per cent of the workforce, a fast-growing but vulnerable group sometimes referred to as the ‘precariat’. ‘Some of these workers have chosen to leave the permanent workforce; most have been pushed out,’ Saval writes. ‘In many cases they lack health insurance and are at constant risk of insolvency.’ The Government Accountability Office estimated the numbers of freelancers at forty-two million in a 2006 study. Since then global economic conditions have added millions to this number, though there seems little political motivation to count them again. Freelancers are a powerless group, as well as a precarious one.

The absence of health insurance became urgent early this year when I experienced a sudden pain in my hip pocket: with the introduction of the Obamacare legislation I would face tax penalties if I did not take out insurance by April.

I decided to join the Freelancers Union. Established in 1995 to deliver benefits to independent workers, this self-described ‘Federation of the Unaffiliated’ now boasts almost 250,000 members. While membership cost me nothing, I was dismayed to learn their health insurance plan for individuals began at US$471 per month. Until the Freelancers Union attracts millions of members, it will continue to boast neither political clout nor affordable insurance. Reluctantly, I found a cheaper plan elsewhere.
Admittedly I’m a lot more fortunate than most freelancers. My time is largely my own to organise and I have a variety of interesting and occasionally well-paid jobs. Skype has liberated me from the commute and the pointless meetings and the nine-to-five. But there have been unexpected consequences too. While I’ve developed a wide social network in New York, I can’t say the same about my professional one. My working week always begins on Sunday, and not because of church. I am often using Skype well into the evenings. It’s convenient but exhausting. I’m always ‘on’. Paradoxically, just like my former employer’s work environment, my home office is often a mirage of freedom from employment – with a less ergonomic chair.

SKYPE IS AN illusionist’s tool and a mixed blessing. It offers the chimera of proximity and the promise of flexibility, without delivering either. Sometimes the sight of its cheerful blue icon on my desktop makes me want to scream. And like any illusion, my working life depends on a sleight of hand. The trick lies in the physical world, in the ‘analog’ network established over years of living and working in Australia. Another paradox.

I depend on Skype, not only financially, but emotionally. It’s my lifeline to steady income and to the lifelong relationships that confirm me as an Australian despite my status as a dual citizen. Every expatriate daughter learns that part of being the one who goes away is the responsibility for staying in touch. Even if I don’t feel distant emotionally from the people I love back home, Skype can exacerbate the geographical distance I feel. It’s the opposite effect of looking in a side mirror: friends and family are further away than they appear on screen. So Skype does not make me feel as if I never left; it helps me sustain the illusion that, online at least, it is possible to exist in two places at the same time.

Virginia Lloyd is an editor, literary agent and the author of The Young Widow’s Book of Home Improvement (UQP, 2009). Her essays have appeared in a range of publications in Australia and the US, where she is based. Her work has appeared in Griffith REVIEW 33: Such Is Life and Griffith REVIEW 17: Staying Alive. www.virginialloyd.com
BRISBANE, 15 JUNE, 2039: Chris shuffles into the homeless shelter. They’ve always been spartan places, but more so now than they ever were when she was a student and did some volunteer work here in 2014.

Not that she has time to dwell on those memories much. She knew she never wanted to come here, but she’s finally given in. It’s just too dangerous outside. The bashings are getting harder to avoid. And if they get you, there’s no point in going to a hospital. If you don’t have private insurance (‘whatever that is,’ she mumbles, though she knows what it is) you pay an up-front fee that she has no chance of handing over. Or they don’t let you in.

Same with GPs, though at least the charge isn’t so high there. It used to be called a ‘co-payment’ when it was lower, but eventually, she remembers, the government just stopped paying anything to doctors. ‘Rightsizing government,’ they said.

She wonders if she recognises the face on the other side of the soup ladle from her student days, but she says nothing.

‘Where you from?’ he asks, trying to make conversation as he half fills a bowl.
‘Round here. I went away. Came back a few years ago.’
‘What brought you back?’
‘I had some work – well, from time to time anyway.’
‘Doing what?’
‘Oh, I was a sessional tutor at the uni. Had my last contract there about eighteen months ago, a few years after I got my PhD.’
BRISBANE, 15 JUNE, 2039: Chris has coffee with an old friend from her university days. She hasn’t seen her for a quarter of a century. They’ve both aged since then, but both like to think the other hasn’t.

They sit inside the café, next to the main window. Across the road is a sparkling new medical clinic. Her friend looks closely at it, then recognition dawns.

‘Isn’t that where we both did volunteer work for our degrees, back in 2014?’

‘Yes, though of course the homeless shelter moved out long ago. They’ve much nicer premises now, but I hear it’s rarely full.’

‘You see quite a few homeless people sleeping out in the park. I guess there’s nothing much to bother them.’ She pauses. ‘Ever used that clinic?’

‘Couple of years ago, I had a cough, real bad. My chest hurt so much I thought I was having a heart attack. They hooked me up and ran all the expensive tests, figured it was just a cracked rib. Well they weren’t expensive tests for me – didn’t cost me anything, of course. But it was really good.’

‘And how’s the job going, Chris?’

‘Quite well. You know, it’s pretty secure. I’ve got my hat in the ring for a promotion.’

‘To senior lecturer?’

‘Yes. It’s a few years since I got my PhD, I’ve done my share of teaching and publishing. I think I’m about due. Is that your baby crying?’

‘I’ll bring her in. I thought she might sleep better in the sunshine. Never mind.’

***

IT’S THE SAME Chris in each vignette. It’s not the choices Chris made that I’m writing about here. She had limited choice. It’s about the choices we make.

We, as a society, face choices that affect what we do, the way we work, the nature of work, and who benefits and who suffers from it. But it’s the choices that we make, that make the difference to her – and to millions of others.

But before going further into the future, what’s the back-story. How did we get to where we are? And where, exactly, are we?

Through several decades after WWII, living standards improved, unemployment was low and workers’ slice of the cake gradually got more icing on it. Wages and benefits rose, annual leave got longer, working hours got shorter. Responding to pressures from numerous parts of civil society, the range of services provided by government widened and deepened.
This changed through the 1980s, in many countries. Major shifts in economy and society were brought about by financialisation, described by Thomas I. Palley as ‘a process whereby financial markets, financial institutions, and financial elites gain greater influence over economic policy and economic outcomes’. Increasingly, financialisation prioritises the monetary over the real, the volatile over the stable, the immediate over the sustainable, and the rich over the poor.

For many, financialisation in Australia was most symbolised by the decision by then Treasurer Paul Keating and Prime Minister Bob Hawke to deregulate foreign exchange markets and substantially loosen regulation of financial markets in December 1983.

For me, though, it was most symbolised by a meeting of the budgetary committee of the Labor Cabinet on 28 July, 1986, when a collapse in the terms of trade and a run on the dollar in financial markets engendered such a sense of economic crisis that some ministers feared possible intervention by the International Monetary Fund. A decision announced earlier that month to introduce seemingly esoteric changes to the treatment of international capital flows, which would have closed off interest withholding tax exemptions, was hastily reversed in the face of financial market disapproval and foreign investment policy loosened.

Perhaps more than any other, it was the day improvements in the ‘social wage’ – government spending on health, education, housing and welfare that directly boosted workers’ living standards – fell off the government priority list. Under the Accord with trade unions, the social wage had been near the top of that priority list, but no more. Through the remainder of the 1980s savings were made to social wage programs, product markets were deregulated, ‘competition policy’ reforms were introduced, and public assets were privatised.

Since then, finance capital has grown in strength. Governments in Australia and around the world have been attracted to ‘market liberal’ policies (sometimes referred to as neo-liberalism). Unions have declined in coverage and influence in the face of increasingly hostile employers under pressure from financiers, indifferent or hostile governments, and their own ‘institutional sclerosis’, as Barbara Pocock described it – their failure to make sufficient internal changes to accommodate the demands of the market liberal era. Globalisation has thus
developed in an environment that has been most conducive to the interests of capital, and most antagonistic to the interests of labour.

The ‘sliding doors’ portraits of Chris illustrate two alternative visions of the future for Australian workers. Which turns out to be true depends on the choices we make over coming years.

The earlier changes and choices have been followed by many changes in the world of work: changes in employer strategies, in the types of jobs, in the nature of work, in the distribution of income and power.

IN 1987, WOLFGANG Streeck wrote of how the great ‘uncertainty of management’ was dealing with the ‘management of uncertainty’. Managers have responded – to the volatility of the product markets in which they sell and the financial markets in which their equity and debt are nested – by a range of strategies, some consistent, many contradictory.

Chief among the consistent strategies is the search for greater flexibility. You hear a lot about employers offering greater flexibility for employees – more choice in their start or finishing times, perhaps in their total hours. This is in response to demands from employees themselves – more on that later.

But the principal form of flexibility is the flexibility by employees that employers seek, to help employers manage – and shift – their own risk. Sometimes they seek ‘functional’ flexibility – getting employees to take on multiple and quite different tasks and hence skills. Sometimes they seek ‘numerical’ flexibility, meaning that the number of workers, or the number of hours they work, or maybe even their pay rates, move up and down according to the needs of the enterprise.

For a long time, greater numerical flexibility was seen as an unequivocal plus, creating greater stability, or at least resilience, in labour markets. Governments were encouraged, including by bodies like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), to remove restrictions on hours and on hiring and firing, and to attempt to emulate the most flexible of them all – the US labour market, where employers hire and fire ‘at will’. Then the global financial crisis came along, and although Europe experienced a greater fall in economic activity than the USA, it was America that suffered the greater fall in employment. In its biggest test, the theory failed spectacularly. The OECD was having misgivings even before then;
after the crisis it recommended governments improve income support and unemployment insurance benefit systems, which it had previously said would decrease flexibility.

Alongside greater flexibility came the urge for control. But how? On the one hand, employees were demanding more voice at work and more control over their working lives. The decline of unions meant that, for many, an obvious mechanism for voice was no longer there. Some technologies inherently gave greater discretion to employees using those technologies. A case study by James R. Barker showed that employees were often more effective at exerting control over the behaviour of fellow employees, and extracting maximum effort, than were their supervisors. So, many employers gave employees greater control over their work.

But it is oh so hard for managers to ‘let go’. The urge for control is human. How can you justify those big bucks if the workers themselves are in charge? And other technologies gave the opportunity to micromanage employees – in particular, to dictate their time. Swipe cards could tell warehouse bosses just how long their workers were taking to move a palette of cans from shelf to truck. Monitors could tell call centre bosses how many seconds ‘customer service representatives’ were pausing between calls, or taking to go to the toilet. Barcode readers could tell supermarket managers how long shop assistants took to process a trolley of groceries. All could be used to tell staff, ‘Work more! Work faster!’ So, many employers gave employees less control over their work.

Regardless of whether they gave employees greater or less direct control over their work, employers typically sought to reduce the indirect discretion employees exercised. For some, keeping out, or throwing out, unions became important. While decades of research had shown that employees could be, and commonly were, simultaneously committed to both union and employer, many employers could not stomach the idea of an alternative source of power. Sometimes through sophisticated human resource management policies that signalled ‘we’re all in this together’, sometimes through aggressive policies of exclusion, those employers often succeeded in obtaining unilateral control of the workforce, precluding collective bargaining in favour of individual contracting.

These employers would often cloak individualistic rhetoric with a collective demand on their employees (though the term ‘employees’ was often replaced
with ‘partners’, ‘members’ or, more commonly, ‘associates’). Corporate ‘cultur-ism’, as it was described by Hugh Willmott, sought simultaneously to make employees feel as if they were treated as individuals but needed to subvert their individuality in pursuit of the collective, corporate goals. Those who failed to toe the corporate rhetoric line, as Diane van den Broek found in her study of a telecommunications company, would be performance managed out. It was reminiscent of the scene in Monty Python’s Life of Brian, in which Brian, facing an adoring but uncomprehending crowd, calls out ‘You’re all individuals!’ They respond, ‘Yes, we’re all individuals!’ He pleads, ‘You’re all different!’ ‘Yes, we are all different!’ Then a little voice at the back pipes up: ‘I’m not!’

Willmott took a more sinister view of it all, likening ‘culturist’ strategies to Big Brother’s attempts at totalising control in George Orwell’s 1984. Yet often these attempts failed because, unlike in 1984’s Oceania, workers were exposed to all sorts of ideas outside the workplace. The HR Department could never be as softly persuasive as Orwell’s Ministry of Truth, or as violently persuasive as his Ministry of Love.

ONE OF THE biggest shifts on the location of work has been from the public to the private sector. In the public sector, ‘new public sector management’ became the rage from the 1980s. Some activities were totally privatised. Services were outsourced to the private sector, policy separated from delivery. But not all changes in work can be traced to market liberal policies or financialisation. Some simply emerged as part of the normal process of development in a trading world.

As in all industrialised countries, manufacturing has declined in Australia – from 17 per cent of jobs in 1984 to 8 per cent in 2013. Manufacturing instead provides the engine for rapidly growing third world or transition economies, for dragging people out of poverty. Still, government policies in industrialised countries influence by how much manufacturing declines, and what it would look like. When the Australian government dared Holden to leave, it could not simply blame the following collapse of component sector employment on forces beyond its control.

While mining is sometimes portrayed as the saviour of the Australian economy – not least by mining companies themselves and their acolytes – it accounts for only 2 per cent of jobs. Employment growth now and
in the future is in ‘services’, a term so broad it can mean ‘anything that isn’t primary production or manufacturing’. Some jobs classified as in the ‘services’ sector are ‘blue collar’ jobs in construction or utilities (electricity, water or gas). Employment in the former is very cyclical; the latter is in structural decline.

Much of the structural growth in new service sector jobs is in occupations that involve personal interactions. These jobs put demands on employees that were relatively unknown in manufacturing or mining – demands for the use of ‘emotional labour’. Employees are asked to evoke emotional reactions in clients or customers that bring about sales or at least make the targets feel more satisfied. From waitresses, bar attendants, sales assistants and customer sales representatives in call centres to air stewards, aged care workers and child carers, employees work with what Arlie Hochschild called the ‘managed heart’.

They may be required to ‘put on a face’ to boost sales, stressfully pretending to feel something they do not (Hochschild calls this ‘surface acting’), like in a ‘smile’ campaign documented by Emmanuel Ogbonna but seen many times over by bewildered customers of numerous firms. Or employees may actually embody, deep down, the emotions that are needed, for example in care work (Hochschild calls this ‘deep acting’). Often these skills are associated with ‘women’s work’. Often they are seen as ‘attributes’ rather than ‘skills’. Often, therefore, the jobs undergo ‘undervaluation’ and the workers are poorly paid for what the work requires.

Other emerging jobs in the service sector, though, may be alienated from human interaction. The rise of internet sales has caught many storefront retailers off guard, replacing shop visits with screen clicks. There are no book sales assistants in Amazon warehouses, where mobile technology monitors and directs workers to use the quickest route between two points. ‘You’re sort of like a robot, but in human form,’ said one manager to the Financial Times. Not just emotionless labour, some jobs are thoughtless labour.

The changes in economic structure had other implications. Manufacturing had long been a source of employment for migrant workers, and so its decline caused particular problems for that workforce. Manufacturing, once seen as the heartland of unionism, now accounts for only 9 per cent of unionists. The largest occupational group amongst unionists is now in health
and related areas, which account for 22 per cent of unionists, with another 18 per cent in education. Unionism has become white collar, like the workforce.

ONE PERSON’S FLEXIBILITY is another person’s insecurity. The mythology of the ‘portfolio’ career, as if somehow workers like to be shunted from industry to industry over their lifetime, hides the fact that workers are treated as more disposable than before. Some, of course, may prefer changes of career, but for others career changes are a euphemism that is forced upon them by the growing impermanency of work.

Particularly in English-speaking countries, employers have become less hesitant about downsizing, and less reluctant to make big cuts. Yet research by Wayne F. Cascio showed that downsizing often results in lower morale, lower productivity and worse performance, in part due to ‘survivor syndrome’ amongst those left behind, and employer expectations that somehow those left will make up, at least in part, for those departed. It may be a contradictory strategy, but still a popular one. We’ve seen companies turning permanent jobs into casual jobs, shifting from direct employment into labour hire, converting employees to the status of dependent contractors.

For some workers, non-standard employment of this type is a means of gaining some control over their working lives. Nurses, for example, might choose labour hire as an alternative to the grind of rotating daily shift work. For other workers, though, it represents a deepening of risk and insecurity. Risk is passed on to workers, many of whom are no longer ‘employees’ but now responsible for their own sick leave, compensation and insurance.

It may also be a means of weakening worker organisation. In coal mining, formerly the vanguard of shorter hours, workers from contractor firms – once only a handful of those on a mine site – account for half or more of their workforce on some sites. This has facilitated, and been facilitated by, the move to rotating twelve-hour shifts, a sometimes gruelling existence for both mineworkers and their families, and the fly-in-fly-out model.

For workers in lower-skilled occupations, or at least those outside professional or managerial occupations, insecurity is likely to trump choice. But it’s not only the low skilled who find themselves marginalised this way. Besides the food retailing and hospitality sector, it is in education where casualisation is greatest. We’re not talking about workers who left school early and can find
no better work – we’re talking about highly skilled workers with doctoral qualifications, who spend semester after semester doing sessional tutoring or sometimes lecturing, some never quite sure when they’ll be paid, sometimes only knowing a week in advance that they’ll be teaching this semester.

Maybe just like Chris. Those ‘sliding doors’ portraits at the beginning of this piece were not extreme imaginations. The first was inspired by modern day USA. From there, reports have emerged in the Chronicle of Higher Education of adjunct (sessional) academic staff living in relatives’ basements or homeless shelters. The problems of the unaffordability of health care would be familiar to anyone who has spent time in USA – a country whose health, education and minimum wage regimes our present policy-makers seem to admire. Health insurance is a work-related issue. In America, unions battle hard to obtain it for their members; employers see cutting it as a means to make major cost savings; Canadian employers regard national health insurance as a competitive cost advantage that attracts businesses across the border; and Australian unions negotiated the introduction of national health insurance as part of their 1983 Accord with the federal government.

The second portrait was inspired by my time in Norway, with its more socially engaged public sector in health and other areas, where university vice-chancellors are elected by staff and students and resist state attempts to impose new public sector management techniques on universities, and where mutual trust is so high that parents routinely leave prams outside shops and cafés while they go inside. You can get arrested for that in the USA.

AS EMPLOYMENT BECOMES more insecure, and as management strategy toughens, work also becomes harder. Through the twentieth century, workers gradually achieved shorter and shorter working weeks through various rounds of industrial action and advocacy. Yet in the 1980s, this started to change. Working hours for full-time workers increased and continued to do so in the 1990s. Surveys showed large numbers of workers reporting increases in how hard they had to work and in the pressure they felt at work. They also showed increasing difficulties experienced by workers in balancing their work and family lives, and problems of work interfering in their personal lives.

No small part of this reflected the changing regulation of working time. Hourly wages with penalty rates and overtime premiums became less
common; annualised salaries that ‘incorporated’ these things became more common. Employers no longer paid the full cost when employees worked extra hours. So management could raise expectations, employees would inculcate them, and the extra work would get done. Some universities, for example, regularly expected their staff to increase research outputs annually with 10 per cent geometric growth.

If wages and premiums stayed in place, then employers might push for the introduction of rotating twelve-hour shifts, as in mining, already mentioned (now working the second longest hours of any industry), or some parts of manufacturing.

Alternatively, employers might push for the abolition of penalty rates and other time-related premiums. The Howard Government’s ill-fated WorkChoices legislation was a temporary culmination of such efforts. Despite its demise, employers in retailing and hospitality still push for the reduction or removal of penalty rates, and now they again look to government for support.

But these are not processes that can continue indefinitely. Eventually, increases in work intensity or working hours become unsustainable. Resistance grows, both organised – through unions and industrial action – and unorganised – through absenteeism, quits, losses in loyalty, problems in quality of output, even possibly sabotage. The employee goodwill or ‘organisational citizenship’ that firms come to expect and indeed rely upon (often without realising it) may disappear. It’s in this context that employee demands for greater flexibility in behaviour by employers have expanded. Some workers have the labour market power to achieve this; many do not.

So, too, resistance may grow to increasing insecurity, and be manifested in the same ways. We see evidence for this in the way that casualisation of the employee workforce has peaked. It reached a quarter of the workforce in 1998 but has been roughly that level since.

Indeed the rapidly growing fascination that employers had with part-time, casual employment (for a long time, the growth in part-time hours was mostly through growth in casual employment) has tapered off. Whereas two-thirds of part-time jobs were casual in 1996, by 2012 just over half were casual. In its place has come a growing recognition of the need for permanent, part-time employment (perhaps also partly under pressure from the demands of women returning to work from maternity leave).
On the other hand, employers continue to be interested in casual full-time jobs, with the proportion of full-time jobs that were casual growing from 8 per cent in 1992 to 13 per cent in 2007, though even that has since declined slightly.

Meanwhile, the growth in the working week for full-time workers has halted. The proportion of full-time workers putting in more than fifty hours in a week rose from 19.5 per cent through 1978 to 30.5 per cent through 2000. It gradually eased to 26.5 per cent through 2012. The unsustainability of such practices was apparent for employers to see. That said, the rotating twelve-hour shift still rules in mining and other areas; employers there still seek an increase in maximum shift length, and the attack on penalty rates in the service sector continues. But employer effort now seems focused on getting employees to work whenever suits employers, regardless of the cost to employee health or social life, rather than on getting individual employees to work longer and longer hours each week.

In public debate, the rationale for the policy choices that have underpinned these changes in work has almost always been about improving economic wellbeing. You may not be made better off as a result of being more insecure, working harder or having less quality time with your family, it goes, but you’re better off through the higher productivity that is brought about.

The trouble is, the evidence suggests that there has been no productivity dividend from all this. Annual labour productivity growth since the deregulation of foreign exchange markets has been no better than over the years that preceded it. During the WorkChoices years – the high point of workplace relations ‘reforms’ – productivity growth slumped.

Not all countries adopted the ‘market liberal’ model as enthusiastically as Australia. Generally speaking, it is the English-speaking countries that are most closely associated with the ‘market liberal’ model. But when you make long run comparisons across OECD countries, you do not find evidence that productivity growth, or productivity levels, are consistently higher in market liberal economies than in ‘coordinated market’ economies like Norway, Sweden, Germany or the Netherlands. (In fact, Norway has higher productivity levels than any of the English-speaking countries.)

But where these economic models really make a difference is in the distribution of income, wealth and power. Inequality is higher in market
liberal countries. Poverty is higher. The top 0.1 per cent typically gets more — though nowhere more than in USA — and the bottom half usually get less. As documented by Georgina Murray, Bill Carroll and others, a small proportion of (mostly) men really do occupy increasingly powerful positions. In a 2006 interview in the *New York Times*, one of the world’s richest men, Warren Buffett, said ‘There’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning.’ He said that with good reason.

Income and wealth inequality declined in Australia and other countries through much of the twentieth century, but they have increased since the mid 1980s.

Other inequalities persist. The gender gap in earnings between men and women, which closed substantially between 1969 and the late 1980s, has stagnated. Progress in achieving more positive attitudes amongst the populace at large and within institutional settings seems to have been offset by a greater distancing between working women and the regulation that protects their interests (for example, it is harder to regulate women’s wages under an enterprise bargaining system than through awards). Women continue to be undervalued when in female-dominated occupations, discriminated against when in male-dominated occupations, and excluded from the top echelons of business. Recent migrants often find their skills and qualifications undervalued and end up in jobs that underutilise their skills. People with disabilities continue to encounter career barriers, while those with less visible chronic illnesses face the dilemma pointed to by Shalene Werth: do I ‘disclose’ and risk possible labelling as a malingerer, or hide it and manage the danger of an unexplained relapse and absence?

It is not as if the period before market liberalism was one without difficulties. In the 1970s and early 1980s, a key problem was competition for what economists like to call ‘rents’ — economic surpluses. In an economy with many areas where product markets were poorly competitive, especially in relation to overseas-produced goods, there were opportunities for parts of both labour and capital to extract rents. This competition for rents became a spiral that heightened the problems of simultaneous unemployment and inflation. That is what prompted Australia to have an Accord between unions and the government.

These days rents are still being extracted, but by different groups — essentially extremely high income earners, the chief executive officers, directors and managers of top firms, parts of the finance sector, and the like. The old
problem of general inflation (and of responding to it) has been superseded by the narrower inflation of executive remuneration and of the incomes of the rich (especially the top 0.1 per cent) and asset price bubbles. Market liberal ‘reforms’ have not solved our economic problems and delivered an acceleration of our growth in wellbeing. They have just changed the problems, and in doing so made life more difficult for many workers.

YOU MAY HAVE noticed that I have barely used the term ‘globalisation’ in this essay to describe the forces at work. It is easy to blame problems in the way we work on globalisation, as if some external, inevitable force is at work and nothing can be done about it. But globalisation – if we mean increasing trade and international communications – is neither good nor bad in itself. Its effects are complex and contradictory.

On the one hand, for example, increased trade helps third world countries industrialise and grow wages, employment and living standards. On the other hand, globalisation increases uncertainty and puts increased pressure on companies to find new flexibilities with the associated pressure on security and wages that this implies. The net effect of these two tendencies is not set in stone. It depends on the policy choices taken by states and the mobilisations by employers, unions and other parts of civil society that determine the conditions under which globalisation proceeds.

The rhetoric of ‘free trade’ is used by multinational corporations to pressure governments to relinquish powers to regulate environmental or workplace behaviour through special clauses in ‘free trade agreements’. Yet governments don’t need to do that. It is a choice they make. Other countries are more ‘globalised’ than Australia – in Norway, for example, trade is 49 per cent of its GDP, compared to 34 per cent of Australia’s – but place more emphasis on ‘job quality’ or what the International Labor Organisation calls ‘decent work’ than is shown in Australia.

When the global financial crisis pushed millions out of work globally, the rationale for market liberal policies was demolished. The opaqueness of complex multi-layered financial instruments, and the perverse incentives created by reward systems in the finance sector – both results of financialisation – directly created the crisis. Governments and central banks in Europe and the USA were forced to rescue financial institutions from their own folly.
As economist John Quiggin pointed out, the credibility of the economic theories underpinning these policies was destroyed. Yet the ideas persisted – like zombies, they would not die. Remarkably, within two years Europe was plunged into a new crisis – a crisis of austerity politics – as enthusiasts for market liberal ideas successfully persuaded policy-makers that governments, not banks, were to blame and that workers, not the beneficiaries, needed to endure years of austerity to pay for the fiscal mess that others had created. More than anything else, this demonstrated the failure of civil society – in particular, unions and other bodies representing workers, children, the environment and the poor – to develop and articulate an alternative policy vision to challenge the failed market liberal paradigm.

Almost as remarkable now is how public debate in Australia proceeds as if there were a fiscal mass in this country when none exists (net public debt as a proportion of GDP is one sixth the average across advanced industrialised countries) – and then, of course, that workers, children, the environment and the poor have to pay to ‘clean’ it up.

Yet that is not the end of the story. Resistance happens, and choices have to be made. We have already seen how employees want voice at work and they want power to exercise some control over their working lives. Employees learn to cope or resist insecurity in their jobs and insecurity in their pay, through unorganised or organised means.

Unions have sought to reorganise themselves, devoting more resources to the workplace and sometimes to the formal and informal training of delegates, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and success. They have reversed the decline in membership, and substantially slowed (perhaps even arrested, we cannot be sure yet) the previously precipitous decline in their coverage of the workforce. That is probably a major accomplishment, though not enough to return to their former glory in the foreseeable future. Although in a hostile environment, unions’ future is in their hands. Democracy within unions is a precondition for success. In a world without wage arbitration, you can’t have power in the workplace if you don’t have power in the union.

Other social movements – representing women, the underprivileged, community groups, environment – need to be drawn into a major conversation if an alternative vision is to be developed, articulated and implemented. The Accord between unions and the government was many things, some of
which are irrelevant to today’s economy, but most importantly for this purpose it was an alternative vision of the economy, a challenge to the liberal market orthodoxy of government departments of the day. The need to develop an alternative vision of what the economy, society and workplace should look like is greater now than ever before. Unions put resources into the ALP, which badly needs the resources but doesn’t want the unions and believes they have nowhere else to go anyway, rather than putting resources into alternative institutions for advancing worker interests. Yet unions are probably the only group in Australia with the resources, the breadth of membership, and the organising capability to draw together the disparate groups and the individuals concerned. They showed an outstanding ability to mobilise resources and a much more limited ability to engage across community groups in the 2007 *Your Rights at Work* campaign. They now need to consider at least as challenging a process, one that spreads further and deeper outside their comfort zones.

So, there are choices about the directions of economic policy that need to be made; and there are choices to be made about the rights of people at work. Organisations think of ‘organisational citizenship’ as depicting ‘good’ behaviour by employees towards the organisation – doing things not in their job description that make life easier for their fellow workers, their managers or their customers, and that in the end help boost profits.

But citizens also have rights, not just responsibilities. We need to think and talk about treating people as citizens at work, people with a right to respect, job security, income security, and a voice. It means people have a right to decent work. And it can be done, if we make the right choices. As leading Canadian jurist Harry Arthurs recently said, it is not a question of going back to twentieth century labour law, as the problems for workers stem from wider forces that ‘also adversely affect all citizens in their non-working lives as consumers, borrowers, tenants and recipients of social goods’. The project is one of restoring the primacy of democratic values and processes over markets.

IN MARCH 2012 I found myself sitting on the floor of a living room in a suburb forty minutes’ drive from the centre of Melbourne. I was surrounded by a tight-knit circle of women in their late thirties. Most of the women – who were long standing friends and neighbours – were on maternity leave with their ‘last baby’. A couple of newborns gurgled on the rug next to me. Older children, two, three and four-year-olds, ran around the backyard with a collection of dogs. The women drank tea and ate chocolate biscuits, interrupted in their energetic dialogue from time to time by a request for a drink, a breastfeed, a knocked knee.

I was there in their midst to listen to them talk about their lives as part of Ipsos’s twice yearly Mind & Mood study into Australian sentiment. We conduct our research a little differently than the average market research company running focus groups. We venture into people’s living rooms, kitchens and favourite meeting places to hear friendship groups talk candidly and in an undirected fashion about their lives, relaxed among their peers they eagerly share stories of their daily pleasures and regular anxieties (mostly the latter). On this particular day the six friends assembled spent a lot of time – as women at their life stage often do – discussing life after maternity leave. Should I return to my old job or profession? Will they take me back? Will I need to retrain? What are the viable work options if I don’t return?
As a result of where these women were living, namely a significant distance from areas where jobs were available for their husbands, they felt the daily commute was a constraining influence. ‘He leaves before 6.30 and comes home around 7.’ And so they were all solely responsible for the child care and school shuttle run each day, not to mention supervising homework and making dinner. There was a financial justification for putting their husbands’ work needs first. ‘You put up with the longer hours [from him] because that’s where the money is.’ But undoubtedly there was also a subterranean belief among these women that their husbands’ jobs mattered more in a non-pecuniary sense. ‘Realistically I am not going back to full-time work for a very long time. I want him to have a job he enjoys.’ Whereas they seemed prepared to put up with shitty jobs that paid some money and slotted easily in with a husband’s schedule and the kids’ needs. Interestingly, the pressure not to return to their previous work commitments seemed to be largely an internal rather than an external one; the husbands were in fact keen for them to get back to work so they could be earning a full-time wage. ‘My husband is putting pressure on me to go back to work full-time. He is stressed, he wants money coming in. But I don’t want to compromise being a mum for her.’ ‘I get the guilt trip when the credit card bill comes in.’

Even among full-time working women the belief that a second-rate job is a flexible job prevails. There is some resentment among women about this as well: the sense that their careers after children had somehow become less important than their partners’ careers. ‘[My son] went to hospital a couple of times with asthma, and [my husband] never took a day off. It was all me…because he’s got the ‘real’ career.’ ‘Like, I find with Steve’s career, Steve’s always comes first.’ ‘We slip into our “half-arsed” bloody careers and still do all the paying of the bills, the shopping, the running the kids around, mowing the lawn…’ Having too much to do in the home and a lack of flexibility in the workplace are seen as key obstacles to mothers maintaining fulfilling careers. ‘When you go back to work…I still have to do everything else. I’ve just got to fit in whatever shitty job I choose.’ ‘The biggest problem I have in trying to get back into my chosen career is flexibility. My career is accounts admin and you have to be there 9 to 5 and I can’t do it with kids. What am I supposed to do? The kids have to come first… I don’t know if Australia is behind the rest of the world, but parts of Europe have 10 to 2… Here there’s no flexibility.’
THE GROUP OF women living on the periphery of Melbourne – and their approach to work at their life-stage – was fairly typical. What did stand out was their conscious decisions to move away from reasonably well paid, middle class jobs in the finance sector and elsewhere, because they believed these jobs would be too demanding and not flexible enough to allow for them to fulfil their other responsibilities. ‘I’m over work. I am over the travel, the politics. I have been there fifteen years in May. I wouldn’t go back into a branch because I don’t like the sales and the quotas.’ ‘With work, I don’t want the responsibility anymore. I am sick of it. I want to go to work and then leave.’

The ideal job for these women in their view would be as a ‘check-out chick’ at a local supermarket. ‘Any job I go back into I am going to have to do some retraining. I’ve been out for eight years. It will be minimum wage for me. So maybe a check-out chick? Five per cent discount on groceries?’ For these women, flexibility meant a job at the tail end of the labour market. Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg would describe this as leaning out. But of course what’s unclear is how capable these women – perched at the lower ends of the middle class – were of leaning in.

Of course what they might not realise – and it’s something I hear from workers in retail all the time – is that a life behind the till or stacking shelves is anything but carefree and flexible. Rosters change regularly and there is the nightmare of the split shift. I recall conducting an interview with a group of women in their early forties in Adelaide, friends because they all worked at the same retail giant. They had all headed into retail after having children because they thought it would complement caring responsibilities. And yet it was clear after a decade or so of working these jobs how unrewarding they could be, especially if hours were scattered all over the week. ‘I was working a casual job, stupid hours and stuff. Brad and I were fighting all the time because just as he would come home I would have to go out for work. No family time. We worked out we were around $50 off better a week. I almost spent that on petrol. It wasn’t worth it.’ ‘They don’t care about the staff. The wages reflect that. In our industry they actually want turnover of staff so they can keep getting cheap ones. They want the young kids and not the mature permanent staff. By underpaying us they hope to force us out. And it’s working too, people are going.’

After years of flexibility that meant low pay, low status, little
opportunity for training and advancement and a roster that ate into family time, these women were looking for the opposite of flexibility: certainty. ‘I am on my sixth year as a contract casual and I am waiting for permanent. I want some stability.’ ‘I’m all about finding a new job. Because we made a loss last year they are cutting down on our hours. But that’s not our fault. We are working just as hard as ever. It’s bad management.’

The group of women considering jobs as ‘check-out chicks’ in the hope of effortlessly combining paid work and family would benefit from reading social science researcher Veronica Sheen’s work on how tenuous jobs slowly, but surely, force women out of the middle class. She has conducted extensive interviews with women in their forties and fifties showing the result of losing, or walking away from, long-term permanent jobs. For women, like my Melbourne mums on their ‘last baby’ who had left full-time work to raise small children and were reluctant to head back into ‘full-on’ jobs, this necessarily means dependence on a husband’s income. But as Sheen points out, this strategy is a risky one in many respects. In a number of cases the husband’s income was then eroded by business failure or retrenchment, or by disability. This meant an exit from the middle class for the household. It placed more pressure on the woman’s employment which, part-time and insecure, could not compensate for the loss of the male job. This could then be further exacerbated by divorce or separation.

Even if these tragic events didn’t occur, once children had become more independent, older women who wanted and needed to return to the workforce were struggling to find a pathway back. ‘There are no jobs [in Toowoomba] for women over fifty. The people at the employment agency told me, go home, you’re too old.’ As Veronica Sheen puts it, ‘The doors to a middle-class life had closed behind them.’ The benefit of an older woman’s income to the household to contribute to retirement savings is obvious, especially given that at around fifty, men – who have been working full-time for decades to support the broader family – are starting to show signs of being worn down by work. More about that later.

WHO COULD ARGUE with the notion of flexibility? ‘Flexibility’ is a key word in the vocabulary of work – and increasingly in the vocabulary of
everything else, contracts with service providers and even personal relationships. Flexibility is associated with a sense of control and feeling ‘in control’ at work is a major contributor to the broader sense of having control over your personal destiny. Ideally, we want to feel in control of our time at work, the pace of work and our schedule, including in some cases when we start and when we finish work. We see lack of flexibility as a source of stress.

As Professor David Peetz, whose essay ‘The choices we make’ also features in this collection, has rightly noted: ‘We love the sound [of flexibility]. It’s undeniably good, seen beside its evil twin ‘rigidity’. If only we knew what it meant. Or at least, knew what others using it mean.’ Indeed in the eight years I have been conducting the kinds of groups described above, I have seen both the light and the dark of our increasingly flexible labour market. I know that in many ways the capacity of any individual worker to make the most out the ‘flexibility’ now on offer is contingent on what they do for a job, what sector they work in, their degree of bargaining power as an employee and increasingly the attitude of their employer and immediate supervisor to flexible work.

Reviewing the last eight years of Australians’ conversations about work contained in the Mind & Mood archive of reports, there are examples of flexibility working as it should. For those fortunate workers, flexibility enhances their sense of feeling in control, both at work and outside. ‘The best thing about my job is that I’m basically my own boss: I can do what I like when I like.’ ‘The money’s good and the flexibility’s good: if the surf’s good, I go surfing [even though I] still work forty hours per week.’ ‘These days you can work more flexibly and potentially from home. Last Monday, being the first day of the school holidays, I was at home and when people ring and hear the kids in the background they’re attuned to it these days.’ It’s clear some workers are prepared to compromise on many aspects of work – pay, hours and stress – if real flexibility is available. ‘My pay is reasonable, but not brilliant, but the conditions are great. If you want an hour or two off, there’s no problem – off you go.’ ‘I have flexibility and the job does let me travel. I can have days off in lieu and keep my holidays intact so I can go overseas. It makes up for a lot of the stress.’ ‘If I didn’t have an RDO once a fortnight, I don’t know what I’d do. That’s everything for me. It’s worth everything to have that day off.’

Yet even those who value and have a certain flexibility and sense of control of their working lives recognising there is a price to pay for this. This is
particularly the case for shift workers. ‘I do shift work and I do enjoy it, I can go to the beach or chill out on my days off, but the downside is my partner is on rosters too and sometimes we can go for days without seeing each other.’

There is a significant body of public health research that shows that long periods of shift work is associated with detrimental health outcomes for workers, including heart disease and sleep disorders. Not to mention the pressure it puts on relationships.

There is recognition too by workers that increased flexibility can equal a looser association with the workplace and with it a sense of diminished responsibility of employers to employees, in terms of issues such as career advancement and further training. Some older workers mourn the loss of the collegiality of the workplace where permanent employees were in the majority. ‘In the old days, people used to pat you on the back at the end of the day and say, “let’s go for a drink”.’ A workplace in which a larger and larger proportion of employees are casual, contract, working remotely on their laptops or turned over frequently for new staff doesn’t sound like a particularly friendly or supportive one.

Technology has profoundly altered the world of work and the ability of some of us in the workforce to work flexibly. Workers of all stripes themselves recognise that the smartphone can be both a useful tool and an irritant. While mobile phones and ‘access anywhere’ technology theoretically allows increased flexibility in patterns of work and leisure, it can also blur the distinction between the two, making it difficult to ‘switch off’. The idea that ‘work can follow you everywhere’ is simultaneously appealing and appalling to the Australians I encounter in discussion groups. ‘People are at work longer even if they are not in the office. You’ve got connectivity at home, so you go and check the email. It’s on your mind; it’s relentless.’ ‘Having a small business is more of a lifestyle thing, but it’s something I can’t get away from, even on holidays. It’s so easy to be contacted.’ Participants in our groups discuss expectations of management to respond to messages via technology in the evenings, early mornings, weekends, official leave and even Christmas. ‘Now with the iPhone there are expectations to be available 24/7 even over the Christmas break.’ ‘My employer expects me to check emails over the holidays. I was driving to Mildura and she was ringing me about some furniture order. Just because she doesn’t stop she expects you to keep going. I
was on my holiday!’ ‘I teach high school sport. I was at a funeral yesterday and missed work. I had two text messages and three phone calls from parents because I wasn’t there… My wife is getting emails at 10.30 at night from parents.’

AT THE BEGINNING of this report I canvassed the issues I’ve observed in our research associated with women, work and flexibility. Interestingly the notion of ‘flexibility at work’ has traditionally been linked almost exclusively with women’s desires and need to take time off to look after small children. But as our society continues to age – and as Australians of all ages take on more responsibility for caring for family members up and down the generational tree – flexibility at work should broaden to include and acknowledge this shift. And yet the view among many Australians, men and women, is that age discrimination exists in the labour market. This is all the more stressful given the current and continuing emphasis on working longer and the raising of the retirement age. As the implications of the ageing society start to dawn on all of us, true ‘flexibility’ at work is something everyone (not just pregnant workers and mothers of preschool kids) will want and need.

The most interesting conversations about flexibility at work I’ve observed have been among men in their fifties and early sixties. A few months after my discussion group with those outer Melbourne mums, I found myself in a very different part of Melbourne, leafier and more affluent, among a group of golfing buddies in their late fifties. Friendly, talkative and candid, these men have seen each other through divorces, problems with kids, career crises and cholesterol problems. The discussion started with a rather detailed exchange about prostate checks that I won’t forget anytime soon. But it soon moved on to a discussion about health, wellbeing and work. These men had been working full-time, often long hours, for many decades and were frankly over it. ‘People say going out to work and succeeding in life is what it’s all about. I don’t think we talk about the toll that takes on people. Men get worn out. They are in a cycle. They spend and have to work.’ There was no end in sight for most of them, given some had had to ‘start over’ after marital breakdowns. A few still had kids at school and fees to pay at the same time as they were trying to build up retirement savings that had been diminished by the global financial crisis. The strong consensus was they wanted to continue to work until seventy, but part-time. I’d like to
work less hours a week and work forever.’ ‘I wouldn’t like to retire now, but what I would like to do is work three or four days a week, wind down until I retire.’

At the forefront of these men’s minds was the retirement experience of their fathers. They wanted something different, a gradual shift to full retirement over a few decades, which would mix part-time work with time spent on grandkids, travel and particularly health and wellbeing goals. ‘Retirement has been a bit on my mind lately. I saw with my brothers as soon as they got out of stressful jobs, their health was so much better. They play golf. Their health is right. My dad flogged himself to the grave. I think about it every day.’ ‘Men who flog themselves at work. They get tired and they don’t eat properly. They drink too much. And then they die. It’s the stress of work.’

What’s stopping these men and others like them from asking for part-time work? It’s not solely the financial imperative, the concern about retirement savings. It’s the fear – a real one – that if you ask for part-time work, it’s a signal that you are a less committed worker, and that you may in fact be expendable. ‘I was retrenched because of the GFC so I have struggled with the retirement thing. I reckon I put out around fifty CVs and I think they read my age into my experience and thought, no way. I have had to come to terms with not working. It has been a forced retirement. I woke up one day and realised I must be retired.’ ‘The people who are going to manage us, they are much younger. They don’t want to employ their dad. They feel threatened.’ ‘I am over-qualified but I also have no debt, no mortgage. I am happy to earn a modest wage and do a decent job.’ ‘But it is also a question of cultural fit. If the workplace is a young workplace, you are a difficult fit, difficult to employ.’ ‘When I was in my twenties and thirties I got every job I applied for. In my fifties it all changed.’

Age discrimination in the workplace is real, felt by men and women from their early fifties. This is not just reflected in our research. The Australian Human Rights Commission released a report in 2013 entitled Fact or Fiction? Stereotypes of older Australians, that explores the extent and nature of age discrimination in this country, with a particular focus on employment discrimination. The overwhelming majority of community and business respondents in the research the commission conducted felt that age discrimination is most like to occur in the workplace (88 per cent community respondents and 92 per cent business respondents).

The most common type of age-related discrimination experienced
by older Australians is being turned down from a position (two-thirds of
Australians aged between fifty-four and sixty-five, and half of those over
sixty-five). Even more concerning is the report’s finding that one in ten of
the business respondents to the survey indicated they have an age above
which they will not recruit – and that average age is fifty.

Age Discrimination Commissioner Susan Ryan, in response to the
proposal to raise the age of retirement, has argued age discrimination must
be tackled if the change is to be effective as a budget reduction measure.
‘Before we ask most people to work longer, we need to ensure the barriers
and impediments in the entire system surrounding employment are removed.
Right now systemic barriers and negative attitudes remain firmly in place.’

How are older Australians meant to find consistent and flexible work, that
allows them to continue to contribute to the labour market and earn a wage
(as the government wants them to do) but at the same time pay attention to
their physical and mental wellbeing in order to age well?

FINALLY, I WANT to make a personal comment about part-time work.
Australia has relatively high levels of part-time employment compared to
other OECD countries. Unsurprisingly, the overwhelming majority of part-
time workers are women. In the literature on part-time work and in our
research, ‘family responsibilities’ tend to be cited as the primary reason why
women do not work full-time. The ‘choice’ is shaped by the belief – real or
imagined – that they would struggle to be able to combine being a full-time
worker and diligent carer. Despite the fact that Australia has a relatively high
incidence of part-time work, in proportion to overall employment for both
men and women, part-time work, in my experience, is still viewed as an
exception, one that is often disruptive to ‘business as usual’.

I have been employed part-time most of my life, largely by choice. This
is so I can have the flexibility to pursue other interests, namely writing and
radio, not just because I have caring responsibilities. I must also acknowledge
that I am able to work part-time because as a high-wage earner I can make a
decent income on a fractional salary. I employ a team of senior women who
all work part-time. We are assisted by a full-time junior employee. There are
mixed reasons why my teammates work part-time: some of them have family
responsibilities, but also it gives them the opportunity to pursue postgraduate
study. It should be noted that our work ‘outside’ our permanent part-time jobs benefits the business in many ways. Clients rarely, if ever, notice.

And yet I constantly notice the subtle and not-so-subtle denigration of part-time work in many organisations and when I encounter senior managers in a variety of industry sectors. When comments are made diminishing the usefulness of part-time workers I challenge that person to name a precise incident in which a part-time worker meant the loss of quality in a job or any other tangible business liability. They generally can’t. My personal observation – and a comment made regularly in groups of part-time workers – is that part-timers are often more efficient and focussed when they are at work. There are fewer long lunches and silly email exchanges.

If we continue to view part-time workers as only ‘partially’ committed to the world of work, then it’s evident we have a long way to go on the path toward a meaningful acceptance of flexibility in the workplace.

WORKERS IN OUR research often comment that the flexibility in the modern workforce doesn’t always work both ways, or at least to the same degree. ‘My employer enjoys the benefits of flexibility, but I don’t always.’ I see women at the ‘having babies’ and ‘caring for young children’ stages of life talk themselves into low-status jobs believing these will be the most flexible, thus setting themselves up for potential later financial and career hardship once children have grown up. I see workers love and lament the flexibility offered by technology. While I can work from home when children are sick or check emails while I watch kids at swimming practice, I may also be caught working around the clock, the expectation from employers that I will available after hours. I feel that the notion of flexibility has yet to adjust to the challenges and changes of our ageing society, with men and women over fifty wondering if they are too vulnerable in the labour market to request part-time work to pursue health and wellbeing goals, or to be able to better care for grandchildren and older family members. Flexibility is a lovely thing to have in the workplace, if it’s genuine. Otherwise you are just bending over backwards.

Dr Rebecca Huntley is a director at the research firm Ipsos Australia. She is an author of numerous books, including a memoir *The Italian Girl* (UQP, 2012) and *Eating Between the Lines: Food and Equality in Australia* (Black Inc., 2008). She is a columnist for *BRW* and the presenter of ABC Radio National *Drive* on a Friday.
I LIVE IN a suburb where no politician lives and therefore the trams run infrequently, often late and without proper brakes. Two, three times a month, when the driver applies a little pressure to the brakes, we are all sent hurtling to the front of the tram like atoms in a particle accelerator. Last month, in a particularly violent trajectory toward the wall (where we are apparently supposed to smash against a plate and separate into our constituent parts) two of us tumbled to the floor.

The woman next to me apologised in halting English for falling. A man in a smart suit rushed to her aid.

‘Are you all right?’ he whispered. She nodded.
‘And you?’ the man said to me.
‘I’m fine, thanks,’ I said.

The man handed a business card to the woman, who was looking thin and alarmed. He handed another to me who, on the other hand, was looking large and robust, with only my clothes and my composure askew. I knelt, then stood and shrugged my suit jacket back into position.

I looked at the business card as the lawyer pressed the woman.

‘Are you on your way to work? Are you a permanent resident? Do you understand what I’m saying?’

The tram driver stopped the vehicle at the tram stop. He came down to help the woman. When he asked if she was able to get up, the lawyer put his arm out straight to prevent the tram driver from touching her.

‘For God’s sake,’ he said to the driver. ‘Call an ambulance.’
‘No,’ the woman said. ‘I okay. I have to go work now. Please.’
‘You don’t have to go to work. Everything is going to be all right. The ambulance is coming.’

I knew this scenario from American cop shows. Layers of mystery would unfold from this woman’s unexceptional tumble on a tram. Forty-two television minutes later, drug busts would ensue, or a paedophile ring would be smashed and the cleric would hang himself.

‘No ambulance,’ the woman said. She used the lawyer’s arm to haul herself to standing position, brushed down her dress, then waved away the lawyer. End of crime show plot.

‘Folks, I’m going to have to call in a brake fault,’ the driver called out. ‘Might take a few minutes for the engineers to get back to me.’

Up the other end of the tram another cluster of atoms was forming, atoms who were going to be late for work and who couldn’t decide who to blame – the tram driver, the lawyer, the woman who’d fallen to the floor, the transport corporation, the government. So they got off the tram. I followed. We trooped down the road to the next intersection where the tracks of an alternative route snaked in twin wires towards town.

Ten minutes later we set off on another tram, jammed padded shoulder to breast pocket. I could feel the ribs of the thin tall woman beside me. My arm was pressed against her in the crush. The back of my arm was gently riding her ribs, up and down like I was playing a musical instrument with frets every few centimetres. One fret higher and my elbow would meet her breast. I couldn’t help imagining its curved bell shape moulding against my arm. I glanced up at her face and saw that she was gaunt and beautiful and so heavily made up it was impossible to tell what colour her real skin might be. Her lips, a startling purple.

Compared to the woman who had fallen, I was tall, but standing next to this commuter I was medium-sized. A medium-sized commuter on my way to a medium-sized job in a medium-sized city that I know too well.

I thought about how if I stayed in this city long enough I would run into the long angular woman at a party. I would spend some time wondering how I knew her face. She might do the same. We’d smile at each other in an I-know-you-from-somewhere kind of way and we might joke a little and offer to get another drink and then move on to a few words about how we happened to know the person...
who was hosting the party and then we would come a little closer, laugh a little louder, touch a little more often until the evening was late enough to slip away together discreetly. Or we might each go off and find someone else to talk to, or we might stand together uncomfortably for a while and then separately decide we were tired after a week of work and it was time to go home. But we wouldn’t take a tram. She would call a taxi or hail one on the main street near the party, and I would walk for a while, pretending I was a big man, not afraid of the dark and the desperate drug addicts lurking inside shadows, but further down the road I’d hail a different taxi, one driven by a man from Somalia who would ask whether I knew the capital of Somalia and when I answered correctly couldn’t think of anything else to say.

**TONIGHT, WITH THE** storm thrumming on the window of the café and commuters bowing into the rain as they hurry along the street, another tram story begins – with someone my friend knows. Sometimes, after work, I meet my friend who works in a government department, writing policy on the punctuality and frequency of public transport, and we drink white wine and eat bowls of hot chips and talk. She told me that this man had begun to act strangely in the office. He wore gaudy ties to important meetings.

‘Great wide lurid things with smiley faces and ducks and fluorescent stop signs.’ My friend shook her head.

I said I wished someone wore ties that interesting to meetings I attended.

‘You don’t understand,’ she said. ‘It’s inappropriate. And he wears brown shoes with black suits, and he has greasy hair.’

When she mentioned the man’s greasy hair, I wondered how long it was since I had washed my own. Before I could stop it, my hand had reached to my head.

‘Your hair’s looking good,’ she said, seeing me tentatively fingering strands, checking the greasy factor. ‘Have you had it trimmed?’

I remembered a man with greasy hair on my tram the other week. Strings of greasy hair. Greasy hair with a rancid smell, greasy hair with months of body oil and polluted rain and the fatty residue of meals
brushed from the fingers – accidentally of course – and thick flakes of dandruff embedded in the matted ropes. He was standing beside me and the stench was overwhelming. I moved away. After a few minutes all the other passengers had drifted away too and he stood in a vacant space, a tiny chapel on the tram. He was praying, loudly, ‘Jesus Christ, Jesus fucking Christ. Jesus, Jesus.’

The space in his tram chapel expanded. He wasn’t holding on to the handgrip and as the tram swayed and sashayed along the tracks he teetered backwards and forwards, the empty space of his chapel moving as the other passengers edged backwards and forwards to avoid him like a raggedy chorus line. I realised I had seen him several times before on this line. Another of my intimate strangers on the tram.

‘Have you got a fucking ticket?’ he shouted. He took a step in my direction and I stepped backwards, on to the foot of someone behind me. She yelped. I apologised. Again. How often have I fallen, stumbled, tripped on trams? How many times have I crashed into people, struck them accidentally with my flailing hand, or pushed my briefcase against them as I juddered forward, propelled by the motion of the tram? How often have I cracked a shin against the sharp corner of a seat, jarred my elbow on the ticket machine, been speared by the tip of another passenger’s umbrella? How many passengers falling, in what seems like slow motion, have reached out and taken hold of items of my clothing – sleeves, jackets, scarves – to break their fall? I have been dragged down and I have scrabbled on the floor. Along the floor. How much of my life have I spent struggling to get up from the floor?

The greasy haired man was pointing at me as these questions crowded my head. I may have been muttering, or at least my lips may have been moving. The tram crowd edged away from me. Greasy man and I were two magnetic poles and the commuters iron shavings being repelled by both.

At the next stop, greasy man turned his head when the doors slid open. Three people hurried off under his gaze, shoulders hunched, their feet taking anxious baby steps. He looked at me once more with loathing.

‘I am the great inspector,’ he roared, and hurled himself off the tram just as the door was sliding shut.
The iron shavings rotated when he was gone. I was the only repellent left. Their bodies rotated away from me and I was left in my own lonely chapel on the tram. At least I still have a job, I thought. I might be mad, but I still have a job.

In the café with my friend, I dropped my hand from my hair and tried to focus on the conversation.
‘I think he’s losing it,’ she repeated about her colleague with the lurid ties.
‘Perhaps he’s having a style makeover?’
‘I don’t think it’s funny,’ my friend answered crossly. ‘So like I said, we’re at this meeting…’

She kept talking while I pondered how linear her thinking had become since she started writing policy. This is why older, more experienced public servants should be given charge of policies that determine movement in the lives of the general public – they have had time for proper thinking patterns to form, time to appreciate and enjoy a vast range of humanity. They understand the cyclical nature of things. Older public servants would at least consider the possibility that a lurid tie may or may not be related to a simple need for life change and that it is wise not to make judgments without hearing the full case.

‘Then he said he thought I had failed to appreciate the gravity of the situation.’ My friend’s mouth was open. She spread her hands and dropped her jaw and shook her head from side to side, begging me with the gesture to express my own astonishment.
‘Huh,’ I said, not too worried that I had missed the actual point. Like a reliable service, I knew the next one would be along soon.
‘And then,’ she went on, ‘when I went to my head of department to…’
‘This guy, tie guy, he writes policy too?’ I interrupted.
‘Yeah, forest management.’
‘And he’s how old?’
‘Fifty, maybe sixty. He used to be brilliant at policy. Everyone hated what he did – the greenies, the logging industry. He always got it right.’

I imitated her gesture of astonishment back at her. The open palms, the hanging jaw, the eyes wide.
‘Well,’ she said defensively, ‘if one of the groups loves the policy everyone will think you’ve been lobbied.’

Lobbied – such a strange word. I thought of being hallwayed or verandahed. Porched. My friend, whose policy fails to ensure regular safe trams on my route, continues with her story as I tick off more words. Porticoed. Entranced. There, I knew I would find a proper word. The man may have been entranced. I realise I am muttering the words aloud and my friend is staring at me. And you can see that now I’m telling you this story in present tense as if it’s happening at this moment, even though I was using the past tense before, and before that I was in the present. Maybe this is happening now, or maybe the actions are completed. Or maybe I am imagining it all. Forward motion is rarely what it seems. We spend half our lives in the future while still thinking about the past and vice versa, in an endless loop of longing and regret.

‘I just thought I’d talk to you about him,’ she continues, still staring. ‘Because you have, you know, experience with these…with…things.’

‘Being mad, you mean?’

‘Don’t be stupid, you know what I mean. You’ve had a nervous breakdown, you know the signs, don’t you? Are they, like, what’s happening to this guy?’

I want to reach out with my hands in the most exaggerated motion I can to imitate her previous gesture of astonishment. And I want to lean forward and snarl or bark or spit in her coffee or do something equally disturbing. But I am a responsible man in a responsible position. I don’t do things like that.

So I lean back and say to her, ‘Everyone has a nervous breakdown. Sometimes they’re little and hardly noticeable. Sometimes they’re catastrophic. Eventually, we all go under. Every time I get on a tram I see someone heading for a breakdown. We’re like machines, we can’t just keep going on. We break down, then we get repaired and back on the tracks. Even you, one day you will have one, even if you don’t realise it yourself.’

I can see she’s trying not to smirk with disbelief at the idea of herself being shunted off to the depot for an overhaul. And maybe I am being too smug. Maybe my policymaker friend won’t break down at all. What
PADDY O’REILLY

would I know? All I really know is that everything would be more straightforward if I could spend my days riding the City Circle tram, the old W class clanker that trundles tourists around town for free, around and around, with a conductor on board whose only job is to help.

‘Did you write the policy on the City Circle trams?’ I ask my friend. She pauses, startled by the change of subject.

‘That’s the Tourist Authority,’ she says. ‘Not Infrastructure. I work in Infrastructure.’

She starts gathering her bag and coat. ‘Got to get back to the grind,’ she says, smiling.

‘Yes, I think your forest man is heading toward a breakdown,’ I say.

Once more she does the astonishment gesture, but this time her head waggle has a new knowingness about it.

‘I knew it,’ she says. ‘No really, I knew it.’

She gets up and goes, paying for us both on the way out to the street where the storm has passed and the wet black footpaths are softly steaming.

I often call the City Circle tram to mind, the gentle pace of it, the tourists hopping on and off. I’d like to pass the carefree image of the City Circle on to the greasy haired man, or even to tie man, who might have already boarded the wrong tram. He probably feels like he’s going places, he’s got speed and modern technology on his side. At the same time he might be looking at the floor, starting to realise that it’s a new kind of floor in a new kind of tram, flat and slippery and deceptive. In this city, you feel like you’re riding high and easy, but there’s a suddenness about things that always surprises you. Up the front, the driver is about to apply a little pressure to the brakes. My friend blows me a kiss and walks off to her car park. I want to call after her. I want to tell her about the future.

You hit the wall, you disintegrate, you put yourself back together again.

No lawyer in the world can help you with that.

Paddy O’Reilly is a Melbourne writer. She has published two novels and a short story collection. Her new novel, The Wonders, will be published in August 2014 by Affirm Press. Her story ‘The salesman’ featured in Griffith REVIEW 29.
ANNIE WAS WORKING as a secretary when she turned sixty, a milestone she’d always regarded as her retirement age. Although she could have coped financially, she found she wasn’t ready to retire: ‘I felt there were still things that I needed to do out there, that I still had quite a bit to offer in the workforce.’ She took on several part-time and casual jobs: after-school supervision, administration for a short-term project, setting up her house for international homestay students.

Annie is one of an increasing number of Australians who have decided to work into older age. In a recent Australian Bureau of Statistics survey of working adults aged forty-five or more who had a retirement age in mind, almost half said it would be between sixty-five and sixty-nine years, and close to one-fifth wanted to go on working until they were seventy or older. Furthermore, over six hundred thousand reckoned they’d never retire.

Despite the general perception that most people are anxious to escape the rat-race as soon as they can, these figures from the ABS show that attitudes to retirement are changing. The 2008 global financial crisis and its aftermath have kept some people working for longer, because, as American poet Ogden Nash said, ‘If you don’t want to work, you have to work to earn enough extra money so that you won’t have to work.’
On the other hand, improved health and its partner longevity, also mean that the ‘third age’ of life (beyond schooling and working) is gradually increasing. More people are living into their eighties and beyond, and are often looking for something to fill that twenty years or so beyond what used to be ‘retirement age’. Regrettably, life expectancy is nowhere near as high for many of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

A US study found that the reasons people continue to work vary with age. Those aged fifty-five to fifty-nine primarily mention economic reasons. This is also a strong motivator for those between sixty and sixty-five, but this group also want to stay active and engaged, and do meaningful work. The priorities change again for those from sixty-six to seventy and still in the workforce: the majority want to stay active and engaged; doing meaningful work is their second priority; and third in importance is social interaction with colleagues. In other words, as workers age, money becomes less important (especially if the mortgage is paid off), but staying in touch with work and colleagues is important.

In Australia, although there are still many people who dream of retiring to play golf, go fishing or pursue the grey nomad life, increasing numbers are looking for constructive and stimulating ways to fill what used to be their retirement years. A national survey of almost a thousand Australians who retired but went back into the workforce found that the motivation was not primarily financial, but rather it was social contact and the opportunity to pass on their knowledge to the next generation. Some said they also went back because they hadn’t achieved everything they wanted to at work.

Boredom is also a great motivator. In the ABS survey mentioned earlier, amongst the almost two hundred thousand Australians who had retired from the labour force, but were either back in work or were planning to look for re-employment, boredom was second to financial need as the reason for the move.

HARRY IS ONE who found he had retired too soon. At fifty-five, after more than three decades in the classroom, he decided he’d had enough and took a redundancy. His wife continued to work, however, and Harry soon found himself at a loose end. He caught up on some of the reading he’d always
intended to do, but after several months life had become boring. One day it occurred to him that he could make a better contribution to the world by volunteering at a local school to help students with their reading. When he submitted his CV, however, he was told that they didn’t have any places for volunteers, but would he be interested in some casual work as a supply teacher?

Since then, Harry hasn’t looked back. The casual teaching work gradually extended to four days a week and he had to resist the principal’s urging to go full-time. He teaches across the school’s primary and secondary divisions and says that because he isn’t a threat to the other teachers, some of the younger ones treat him as a mentor. What’s more, the additional income allows him to support charities more generously.

Those who’ve been able to find re-employment after retirement are the fortunate ones. Many people who leave employment in later life, whether through forced redundancy or by their own choice, often find it difficult to obtain another paid job. The ABS reported in 2013 that among those aged forty-five or more who were seeking work, a fifth said they were regarded by employers as too old and a similar proportion were told there were too many applicants. This may be a mask for age discrimination, which is now outlawed in Australia except in a couple of particular occupations in some states.

The CEO of National Seniors Australia, Michael O’Neill, said that some employers circumvent age discrimination laws by using recruitment agencies to screen applicants, use code words, such as ‘overqualified’, and phrase their advertisements to imply they want a younger person. The extent of such discrimination is highlighted in a 2013 report of research by the Australian Human Rights Commission, which found that around ninety per cent of those surveyed believed there is age discrimination in the workplace. One over sixty-five told the Commission: ‘Many people don’t disclose their age in the workplace, because they know that others may make presumptions about what that person might be thinking or doing...there are others who modify their age.’

Despite the discrimination, an increasing number of adults continue to work into older age, including those who have developed ‘encore careers’, a term coined by American author Marc Freedman in 2007, to describe a new
career after the main mid-life vocation. An encore career is typically adopted in what was once retirement, builds on previous knowledge and skills, but heads in a new direction.

The late Bryce Courtenay developed an encore career as an author, after working in advertising. He was fifty-five when he wrote *The Power of One* (Heinemann, 1989), and said to himself at the time: ‘Well, you know I’ve always wanted to do this. Let me have a go. I’ll probably fail, but what the hell.’ The book sold millions of copies, and established Courtenay’s writing career.

Passion built on experience seems to be a key to a successful encore career, according to Freedman: ‘Successful late-blooming entrepreneurs weave together accumulated knowledge with creativity, while balancing continuity with change, in crafting a new idea that’s almost always deeply rooted in earlier chapters and activities.’

**FREEDMAN THINKS IT** is more about reintegration than reinvention, which explains why becoming a consultant is an appealing encore career for some professionals. A consultancy role not only builds on knowledge, skills and understanding developed over mid-life, but also has the potential to allow more autonomy and flexibility. Nevertheless, being a consultant may also mean a more precarious existence. Andrea Coutu, editor of *Consultant Journal*, said that when you become a consultant, you have to be prepared to forego the level of organisational support you were probably used to, as well as the moral and creative support of colleagues.

A consultancy is a form of small business, another avenue to an encore career, and a direction that Roger took when he suddenly found himself redundant following a company takeover. With more than thirty years in administrative roles with a major newspaper chain, Roger’s ‘separation’ came as a surprise and, with no formal qualifications, he soon discovered he was not well positioned for another job.

After a couple of false starts, he chanced upon a new business, as a licensee of a suburban post office, where he was responsible for his own success. From his previous work, he knew the importance of a strategic location for a retail business, and he could read a balance sheet, but still he hesitated. ‘You’re
putting your big dollars on the counter and then thinking, well, is this going to work?’ he said.

Finally, he made the move and found a satisfying career, in which he was the boss. After more than fifteen years, he sold the business so that he’d have more time to play golf, but also hoped he might pick up a day or two a week as a relieving post office manager.

TRANSITIONING TO FULL retirement through part-time work is a popular option for older workers, with a higher proportion of part-timers in the over sixty-five age group than amongst those a decade younger. As the first wave of so-called Baby Boomers reached their mid-sixties, not only were they in the workforce longer than they’d expected, but they were more likely to be working part-time and most were happy with the number of hours they worked.

Among the reasons older people tend to move into part-time work is that they have paid off their mortgages, and so can survive on a lower income, or they prefer to have less responsibility, while others like the opportunity not to work five days a week full-time as their bodies begin to slow.

Frank is one of those who decided that, after twenty years of running his own tiling business, established when he was in his forties, his body was telling him it was time to scale back. Fortunately, he’d been building his superannuation up. In his early sixties was able to access some of those funds and supplement them with small jobs that come through word of mouth and an occasional letterbox drop. His wife works three days a week as a sales assistant, and every so often they head overseas for a few weeks.

For Frank, it’s a nice balance, but the impact of the ageing process is different for each person and uninformed views give rise to myths – sometimes accepted as fact by older people themselves – that support general discrimination. Such attitudes may lead to capable people not being allowed to work into older age.

On the other hand, there are older workers who want to leave the workforce as soon as they can afford it, especially those in physically hard jobs. University of Tasmania researchers found that although 80 per cent of Baby Boomers surveyed expressed a preference for phased retirement, on an
industry basis the percentage of labourers who wanted to stop completely when they retired from full-time work was three times that of managers and administrators.

Dick Whitehead, a Construction, Forestry, Mining and Engineering Union official, said in 2010 that by the time labourers reach sixty, ‘they are literally falling to bits’, which helps explain why they may want to get out of the workforce. In contrast, a research study in 2011 found white-collar workers generally did not perceive personal discrimination on the basis of age.

Industries with the highest proportions of older workers are the ones most likely to be affected by the loss of knowledge and skills as experienced members retire. These include agriculture, forestry and fishing, and education and training, where more than half the workforce is over forty-five, closely followed by health care and social assistance, and transport and logistics. The lowest proportions of older workers are in hospitality and retail, probably because those industries rely heavily on young people in part-time and casual positions.

GOVERNMENTS IN THE countries where populations are ageing, however, are encouraging as many older workers as possible to stay at work, because the demographics have implications for welfare and health budgets, as well as productivity. In Australia, the number of people aged sixty-five and over is projected to more than double by 2040, from just over three million people, (14 per cent of the population) to almost seven million (20 per cent). At the same time, the proportion of people under fifteen is expected to decrease, because of falling fertility rates.

In recent times, successive Australian governments have developed policies to encourage older workers to stay at work, to use their knowledge, skills and experience and at the same time reduce pressure on the welfare budget. More directly and less benignly, in 2009 the then Labor government announced that the minimum pension age for both males and females would increase gradually to age sixty-seven by 2025. Its successor, the Liberal–National Party government, in its 2014 budget increased the pension qualifying age to seventy years, to be reached in stages by July 2035.

The government also introduced an incentive payment to employers who hire a job seeker (including those on the Disability Support Pension) aged
fifty years or over who has been receiving income support for at least six months. The full payment will be staggered over a two-year period, which may make it less attractive to employers. In any event, such an incentive will be effective only if existing jobs are maintained and new ones created and age discrimination is tackled. Furthermore, the government needs to give greater policy recognition to the desire by many older workers to move into part-time work. Transition-to-retirement schemes, in which one option is to cut down working hours while maintaining the same level of income through accessing superannuation, is a step in the right direction. On the other hand, the Australian government’s abolition in 2014 of the mature age tax offset, which had allowed eligible older people to earn more income before they paid tax and the Medicare levy, seems a retrograde step in encouraging people to stay in the workforce.

The potential impact of later retirement on government coffers is considerable, apart from easing the pressure on the welfare and health budgets. A report by National Seniors Australia in 2009 estimated the economic contribution of Australians aged fifty-five or more and working full-time at almost $60 billion dollars a year. The report says that not using the skills and experience of older Australians, who are not in the workforce but seeking work, is costing the nation close to $11 billion annually.

Working into older age is a more complex issue than the economic argument. On the one hand, retirement age can be dependent on individual circumstances and motivations, while on the other it may be controlled by attitudes and practices of employers and shaped by government policy. For those not seeking remuneration, the perceived benefits of meaningful engagement and cognitive and social stimulation, may be met just as well by carefully chosen volunteering.

Nevertheless, government policies to encourage older people to stay longer in the workforce are developing at a time when the Baby Boomer generation has already begun to reach the traditional retirement age. As they come to recognise their increasing longevity and realise that their cognitive and physical decline is generally not as rapid as they feared, boomers are often looking for meaningful activities in the third age of life that will make use of their years of life and work experience.
Generally, more highly educated than previous generations, some of them will find these activities in casual or part-time employment, others in ‘encore careers’, including in small business or volunteering. Still others will want to continue working, but will be stymied and frustrated, sometimes by health considerations, more often by age discrimination.

When it comes to working, it seems there is a new spirit of endeavour among the Boomers, and an increasing need for finding meaning in their lives as they move into older age. William, a computer repair technician aged sixty-six, summed up the prevailing feeling among a significant number of his peers: ‘I just think I’d hate to be on my death bed and thinking, bugger, I wish I’d had the guts to do something.’

All the personal stories in this piece are true; names have been changed for privacy reasons.

References available at www.griffithreview.com

Darryl Dymock works as a writer and also part-time as a senior researcher and adjunct lecturer in adult and vocational education at Griffith University. His most recent books are Extending your use-by date: Why retirement age is only a number (Xoum Publications, 2013), and a biography, Hustling Hinkler: The short tumultuous life of a trailblazing aviator (Hachette Australia, 2013). He has not yet set a use-by date.
Flying high
The rise and guise of self-funded retirees
Mandy Sayer

TWO DECADES AGO, my father, then in his mid-seventies, used to fly to the northern New South Wales town of Lismore several times a year. He would buy $10,000 worth of marijuana, store it in his carry-on luggage and return to Sydney the same day.

A lifelong user, he had started dealing in order to supplement both his habit and his old-age pension. At the time, I considered him an entrepreneurial anomaly, but these days more and more Australian pensioners are cultivating and/or selling illegal drugs. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some do it for the promise of regular visitors, others to fund hobbies, others to be able to afford to self-medicate. Most, however, seem to be happy to be on the wrong side of the law for the chance to top up their pensions with tax-free cash.

Brian Ogilvie, for example, was a 68-year-old pensioner living in a caravan in Bowen, Queensland, when he decided to deal marijuana in 2008. His wife had died forty years previously and he’d been on antidepressants for three decades. The former fisherman and council worker had grown bored and isolated, so he opened his caravan for business. He treated his dozen or so customers as friends, serving them tea and sandwiches, before he was raided and charged in 2010. Before his bust, he’d been planning to save funds from his dealing to travel around Australia as a grey nomad.
‘There’s no money. You can’t live off the pension,’’ 71-year-old Queenslander Alan Hogan told the police in July 2011. ‘I can’t work. I had a shoulder reconstruction.’ After his Cooroibah property was searched, a sophisticated hydroponic set-up was discovered behind a lockable cupboard. Police also discovered two kilograms of cannabis, forty plants, and more than a thousand dollars in a drawer. Hogan was sentenced to two years in jail, to be suspended after he’d served eight months.

Meanwhile, a month earlier, an eighty-year-old man was arrested during a raid in Broome, Western Australia. He’d been caught selling cannabis from the front door of his property. The court was told Ahma Bin Haji Mohamed Noor lived on a pension of about $400 a week. The magistrate noted that the retiree had a history of similar offences and had been fined $600 only eighteen months before. Noor was fined again, this time for $2,000 and was warned that if he got into trouble in the future he’d be going to jail. And then, last June, a 78-year-old woman who lived in a unit in Sydney’s southwest was charged with selling cannabis from her home. A police raid had allegedly uncovered a large amount of cannabis and cash, scales and other drug paraphernalia.

A few months later, a couple of grey nomads in their mid-sixties from South Australia, were charged with trafficking. Police allegedly discovered sixteen packages, each containing about 450 grams of cannabis, in a purpose-built compartment in the undercarriage of the couple’s caravan. They alleged the couple was planning to sell the product interstate.

Statistics show that more than a quarter of older Australians struggle financially. The Global AgeWatch Index 2013 is the first international league table to rank the welfare of people aged over sixty. Australia trailed behind Sweden, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom overall. Australia’s ranking was diminished by the financial circumstances of its older people. Just over a third of them have an income less than half the country’s median income. It’s little wonder that some are peddling drugs in order to make ends meet.

IT’S SATURDAY MORNING on the main street of Nimbin and the footpath is alive with stalls of clothes, jewellery, jams and floppy hats. Buskers
play raucous trombones and drums, barefoot toddlers run around and dogs wander in and out of cafés, nosing for scraps of food. Everyone, it seems, wants to sell you something, whether it’s the skinny man flogging clay ocarinas or the young ‘Laneway Boys’ hawking weed to tourists who arrive on buses several times a day.

As I walk beneath the awnings, I hear a high-pitched voice crying, ‘Cookies! Cookies!’ and notice a plump older woman waving a small plastic bag in the air like a miniature flag. Her face is deeply lined, her grey hair is swept up into a roll, and she’s wearing a loose orange-and-black caftan and a pair of rubber thongs. Her bag contains three round biscuits.

‘How much?’ I ask.

‘Three for twenty, or six for thirty.’

We sit down on some nearby milk crates. When I tell her I’m writing a story about pensioner drug dealers she agrees to talk to me as long as I don’t reveal her real name or address. ‘Nanna’, now in her late sixties, worked full-time as a nurse in Sydney before retiring to northern NSW. Seven years ago, in order to supplement her pension, she began baking marijuana cookies and selling them two days a week to day-tripping tourists.

‘Why only two days a week?’ I ask, ‘Is it because you get tired?’

She shakes her head. ‘It’s not that. The Laneway Boys get the shits. They don’t like me moving in on their territory.’

A group of young Asian men shuffles past. Nanna jumps to her feet and waves the bag again. ‘Cookies!’ she trumpets, in a voice so warm and maternal that they stop and enquire about her prices. As she quietly negotiates with the non-English speakers I can see why the Laneway Boys feel so threatened by Nanna. Scoring from the Laneways requires handing cash to a paranoid and pimple-faced teenager, then following him down several back lanes, where the cash is handed over to yet another paranoid and pimple-faced teenager, who disappears beneath a house or onto the roof of a café and returns with your marijuana in a paper bag. Buying home-baked cookies on the main street from a woman who looks as harmless and gentle as your grandmother is an appealing alternative. It obviously works: a few moments later one Asian man is giving Nanna his money and she is whispering to him to hide the purchase in his jacket pocket before the coppers spot them.
As she sits back down I ask her if she’s ever been arrested. She brushes a stray grey tendril away from her face and nods. ‘I’ve been raided three times and busted twice.’ Most recently, in 2011, she was fined $365 and given a two-year good behaviour bond.

‘But that still hasn’t stopped you?’

She smiles and shouts, ‘Cookies!’ to three passing people so pale and fair I wonder if they could be albinos. Nanna says she doesn’t grow or harvest the cannabis plants, but sources them through a local grower. She’s never been a recreational user. (‘Oh, I had a toke or two when I was nineteen, but didn’t everybody?’) Instead, she eats half of one of her own cookies every night – and has done so for the past seven years – for relief from arthritic pain and to help her sleep.

The albinos are now in a huddle nearby and are glancing back at Nanna. I ask her how much money she makes in a week and she replies, ‘Depends on the weather and the time of year.’ As I watch ten-dollar notes flutter between pale hands, she adds, ‘Roughly between one hundred and six hundred for the weekend.’

The albinos approach and the deal is done within several discreet seconds. The cash disappears into Nanna’s bra, and the cookies are sequestered in a buyer’s bumbag. As the albinos leave, Nanna warns them, in a voice reminiscent of the caring nurse she once was, ‘Remember it takes an hour to kick in. And don’t drive a car, all right? It’s far too dangerous!’

IN BYRON BAY there is a gift shop filled with candles, tie-dyed saris, feathered dream catchers and Balinese bells. Towards the back, you’ll notice a small door ajar. If you nudge it open you’ll see a small, enclosed verandah cluttered with boxes of stock, a desk littered with papers and plastic lunch bags filled with marijuana. You’ll probably also spot a balding man named Lotus, whose silver hair and beard makes him look like a well-tanned Gandalf. He’ll usually be perched over the desk, weighing up buds or trimming stalks from dried plants.

Today he’s sitting on a red towel on the floor, trying to salvage stock: some sheets of fluorescent smiley-face stickers that got wet during last night’s storm. The tin roof is still leaking and the tiny area smells like damp dog fur.
Lotus looks up and gestures at me to take a seat. As he continues to dry and stack the stickers, I ask him how long he’s been selling pot in the back room of his legitimate retail business.

He pauses and pulls on his beard. ‘About ten years,’ he replies.

‘Do you think you’ll ever stop? I mean, as you get older?’

His lips curl into a cheeky grin and he shakes his head. ‘I can’t ever see myself stopping, no.’

Now nudging retirement age, he began smoking weed when he was seventeen and suffering from severe arthritis. Within a year he was symptom-free and playing touch football every weekend.

I notice a bag full of marijuana sitting on the desk. ‘How much do you charge for a bag of this?’

‘Two [hundred and] eighty for an ounce,’ he says. ‘Or ten dollars a gram.’

I ask him if he grows the weed himself and he replies that he buys it from a local farmer. He explains that he’s also involved with two companies in Thailand to develop alternative seed stocks for the hemp food industry and for hemp fibre production. He makes two trips a year to confer with his overseas colleagues. When in Byron Bay, he communicates and shares information via Facebook and email. Lotus tells me the main reason he sells pot nine hours a day, seven days a week, is to fund his research into the medicinal potential of marijuana. He estimates that he sells about 40 per cent of his product to recreational users. The profits allow him to give away the remaining 60 per cent to sufferers of cancer, arthritis, Parkinson’s disease and multiple sclerosis.

‘At the moment, I’m developing a massage oil with a very high THC level to use on sufferers of cerebral palsy.’ *Tetrahydrocannabinol* is the main psychoactive ingredient found in the cannabis plant.

When I ask Lotus if he has ever been busted, he rolls his eyes and nods.

‘The last time was about two years ago. I got a “section 9” [good behaviour bond] and had to enter into a three-month merit course.’ The program involved regular urine testing as well as education on the long-term effects of drug abuse. ‘During that time, my blood pressure went through the roof! My arresting officer reckoned I wouldn’t make the three months, but I did.’ And how soon was it before he was back in the shop, smoking and dealing dope on a regular basis? ‘About a week.’ Lotus tells me a story about a pensioner
named Chicken George, who retired from his council job in Coffs Harbour in the late ‘90s and moved to the Byron Bay area. Chicken George soon realised he had two problems: a growing taste for marijuana and an inability to live well on the pension. ‘At the start of every winter, he’d buy up a few kilos of weed and then have a mate – who owned a trucking business – remove the wheels of his van and store the dope in the tyres. Chicken George’d then drive up to Cairns on his own, check into a caravan park and spend two months dealing there, which funded his lifestyle for the rest of the year.’ Lotus adds that Chicken George did this for several winters, without being arrested, until his death seven years ago at the age of sixty-six.

‘I do have one rule, though,’ says Lotus, ‘and so did Chicken George. We don’t sell to minors, no matter how much they offer to pay.’

ONE OF THE most recent trends among retirees, primarily on the Gold Coast, is to on-sell prescription drugs such as the painkiller OxyContin (nicknamed ‘hillbilly heroin’) to youths who like to mix them with alcohol. Older people can easily fake symptoms, they have immediate access to doctors, and pensioner subsidies on prescriptions ensure a tidy profit. Between 2009 and 2011, for example, more than 580,000 taxpayer-funded scripts were approved in NSW for OxyContin and similar opiate painkillers, such as OxyNorm and MS-Contin. For every $34 script of OxyContin, users are supplied a box of twenty, eighty milligram tablets. Each tablet can then be sold on the black market for as much as $50. With further discounts to pensioners, the box can be bought for as little as $6 – which can then be on-sold for $1,000.

But it’s not just the trafficking of cannabis and pills that provides financial assistance for Australia’s ageing. In 2008, Kevin Griffiths, then seventy-four, of Sydney, was arrested on charges relating to the dealing of ice, or crystal meth. He and one of his co-accused, Zivko Skepervski, then sixty-seven, of Macquarie Hills, were allegedly the kingpins of one of the largest trafficking operations of the drug exposed in NSW. Police said the drugs they seized had a street value of $500,000 and were the equivalent of 10,000 single uses.

On a sunny afternoon in Sydney I have lunch with Don, an 83-year-old chemist who has been on a weekly retainer for the past five years with a major Australian bikie gang. His only job is to develop alternative molecular
structures for the production of crystal meth, ones that can evade the ever-changing federal laws.

We meet at an outdoor café, just around the corner from his unit in leafy Killarney Heights. His hair is cloud-white and styled into a curly pageboy cut and he’s sporting a black eye and bandaged wrist from a recent fall at home. Even though he’s apparently unsteady on his feet these days, Don refuses to use a walking stick, let alone a Zimmer frame. With him is his friend, Snapper, fifty, the middleman between Don and the bikie gang. Snapper’s secondary, legitimate, business is a pizza shop in Sydney’s west.

In a soft, child-like voice, Don remarks that it’s impossible to make money in Australia by cooking up meth these days. ‘Too many taxes [on the precursor drugs], and too much bureaucracy.’

‘The chemicals are hard to get,’ Snapper adds. ‘I mean, on an industrial level.’ Snapper has lost some of his front teeth and I have to lean forward to hear him fully. ‘In the old days we used to be able to buy 200-litre drums of benzyl methyl keytone for fuck all…’

‘And then all of a sudden you can only get 10-mil bottles!’ interrupts Don, horrified.

For a few minutes, Snapper and Don forget I’m here and begin to argue like an old married couple over the correct names of various chemical combinations that they’re experimenting with, including those concocted from a kangaroo-tanning product derived from ox blood.

‘No,’ says the older man, shaking his head. ‘It’s phenylacetic. I should know!’

Don explains that he flies to China three times a year, purchases precursor chemicals for a fraction of the price of those in Australia and on-sells them to another international destination. They will eventually arrive in Australia through a covert operation that he’s not willing to discuss.

‘So how does it all work?’ I ask. ‘I mean, between you and Snapper and the bikies? Who’s in charge?’

The two men glance at each other. ‘It’s easy,’ replies Don. ‘There’s only one law. Whoever has the money makes the rules.’

Don says that he was admitted to university in the 1930s to study chemistry at the age of sixteen. An only child, both his parents were doctors and he served an apprenticeship with his father in order to receive his qualifications.
‘How long was it before the apprentice outgrew the father?’

Don snorts and shakes his head. ‘Oh, I was about twelve,’ he replies, waving a dismissive hand.

Snapper lights a rollie and tells me that recently a Lebanese gang tried to move in on Don. They, too, offered him a generous retainer in return for ‘chemical consultations’. When members of the original bikie gang discovered what ‘the Lebs’ were up to, they directed two of their girlfriends to beat up the interlopers, which they did – right in front of their precious pensioner. The only problem was that the bikie chicks then moved in with Don for a few days, polished off his whisky and used up all of his hospital-prescribed Xanax, Valium and morphine.

Developing alternative strains of crystal meth is not Don’s only preoccupation. ‘I’ve also experimented with diet drugs…synthetic skin…’

‘What are the other challenges for you when manufacturing meth,’ I ask both men, ‘besides sourcing the chemicals?’

Don begins. ‘It takes three people a week to cook one batch up…’

‘Glassware,’ overlaps Snapper. ‘Sometimes we buy it second-hand from an internet firm…’

‘Yes, but even second-hand glass has to be registered with the government,’ adds a withering Don.

Snapper sighs and rubs his two-day growth. ‘But it’s just a code of practice, not a law. Nothin’ we can’t deal with.’

Snapper tells me that the reason Don was freed from remand in Long Bay a few years ago was because he’d become too popular with his much younger prison mates. ‘He was like an old grandfather teaching them all how to cook. The screws got so mad they had to kick him out before he totally corrupted them all!’

As Don rummages in a shopping bag, I ask him if ever uses the drugs he is obviously so skilled at developing. He shakes his head, uninterested, and continues rummaging.

‘So is it the money?’ I add, wondering aloud why he’d risk so much to provide for an infamous and dangerous bikie gang. He laughs and pulls out a notebook. ‘The money’s good, but that’s not all.’

‘Well, what is it then?’ I persist. ‘The company? The sense of risk?’
He looks at me directly with his good eye and hands me his business card:
'Don Miller: Consulting Chemist; Chemical Analysis; Custom Synthesis.' He
grins and places a plump hand on mine. 'It’s to satisfy my boundless curiosity.’

LIVES LIVED WELL is a Queensland not-for-profit organisation that
supports people who are struggling with addiction. Its chief executive,
Mitchell Giles, believes that Australians’ idealisation of a peaceful retirement
belie a raft of problems that today’s elderly face, including isolation, depres-
sion and stress. ‘These factors can strongly increase the likelihood of older
people misusing alcohol or other drugs as a coping mechanism.’ Not only are
many retirees trafficking drugs to assist them financially, but some are also
becoming regular users of the products they deal. Figures from the Australian
Institute of Health and Welfare, reported in October 2013 in the Courier-Mail,
show that between 2003–4 and 2011–12 there was a 321.18 per cent increase
in amphetamine use for Australians sixty years or older, while treatment for
cannabis use among the over-sixties increased by 231.60 per cent.

If these statistics seem to have come out of the blue, we’d do well to
remember that many of today’s pensioners are yesterday’s hippies: former
Vietnam War protestors, alternative lifestyle practitioners, flower children
and anarchists. The generation that came of age during the 1960s is past retire-
ment age or rapidly approaching it. During the 1970s, these same people
enjoyed the largesse of a generous Whitlam government, one that provided
free tertiary education, various social services and dole payments that they
could actually live on.

During the ’80s, many baby boomers were enticed into more conven-
tional lifestyles, had families and settled down to enjoy the security and
comfort of middle age. It’s a generation that is not accustomed to making
sacrifices or ‘going without’. It is also, paradoxically, the generation that
began, and continues to fuel, the self-help industry. Put the two together and
we have the perfect storm.

This older population is already putting a strain on our hospitals, aged
care services and pensions, with economists predicting an escalating financial
crisis. What many people have not predicted, however, is that with more and
more elderly Australians appearing, and reappearing, in court for illegal drug
related issues, our already full prisons – and prison hospitals – will be in danger of becoming crowded with ailing grandmas and grandpas.

In December last year, for example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics released figures revealing that for the first time in history the number of prisoners in Australia had reached over 30,000. Moreover, between 2003 and 2013, there was an increase of 2.6 per cent in over-fifty-five male prisoners, and an increase of 4.5 per cent in over-fifty-five female inmates.

During his twilight years of smoking and dealing cannabis, my father spent his extra tax-free cash on improving his lifestyle. He invested in a rowing machine, a racing bicycle, a surfboard and a wetsuit. He bought health food in bulk from a co-op, purchased plane tickets to visit friends and relatives interstate, and picked up new cymbals for his treasured drum kit – acquisitions that kept him healthy and independent till the ripe old age of eighty.

When I think of the last, happy decade of my father’s life, I’m reminded of a piece of graffiti scrawled on the wall in the back room of Lotus’ Byron Bay store. It’s a quote by Rumi: ‘Out beyond ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there.’

*Some names and locales have been changed.

---

I'M BACK WORKING with the Dragon Lady after we both went overseas, again, and changed companies, again, came back to hospitality, again, and accidentally landed in the same shit-hole, again. We all go to our death, some walk, some run, some dance and some ride motorbikes.

'I see the bulls didn’t get you in Pamplona.’
‘No way. I was on a rooftop watching them, too drunk to walk, let alone run.’
‘At least you didn’t let sunny Spain brighten your outlook too much. It makes me happy.’
‘I’m here, aren’t I?’
‘Here as the ninth letter of the alphabet.’
‘Fuckin’ writers. I read somewhere a lot of writers kill themselves. When are you going to do it?’
‘God knows. I’m not even finished my book yet. Any ideas?’
‘Maybe when you wake up and realise your God isn’t real.’
‘Chuck Palahniuk said, all God does is watch us and kill us when we get boring.’

She shakes her head and flicks the ciggy butt into the car park.
‘Ughh, I don’t know why I even talk to you.’
‘Because we work together.’ I smile.

This time we have to pretend we don’t know each other because Mikey the manager is such a jealous shit he won’t let us talk if he knows we’re friends. The bar we work in is generic. Lots of beer, lots of red, lots of white, lots of basics, plenty of
cheap bistro food and lots of reasons to go and ‘have a poke’ in the meantime. On the walls are political agendas that no one seems to notice. Government warnings about problem gambling, problem drinking, problem smoking, plastered on posters in toilets competing with the club’s propaganda – footy playing kids who stare out from under worried frowns (who voted to cut kids’ sport funding?) the android heads of CCTV (who voted for more surveillance?). Agenda verse agenda, fear verse fear. Two national powers pulling at the heartstrings of people they don’t want to know. Maybe if we weren’t in the pokies we’d have more money for footy boots and clubhouses, but then maybe if we had jobs we gave a shit about we wouldn’t need so much relaxation.

The pokies bubble away after the beers stop pouring. Everyone knows gambling’s probably a bad habit, everyone knows they have it under control, everyone knows someone who won big. I watch the grey-hairs sit semi-happily under the slow bake of Pearl Treasure and Outback Gold and Pink Panther with shades of silver, yellow and magenta flushing wrinkles with reflections of bad electronic art. They share the row with the resident shadies.

A curved and jaded twenty-year-old leans up at the end of the row in her painted on mini-skirt. Even under seven layers of concealer and comically long lashes you can see she’s tired. She looks after her boss’s house when he’s away. Maybe a stripper, maybe a hooker, maybe a companion. Either way, free rides are never quite free. Sometimes I say, Hi. Tonight she talks more, says I should come around sometime, that she’ll be alone in a mansion on a canal and she gets scared when she’s on her own. I think about it carefully, say maybe.

Her friend, Rat-face, is a nobody in criminal chic. Sleeve tattoos of Japanese demons and Koi fish, crazy silver tribal-style Tapout shirt, shiny black Adidas trackies, gold chain and bum bag over the shoulder. Connected but not clever, the speed-byproduct dutifully punches fifties into two machines at once betting five bucks a spin until the hotel closes or he wins most of it back in freshly laundered notes. The guy is rude-ish but he tips the attendant when he wins a grand or two. They’re here every night I am.

Generally all I do is babysit semi-functional adult alcoholics while
I try not to get caught watching sport or reading the papers. The club has to have me here by law and my manager resents me for it. He’s the kind of guy who joins tipping comps and lays on multies where you can’t remember who to cheer for. It’s not about team colours or parochialism or pride or prejudice. It’s all about the multiplier, the long odds and the short. Everyone loses in the end and he resents them for it.

At one in the morning I kick everyone out and walk a pensioner to the car park after they’ve all gone. She has eight hundred dollars in her pocket and the way is dark but she repeatedly refuses my help because she lives close and she’s drunk. I’ve barely even seen her drinking. It’s so hard to tell when they’re just sitting there, not speaking, sipping. I watch her cross the public park on jelly legs until she falls face-first into the turf. I race over but when I get to her she chuckles in embarrassment and is twice as determined to make her own way home. She smells like cut grass and stale plums, with a hint of liquorice and Port Royal on the back palate. Reminds me of my grandmother.

The Dragon Lady is waiting back at the doors, pulling hard on her smoke.

‘Thought you were dead.’ She smirks.

‘No such luck.’

‘Did you pull grandma out of the grass?’

‘I tried but she wouldn’t have it.’

‘I’ve seen her before, she’s so fucking miserable. She should just kill herself.’

‘I don’t think she will after what she won tonight. Not until she’s told everyone how she got it and how she lost it.’

‘She’ll be lucky if she makes it on those legs.’

‘My grandma wants to die. I thought about helping her once.’

‘Why didn’t you?’

‘I dunno, same reason she never did it by herself I guess.’

‘She ever try it?’

‘Mum says she tried to. She got hold of a bunch of sleeping tablets but didn’t know how many to take so she fed them to the dog first. Rolled them up in balls of cheese and mince. The mutt spent a day and a night heaving and throwing them up all over the carpet. She botched it so bad she decided she better not to do it to herself.’
'Hah!'  
I lock up and we sort the cash from the night’s pokie takings into bundles of fifties, twenties, tens, fives, which is slightly illegal. We feel the pointlessness like a weight. Piles of green, orange, red, blue, pink, high on the table like a fiscal rainbow. Years of our working lives sorted in neat stacks at the end of every shift, every night. The government takes a huge cut. The company takes a huge cut. The rich get richer. And me, the Dragon Lady and Mikey the manager resent them for it.  
I wonder why anyone would ever risk trying to rob a bank. Put a hole in the pub window and walk in with firearms and I will hit the floor while the staff show you to the cash. Forget the vault. Quick in, quick out, no fucking around. I think about whether it would be worth it with a uni degree on the shelf, no career prospects and a steadily maxing credit card. But then I think about accomplices. I think about Rat-face and his twitchy fingers and hard grey eyes. I think about the Maybe-stripper and her maybe habit and her big mouth. I think about the guys that dropped out of school and got probation or prison for weed and hooning and generally being dickheads. I think I’ll leave them to it. All this shit is linked.  
I FINISH UP and wait ‘till we sign out paging through copies of the Courier-Mail and Gold Coast Bulletin disinterestedly. There’s been a spate of hold-ups, but a shooting at the Pacific Pines Hotel twenty minutes down the highway is actually news. A cop is in a coma. The reports are brief and padded with hard-core press conference rhetoric. Shocking crime…unscrupulous and evil act…yada yada yada. The staff was held at gun-point and a security guard bashed into submission for twenty-five bucks an hour. He didn’t physically resist, but they made an example of him after one of the staff called the cops on a mobile. The police arrived on the scene. A female officer and her partner jumped out. They were both experienced and he was willing. She lived, he died, the crooks ran and Australian Liquor Holdings made an insurance claim. Stupid fucks, someone must have fucked up. Why weren’t the cops together? Why did they go in at all? Why did the staff call them? Why did the idiots shoot a cop? I put the paper away. I don’t know the
BLUE PEOPLE

details. I hope I don’t know any of them – the cops, the robbers, the staff – or maybe, I just hope I don’t like any of them.

WE LEAVE AT 3 am and the Dragon Lady climbs up behind me on my Kawasaki and wraps her lithe frame around my heavy frame and breathes her light, hot breath on my dark, cold neck and presses her breasts against the top of my back. The old sports-bike coughs once, then rumbles and barks its complaint at the frosty night. My manager offers a warm ride in a big car and she shouts to him.

‘No thanks, byeeee! Love you Marky!’ and whispers to me, ‘but really I hate him.’

He doesn’t hear it, but he feels it. He resents us for it.

The next day I get woken up at noon by my boss.

‘Can you work tonight?’

‘When?’

‘Eleven till eight, solid nine hour shift mate.’

‘Eleven pm ‘til 8 am?’ My brain fizzes.

‘Yep, static shift, just hanging around.’

‘I gotta work the next morning mate, I gotta teach a class, I gotta prepare, I gotta do marking.’

‘Super easy shift mate, take your shit with you.’

I get suss. My brain ticks over and I remember the newspapers.

‘Pac Pines.’

‘Yep.’

I think of the danger briefly but mostly I think of writing on the job with no one to harass me. I think of getting shit done that I should have done already. I think of writing up my story about how much I hate Ricky Stewart and how Queensland will annihilate the Blues in the next State of Origin. I think of mixing Origin and southern migration to the sunshine state in a story called, ‘You Play Here, We Stay Here’. I think of the other story I read last night of shootings and shit, but mostly I think of how broke I am.

‘Ok, when?’

‘Great. 10 pm. You’re taking over from Laurie, he’s been there since ten this morning. Cheers maate,’ he chirps.

‘Oh by the way. Will I be alone?’
'Yeah. But there'll be coppers there.'
'Replacements.'
'What?'
'Nothing.'

I take the lightning never strikes twice approach and scoot down the highway at nine. Pacific Pines is a bold suburban frontier to the Gold Coast glitz. My mate lives up the road in the manicured labyrinth of low-set brick places and cul-de-sacs. Comfortable and uniform and on the wrong side of the freeway, they’re still only half an hour to Surfers, unless its peak hour, or a weekend, or a holiday, or raining.

When I get to the pub it’s quiet. The streets are wide and dark and black-asphalt-smooth. Nobody is anywhere. Two Coppadores and a white, red and blue Ford Territory triangulate the Pac Pines Tavern in wide flashes of siren-less lights. They pay little notice as I circle slowly on the bike. I wave as I pull up to a line of chequered tape and a dark figure drops the chain and points me to the drive-thru. I meet Laurie and I ask why we’re here when there’s six cops on site and he says he reckons it might be to stop the police from raiding the liquor barn. I say I doubt it and he says it’s gonna be a cold night.

I don’t wander at first. I just push the bike into the way of the wind. I think of my cousin, who didn’t get selected for the cops and my other cousin who quit after a few years with them. I wonder what the detective had that they didn’t. I wonder if I have it.

I lay out a pile of papers and pick up a pencil and the first one is a wild ramble from a student I know who’s a couple of bad debts away from holding up a pub. The writing is virile and hard to follow. Paragraphs buckle and cold simple phrases strain at the bit. It only makes sense because I can see him there on that corner of the canal with Rat-face and the Maybe-stripper. I know these people, these faces, these stories. I can see them watching dawn’s light glance in iridium bronze off the surface of the glassy channel. Q1 tower stretching heavy in the beyond like an Empire State for an estuarine people.
BLUE PEOPLE

I imagine him plotting escape plans and calculating difficulties in a haze of sleep deprivation and antidepressants. This is where we go in. This is where we go out. The Maybe-stripper in the XR8 with the motor rumbling. Him with a handgun pulling crowd control with a couple of heavies, a couple of shadies. Rat-face in the carpark with the shotty. He’s good with a shotty.

Ripples on the watercourse make it shine like polished platinum. If you’ve taken enough acid or smoked enough dope you’d swear you could just walk across and take hold of those high-rises, tear ‘em down or just bring a little piece back with you. Traverse the fantasy. Push and pull the layers of the Gold Coast, like blinds and screens of laminate and tinted shades and gold leaf. Here dreams are sunk into sandbanks with foundations in the current. Beneath the glassy surfaces juvenile bream and mullet skim the white powder sending little puffs of sand up in lines. Feeding. Darting in and out. Playing games where lives end on a rising tide. Everyone knows the canals are full of bull sharks. It’s getting late. The dreams intermingle, like everything else in this place, the difference between characters and real life is not simple. The story slides through my fingers. My head drops.

BAT. I WAKE up after a micro sleep, or maybe a minute sleep. I check my watch. First of May, 4 am. I’m in the BWS drive-thru at the Pac Pines Tav. Today a cop died so tonight I have to work. I sit propped against a girder fighting to stay awake, grading papers from fair to fail as I pick through essays by Aussies who cunt spell and Asians who cunt grammar. Working while I work.

A tree shakes, a flying fox lopes out into cold air and beats hard against it pressuring into flight, chuckles mirthlessly as I round the pub and pick through a car park. Frag A, frag B, frag C, it takes a moment or two to realise, I’m in an evidence graveyard. There are fresh yellow spraycan markings that look like Main Roads work but it’s forensic graffiti.

Waves of blue neon taint the evidence with pokies room ambience as the Keno plays out relentlessly on big screens, green forty-three, lemon thirty-seven, cold electronics aping the spectres
of fortune. A busted gate, a McDonald’s style playground full of neat holes, a dense spray of dark on the pebble pavers.

I think it’s nothing I should be looking at. I think it looks a lot like the oil stains in the car park. I think it’s a lot like a place where a cop’s face used to be. I think it’s time I got back to writing. I think there’s a bakery nearby.

I smell fresh baked bread and pastry and buns as the dough cools, the blood dries and...the blood dries and...the blood dries and it maps the last moments of a mind. All that brain wasted. All those convictions, assertions, experiences, all those exams, interviews, tests. All that criteria painted dark and heavy over the cold walkway of a pub that doesn’t have the decency to dim the jingle-jangle of the gaming room. This is all linked, I think. I wander back to my bright-lit post, stop and talk shop with a cop. He’s SRT special response. That means he gets a Taser, spray, sidearm and a Kevlar vest, all the good gear that wouldn’t have done shit. Says the dead guy was in civvies, a ‘D’. The detective got a couple shots away but missed, got surprised by someone with a shotgun. They gave him both barrels. Blew a bit of the back of his head out from ten metres but he took a day to die. I ask if it was a solid slug or SGs. He says the hole in the front of his head looked solid but there were pellets everywhere. ‘Maybe two different loads, second shooter, dunno.’ Maybe he talks because I’m polite or because I bounce, or maybe he tells this shit to everyone.

He has that friendly way about him that good bouncers have, good stories, good injuries, a lack of pretence and the kind of matter of fact take on violence that betrays a friendly familiarity with it. None of that pent up defensiveness you get from people who can’t go there, can’t do that. I’m not sure if this is risky, writing it all up a stone’s throw from this man, probably less so than getting stoned on my way to this shift.

Crow call from low lights and its 5 am. The scavengers are circling already, having conversations on the wing as fit people assemble at a nearby gym. No lorikeets, I notice. Fitting, I guess, lends solemnity to the scene. The only pub that served no beer today. In the rising sun I spot pots and schooners half-drunk
sitting on the rails of the verandah. A Tooheys tallie in the gutter reflects slow arresting flashes of blue, red, blue, red, while cold storage fridges drone on, preserving overpriced stock for an overdue opening.

Crows calling at the Pines Café. Peewees in the Poinciana bleating. Swifts hunt and pierce. A kookaburra lands and doesn’t laugh. The cop van sits in the entrance weighed down with flowers. The blue people have not always been my friends but we’d be worse off without them, like sleep they probably keep us feigning sanity. Like they say, money’s made round to go round. I see the shadies pumping cold notes through hot machines on the weekends. I see the old ladies falling face-first in the wet grass. I see managers counting money and busting humps. I see the cop chopper chasing schoolies through Surfers. I see a mining magnate bring down a prime minister over a tax. I see a detective at a crime site where there’s no detection required. All this shit is linked.

I see all this and I know I’m naive. But no one deserves to be cut down for revenue. No one deserves it while they work, wife worries, daughter sleeps. I resolve on this day to never die doing a job I don’t like for people I don’t love in a place that I hate. So if I tell you I can’t, then fuck off. I’m resigned to it, I will not do it. Instead – I keep pen on paper. Rubber to road. Brainium in cranium.

Adam Narnst is a writer who lives in Brisbane, Gold Coast and Shanghai, surviving on teaching, bouncing, prize-fighting, handouts and the odd compo payment. His stories have been published in Griffith REVIEW, Talent Implied, Wet Ink and Antique Children. ‘Blue People’ is a chapter from Ugly Lights, his first unsigned manuscript.
MY INTERVIEW WITH Mr Syed did not get off to a great start. We’d arranged to meet at the Dandenong library – part of the city council building, a huge, bright orange edifice in the redeveloped heart of Dandenong in Melbourne’s southeast.

I was early and kept a close watch on the library’s sliding doors as rain showers blew across the civic plaza outside. Various men who might conceivably have been asylum seekers from the subcontinent came and went but none of them proved to be Mr Syed.

Just as I was about to call him, Mr Syed sent me a text. ‘I’m waiting at Dandenong library,’ it read. ‘But it has moved from here and closed.’

The new library, I belatedly discovered, had only just opened. Mr Syed was familiar with the old one, near the market where he does his shopping. I eventually found him about fifteen minutes later. I felt bad about a misunderstanding that had caused him to wait so long in the cold, but perhaps it made it a little easier for us to start talking. Rather than sit down immediately – two strangers across a table discussing painful and personal issues – we took advantage of a break in the weather to walk briskly back to the new library to retrieve the umbrella that I had left behind there. (It was only a $2-shop job and I might not have bothered, but Mr Syed insisted. It was a measure of our different circumstances.)
We talked as we walked, Mr Syed sketching the broad outlines of his life in Australia so far – arrival by boat from Indonesia in October 2012, held in a Darwin detention centre for seventy days, released into the community on a Bridging Visa E. In some ways Mr Syed is lucky. He did not get sent to detention in Manus or Nauru. In other ways, he lucked out. Like other asylum seekers who reached Australia by sea after 13 August 2012, Mr Syed’s bridging visa denies him the right to work.

By the time we meet he has spent almost eighteen months living on a government payment of about $221 per week – equivalent to 89 per cent of the Centrelink Special Benefit. Using standard OECD measures, the Australian Council of Social Services calculates that the poverty line is $358 per week for a single adult. It says anything below this ‘equates to a very austere living standard’.

After paying rent in a house shared with up to eight people, Mr Syed is left with less than $20 per day to cover all his other expenses. Somehow he manages to make the money stretch, to keep himself fed and clothed. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has found that some asylum seekers on bridging visas in Australia get by on one meal a day, and will go without food in order to buy phone credit so they can keep in touch with family overseas. Mr Syed can supplement his income with vouchers and donations from charities like the Salvation Army, he even manages to set aside some money to send home to his wife and children. Living below the poverty line is very difficult, but it is not his biggest concern.

The more important issue for Mr Syed is that he is denied the right to contribute. He is a man with a strong work ethic and a strong sense of personal responsibility. The experience of being forced to do nothing and rely on handouts is eating away at his soul. ‘We feel ourselves like a beggar here,’ he says. ‘This is a poison, really a poison for the life of a person.’

THE DENIAL OF work rights to asylum seekers living in the community was part of the Gillard government’s response to the 2012 Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers chaired by General Angus Houston – even though the panel’s report made no such recommendation. What the panel did recommend was ‘the application of a “no advantage” principle to ensure that no benefit is
gained through circumventing regular migration arrangements.’ According to then Immigration Minister Chris Bowen, this ‘underlying principle’ was ‘the most important recommendation of the Houston Expert Panel’. Preventing asylum seekers from working was, he said, ‘consistent’ with the ‘no advantage’ concept.

Mr Syed is one of thousands of asylum seekers affected by this policy – although exact numbers are hard to come by. According to monthly reports on the Immigration department website, in April 2014 there were 24,273 asylum seekers living in the community on bridging visas. Consistent with the lack of transparency that has characterised the administration of Minister Scott Morrison, however, the department could not or would not tell me how many of them had work rights. The terse reply to my emailed inquiry was that the overall bridging visa statistics on the website were ‘all that is currently available’.

Labor Senator Kim Carr had more success in getting data when he put a question at Senate Estimates in February 2014. At that time there were 19,353 asylum seekers living in the community without work rights. (Another three thousand or so asylum seekers live in community detention, confined to a particular, designated residence. They are not allowed to work either.)

Most of them, like Mr Syed, have been in this situation for more than a year and there is no prospect of anything changing quickly given current policy settings and the immigration department’s processing backlog. As Curtin University researchers Lisa Hartley and Caroline Fleay comment in their February 2014 study *Policy as Punishment*, ‘It is likely that asylum seekers living in the community will face months if not several years without the right to work while they wait for their refugee claims to be finalised.’

At a rough estimate, and without accounting for administrative expenses, the cost of providing 89 per cent of the Centrelink benefit to nineteen thousand asylum seekers runs to more than $4 million per week. Even if only half of them managed to find jobs, granting these asylum seekers work rights could save taxpayers more than $100 million per year. In addition, those who did find work would be contributing to government revenue by paying taxes and would become less frequent users of other government services, including Medicare.
To deny the right to work is to deny a fundamental source of human dignity. Work contributes to a sense of self worth that is essential to well-being. It can be a vital coping mechanism, particularly for people who have suffered trauma and upheaval. That is one of the reasons why the right to work is enshrined in international treaties that Australia has ratified, including the Refugee Convention and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. To deny asylum seekers the right to work is to put their mental and physical health at risk. The human and financial costs of such a policy could be very great indeed.

OUR CONVERSATION IS polite, almost formal. He calls me Mr Peter. I call him Mr Syed, although he insists that I use his full name for this article and writes it down for me in an elegant cursive *Syed Ejaz Hussain Zaidi*. He is a dignified man, educated and softly spoken, but I sense that Mr Syed is under extreme pressure and at times he struggles to maintain his composure. As we sit drinking coffee he explains why he made the difficult decision to come to Australia, leaving behind his wife and five children, aged between four and eighteen. ‘I don’t know whether I did right or wrong,’ he worries. ‘Was it a correct decision or a silly mistake?’

Mr Syed is from Quetta, the capital of Pakistan’s Balochistan province that borders Iran and Afghanistan. He is a member of the minority Hazara community, Shia Muslims in a predominantly Sunni country. ‘I had a good life in my city,’ he says. ‘I earned a good salary and had a small business on the side. I was such a successful person there.’

Mr Syed worked in the regional office of a Pakistan government department. He was the only Hazara amongst the staff in his section. When five strangers came asking for him in August 2012, but refusing to say what they wanted, Mr Syed’s colleagues were alarmed. They rang him and warned him not to come to work. After receiving death threats by phone and text, Mr Syed went into hiding and then fled the country. I ask why he chose to seek haven in Australia, rather than some other place.

‘Because it was easier and cheaper than Europe,’ he says. ‘At that time Australia was a leading country, welcoming refugees and giving them shelter. I was thinking about the future of my children and thinking about the future
of my own life.’ At that time too, record numbers of asylum seekers were reaching Australia by boat and the Gillard government was desperately casting around for ways to deter them.

Mr Syed hopes his family can keep themselves relatively safe in Quetta secluded in the predominantly Hazara suburb where they live. To travel outside that enclave is to take a grave risk. This is consistent with independent reports on the situation in the city. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan says the city’s Hazaras ‘have retreated to just a couple of localities in Quetta to avoid being targeted’.

Amnesty International says ‘routine targeted killings’ are part of ‘a long line of brazen attacks against Quetta’s Shia population’. In two incidents in September 2012, shortly after Mr Syed stopped going to his office, men armed with rocket launchers and Kalashnikovs halted buses, hauled off all the Hazara men on board, and killed them. (Hazaras are generally easily identified by their East Asian appearance.) On at least two occasions, university buses carrying Hazara students to their studies have been targeted for bomb attacks.

The Sunni extremist group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi often openly admits its role in the violence and has issued public warnings to Hazara Shias to leave Quetta or be killed: ‘It is our religious duty to kill all Shias, and to cleanse Pakistan of this impure nation... in all of Pakistan, especially Quetta, we will continue our successful jihad against the Shia Hazara and Pakistan will become a graveyard for them.’

Despite such evidence, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi appears to operate with impunity.

In January 2013 a double bombing in Quetta killed almost a hundred people, mostly Hazaras. In protest at authorities’ failure to protect them, the community refused to bury their dead. In sub-zero temperatures they staged a three-day sit-in beside the bodies of their loved ones.

In the face of such atrocities, it is hardly surprising that Hazaras in Quetta might be drawn to the promises made by smugglers, or that the danger of trying to reach Australia by boat may seem like a risk worth taking. In 2010, a suicide bomber killed more than seventy people at a Shia Muslim rally in Quetta. In news photographs of the aftermath, a large billboard warning against travelling to Australia by boat is clearly visible in the background.
A couple of years ago I worked on a research project mapping the spatial distribution of inequality in Australian cities over time. In our coloured maps of Melbourne, Dandenong consistently showed up as one of the darkest or lightest shaded areas, revealing high levels of disadvantage. At the 2011 Census, the unemployment rate was 3.3 per cent higher than the national average and median household weekly incomes $281 lower. Dandenong had a higher than average proportion of single parent families and lower than average levels of educational achievement. Looking back across five census periods, the same patterns appeared. Disadvantage in Dandenong appears to be entrenched and persistent. On paper it is not the kind of place that you would expect to cope particularly well with an influx of thousands of asylum seekers who have no choice but to live in poverty and to rely on welfare and the goodwill of strangers because government rules have forced them into unemployment.

Yet by and large, the local community has responded with generosity. There are thought to be around three thousand asylum seekers on bridging visas living in and around the Dandenong area. The largest groups are Hazaras from Afghanistan and Pakistan, Tamils from Sri Lanka, and Iranians, although there are many people from other backgrounds as well. ‘Considering the number of clients here, there have not been many issues,’ one local service provider tells me.

Perhaps it is because the people of Dandenong are not fazed by difference and know what it means to try to rebuild a life in a new land. According to the last census, fewer than four in ten Dandenong residents were born in Australia, compared to an average of close to seven in ten for the Australian population overall. More than sixty per cent of households in Dandenong speak two or more languages at home, compared to only twenty per cent nationally.

The federal government funds organisations like AMES and the Red Cross to provide transitional services to asylum seekers on bridging visas after their release from detention, including initial accommodation assistance and a limited number of English language classes (usually three two-hour classes per week). The funding for these services runs out after six weeks, however, long before clients’ basic needs are met. While funding may be extended for
asylum seekers who are assessed as particularly vulnerable (due to factors such as age, health or trauma), in reality agency case workers continue to offer support to all comers for as long as it is needed, which could be months or even years. Case workers stretch themselves to cover the gap in resources and call on volunteers to help out with such things as English tutoring or donations of essential goods like clothing or prams or fridges. AMES and the Red Cross also refer asylum seekers to local charities like the Salvation Army or the St Vincent de Paul Society and work with other community groups to develop free activities. Around Dandenong there are regular cricket or soccer matches, bicycle maintenance workshops, sewing groups, cooking classes, gym access and swimming lessons on offer to asylum seekers. I hear about one man – ‘a shy, normal Aussie bloke’ – who takes two asylum seekers to a game at Docklands Stadium each week to introduce them to the delights of AFL.

The work with asylum seekers in Dandenong goes well beyond the not-for-profit sector to involve local government, local businesses, the police and ordinary citizens. I’m told that local schools ‘bend over backwards’ to help integrate the children of asylum seekers into classrooms; that the library is very welcoming; that real estate agents – often themselves of migrant or refugee background – can be very generous in finding rental accommodation, despite the fact that asylum seekers have no rental history and no credit history.

In a relatively disadvantaged area like Dandenong, this puts additional strain on already scarce resources. Despite the best efforts of many local agencies and individuals, there are problems.

In an assessment of the gaps in Australia’s protection system, the UNHCR found that asylum seekers in the community often struggle to find accommodation because they are seen as high risk: agents looking to set up long term lease agreements are reluctant to sign tenants on short term visas. Some landlords around Dandenong are exploiting the situation by crowding asylum seekers in together and charging rent per head, rather than rent for a property as a whole. Charging six people individual rents can double the return on a three-bedroom house that would normally let at $300 per week.

Asylum seekers on bridging visas are competing for a limited range of houses at the lower end of the rental market. In a report on its emergency relief
program, Uniting Care notes that asylum seekers often end up in low-quality accommodation with inefficient heating and hot water systems and poorly maintained plumbing. As a result, they can find themselves in financial difficulties when they are hit with unexpectedly high water and electricity bills.

The UNHCR also reports of asylum seekers working, despite the restriction on their visas, and getting exploited as a result of their vulnerability: ‘not being paid, working long hours for a meager wage and having no recourse to remedy these experiences due to fear of being found out.’

Local community workers know this kind of exploitation goes on in Dandenong, but as one person put it to me, ‘there is stuff—all we can do about it or will do about it.’ As another said, ‘you can’t tell someone to quit a job paying $10 an hour.’ To report the situation would be to put asylum seekers at risk of being sent back to detention, potentially on Nauru or Manus, for working in breach of their visa conditions. A job, even a badly paid job, not only helps asylum seekers put food on the table and pay the rent, it also keeps them occupied, gives them something to do, helps them to stop thinking.

Overall though, the view I hear repeatedly in Dandenong is that the community response to asylum seekers has been remarkable.

As the resident of a more affluent part of Melbourne, Rosa Misitano admits that she had some stereotypical views of Dandenong before she came to work in the suburb. Now she holds the area in very high regard. ‘It is very, very welcoming,’ she says. ‘I often get to see the nice side of humanity.’

Six years ago, dissatisfied with her career in the mining industry, Misitano went back to study, completing a Masters of Education and a Graduate Certificate to qualify as a careers adviser. In the process of retraining she discovered volunteering and an absolute passion to help others to be their best. ‘I can use my business experience to do that,’ she says.

Misitano has been the manager of the Dandenong branch of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre since it opened in September 2013. The Centre operates from Monday to Wednesday out of a two-storey shopfront on the main street and is financed entirely by donations. A team of thirty-five volunteers provide employment services and eighteen two-hour English language classes per week. When I visit in mid April, the teacher of the more advanced group is sharing a recipe for Anzac biscuits.
The Centre has considerable success in finding jobs for those asylum seekers who do have work rights, despite their diverse backgrounds. ‘We’ve had prawn farmers, archaeologists, metallurgists and teachers,’ says Misitano. The Centre helps asylum seekers with basic skills, including CV writing; provides some occupational health and safety training and offers instruction on Australian workplace culture, such as advice about making eye contact, or about how to respond to an invitation to Friday night drinks if you do not drink alcohol.

Expectations on the participants are high. ‘We’re tough,’ says Misitano. ‘They have to apply for twenty jobs per week. They have to get into the habits that they will need in the workforce.’ The Centre has helped asylum seekers get jobs at many different businesses including a fertiliser factory, a rose farm and a Toyota dealership.

Misitano sees how work can change lives. She tells the story of a young Afghan asylum seeker who insisted on treating her to coffee and cake after getting his first pay. The young man had been distraught when he first came to the Centre, because he felt that he had to lie about his circumstances when he spoke to his mother on the phone. Now, for the first time in months, he was comfortable calling home, because he knew would soon be able to send money back to his family.

Misitano is upset, however, that she can’t do more to ease the distress of asylum seekers without work rights. ‘They come to me and say: I need something to do. It gets dark. It gets me sad,’ she says.

Staff I speak to at other community services in Dandenong echo this view. (Some prefer not to give their names because they work for organisations in receipt of government funding.) ‘They’re in limbo, they can’t move on in life,’ says one. ‘It’s a mental health issue and their physical health deteriorates as a result. Over time we’re seeing many more incidents of self harming.’

‘Would granting work rights make a difference?’ I ask. ‘It would make a massive difference,’ comes the answer.

Evidence gathered by the UNHCR reveals that many asylum seekers find it ‘shameful and demoralising’ to rely on handouts rather than working. Denial of work rights prevents them having meaningful engagement with the community and adds to a sense of hopelessness and social isolation. The
prolonged lack of purpose can be ‘devastating for drive, meaning, purpose and mental health’.

Roslyn Leary is the local manager of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture – more commonly known as Foundation House – which provides support to people who have been subjected to torture and trauma. In the current circumstances, she says, the agency has had to re-think the way it works with asylum seekers.

‘The basis of trauma work is that a person has to feel safe,’ she says. ‘With asylum seekers who fear deportation, who fear being put back into detention, who cannot work and establish a new life, the principles of trauma work have been pulled out from under us.’

Leary describes much of the work with asylum seekers as ‘symptom reduction’ – attempting to alleviate high levels of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation. ‘Sometimes it feels as if we have had another good day at work because nobody has killed themselves,’ she says.

Leary has spent time on the frontline of the global refugee crisis, working as a refugee determination officer with the UNHCR in Egypt, deciding about who will and who will not be granted the agency’s protection. Despite the much greater resources and support available to asylum seekers in Australia, in some respects, she says – particularly the denial of work rights – the situation for them here is worse. ‘In Egypt, asylum seekers were not supposed to work either,’ she says. ‘But there is a big black market economy. Many could at least find some sort of job and feel like they are functioning as a human being. That aids people’s sense of dignity.’

Here the lack of meaningful activity means ‘endless days, boredom, frustration and anger’. Many asylum seekers have already spent a long time in transit countries or in detention centres. With nothing to do, they can’t help but think about those wasted years. ‘It has an extremely damaging impact on people’s sense of self,’ says Leary.

WHEN I ASK Mr Syed how he spends his days, he replies, ‘I am walking around the streets like a mad person. We have no access to the social benefit of life. We do not have anything to do. We are in depression.’
For a brief period, Mr Syed volunteered gift-wrapping Christmas presents at Myer, with customers donating money to charity in return for the service. About fifty asylum seekers took part in a project that raised almost $70,000 for Vision Australia. Mr Syed says it helped to be busy. ‘It has a good psychological effect on you.’

Asylum seekers show great interest in volunteering and in April 2014 an audit by AMES concluded that as many as four hundred asylum seekers in Melbourne had volunteered in some capacity in the previous twelve months. Organising such opportunities is far from straightforward, however. Language can be a barrier, as can police checks or working with children certificates. And the federal government has put strict but opaque rules in place, limiting volunteering to not-for-profit or local government organisations that already have a volunteer program and to activities that will ‘benefit the community’. Asylum seekers are not to receive any cash or in kind benefits in return for their time and cannot be engaged in any activity that might ‘otherwise be undertaken in return for wages by Australian resident’.

Nor can asylum seekers study – unless of course they can afford the full, up-front fees that are charged to international students.

‘We are keen to work,’ says Mr Syed. ‘We want to be part of the society. We want to contribute our services. We don’t want to be a burden.’ He is completely mystified as to why the government would give him money and refuse to let him pay his own way. ‘Why are they doing this?’ he asks me. I explain about the perception that asylum seekers are economic migrants rather than refugees, drawn to Australia by the attraction of better jobs at higher wages.

‘I did not come here for financial benefit,’ he insists. ‘I came here to get a secure life for my family.’ I say that perhaps there is another reason too, that the government is probably hoping that Mr Syed and other asylum seekers will give up and go home.

Roslyn Leary from Foundation House puts it this way: ‘The message from the government is very clear: because you came “illegally” you cannot participate in any way in our community. The overall intention is to drive people out, to get them to give up and go home.’ Leary says some people are returning: ‘People who feel they have to go back to see family, even if they die.’
Returning to Quetta is an option that must have crossed Mr Syed’s mind: ‘I can’t tell you how my children are getting upset mentally. Every time I speak to them on Skype they ask me “when will we be with you?” What should I answer? I can only say, *it is only God who knows*. I am reaching the stage when I cannot face my family any more.’

After more than eighteen months in Australia, immigration department officials have not yet interviewed Mr Syed about his application for a protection visa. His original six-month bridging visa expired long ago and has not yet been renewed, rendering him technically unlawful. According to information provided to Senate Estimates, in February 2014 Mr Syed was one of almost twelve thousand asylum seekers in the community whose bridging visas had ‘ceased’. For some (though not Mr Syed) this has created serious difficulties in accessing health services, because without a valid visa they were unable to renew their Medicare cards.

The department had suspended bridging visa renewals ‘pending finalisation of legislative and administrative arrangements’ for Minister Scott Morrison’s Code of Behaviour. Now the code is in place, asylum seekers must undertake not to ‘engage in any antisocial or disruptive activities that are inconsiderate, disrespectful or threaten the peaceful enjoyment of other members of the community’ in order to renew their visa. The Minister insists that the code is necessary to ‘protect’ the Australian community. Asylum seekers who breach it risk detention on Manus or Nauru.

When Mr Syed does eventually get to argue his case for protection, he may have to do so without professional advice because the federal government has withdrawn funding for legal assistance for asylum seekers. Mr Syed knows that if he is recognised as a refugee, he is only likely to be granted a three-year ‘humanitarian concern’ visa, a reincarnation of the temporary protection visas introduced by John Howard. The Senate has twice disallowed the reintroduction of temporary protection visas, but the Immigration Minister is determined to bring them back.

If Mr Syed were to go home to Quetta, despite the risks he faces there, the government would mark him down as a voluntary return. In reality, he would have been forced into that decision by the denial of any other option. ‘I would prefer to live in hell with my family than to live in
heaven without them,’ he says. ‘I do not want to die alone. I want to die with my family.’

Mr Syed puts his head in his hands. Rubs his eyes. I look away and stare through the window at the rain outside.

RECENTLY I WITNESSED Julie Bishop giving a leadership talk to a group of undergraduates. When one of the students asked what was the biggest challenge facing the world today, the Foreign Minister nominated ‘constraints on freedom’ and ‘the movement away from democracy’ in many parts of the world. She gave the example of Syria as a place where people lack freedom of choice, freedom of speech and the freedom to make decisions for themselves.

It was not my place to ask a question at the gathering but I was silently hoping the students would ask about many of the asylum seekers locked up on Manus or Nauru or Christmas Island: individuals, who, denied freedom in Syria or other similarly troubled places, had exercised what little choice was available to them to seek a better life for themselves and their families.

When the Minister went on to say that she had joined the Liberal Party because it champions self-reliance, reward for effort and hard work, my thoughts turned immediately to Mr Syed, a man who desperately desires to be self-reliant but is denied the right to be so; a man who would work hard at any job, no matter if the reward for his effort was small; a man who came to Australia to try to free his family from the kind of persecution that Julie Bishop abhors.

None of the students asked about the treatment of asylum seekers. If they had, she would no doubt have defended government policy on the basis of preventing the horror of deaths at sea, or by trumping the individual rights she had just championed with another set of rights, based on sovereignty and the democratically expressed desire of the Australian people for the government to control our borders.

Even if we grant the point that there are conflicting sets of ethical concerns at play in the asylum seeker issue, even if we were to go so far as to acknowledge that there may have been a case for using deterrence to ‘stop the boats’ to save lives at sea, the soul-destroying treatment of Mr Syed and other
asylum seekers and refugees can no longer be justified. No asylum seekers have made it to Australia by sea since December 2013. The Abbott government’s strategy of naval interception and of forcing people back to Indonesia in unsinkable, nausea-inducing orange lifeboats has proved to be an effective blockade. As long as the smugglers cannot reach Australia, they have no service to sell to asylum seekers in Indonesia.

As Robert Manne has argued, this gives us an opportunity to help ‘save the lives of the tens of thousands of asylum seekers’ who are already Australia’s responsibility. There is no longer any reason to ‘send a message’ to potential boat people waiting in Indonesia or elsewhere by denying work rights or family reunion to people who arrived before that naval barrier was put in place. There is no point in extending the suffering of those detained in Manus or Nauru or Christmas Island. Regardless of whether or not it was ever morally justifiable to damage the wellbeing of one group of asylum seekers in order to deter another group from making a similar journey – to use people as means, rather than treat them as ends – there is no longer any point to such punishment. It is just unconscionable cruelty.

References at www.griffithreview.com

Peter Mares is contributing editor with the online journal Inside Story, adjunct fellow at the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University and a moderator with the Cranlana Programme.
IT IS GETTING dark as we approach the Cameron Highlands, about two hundred kilometres north of and a three-hour drive from Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. These highlands were once a hill resort for the colonial elite and continue to attract visitors to their temperate climate where tea and strawberries blossom. The rolling hills afford genteel country views and lush green vegetation cushions the landscape.

Tucked away from the immediate tourist gaze is the industrial-style fruit and vegetable production on farms stretching along the verdant valleys, often guarded from the elements by plastic sheeting that shimmers brightly in the sunlight. These farms produce much of the fresh fruit and vegetables available in Kuala Lumpur supermarkets and they do so relying heavily on migrant labour. Much of the Malaysian economy today is facilitated by the influx of legal and undocumented workers who predominantly toil in low paid and manual work sectors with little or no workplace or health protection. Some of those working on the slopes of the Cameron Highlands are, in fact, refugees.

Malaysia is home to one of the largest refugee populations in this region. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has registered about a hundred thousand refugees, but some estimate that more than two hundred thousand now live (and many work) in Malaysia.
The vast majority of refugees have come from Burma, fleeing conflict, army repression and violence against minorities. Malaysia is not a signatory to the UN refugee convention or its protocol, meaning that refugees do not legally exist in Malaysia. The Malaysian government tolerates the UNHCR and its work, but treats refugees not much better than the millions of other undocumented migrants living and working in Malaysia. This means the police routinely harass, arrest and detain them in immigration detention and, on occasion, deport them to places like Thailand. Human rights abuses are documented, but rarely acted upon, with political will expended elsewhere, placing refugees amongst the most discriminated and marginalised groups in Malaysia.

I HAVE COME to the Cameron Highlands to document and interview a community of refugees working and living on farms with two representatives from a Chin refugee community organisation. They too want to see what life is like for refugees living and working here. The refugee experience in Malaysia varies depending upon ethnic and religious identity, as refugees from Burma have to register via ethnic-based refugee community organisations before they can be processed by the UNHCR. The immense numbers of refugees from Burma have strained UNHCR resources and as a result it has initiated, part-funded and works with many refugee community organisations to help with basic service provision, such as health, education and social programs. These organisations are run by refugees for refugees. They often issue their own identity cards, help with data collection about vulnerable populations and generally are the first point of contact for new arrivals. Most refugee organisations also offer an employment service for members, which, given the illegality, are surprisingly well organised. Today, we are checking in on some of the people a refugee organisation has placed here to work on the farms.

After taking some turns off the main thoroughfare, the mountainous roads give way to deep valleys and we see the expanse of farms dotted along the road. At the first large farm men are busy harvesting tomatoes under the polystyrene sheeting as a light drizzle envelops the mountain slope. We chat to a couple of workers from Nepal and they point us to a further lot up the
hillside where they say the ‘Burma people’ are working. We trek on and come upon a group of Chin labourers ripping out old plants and throwing them into containers. They say conditions are okay and they are paid on time, but they wish the UNHCR process of registration was quicker, as some did not have the registration card that provides some protection with the police and immigration officials. One of the Chin refugees led us to their dormitory housing, a basic wooden structure with a range of sectioned-off rooms. Some were used by families, others contained mattresses for up to ten single men. Some families had a bedroom and separate kitchen; entrepreneurial ones even had a small garden behind the dormitory block in which they grew vegetables for cooking.

Everyone on the farm with whom we spoke had found their job either via a refugee organisation or friends who were already working here. Many refugees from Burma are sought-after labourers, as they were farmers in Burma. Many of Chin workers on this farm had left their mountainous villages and small farms in search for a life away from army persecution and in search of a better life. Now they found themselves in similar conditions on another hillside in a foreign country working and still hoping and dreaming about that better life. The conditions on the farm here were basic, but the biggest problem was that they could not leave the farm for fear of being arrested. As a result some had missed appointments with the UNHCR in Kuala Lumpur, or were simply unsure about what had happened to their refugee application.

Further down the valley at another farm, fear of the authorities became palpable when a group of unregistered refugees showed us their sleeping quarters. They had carved a secret passageway through the dense rainforest to a basic wooden structure, which they used as a meeting room and lounge to relax after work. From there a short walk up the hill took us to even denser forest until it became apparent that the trees were in fact their bedrooms. They had constructed makeshift treehouses in the thicket, obscured from below. The dwellings were not only basic, but also precariously constructed jutting out over ravines. One of the refugee farm workers, Michael – Chin were missionised by American Christian missionaries in the late nineteenth century and many have adopted English Christian names alongside their Chin
Griffith REVIEW 45

names – told us of their fear of the authorities. Other refugees had told them that they would be beaten and taken away if they were detected. The vulnerability of refugees is even greater here as they do not receive information about what services refugee organisations can provide, what refugees can do to protect themselves from authorities and where to go for help when someone gets arrested. Simon, one of the Chin refugee organisation representatives, shared this information with them and allayed some of their fears, but the possibility of detection and arrest persist, especially for unregistered refugees.

AS AN ANTHROPOLOGIST my work traverses a number of fields of enquiry, some marked by my own interests, others as they appear in my research. My work has for a number of years revolved around identity politics and how we can find ways of overcoming our desires to categorise, label and ultimately divide people into ‘us’ and ‘them’. I have explored these questions in Malaysia, a major trading partner and holiday destination for Australians. When the Australian government announced the so-called ‘Malaysia solution’ in 2011 there was suddenly another dimension to this relationship. Indonesia continues to be seen as the staging ground for boat arrivals to Australia, but increasingly awareness spread that Malaysia was the main conduit for refugees from beyond our region to Indonesia in the first place. With its profile raised, Malaysia was portrayed as unfit for ‘our’ refugees to be processed and human rights issues precluded the Malaysia refugee swap to come to fruition. Indeed, Malaysia has a bad record when it comes to providing its citizens, let alone refugees, migrants or others with human rights. However, Malaysia does provide a first protection space for many who have nowhere else to go.

For the last four years I have been living and working with refugees across peninsula Malaysia to get an idea of what life is like for them in a country that does not recognise them. The experiences I have recorded tell many sometimes conflicting and contradictory stories. The majority of refugees find work in factories, on plantations, in restaurants and other service industry jobs. While many find it difficult to earn a living, some refugees have found relative prosperity in Malaysia. Indeed, I am aware of cases where resettlement to a third country has been declined by refugees whose jobs or businesses in Malaysia have provided a good life. Some earn monthly wages
equivalent to Malaysia’s mean/median income levels of 1500–2000 R.M (around AUD$500–650) per month, working as shop assistants, restaurant cooks or in beauty parlours. These lucky few do not represent the refugee experience in Malaysia, but their existence illustrates the vast diversity of experience amongst individual refugees. It also points to the major pull factors drawing in refugees from camps along the Thai–Burma border in search of work and the opportunity to earn money for their own survival, as well as the opportunity to send remittances to their families and friends left behind.

Many refugees from Burma who have made it to Malaysia are regarded by their brethren who remain in refugee camps along the Thai–Burma border, or even in urban refugee clusters around New Delhi, as the lucky ones because Malaysia is seen to provide opportunities to work and be paid relatively well. As a result, refugees working in Malaysia are expected to send remittances to family and friends. This is not always possible, especially as expectations often exceed the reality. One refugee remarked to me: ‘I try to send money back but now I have a measly salary, I haven’t sent money back in a long time.’

Refugees are defined by their precarity, beginning with flight from a place where they no longer felt safe or secure. Fleeing home is the beginning of a new precarious existence in limbo, in transit and insecure. Refugees’ precarity is thus existential, but also rooted in the everyday existence of not knowing where the next meal will come from or where they can stay, whether they will be safe there or not. The UNHCR, some local NGOs, churches and community refugee organisations have very limited means to support refugees, and while some organisations offer newly arrived refugees a place to rest and some staples to begin with, most rely on friends and family to survive and find shelter and paid work.

Work is an act of survival in Malaysia. This fact is sometimes taken advantage of by unscrupulous employers. Common stories revolve around the non-payment of wages, terrible working conditions and other forms of rent seeking. Many employers exploit refugees’ vulnerabilities, such as not having work rights or even a legal right to reside in the country. Refugees have no recourse; they cannot go to the police or the courts to seek remedy.

James, a refugee working in a Kuala Lumpur restaurant, lamented the twelve to thirteen hours of work every day with little sleep and few days off
(two days a month): ‘every day [I work] like a cow, go to work, cannot think about leisure, if we don’t go to work we cannot pay rent, food.’ His job is far from his cheap rental apartment he shares with several other refugees. He takes public transport to work and is very aware of the daily risk he takes. Police could arrest him at any stop. Usually the police are not interested in arresting and charging refugees but in extorting some money, a mobile phone or other item of value. They know that most refugees carry their wages on them as they have no bank accounts, so make for easy pickings. Because transportation is a major issue, many refugees try to find work that also offers them a place to stay. This arrangement may sound generous but many of the places I visited were small, bare concrete lots with portioned-up dwellings. In one, seven families and several single men lived on a bare concrete floor with partitioned rooms, each the size of a large bed. They shared one toilet and one kitchen area. James hopes to escape this situation and ‘hopes every day for [the] resettlement process.’

RESETTLEMENT IS THE preferred option of the vast majority of refugees, especially to Australia or the United States. Many see resettlement as the end to their predicament and the precarity they live in every day. Malaysia has become one of the top resettlement countries, but even then only a couple of thousand are resettled every year, not enough to curb the numbers of new arrivals. UNHCR Malaysia is faced with an ever-increasing caseload as long as regional conflicts continue to push vulnerable populations abroad in search of protection. This pressure on an under-resourced and overworked UNHCR post in Kuala Lumpur means that contact with clients is via mobile phone. This is beneficial as it means clients do not have to attend the UNHCR offices to continually check on the progress of their application, rather they are contacted via text message or phone call. For those with a stable income this is a preferable option as it allows them to work and earn money away from Kuala Lumpur, while they await the outcome of their refugee application and later resettlement application. However, many refugees do not have the disposable income, or any income at all, to afford a phone and phone number. Most rely on cheap pay-as-you-go tariffs and their telephone numbers lapse when they cannot afford, or forget, to recharge their accounts. For some
it is also simply a problem of connection, especially those working deep in plantations where mobile phone reception is weak and inconsistent. Thus the UNHCR, with the help of refugee community organisations, is constantly trying to update telephone registers in an effort to connect with refugees out of town or out of touch.

I met one Somali family in financial difficulty in an outer suburb of Kuala Lumpur, where new developments continue to displace the plantations and formerly wild fringes of the metropolis. Here, older low-set housing estates from the 1970s and ’80s stand interspersed by commercial lots, food stalls and car repair shops. In one of the buildings, we are led up to the second floor where the family lives, and up another flight of stairs to a makeshift Somali refugee community school and meeting room. We settle in to hear the story of their lives in Malaysia, how they came to be here and what their everyday life looks like now. The family fled Somalia and came to Malaysia by plane following the breakdown of their country and increasing violence in their hometown. Patriarch, Ahmad is the chairperson of the Somali community and a former Somali airlines sales manager and has been in Kuala Lumpur since 2007. He is the father of five children, two of whom were born in Malaysia. No one in the family currently has a job and none of them can find work; they have been looking for work, but without luck. One of them worked on an oil palm plantation a long time ago, but they were cheated out of their pay cheque. They now rely on remittances from other family members who have been resettled to Canada.

In 2010 the UNHCR provided Fatimah, Ahmad’s wife, with some help to establish a business making Somali food. She managed to set up her stall in the UNHCR compound once, but has been unable to set up her business elsewhere. The problem is finding a market for her food. She told me that she tried the local masjid (mosque), but the imam turned her down, even for the Ramadan market when many traders come from rural areas to sell specialty food in the city. Both Ahmad and Fatimah are Muslims and had hoped that in Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country with a history of providing sanctuary to Muslim refugees, they would find support and help from the local Muslim population, but they feel bitterly disappointed. Racism in Malaysia has made it extremely hard for African refugees to find work. Discrimination
is rampant, based on skin colour, and even a shared religion cannot bridge the divide. Resettlement options have been sparse for Somalis and thus the waiting periods get longer and longer with lives in limbo stretched into an unforeseeable future.

African refugees in Malaysia are faced with an especially difficult situation; they have few networks and rarely find support from other local organisations. Refugees from Burma, especially the large Chin and Rohingya contingents, are often able to connect to local churches, mosques and organisations willing to help them. A Sudanese refugee from Darfur concurred, saying that finding a job is a big problem: ‘Malaysians see us as Africans, our reputation is not so good.’ He had been in Malaysia since 2007 and had not found a job. He motioned to some other Sudanese refugees standing nearby – the only jobs available are those in the small Sudanese community in Kuala Lumpur – ‘it is’, he said, a ‘very miserable situation.’

As night falls in the temperate climate of the Cameron Highlands where tourists mingle with locals enjoying the fruits (and vegetables) of migrant and refugee labour, I reflect back on the journeys these refugees have completed just to be in Malaysia. The Chin refugees mostly trekked across mountains into India and took boats across the treacherous Andaman Sea to Thailand before being smuggled into Malaysia, others came from refugee camps in Thailand. Most of the African refugees fled on foot and car from their homes to Mogadishu and flew, sometimes via a host of other destinations, into Kuala Lumpur as tourists and remained as unwanted guests in a country not ready to accept them. Each story of suffering was supplanted by hope and hard work to make a living while waiting, waiting for the next step out of precarity and into a life worth living. Working on the farms, in the restaurants and factories these refugees contribute their labour every day to a nation that does not know their names, their stories nor their contributions.

Tomorrow is another day and for all the people in this story another day of work.

Gerhard Hoffstaedter is a lecturer in Anthropology in the School of Social Science at the University of Queensland.
'AND HOW DOES that feel – to be hungry?'

The girl, Abrinet, looks at me, smiles, then looks down. She plays at a gash on her foot and I see Mitch frame it up on ‘A’ camera. Travelling from her face down her body, he pulls focus, creating edit points. He is good like that, Mitch, his sense of small things.

The ‘B’ camera holds on the two-shot of the girl and her mother. We have sat them on a woven blanket in front of their tiny stone house. A vial of holy water hangs at the door above them. After a gentle prompt from her mum, the girl responds with small soft words.

Mitch swings back up – captures the girls face in a close-up. There is a moment between her words, and the translation from Tigray to English. The truth is in that moment. Captured on a face lost in thought.

‘She says, Sometimes, I am so empty, I want to cry.’

I nod my head and let out a small Hmm. It is meant to signify understanding and empathy, but really, what do I know about hunger? I exchange glances with Mitch – let my eye-line fall to the girl’s foot. He sits down in the dirt and puts the camera on the ground.

‘Can you ask how she got that gash on her foot?’

She is still playing with it. Small long fingers tracing the edge of congealed blood. Dirt in it. Mitch is on his stomach now, searching for a better frame. Flies land and defoot, and I hope for a clear patch long enough for some useable vision.

‘She says she cut it with a machete, while she was chopping wood.’
(Fuck.)
(Gold.)

‘Hmm. That’s no good. It looks sore. Does she have medicine or some ointment to put on it?’

Abrinet is eight. The same age as my eldest daughter, though much smaller. I project my daughter onto the blanket, in Abrinet’s place. I hold the image for as long as I can. It kills me.

‘She says, No. My mother cannot afford medicine.’

Mitch and I let out simultaneous Hmms. I tell the translator that the next question is for the mother and Mitch gets up off the ground and repositions. I look at ‘B’ camera, sitting on sticks, rolling away unattended. Jenna has abandoned it to shit what is left of her stomach into the desert.

‘How does she feel, when she cannot afford treatment for her daughter’s foot?’

After the words – that moment again – the reality of how it feels to be unable to help your child, captured in a look. It is terrifying. Mitch holds frame. He waits a beat past unbearable, then in one fluid motion flows down her right arm and rests the shot where the mother gently cups her daughter’s hand. Pulls focus. Dude’s an artist.

The mother has answered with her own question. She eyeballs me.

‘She asks, Do you have children?’

(Fuck.)
(Gold.)

ETHIOPIA IS DOWNSTAIRS. It lives in a box on my desk. I go down to the box and open it and Ethiopia comes out. I cut it and shape it and make it smaller. When it is as small and sharp as the head of a pin, I send it into cyberspace. When you open it, it will jump out and stab you.

JENNA REJOINS US. We discretely pump her full of Loperamide and electrolytes, aware that kids die in these parts for want of what we causally pull from a daypack. Introductory interview over, we get Abrinet to give us the grand tour.

She leads us through a low stone doorway into her single room house. Here her, her mum, and her brother and sister sleep on empty grain bags on the dirt floor. In the centre of the room is a fireplace for cooking. There
is a small clay grain silo – long empty – and a few pots and pans. Enough to survive and nothing more. There is just enough room for me to swing a boom, and Mitch to shoot, so we assign Jenna the mission of collecting overlay from around the village.

‘Needy or cute,’ I remind her.

The interior of the house is full of problems. The empty grain bags the family sleep upon are the distinct red, white and blue of USAID. Even worse, a third-full bag of USAID grain sits against the wall. At one time, the house must have had power, and a single dead light cable hangs from the roof. Abrinet’s brother and sister join us. The girl, a toddler, is topless. The boy, about eleven, wears a T-shirt that reads ‘Nude aerobics instructor, first lesson free’. Next to a framed picture of St George, the patron saint of Ethiopia, hangs a poster of Beyoncé – the patron saint of hot pants.

I tuck the cable up into the roof while Mitch picks up a blanket and drapes it over the bag third-full of USAID grain. We will film the family lying on the floor, recreating Abrinet’s bedtime, so bodies and blankets should cover the grain bags there. Mitch and I like the St George picture, it’s the vibe we want, but are undecided on Beyoncé. Will her arse cheeks pull the viewer out of the story, or will they create a shared bond, a universal reference point, connecting Abrinet and our audience, ‘Australian Youth’?

AUSTRALIAN YOUTH. A defining marketing term – as soon as you use it, you know you are not part of it. It is a segment analysed beyond reason, and there are many graphs. Mostly, it seems to be a fourteen-year-old Glen Waverly girl, with a hundred and sixty-three Facebook friends, a $30 per week clothing allowance, and a deep concern for the environment and shit. Her name is Madison.

Everybody wants a piece of Madison: her money, her time and her lifelong brand preference. She gives a third of her waking life to the world of screens – those few millimetres of glass, infinitely deep. She navigates this world with a compass where north, south, east and west, have been replaced by a single direction – like. Although she has an inkling, Madison has no idea just how deeply fabricated her random world is, and she is hammered stupid with the images, sounds and ideas of those chasing her ‘thumbs up’. I have around a hundred and eighty seconds to get her attention, educate her, and move her to act. It is a timeline not conducive to detail or complex ideas.
Her sense of what African hunger looks like has not evolved fully from that of her parents, and was largely set in place by the Ethiopian famine of 1984. Arguably the first mass televised famine, it aired at a time when news was news and was graphic with an honesty that would now be sanitised with one eye on the sponsors. We saw skeletal children and babies. We watched families trapped in open desert – devoid of food, water, shelter or possessions. Described by BBC reporter Michael Buerk as ‘the closest thing to hell on earth’, it was despair played out on a medieval backdrop. For many, it formed our ideas of what hunger in Africa should look like.

But these people weren’t hungry. They were dying.

I HEAR SCREAMING and ignore it for as long as I can. When it becomes intolerable I head into the backyard. A trampoline incident has unfolded and my five-year-old tells me her sister landed on her head on purpose. I tell my girls to sort it out, that I am trying to work. They beg me to get on and bounce with them. It’s Saturday. The five-year-old follows me back under the house and into Ethiopia. I give her some printer paper and pens. I tell her to draw me a picture of under the sea, with every kind of sea creature that ever existed. The feedback on the last script version is that there is still too much focus on Abrinet’s mother. The creative director wants a rewrite, but doesn’t want to have to recut the images. Sure. No problem. I play the video file and read aloud some changes over the top. I can’t see how to do it. It doesn’t flow. The messaging seems too obvious. Madison will be onto us. My five-year-old is standing next to me, holding her picture out. On the screen, Abrinet finishes drawing in the dirt and eyeballs me through the camera. The moment is probably designed as some beautiful epiphany, but it empties me. I shut down the computer. I compliment my daughter on her whale. It’s a crab.

MONEY FROM NON-GOVERNMENT organisations for food aid and development is needed before hunger becomes death, and Madison, if we can get her to like us, can be quite generous. Yes, she is often to be found rendered beyond vacuous with mind bling, but break through, break in, and she will advocate, fight and fundraise harder and smarter than any generation before her. She wants to be famous, but is happy to ‘Make Kony Famous’ along the way. The Kony campaign showed us she will respond to a good story well told. But it
is storytelling, and Madison likes a clear Villain. The bastard with malnutrition is that it is often too insidious to make a good bad-guy. In much of Africa, half a country’s population will be under eighteen years of age, and many of these children will be malnourished. In countries such as Ethiopia, half the children under-five are malnourished or stunted. Their vital organs and brains are not developing properly. They cannot concentrate and their capacity to learn can be greatly diminished. Children – who could have become teachers, or doctors, or engineers, who could have thought laterally and creatively about new farming techniques, or better government, or erosion mitigation – won’t. Malnutrition can smack kids thin as a stick, and thick as two planks. A generation is being lost and it’s a bugger to sell to the market place.

JENNA RETURNS TO ask if it’s okay for the telecom tower in the middle of the village to be in shot. ‘It’s really hard to frame it out in the wide shot,’ she tells me. ‘Also the powerlines, and the cars going past?’ Madison should not see the tower. An Africa where Abrinet cannot get enough to eat, but can take a picture of her empty bowl and upload it to Facebook; an Africa where a billion dollar road passes her village not to bring food in, but to take minerals out won’t fly, and she may dismiss us as fakes. It is a paradox, because Madison accepts these images from India. In India, we would deliberately leave the tower in. Mitch would pan down from the gleaming spire of its 4G satellite dishes to reveal Abrinet barefoot, sorting recyclables from a plain of middle-class bio-waste. Fifty frames a second. 35-millimetre lens wide open to the sunset.

Gold.

Jenna is learning fast – she gets it. Her first day out though, disaster – all dicks and donuts. A village not far from Abrinet’s. Our first day in the field proper, after flying from Addis Ababa to Mekele, then driving north to Wukro, we had met a seven-year-old boy who lived with his grandmother. He had an ear infection that was slowly sending him deaf. He couldn’t concentrate at school so spent most of his time home alone, wasting away, while his grandmother broke rocks on a government food-for-work project. We had sent Jenna out to cut her teeth on some overlay. Wide shots of the village, old men walking skinny cattle, camels on the horizon, children playing in dust, anything that would help build Madison’s mood and sense of place.
That night, we viewed the day’s work on a laptop. Checking our exposure, framing and coverage – compiling a list of pickups for the following day. Had we captured the need? Can we tell the story? Have we gathered the elements necessary to build Madison a convincing three-minute Ethiopia? Buzzing on duty free bourbon, Jenna passionately talked us through her shots.

‘Fifty frames a second,’ she said. ‘Man. I wish the whole world was in fifty frames a second.’

‘Dicks,’ said Mitch. ‘Full of dicks.’

And it was. Jenna’s shots were beautiful, and life does look better at fifty frames a second, but almost every sequence had a pants-off boy somewhere, swinging jubilantly in slow motion. Camel train against the sun-silhouetted dick. Wide shot of village background – walk-by dick. Kids doing handstands – upside-down dick. Kids playing jacks with bones – dusty dick.

‘You can hardly see them,’ Jenna said, not knowing. ‘They are kids in the desert – they can’t afford clothes. It’s the way it is...’ She sensed her argument had no sway. ‘But they are kids.’

This was my fault. I should have given Jenna ‘The Talk’. The same one given to me on my first trip; the time I fucked up and shot gigs of incidental kiddy bits in Northern Kenya.

The Talk:

*You know how our job is to document and not distort the truth. How we respect the local culture as we find it, and at all times must remember not to impose our own cultural values.*

*Yes. Of course.*

*Well, that doesn’t apply to naked kids.*

*Why not? It’s hot. They have few clothes. If I was a kid in the desert, I would run around naked as well.*

*Yes. But back in Australia. When we send this vision out. A paedophile might watch.*

*So we just rock up and tell everyone to put pants on before we film anything?*

*Yep.*

But won’t this make them think there is some kind of shame in their kids being naked? Aren’t we just forcing our own screwed up cultural values onto them?

Also, all girls must have a top on. The paedophiles…they might wank.
When you film a mother feeding a child, try not to show any breasts. Definitely no nipples.

Jenna looks like she wants to cry. Mitch attempts to cheer her up by pointing out not only does one boy have his dick out, he is eating what appears to be a pink-iced donut.

‘Not a good look during a food crisis,’ he points out. ‘The drivers. They can’t help themselves.’

THE WATER OF the bay is flat and clean and the sky above wide open. Holidaymakers from Canberra have begun to occupy their holiday houses and a carnival has set up on the foreshore. My girls play on the love swing on our back deck, deliberately smashing it into the railing. I pick at the toast and egg and bacon they have abandoned and drink my second coffee. A perfect day is forecast. I don’t want to go down there – to the small room under my house. Concrete walls and the box and decisions, but there is no avoiding it.

WE SHOT TWENTY-THREE hours of footage over ten days in the Tigray region of Northern Ethiopia. Four hours with Abrinet and her family. After we got the kids into appropriate clothes, we followed her for the rest of the day. We filmed as her mother cooked their single daily meal of flat bread. Shot coverage of her collecting water from the village well and sweeping the dirt floor and courtyard of her house. We had her show us how she chops wood barefoot with the machete. We filmed her playing with her only toy: a discarded battery she pretends is a saucepan.

Cooking games – big with hungry kids.

I bring up the vision of an aid worker measuring the circumference of Abrinet’s upper arm with a coloured tape. She slowly pulls the tape tight, through the green and yellow bands and into the red zone. This means Abrinet is acutely malnourished. It is why she gets sick all the time and cannot concentrate. It is why something like the wound on her foot could knock her over in a few weeks if it became infected. But unless you really study her, and know what you are looking for, she just looks like a skinny little kid. Her body won’t shock you, even though inside she is eating herself away. In some shots, at the right angle, she even appears to have a little belly – possibly filled with pink-iced donut.
I start to build a world for Madison. An Ethiopia 1080p high 50 megabytes wide, and three minutes long. I select images of the measuring tape showing red, cracked bowls and the empty grain store to help heighten the sense of need. Although Abrinet’s hunger isn’t written on her body, it is written on her face, and I mark the moment when she tells us what it feels like to be hungry. I play it over and over, moving the edit points, looking for just the right few seconds – that moment when she looks her weakest, her tiredest, her sickest. I scan through every frame, looking into the faces of her mother, her brother, her sister, looking for gold. downstairs in Ethiopia, everything is flipped on its head. Bad is good. Good is bad. The worse, the better. The world may be getting smaller, but right now I need it to look as big and bad as ever.

Abrinet carries the family’s water on her back in a large plastic container. It is a two kilometre round trip and the fatigue is beginning to show – Gold. In this shot, her little sister is falling asleep, tired from hunger – looks a bit like she is dying – Gold. Here is Mitch’s close-up of the mum’s anguish, and the pan down the to hand hold – Gold. Let’s cut to a sad-eyed close-up of Abrinet. Now her mum is making firebricks out of cow shit. Let’s lay that next to a few seconds of her making flatbread – Gold. Play through the footage of Abrinet’s wounded foot. Wow. It looks worse than I remember. Too many flies feeding on her wound to use the close-up though – Bugger. Here is the stuff of Abrinet chopping the wood with the machete. Let’s put this down first, then bam, cut to the wounded foot – No – Other way round. Let’s show her pretending to cook food with her battery saucepan. It’s the only toy she has ever had. She chewed the lid off – scooped out the inside with her finger – Gold. Here she is trying to console her baby sister. The kid is crying from hunger because the mother is too malnourished to produce breast milk. Abrinet is singing to try and calm her. It’s not working. The kid needs food. That foot has to hurt. You can see Abrinet’s ribs in that shot, but I can’t show her topless. Things would be better if they had a dad, but he went to the city and hasn’t returned.

( Gold.)

Cry Madison. Why won’t you fucking cry?

UPSTAIRS AND IT is still warm. From my back deck the setting sun shoots the bluff on the other side of the bay lucid, and I’d like to go and
sit there by myself for a while. A family from Canberra has arrived next door. Their spare house is empty forty-eight weeks of the year, and when my recycle bin overflows I use theirs. I watch as they empty their car into the house. Suitcases. Bags of groceries. Shiny new boogie boards. Music starts. The father emerges onto his back deck and lights his barbecue. He flicks on fairy-lights, nods his head and his beer towards me.

‘Life’s good, hey?’
‘Not bad mate. Not bad.’

We chat about fishing. Flathead off Malua. Bream in the river. His kids spill out behind him. The daughter looks about fourteen. She gazes up from her iPod, waves at me and smiles. I wave and smile back.

My eight-year-old asks if we can have a barbecue as well. It seems like a good idea. We sit together on the love swing, and she asks me how the Africa kids are going. For as long as she can remember, she has watched me work with images and tell stories from the developing world. Often she will visit me downstairs, sit on my lap, and help me pick happy images. Shots of kids playing and laughing and cartwheeling in the dust. Shots of kittens and big-eyed camels and funky wonky donkey wagons...and nothing cracks her up more than a random penis. In a couple of hours she will be full of food and sleep, Abrinet will still be hungry. I really don’t understand how any of this has come to be.

Tonight, while my daughters sleep, I will go downstairs to Ethiopia and add some layers of light to the story of Abrinet. There are some stunning shots of her skipping, and a beautiful sequence of her playing with her baby sister. The story we tell will be an honest one. It will be painful but full of hope. It will treat Abrinet and her family with dignity and respect. It will make a difference, and Beyoncé’s arse might be in it. That should get a laugh out of Madison.

They are good kids, Madison and Abrinet; I hope they like each other.

Andrew Belk is a writer and filmmaker based on the New South Wales south coast. In 2003 he won the inaugural Josephine Ulrick prize for literature for his story, ‘The big Jesus’ which was published in the first issue of Griffith REVIEW. His creative work has also been broadcast on ABC Radio National and SBS. Since 2008, he has created digital content for campaigns advocating child welfare and social justice.
Justin Clemens

Aesthetic suicide

after Janet Burchill and Jennifer McCamley

My daughter, who loves Andy Warhol, was horrified by your Super-8 re-enactment of his attempted execution by Valerie Solanas, who wrapped her bullets in silver foil and went after the bewildered bewigged bigwig like a bat outta hell, ranting it up with the radical ratiocinations of the SCUM Manifesto, wherein it is announced that there remains...

the rest following, because she didn’t understand the violence even if she, being four years old, may have got the motivation after I sat her on my knee and explained how the avant-garde tried to undo the bourgeois divisions between art and life, having, in the words of the philosopher, ‘a passion for the real’ such that performance and action were forced to become each other to the point of inseparable indistinction today, although admittedly she kept asking ‘why, Daddy, why?’ despite my best efforts, and I was forced to linger frustrated awhile in uncomprehending incapacity, the idea of revolution somehow at once omnipresent and effaced, the chiasmus of existence cracked into a chasm of refined befuddlements, as if, angularly disposed behind the TV’s silvered cube, as you cite on the wall inscribed in a great futuristic X like the crossing of the arms of the Slade School students Ezra Pound parodies in a typically-scabrous early poem, it were just a desperate attempt to groove in an un-groovy world.

Justin Clemens’ recent books include Psychoanalysis is an Antiphilosophy (Edinburgh UP, 2013) and The Mundiad (Hunter Publishers, 2013), which was shortlisted for the Kenneth Slessor Prize for the 2014 NSW Premier’s Awards. He teaches at the University of Melbourne.
‘I HAVE NEVER used a vacuum cleaner,’ my ardently intellectual mother says proudly. ‘That was my condition when I agreed to emigrate to Australia.’

In the whites-only northern suburbs of 1970s Johannesburg, I too was oblivious to the demands of domestic work. My egg-yolk-yellow school uniform was washed and dried, ironed and hung up in my wardrobe. My toys were stowed away, my bed made. Hair from moulting lapdogs, confetti from the hole-punch, a broken glass and dust – all magically disappeared.

Only when I stayed home sick from school did housework become visible. I’d hear the growl of the vacuum cleaner and smell the tang of disinfectant under the hand of Lena, Lizzie, Dora, Violet or Ellen, the Xhosa or Sotho women from the Transkei, Soweto or Meadowlands who worked for our family during my childhood. They dressed in pink, yellow or blue uniforms provided by my mother – these uniforms were always passive pastels, never a strong primary colour. ‘There were no other colours,’ my mother tells me. ‘The only uniforms OK Bazaars sold were pastel.’

Last year after ‘cleaning out’ her papers, my mother sent me two large manila envelopes with old letters, reports, my Bat-mitzvah and vaccination certificates and the typed copy of a poem by South African playwright and director Barney Simon. On the back of the full version of this poem, in red pen, she’d scrawled, ‘This is such a moving, meaningful evocation of the South African horror.’
Madam, please –
before you shout about your broken plate,
ask about the meal my family ate.
Madam, please –
before you laugh at the watchman’s English,
try to answer in his Zulu language.
Madam, please –
before you ask me if your children are fine,
ask me when – ask me when I last saw mine.
Madam, please –
before you call today’s funeral a lie,
ask me why my people die.
Ask me why my people die.
Madam, please.

When I emigrated to Australia on my own in January 1989, the slights and accusations came thick and fast from my graduate law class and new ‘friends’. The gist was: ‘If you’re a white South African, you must be racist.’

I was ashamed of my background. Self-conscious. Horribly lonely – and determined to fit into this new culture. I equipped my flat with mould destroyer, oven cleaner, sugar soap, gumption, a rainbow of sponges and steel wools. It was a steep learning curve. I followed the instructions on the oven cleaner carefully. As the chemicals stung my nostrils, I thought about Ellen and Dora. In the Transkei and Meadowlands there was no electricity. How had they learned to do all these jobs?

FOR THE LAST decade, I’ve lived in a solar-powered cottage on a cattle farm in the Australian bush – nearest town Casino, the Beef Capital of Australia. As my partner Jen, a home-science teacher turned farmer, fishes a dusty ballpoint pen from under the couch, she says, ‘God can see under the couch, Hayley.’ Although playful, her tone is tinged with the scold of the home-science teacher.

Guilty as charged. I’ve had years of practice at housework and have a definite ‘grot threshold’, but I’ll forget to clean the draining board and often don’t vacuum under the heavy furniture. And when Jen cleans? The plughole glints, even the air tastes clean.
We’ve decided it’s hereditary – her mother was a homemaker who made marmalade and mustard pickles, and always cleaned under couches and behind doors. Fortunately Jen’s family has another expression: ‘Never use a broom after the sun goes down’.

I keep coming back to the notion of choice. Eating, drinking, sleeping – all obligatory. But would it kill you if you didn’t sweep and vacuum? Perhaps not, but if your home descends into squalor, you’re considered lacking in self-respect or mentally ill.

Some call it uncivilised; some call it standards of propriety. Others chant ‘cleanliness is next to godliness’, which, I imagine, is the root of Jen’s family saying, ‘God can see under couches and behind doors’.

In Marilynnne Robinson’s magnificent book *Housekeeping* (Picador, 2004), the drifter, Sylvie, returns to Fingerbone to care for her nieces. But her housekeeping offends her older niece’s ‘sense of propriety’. The ladies of Fingerbone, ‘obliged to come by their notions of piety and good breeding’, pay Sylvie a visit. And what do they find? ‘The kitchen was stacked with cans, brown paper bags…and in the parlor, [the cats had] left [birds’] wings and feet and heads lying about, even on the couch.’

Picture those pious faces.

In the runaway bestseller *Spotless* by Shannon Lush (ABC Books, 2011), ‘Australia’s Queen of Clean’ describes in cookbook style how to deal with all things domestic from mice (pellets of snake poo from the reptile shop) to chewing gum on leather. Shannon also says that bicarbonate of soda, vinegar, water and sunshine are your most important products.

Sylvie in *Housekeeping* also ‘talked a great deal about housekeeping’ and ‘believed in stern solvents, and most of all in air’.

Stern solvents. The language of cleaning is suffused with such sibilants: sweet-smelling, sparkling, shining, spick and span, spotless, ship-shape, spinkle, scale, spray, scratches, scum. How apt given how housework is always lurking, slithering through our lives.

But the language of cleaning is also a battle cry. Cobwebs are sucked away, grease and grime cut through and erased. Mould is destroyed. Stains are removed. Cockroaches are lured and killed.
Perhaps it’s this willingness to murder that distinguishes Sylvie from Shannon. ‘Sylvie in a house was more or less like a mermaid in a ship’s cabin. She preferred it sunk in the very element it was meant to exclude. We had crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, sparrows in the attic.’ When Sylvie swept, she ‘took care not to molest’ the leaves ‘some of them worn to a net of veins’.

APPARENTLY SOME PEOPLE enjoy housework. Others see it as a meditation – like the monks’ sand mandala carefully created and then disrupted. But however you see it, there’s no doubt the rewards are transitory. No sooner is the housework done than red wine is spilt or dust invades unseen. Or the house burns down. Or we die.

Little surprise few people want to do it and most people want someone else to do it for them. Even the Australian feminist T-shirt ‘Fuck Housework’ is not so much a call to squalor, as for decent pay for work done primarily by women.

Historically – and not just in South Africa, as my deeply ashamed self once believed – people have always had less privileged people do their housework for them and used justifications like, ‘without this job, they’d have nothing to feed their children’.

Of course Australia too has had a history of exploitative domestic and farm work: ‘...the greatest advantage of young Aboriginal servants was that they came cheap and were never paid beyond the provision of variable quantities of food and clothing. As a result any European on or near the frontier...could acquire and maintain a personal servant,’ Henry Reynolds wrote in *With the White People* (Penguin Books, 1990).

Later, when stealing Aboriginal children became official policy, the motivation was allegedly less about cheap labour than, as Sir Ronald Wilson, Chair of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry into the Stolen Generations, noted, ‘to strip the children of their Aboriginality, and accustom them to live in a white Australia.’

The practical reality of these assimilationist policies was that Aboriginal girls were sent to institutions like Cootamundra Domestic Training Home for Aboriginal Girls to be ‘civilised’ so that they could be prepared for work as ‘domestic servants’ in white Australian homes. Once again, unpaid or lowly paid domestic work in the name of propriety.
The 2011 International Labor Organisation’s *Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers* acknowledges ‘the significant contribution of domestic workers to the global economy’. So it should. A staggering one fifth of the Philippines’ GDP comes from domestic helpers sending wages home, and in South Africa, where unemployment is 25 per cent, domestic workers account for 6.3 per cent of the labour force.

Whatever the era or country, implicit in the notion of domestic work is relocation. A woman, or young girl, leaves her home and family to work in another’s home where she cleans and cares for children.

In apartheid South Africa, all black people had to carry a *dom pass*, that’s ‘stupid pass’ in Afrikaans, which gave their home address and employer’s details. If they couldn’t produce that passbook, those domestic workers in their pastel uniforms were thrown into the police van, charged, fined or imprisoned and then sent home.

In the triumphant final chapter of Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, Sylvie and Ruth literally say ‘Fuck Housework’. They burn down the house: ‘Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to the housekeeping.’

But Sylvie and Ruth are unusual; most of us want a home. In 2011, a Filipino woman Evangeline Banao Vallejos, a mother of five who lived and worked in Hong Kong since 1986, challenged a Hong Kong law that prevented foreign domestic helpers from getting permanent residency, even though foreign workers are typically eligible for residency after living in the city for seven years. Daniel Domingo, another Filipino domestic helper who’d lived in Hong Kong for twenty-eight years, was the joint appellant. They won in the High Court. There was huge opposition in Hong Kong, and the government clung to ‘floodgates’ arguments, saying this judgment would lead to domestic helpers’ families moving to the already cramped city and putting a strain on the local economy and services. Ultimately, the Court of Final Appeal ruled against Vallejos and Domingo, and domestic helpers in Hong Kong must return to their country of origin at the end of their contracts.
AT HONG KONG airport in 2012, the tourist queue I stood in snaked an hour-long coil. To the left another cordoned-off queue moved quickly: it was specifically for foreign domestic helpers. There were three hundred thousand foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong, mostly from Indonesia and the Philippines.

On a Sunday, on the street outside the Armani store in Hong Kong, I noticed women camping on plastic mats or cardboard boxes. They chatted; they scooped curries from polystyrene buckets; they plaited each other’s hair; they read; they knotted string or wool to make handbags; they texted on mobile phones.

I had no idea why they were gathered on the pavement outside this store patrolled by a security guard. Were they waiting for something?

I asked one woman, she smiled in response. Then I asked another woman who wore jeans and a T-shirt and was texting on her mobile phone. She told me she was a domestic helper and Sunday was the day she didn’t work and could meet her friends. They had nowhere else to go, apart from the streets. She worked for a family with two children, did the cleaning and looked after the children. I asked if she had children herself. ‘A thirteen-year-old girl. There is no work at home in the Philippines. This is the only way to get money for my family.’

Sunday is evidently the day most domestic helpers in Hong Kong have time off. It was the same in South Africa. Ellen, a Methodist, would dress in a red blouse and a black skirt; Lizzie wore a green felt badge with a Church of Zion star.

This one day off a week only came to Singaporean domestic workers from 1 January 2013 – probably as a result of the 2011 ILO Convention that seeks to redress discrimination and human rights abuses. Article 10 states, ‘Weekly rest shall be at least twenty-four consecutive hours.’ Many Singaporean employers are angry with the new law. They’re concerned the domestic helpers will use their time off unwisely and have to be sent home.

Walking through Hong Kong’s Victoria Park on a Sunday, I found Indonesian women, many dressed in hijabs, camped under the trees around the park’s perimeter. Most of the women fanned themselves with little paddles made of thick card with plastic handles. The text on the paddle was
Indonesian, but from the numbers and word ‘tarif’, advertising a mobile phone deal. At the tent bearing the phone company’s logo, I started a conversation with a young woman dressed in a white hijab with a sequinned edge. She told me she didn’t wear the hijab during the week.

‘Is that because of your employer?’ I asked, wondering if her employer allowed her to practice her religion.

‘No,’ she said. ‘It’s too hard to work in.’

Other women, I discover from an article published in the China Post, are banned from dressing according to their religion or praying in the homes where they work. I wonder why they don’t pray in their own room; surely they’d have a room like Ellen or any of the other women who worked for my family in Johannesburg?

Not necessarily. The Hong Kong Government has a ‘Schedule for accommodation and domestic duties’ which acknowledges that ‘the availability of a separate servant room is not common’ but that Employers should provide the Helper with ‘suitable accommodation and with reasonable privacy’. The schedule gives examples of unsuitable accommodation: ‘the Helper having to sleep on made-do beds in the corridor with little privacy and sharing a room with an adult/teenager of the opposite sex’.

As for domestic workers practicing their religion, in 2012 the China Post reported that only a few thousand Indonesian domestic helpers were able to attend collective prayer rituals during Eid al-Adha, an important Islamic religious holiday.

At the time there were some two hundred thousand Indonesian domestic helpers in Hong Kong, 90 per cent of whom were Muslim.

AS A BABY, while my mother taught high school English, played tennis and bridge and lunched with friends, I was carried on Ellen’s back, secured by a woollen blanket. There I slept or watched as she pegged washing to the wire line behind the house, ironed sheets, washed dishes, made our beds, vacuumed the thick pile carpets, dusted bookshelves and polished silver.

Some mornings she’d put me down to sleep in her bedroom in the backyard of our two-storey house. Her single bed was up high on milk crates because of the demonic spirit known as the tokolosh – and perhaps because it
gave her storage space. Her room was much smaller and darker than my own and furnished with a small table, two chairs and a dark wooden wardrobe with a mirror.

Her son Vusi was born three years after me. He lived in the Transkei with his grandmother, while Ellen lived with us in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. She had a day off during the week, two weekends off a month, four weeks’ leave a year and Vusi came to stay during school holidays.

Before we taught Vusi to swim in our pool, Ellen would say to me, ‘Watch Vusi, mbumbu. Make sure he doesn’t fall into the pool.’

Mbumbu means ‘my baby’.

On our farm in the Australian bush there is, of course, no Ellen. On a visit back to South Africa my Aunty Sheila asked me to get the tub of schmaltz from the fridge. She was teaching me how to make kneidlach,

‘You can’t buy schmaltz in Casino,’ I said. ‘The only way I’ll be able to get it is if I render down some fat next time our neighbour kills chooks.’

Shaking her gold bracelet, my aunt said, ‘Much easier to go to the shop.’

So I tell her about the cherry tomatoes: how I wash them free of dirt, mash them, strain the seeds, cook them and bottle them in jars I label in black ink.

‘Oy,’ my aunt says. ‘You need someone to do your cooking and cleaning.’

As I beat the mixture of egg, matzah meal and schmaltz, I tell her about Jen’s cleaning standards – how God sees behind doors and under couches.

Aunty Sheila’s advice: ‘Just tell her, different God.’

Although Jen and I fantasise about employing a cleaner on the farm, there are all sorts of jobs we wouldn’t ask anyone else to do for us. Our toilet is a long drop (a hole in the ground) with a proper pedestal and seat, a bucket of sawdust with a jam tin scoop and a morning view of pink and grey galahs and wallabies.

Guests are given instructions on arrival: please no plastics or nappies down the hole because they don’t break down. So what? Well, once the hole is full, we move to the other hole. But first we have to dig out last year’s full hole. We fill at least eight wheelbarrow loads with this compost.

We call it ‘taking care of our own shit’. Maybe it’s also atonement for my South African childhood.
MY EIGHTY-YEAR-OLD MOTHER expertly uses a mobile phone but still no vacuum cleaner. Michelle, who migrated to Australia from the Philippines, comes for four hours once a week to vacuum, mop, clean and iron. By Australian standards, my mother is unusual. According to time-use analyses conducted by Professor Lyn Craig, an ARC QEII Fellow at the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, only 8.4 per cent of Australian households employ a cleaner. Even in high-income households, 85 per cent of Australian families do their own cleaning, although meal preparation, laundry and mowing are often outsourced.

So is this a result of financial constraints or cultural attitudes? After all, unlike Hong Kong and Singapore, Australia has no employment scheme for foreign domestic workers. When I raised this statistic with my born-and-bred Australian friends, one who works as a cleaner said she’d rather be working in a flower shop but jobs are few in our area, another said she cleans motel rooms because it’s hard to find consistent work cleaning private homes. Other friends, some who worked as cleaners during student days, said ‘why would you pay for what you can do yourself’ or ‘others don’t clean the way I want it done’; others were concerned about theft or didn’t want strangers in their ‘space’; and others who were focused on cost said, ‘the money’s better spent elsewhere’ or ‘I would if I could but it’s just too expensive’.

University of Queensland researchers Janeen Baxter, Belinda Hewitt and Mark Western, in an article for Feminist Economics, found that affordability and efficiency influenced choices about employing domestic workers. But they also found cultural views about the appropriateness of paying for such work rather than doing it oneself play a pivotal role. Women with the ‘do it yourself’ attitude were no more likely to employ domestic workers if they worked longer hours.

Australians are uncomfortable and embarrassed about someone else cleaning their bathrooms and bedrooms; they often feel that they have to clean up before the cleaner. And if you do get a cleaner, well, don’t tell anyone.

Ah, so there it is again, that sense of propriety.

Shannon Lush knows her Australian audience. In Speedcleaning (ABC Books, 2006) she advises ‘what to do about unexpected visitors’ when your house has that ‘lived-in homely look’: keep a cloth impregnated with lavender
oil near the front door and wipe over the edge of the door before opening it. ‘The smell creates an impression of cleanliness.’ She also suggests placing your washing-up gloves over the pile of dirty dishes ‘to suggest you were about to wash them if you hadn’t been interrupted by your visitors’.

Scornful laughter? Even so, how much of your grot are you willing to show?

Like personal hygiene, housecleaning is private. Invisible. Cleaning products are stowed out of sight and advertisements for them haunt daytime television rather than peak viewing times.

This may be an extravagant extension to the researchers’ findings, but I wonder if this Australian sense of propriety points to a deeper privacy concern. Domestic workers witness a family’s struggles and secrets. Maybe Australians don’t want someone else living in their homes, seeing into their families. Home is sacred.

PERHAPS PRIVACY WAS not so sacred in the South Africa of my childhood. Every time I visit South Africa, Ellen tells me stories about my family during my early years. I know now about the lipstick on my father’s collar in the year before my parents’ divorce and how Ellen laundered it clean without my mother’s knowledge.

Ellen left our house when I was twelve. I wept. She said she was pregnant. She wasn’t. She didn’t like the way my stepfather and stepbrother talked and bullied my mother and me. She didn’t like how they spoke to her. She didn’t like what she saw.

What a position to be in: to live in another’s home where even if you don’t like something, you are not able to say.

Ellen was seventy-eight when I last visited South Africa. On arrival, I telephoned the house where she’d worked for the last twenty-six years. She’d retired a few months earlier. ‘It was time,’ Irene her employer said. ‘I had to get someone to clean for her.’

A week later Ellen told me to meet her at Irene’s house where she’d be making kneidlach and gefilte fish for Pesach. As we sat together on Irene’s leather lounge, Ellen told me that she has a room in a cousin’s house in Soweto while she waits to get her own house. Twelve years ago she applied for a three-bedroom house in Soweto so that Vusi’s teenage sons could live with her. Vusi
died fifteen years ago; Ellen told me it was ‘pneumonia’ that killed him. His wife died soon after, also ‘of pneumonia’.

‘They give the houses to the Nigerians, mbumbu,’ Ellen said, rubbing her thumb against the pads of her forefingers. ‘Too much corruption in this country.’

Ellen has a rural block of land in the Transkei and some money in her bank account, but she believes she’s entitled to a house in urban Soweto under the Government’s Reconstruction Program.

‘I’m a citizen of South Africa,’ she tells me. ‘They must give me a house.’

Ellen has cleaned and cooked and raised children in the homes of middle-class, Jewish, white families for fifty-five years. She has savings, but not a home of her own.
ESSAY

Not missing in action

The enduring penalty of ‘being female’

Liz Temple

WHILE MANY ASPECTS of working life have changed in recent decades, the inequality of outcomes experienced by male and female employees has been remarkably resistant. In particular, the progress of women into leadership positions within the workforce has been dismal. Within corporate Australia, for example, the proportion of female chief executives in ASX200 companies only increased from 1.3 per cent in 2002 to 3.5 per cent in 2012. During the same time span, the proportion of executive management positions held by women increased from 8 per cent to 10 per cent while, for board directors, the proportion increased from 8 per cent to 12 per cent. The stats get worse when looking at the full ASX500: only 2.4 per cent of CEOs are women, and they fill just 9 per cent of executive positions and company directorships.

Many advantages have been reported to result from increased female representation in an organisation’s leadership, including improved performance on a range of profit-related indicators. Nevertheless, in Australia the upper echelons of many organisations and companies continue to contain a preponderance of men. This appears to have led to the stagnation of workplace culture, with many organisations still expecting and rewarding work patterns and practices that are most compatible with employees fitting the traditional male breadwinner ideal. That is, someone who can work long hours and will prioritise work over all other aspects of their life.
An employee can only meet these expectations if they do not have primary responsibility for providing care to children or elderly parents. It also helps tremendously if they have a partner who can take care of the day-to-day tasks associated with running a household. In Australia, the majority of these caring and domestic responsibilities still fall upon the shoulders of women, making the reality of their lives somewhat incompatible with the expectations (and demands) of their employers. So, we have a catch-22 situation: changing workplace cultures to be more inclusive and accepting of the many women who are deemed to be ‘non-ideal’ employees may only occur once there are more ‘non-ideal’ employees in leadership positions, yet leadership roles are typically only conferred upon those individuals who conform to the work culture set by their employer.

It is this situation that has prompted a number of feminists to push for mandatory quotas for women in leadership roles. This proposal however, has very few supporters within corporate Australia, with the opposing argument typically being that quotas would undermine the meritocracy that is posited to currently exist. Proponents of the ‘merit’ argument would have us believe that the dearth of women in leadership roles is an accurate reflection of the proportion of ‘women of merit’ in the workforce – that they aren’t just MIA (and easily locatable by a good search party), but rather they’ve willingly gone AWOL, choosing to work less hours, being less ambitious, failing to ‘lean in’, and so on. I could expend many thousands of words refuting these ‘explanations’ but I won’t – they are just part of the smokescreen that keeps us focused on the ‘faults’ of the female workforce. To understand the continuing levels of disparity evident in Australian workplaces we need to scrutinise the institutional and societal structures that underpin the inequity. A good place to start is with an examination of the factors contributing to the gender wage gap.

**CURRENTLY, THE GENDER** wage gap sits at 17.1 per cent. This means that, on average, women earn 82.9 cents to every dollar earned by men for the same or equivalent work. At its narrowest, in 2005, the gap was 15.1 per cent. Since then it has been widening, eroding progress to the point that the current gap is now larger than it was twenty years ago – in 1994 it was 16.2 per cent.

Common explanations for the gender wage gap include that, in comparison to men, women work in lower paid industries, work fewer hours, are
less ambitious, less capable, less productive, less experienced, and take time out to have and raise children. These assertions are more fallacy than fact: the gender wage gap starts early, being evident right from the beginning of professional careers. According to Graduate Careers Australia’s GradStats, in 2012 male university graduates were paid $5,000 a year more, on average, than females for their first job out of uni. When directly comparing within occupational categories (so differences cannot be considered a factor of the gender segmentation of industry), males earned more than their female peers in 57 per cent of occupation categories (ranging from +$500 for agricultural sciences to +$14,400 for dentistry). There was parity for 13 per cent of occupations (education, humanities and medicine) and females earned more in 30 per cent of occupations (ranging from +$500 for biological sciences to +$3,700 for earth sciences).

So, we have two graduates with no experience and the same qualifications, but the male gets paid $5,000 more on average than the female. This alone should dilute any support for the idea that the gap is simply circumstantial and not sexist. Further evidence is available from an extensive study completed in 2010 by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling at the University of Canberra, *The impact of a sustained gender wage gap on the Australian economy*. After accounting for differences in male and female work patterns and experience, qualifications and so on, the researchers found that 60 per cent of the gender wage gap was due to ‘being female’. To be clear here, this means that most of the gap is not related to choice of occupation or sector of employment, having dependent children or a uni degree, or any other such variation. It’s just about *being female*. In their modelling, this ‘being female’ penalty equated to a deficit of $3,394 a year on average.

Evidence of the ‘being female’ penalty was also found by Juan Baron and Deborah Cobb-Clark, who investigated the gender wage gap using the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) data for 2001 to 2006. Overall, being female explained more than half of the gender wage gap for those working in the public service and a whopping 88–92 per cent of the gap for those working in private companies. However, it is important to note that their analysis indicated that this ‘being female’ penalty was only evident for higher-waged positions – the gap in lower paid jobs
was wholly explained through factors such as the sector of employment and the labour history of the employee. This is a different sort of ‘being female’ penalty, where female dominated industries tend to be less valued than male dominated industries, even though the work completed is of similar skill and difficulty and where having children adversely impacts on the careers of female employees through fewer years in the workforce.

Focusing solely on those in higher-wage positions (namely, managers), Ian Watson, from Macquarie University, found similar results in his 2010 study, *Decomposing the gender pay gap in the Australian managerial labour market*. This analysis of the 2001–2008 HILDA data, indicated that small proportions of the 27 per cent wage gap found between female and male managers were related to factors such as women working fewer hours per week than men (3.3 hours less on average = $1,607 per year), having less experience (3.21 years less on average = $2,153 per year), and working in health and community sectors (= $550 less per year). However, 65–90 per cent of the gender wage gap was explained by ‘being female’. The price tag attached to this bias was $12,899 per year.

FURTHER EVIDENCE OF the ‘being female’ penalty is demonstrated in studies investigating decision-making around hiring and promotion. The most compelling of these studies use matched curriculum vitae (CVs), which differ in relation to the gender of the applicant/employee, but are otherwise identical in content. Such materials are given to individuals responsible for employment decisions in the ‘real world’, who are asked to indicate whether or not they would, for example, hire or promote the person depicted. A good example of one of these studies was completed by Rhea Steinpreis and colleagues from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and involved the comparison of CVs for two job applicants who were going for their first job after completing graduate school.

The CVs, which were identical except for the applicant’s name (Karen Miller or Brian Miller), were distributed to 238 participants – psychology academics at US universities. Among other things, the academics were asked to assess the quality of the candidates in relation to their work experience (teaching, research and service) and to state whether they felt the candidates
should be hired. The study results showed that, irrespective of the gender of the participating academic, they were more likely to rate the male job candidate higher than the female candidate on each of the aspects of work experience assessed. They were also more likely to recommend hiring the male candidate than the female candidate. So, to be explicit: two candidates with identical CVs achieved different outcomes. As the researchers concluded, ‘The present findings indicate that at the fledgling stages of the career of a young professional, gender is seen as an indicator of success.’

An additional part of the study by Rhea Steinpreis and her colleagues compared candidates seeking tenure in a position they already held. Again, identical CVs were used, only the applicant’s name was different. The same academics were asked to assess the quality of the candidates in relation to their work experience and to state whether they felt the candidates should be given tenure. Unlike with the job applicants, the academics gave the male and female tenure candidates similar ratings and tenure recommendations – suggesting a reduced ‘being female’ penalty. The academics were, however, four times more likely to write, what the researchers referred to as, ‘cautionary comments’ for the female candidates than for the male candidates. These comments included: ‘We would have to see her job talk’; ‘It is impossible to make such a judgment without teaching evaluations’; and ‘I would need to see evidence that she had gotten these grants and publications on her own’. The researchers concluded that: ‘Although it is unclear at what point the burgeoning record begins to speak for itself regardless of gender, it does seem clear that there comes a time when a scientist’s record becomes strong enough to outweigh the gender bias.’ I would like to be able to agree with the conclusion, but I don’t think you can ignore the comments, which demonstrated clear bias.

At their core, the comments indicate that more evidence of competence and achievement was required of the female than of the male candidate, suggesting that the woman was perceived as being less appropriate for the position than the man, even if they presented objectively equal. This gender double-standard for competency has been well documented in the research of Martha Foschi, who notes, ‘Experimental research provides clear evidence of stricter standards for women than for men when both perform at the same
level and performance evaluations are objective – but can nevertheless be interpreted as either conclusive or inconclusive evidence of competence. Double standards provide the mechanism for those differences in interpretation.’ As such, double standards applied to competency judgments act to prevent and/or hinder female entry and advancement in many occupations.

Foschi’s research on double standards frames the phenomenon around the status of being part of the ‘valued’ or ‘devalued’ group – in relation to gender, males and females, respectively. As such, the valued (male) group is not required to demonstrate as high a standard as the devalued (female) group on any attribute of interest because it is inferred that they are bestowed with the attribute to a greater extent, even though objective evidence does not support this inference. This aligns with Madeline Heilman’s Lack of Fit model which I believe explains the ‘being female’ penalty in employment-related decisions.

THE LACK OF Fit model posits that expectations of how well someone will perform in a position are driven by the perceived fit between the person’s attributes and the job’s requirements, where good perceived fit leads to expectations of success. On the surface, this sounds logical and sensible – the person who seems to best fit the job is expected to do well in it, and is therefore hired/promoted into it. However, such judgments are affected by gender stereotyping, such as expectations about what women are like and how they should behave. Therefore, when a female applies for a job, or a promotion into a position that has been traditionally seen as a ‘male’ job, her perceived attributes don’t fit well with the male-type template of perceived job requirements. She is therefore viewed as being less likely to succeed in such a position, leading to being less likely to be hired/promoted into it. Given that the vast majority of occupational roles, and leadership roles in particular, have been traditionally viewed as ‘male’ jobs, this is where the ‘being female’ penalty occurs. Thus, as per the double standards for competency, to get the job or promotion, she will have to demonstrate, indisputably, that she is more qualified and competent than a male would have to be to get the same job.

To test this model, Karen Lyness and Madeline Heilman examined two years’ worth of promotion decisions within archival data from a US organisation. They found that female managers in traditionally male parts of the
organisation (business management, operations management and sales) were rated lower on performance indicators than female managers in traditionally female parts of the organisation (human resources, administration and external affairs) and males in both types of management areas. Thus, females doing ‘female-type’ work were not penalised because they were perceived to be a good fit when evaluated against a female template of job performance, while females performing ‘male-type’ work were judged more harshly because they were perceived to be a poor fit with the male template of job performance. An additional finding of the study was that, overall, females had to receive higher job performance ratings to gain a promotion than did their male colleagues, indicating the competency double standard.

According to Heilman, violations of the gender stereotypes influencing perceptions of job-fitness result in bias against successful women in the workplace. Specifically, because women who gain ‘male’ jobs are not seen to be a good fit, they are expected to fail in such positions. Hence, when women succeed, they are in contravention of gendered expectations. This leads to a number of social sanctions, including the devaluation of their performance, the denying of credit for their successes and being penalised for being competent. As I discuss each of these sanctions in more detail, take the time to reflect on the way successful women you know are treated in the workplace.

When women are achieving in a traditionally ‘male’ position, their performance is first devalued. Heilman notes that this can take a number of forms. In one form, devaluing is evident when the same behaviour is judged differently if performed by a male or a female. For example, a man who spends time chatting to colleagues or clients is considered to be a good networker, while a woman who does the same is wasting time or ‘gossiping’. Similarly, the man who speaks up and offers opposing views at meetings is seen as being an independent-thinker with leadership potential, while a woman who does the same is viewed as being difficult, disloyal and as damaging collegiality. This type of devaluation extends to claims that an achievement by a female is actually not an achievement or was not actually that important or difficult to attain, when a similar achievement would be held in high regard if attained by a male. In all of these instances the behaviour is valued when completed by a male, but not when completed by a female.
Devaluing of performance is also evident when a woman’s work is considered inferior to that of male colleagues when it is actually (objectively) of equal quality – as was evident in the study discussed above, where the same CV was used for male and female applicants, but the ‘male’ candidate was assessed more favourably. (An interesting example of this is reported by US neurobiologist Ben Barres, who was once told a colleague had commented, ‘Ben Barres gave a great seminar today, but then his work is much better than his sister’s.’ The ‘sister’ referred to was Barbara Barres; this was Ben’s name pre sex-reassignment surgery.) A number of studies have shown that this type of devaluation occurs more often when there is some level of ambiguity around performance indicators, which is, unfortunately, the norm for many work roles. As such, devaluation of performance enables gender role stereotypes about competency to remain unchallenged.

Devaluation tends to be prevalent unless there is irrefutable evidence demonstrating the equivalence of the work performance or outputs. If, however, there is incontestable evidence that a woman is performing successfully in a traditionally ‘male’ job, the next step is to deny her credit for her successes. This type of sanctioning is evident in the comments about the female tenure candidate, particularly: ‘I would need to see evidence that she had gotten these grants and publications on her own.’ Basically, the person making the judgment cannot deny that the female has been successful, but they can deny her credit for these successes by asserting that they are due to something other than the woman’s own abilities or efforts. This often takes the form of assuming (or asserting) that the woman had help from mentors or colleagues, she got a ‘lucky’ break, ‘fluked’ it, or had some sort of ‘special’ treatment.

Any excuse really, as long as it means that the woman was not personally responsible for the success, because if she was actually successful in the ‘male’ role this would challenge the stereotypical gender beliefs about competency held by the judge.

Denial of credit for successes often affects women hired or promoted through affirmative action or quota arrangements, as well as those who have completed women-only training (such as women’s leadership courses). This is because it is easy to point to the ‘special help’ the women have received and,
thereby, maintain a belief that the women would not be succeeding without it. Women in this situation are plagued by the questioning of their legitimacy and competency in the positions they hold. This is in stark contrast to the treatment of men who are vouched for or assisted in other ways by mentors or ‘old-boy’ networks.

When a woman makes it to a point where her successes are conclusively based on her own abilities and efforts, she is accepted as being competent in performing a ‘male’ position. But, because she has contravened the gender role stereotypes with her competency, she is held to be ‘different’ from other women. This enables the maintenance of gender stereotypical beliefs in relation to other women. Thus, while a particular woman may be judged successful and to have ‘broken through the glass ceiling’, this does not act to ‘shatter’ the ceiling. Rather, each woman needs to break through on her own, and each that does so is similarly viewed as an exception to her gender. It is important to point out here that this belief – that successful women are different from other women in some meaningful way – can be held by both women and men. However, the ‘otherness’ of women who succeed in ‘male’ jobs is part of the penalty they pay for their competence. It is evident in the derogatory treatment of these women, where they are called out on their lack of ‘femininity’, being described as cold, aggressive, ruthless, and unfeminine, and called a ‘bitch’, ‘ballbreaker’, ‘ice queen’ and worse. Tied in with this disparaging treatment, is another penalty for women who demonstrate competency: dislike. That is, women who succeed in ‘male’ jobs are typically viewed unfavourably and are not liked by other women and men, which contrasts with the views held of women who succeed in ‘female’ jobs and attitudes held toward successful men.

SEXISM SUCH AS this is difficult to prove, as is much of the sexism in the workplace. There is often a lack of transparency around hiring and promotion decisions and the assessment procedures underpinning such decisions usually allow for some level of subjectivity, which is where bias can creep in. Even when sexism is suspected, women who point it out in the workplace are often derided for playing the ‘gender card’. The worst aspect is that the bias is often internalised – the resulting discrimination is typically not, therefore, based on a conscious decision to discriminate against women.
So, how do we tackle such deeply entrenched biases against women in the workplace? Well, we should make assessment procedures more objective when we can. But, as this is not always possible, we really need to change the underlying causes of the ‘being female’ penalty – the stereotypes on which decisions about perceived job fit are based. This puts us back in the catch-22 position discussed earlier: women are hindered from reaching leadership positions because they don’t fit the gendered expectations associated with the positions, but these expectations won’t change until there are enough women in such positions to make it unexceptional. I suspect there will be a tipping point such that, maybe when more than a third of leadership positions are held by women, a critical mass will be attained and women in leadership positions will cease to be perceived as ‘exceptions to the rule’ or deemed to be ‘token’ representatives of their gender. Thus, while many do not like the idea of quotas, and the women advanced under such programs will pay a hefty price (particularly in relation to questions of legitimacy), they would make a difference – when women become relatively common in the upper echelons of the power structures in our society we will stop viewing these as ‘male-type’ positions. Quotas, however, will not fix everything. The availability of leadership positions is part of the issue but, as mentioned earlier, women’s participation in the workforce is also impacted by decisions made within the domestic sphere, such as how to share caring responsibilities and domestic labour.

DECISIONS ABOUT WHO does what within each couple is determined by a number of factors. However, it is evident that these personal decisions are often influenced by societal norms, which are informed by stereotypes about what women and men are ‘best’ at. As such, the principles of the Lack of Fit model seem to be somewhat transferable to this situation, though this time males must prove their competency regarding child care and domestic work; skills and abilities that are viewed as inherent to females in our culture. Hence, most child-related and other domestic work tends to fall to women, especially when children are young, while most of the income-earning work falls to men. This starts immediately after childbirth, where it is extremely rare for women to not take at least six weeks of maternity leave. Then paths
diverge. Typical patterns for women include taking up to a year’s worth of maternity leave before returning to paid employment, or not returning until after their youngest has commenced schooling. Approximately half work part-time, generally not returning to full-time employment until children reach high school.

Evidently, any time taken out of the workforce will have an adverse impact on an individual’s career progression, including lifetime earnings. However, even when women take a minimal amount of maternity leave, say twelve weeks, they are penalised for it in a way that does not happen for men or women who take a similar amount of leave for other purposes (e.g. long service leave). This is an additional ‘motherhood penalty’, which often shows up when women return to the workforce after maternity leave, and acts to slow further career progression. Often this is due to a reduction in opportunities for advancement being offered to mothers, with this seemingly driven by assumptions that a woman will be less reliable, less committed, less competent and less interested in her career than she was prior to becoming a mother. Unsurprisingly, these assumptions are driven by the differing stereotypes about what it is to be a ‘mother’ and what it is to be a ‘father’ and by the responsibilities commonly assigned to these roles in our society.

From a financial perspective, the ‘motherhood penalty’ adds to the pre-existing ‘being female’ penalty affecting the gender wage gap. Ian Watson’s study on managers also included an investigation of gender wage differences in relation to the parental status of the managers. Examining the data for managers with thirty years of work experience, he found that males with no children earned approximately $120,000 a year on average. For men with children, each child they had acted to increase their earnings by $2,000–$5,000 a year, resulting in a salary of about $130,000 for managers with three or more children. In contrast, the base rate (no children) for females with equivalent work experience was around $95,000, which decreased by $2,000–$7,000 per year for each child, to an annual salary of approximately $77,000 for managers with three or more children. Thus, the combined ‘being female’ and ‘motherhood’ penalties mean that, in comparison to a male with equal years of experience and number of children, an Australian female manager with thirty years work experience earns approximately $35,000
less per year if she has a single child, $40,000 less if she has two children and a massive $53,000 less per year if she has three or more children.

Unsurprisingly, the financial penalties associated with being female and being a mother are one of the factors that encourage families to make the decision for women to cease or reduce hours of paid work and to take on the majority of the family’s unpaid work, while men continue to work full-time in paid employment. Such decisions, while personal in nature, then reinforce the stereotypes embedded in our culture. Recent research by Sreedhari Desi and colleagues shows these decisions have broader impacts on other women in the workplace. Specifically, these researchers found that males in ‘traditional’ marriages (where the husband was in paid employment and the wife was not) were more likely than males in ‘modern’ marriages (where both partners worked full-time in paid employment) to hold negative attitudes about women in the workplace, believe that organisations with higher proportions of female employees run less smoothly, deny promotion opportunities to qualified female employees and view organisations with female leaders less favourably.

These findings are concerning, to say the least. As the researchers note, men in ‘traditional’ marriages are more likely than women to ‘populate the upper echelons of organisations and thus, occupy more powerful positions’. Even if only a small proportion of men in leadership positions throughout Australia are in ‘traditional’ marriages, their attitudes may be having a negative impact on many workplaces and other aspects of our society, such as the bills that are considered and passed in parliament. These sexist attitudes, associated gender stereotypes and resultant biases in the workplace are the underlying causes of the ‘being female’ and ‘motherhood’ penalties represented in the gender wage gap. They obstruct the advancement of women in their careers, thus impeding progress towards equality of outcomes between female and male employees in Australia, including acting to maintain the low proportion of women in positions of leadership.

SEXISM IS DAMAGING for everyone; both female and male stereotypes are detrimental. Altering them is difficult – it will take large-scale change. An essential step in this process is changing the influences children are exposed
to in the home and schools, such as through providing children with gender neutral messages and examples of behaviour, challenging the sexist beliefs and attitudes they come in contact with in their daily lives, and teaching them skills to distinguish fact from fiction. To assist this process we need to treat sexism as we do any other condition that has an adverse impact on wellbeing. So, let’s look at the sorts of programs and advertisements that are screened during children’s peak viewing hours and remove those that promote sexist attitudes or a lack of equality between females and males. Further, let’s add a ‘sexist content’ category to the advisory guidelines for television programs, video games and movies (Sweden does this for movies). We can also choose how and where we spend our money and which media and entertainment sources we access, to start sending the message to the hospitality, retail and corporate sectors that their endorsement of sexism and all that goes with it will be punished financially.

We must also keep sexism on the workplace agenda, ensuring people responsible for hiring and promoting employees are aware of the insidious, unconscious nature of gender bias and the detrimental effects it can have on individuals and organisations as a whole. If we do nothing and continue to place the blame for the lack of women in leadership on women choosing to go AWOL in their careers, we will squander generations of female potential. If we set our minds to it, however, the elimination of harmful gender stereotypes and attainment of gender parity within the workforce could be achieved in a decade or two. The first step to this end is for everyone to take their gendered blinkers off and look around their workplace: the ‘women of merit’ aren’t really MIA either, they got tangled in the ‘being female’ and ‘motherhood’ penalties while fighting a rear guard action against outdated gender stereotypes. They’ll win through eventually, but it will be much faster if everyone joins the battle.

References at www.griffithreview.com

Liz Temple is a lecturer in psychology at Federation University Australia. She teaches and supervises students in the areas of health psychology and personality, and has two key areas of research: biopsychosocial wellbeing, and substance use.
IT’S EARLY FEBRUARY 2014 in Paddington, Sydney at a tucked away, charismatic oasis in Underwood Street. Hidden to most people except investment seekers, entrepreneurs and philanthropists, the event is the launch of the Springboard Australia accelerator program for female entrepreneurs. The host is wealthy investor Mark Carnegie, although he doesn’t show. He has asked Rebekah Horne, one of the high tech entrepreneurs he has backed, to talk. She gives an honest and grounded account of her experiences raising funds and ultimately exiting the business. It’s tough, fun and worthwhile. She welcomes back three women from last years’ Springboard Australia class, who will later impart the wisdom they gained from the program, and stresses the importance of female entrepreneurship to Australia, the potential to go global and the impact women are already making on the local innovation and tech start-up culture.

It is clear Rebekah Horne is shrewd, smart and seasoned. Undoubtedly, she needs to be. MH Carnegie & Co is looking for home runs that will see its private funds multiply ten times on exit. This means, in general, that an investment of between $1 to $5 million will be expected to return up to $50 million; such is the nature of venture capital. It is even more cut throat in Sydney where such Series A and B capital, the funding phase beyond seed or angel capital that entrepreneurs call the valley of death, is notoriously hard to come by; there’s a dearth of this type of capital. It’s not such a surprise that so few women in Australia have reached this level and so few have given it a go. But now there’s a shift, and it’s happened remarkably quickly over the past months as some of the barriers to capital are breaking down and female entrepreneurs are starting up.
One person who has impacted the shift toward more women founding start-ups is Wendy Simpson who chairs Springboard Australia. She has introduced the global accelerator program to Australia and this year is supporting eight women-led businesses in high tech, software and life sciences. In USA, Springboard has helped 80 per cent of the entrepreneurs in its program, around four hundred and fifty women, raise an astonishing $5 billion. Compared with other non-gendered accelerator programs, this outcome is remarkably significant because, Simpson says, not only is it demonstrating the possibility of soaring success to other women, it is a cycle that builds the funding ecosystem for women which will impact local innovation. ‘These women will raise capital and will have seriously strong global businesses. In ten or fifteen years, they will have exited and will be cashed up and ready to re-invest. Springboard’s poster child is Lauren Flannigan, who has started up and sold three software companies, started an angel investment fund and a venture capital fund. This is the cycle we are supporting,’ said Simpson.

Until fairly recently, this process had not been well understood, nor followed, by female entrepreneurs, because traditionally men have dominated the field and access to funding and resources was not readily available.

Richard Dale is co-founder of Sydney Angels and was a venture capital investor during the first tech boom of the late 1990s. He has had great exposure as an investor in Sydney – it is the start-up hub of Australia, with 65 per cent of start-ups based there – and he has also been a case manager with Commercialisation Australia; working with entrepreneurs seeking funding through the federal grant program, the funding for which was recently put on hold. He says the high tech, high growth start-up scene was predominately male in the first boom. ‘If you look at the microcosm of the Sydney scene then, there were two female led companies at that time: Michelle Deaker of E Com, who is now at One Ventures, and Elizabeth Lewis-Gray of Gekko Systems. They were the two female entrepreneurs who were successful that I can remember. I don’t remember more,’ said Dale.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT this time around is that it is much easier to launch. Dale says back then it was experimental and exploratory, but now with the ‘new internet’, which is commoditised, more people know how to do it and less capital
is required. ‘It’s more about the business model and how well you execute. That makes it more accessible, particularly to women, and more are having a go.’

Irrespective of whether the founder is male or female, the opportunity is what matters to investors. Investors are looking for a high growth opportunities, founders with strong track record in execution and a team with a broad skill set that can turn an idea into a profit.

Luke Carruthers is an entrepreneur who has achieved five exits in his own companies and now invests in and co-founds start-ups. He works with entrepreneurs to achieve profitable exits, targeted in the range of $5 to $25 million, which he says is an underdeveloped ‘sweet spot’ in Australia. Within his portfolio, he is working with four female founders on businesses from cloud-based software to e-commerce and thinks as many as a third of the entrepreneurs driving the current wave of innovation in Australia are women. ‘This is a massive shift from the ’80s and ’90s when men featured heavily. The traditional “wheeler dealer” style male entrepreneur was the predominant image. Now there are blended teams, male and female co-founders, and this is creating better opportunities for investors,’ said Carruthers.

In the previous waves, he says, men were making products for themselves, as many good entrepreneurs do. ‘That means that more of the opportunity space for male-targeted businesses has been explored. This wave, there are more female entrepreneurs and making products for themselves leads them into unexplored markets. Consequently, there’s a higher percentage of interesting female-led businesses.’

The amount of capital needed to start-up has significantly reduced and this, along with an investment community who wants to work more collaboratively with founders, is making entrepreneurship more attractive to women. ‘In the dotcom boom, $3 to $5 million didn’t get a software business far. Founders were severely criticised at board level and many were replaced,’ says Wendy Simpson.

Now, replacing founders is uncommon and a start-up can get going with low levels of capital, as little as $100,000 to $500,000 in seed funding, to achieve a runway to the next round with greater ease. Early failures by founders are more acceptable and pivots are expected in the lean start-up methodology. Simpson says women can now see that they can start something on the side, even whilst doing their day job, and they don’t have to risk
everything by self-funding. ‘There’s more access to seed and angel capital, which helps female entrepreneurs. Today’s angel community is more diverse, and the friends and family round is an interesting phenomena,’ said Simpson.

A friends and family round can kick off a start-up. Baby boomers and self-managed super funds are more prevalent sources of seed investment and, Simpson says, women are more competent at raising this type of capital and moving to the next stage. This competence comes with better understanding of the process and more support globally. The ease of connecting, networking and collaborating with an online community means women are organising in learning communities, which is accelerating their knowledge, confidence and capability as entrepreneurs, and are supporting each other.

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS ALSO have a substantial and broader skill set, which is what investors are looking for. Being a start-up founder fifteen years ago meant you needed to be able to code software, but today the skills required of founders are much broader. Marketing is as least as important as product development. Female founders have often had very successful global corporate careers and bring a depth and breadth of experience, skills and insight to their business which investors are looking for.

One such entrepreneur is Dr Catriona Wallace who founded digital platform Flamingo, a way for organisations to co-create a whole of experience including product, services, communications, pricing and channels with their customers. The idea came from her specialist expertise as chief executive of one of her businesses, Fifth Quadrant, a management consulting firm focused on customer experience. She is a two times Telstra businesswoman of the year finalist in NSW and a highly regarded global authority, with a doctorate in organisational behaviour.

It is her view that female entrepreneurs more readily adopt a leadership style that enables disruption and innovation, which is essential for start-ups. Dr Wallace says the traditional models of business are no longer relevant because they are built on the industrial models of hierarchy. ‘What we are now seeing is the rise of the feminine archetype in business, in which the leader values and models a strong culture of inclusion and diversity, a strong focus on collaboration, networking, mentoring and connecting, as well as a deep level of caring for people including employees, customers and suppliers. This
may take the form of having a strong philanthropic culture, having children in the workplace and an acceptance of emotion in the workplace, and letting go of egos, power plays and politics.’

Dr Wallace says that not all women adopt this style and conversely men also lead in this way. However, she believes this is the predominate style of today’s successful female entrepreneurs and, as such, we will see significantly more women leading global businesses, either as founders or senior executives. ‘This will inevitably lead to a greater culture of entrepreneurship and as a nation we need to embrace innovation. Corporates struggle with how to innovate and more women stepping into entrepreneurship and experiencing success will lead to greater innovation across the board.’

A big part of success, she says, is having competency to secure investment and the expertise to structure equity investments. Kay Koplovich started Springboard in 2000 motivated by her own personal experience with raising and securing capital for USA Network, the company she founded and grew into a billion dollar business over twenty years. In her twenties, she signed on a silent investor, but unknowingly signed all of her equity away. When the exit of $4 billion arrived, she received very little. ‘Women really need to know how to deal with investors and they also need good legal and financial advisors. Lawyers are so important. If you don’t get your shareholding, patents and IP right, you can fail. We are working with a whole group of lawyers and advisors who can give good quality advice and can take a deferred fee,’ said Simpson.

With advice, mentorship and skills, women can ride a wave, but as Carol Schwartz, co-founder of Scale Angels warns, the only limitation for entrepreneurs based in Australia is the lack of capital. Scale is an angel investor group that empowers women as investors. It invests significant equity and influence in enterprises that have female founders or women in the senior executive team.

Schwartz says Scale aims to empower women investors to be confident risk-takers, to be part of a due diligence team and to learn to accept failure. She measures the success of Scale on the re-empowering and reinvigorating of women. ‘There is a dominant view in this country that women can’t make high-risk decisions in venture capital. My personal motivation for co-founding Scale is the financial empowerment of women. For example, a colleague of mine told me about an investment banker from Goldman Sachs who had been out of the workforce for ten years and was lacking confidence. She read about Scale, but
thought she was not qualified to get involved. I met with her and our CEO Laura McKenzie and she joined up as a Scale Angel. She has been absolutely brilliant on a due diligence team and has her confidence back. This is success.’

The Scale Angels’ network includes talented, experienced women. Laura McKenzie says a decade ago in United States, 8 per cent of angel investors were women and only 4 per cent of the funding was received by women entrepreneurs, now a fifth of angels are women and 13 per cent of funding is received by women.

Whilst the data in Australia is nowhere near as rich, recent reports such as the Crossroads report launched by StartupAUS in April 2014, highlight the need for more entrepreneurs and investors. Women play an increasingly important role. ‘We are seeing a lot of women in their thirties and forties who have had very successful global corporate careers and are now setting up something on their own,’ said McKenzie. She says there is a great deal of research that shows the level of experience of the founder will influence the enterprise’s ability to grow and generate the best business outcome.

Schwartz hopes Scale will have an enormous impact. ‘Firstly, it’s the intangible impact of empowering women as investors. That means, of course, you’re growing the pool of investment capital in our country. By the same token, you are also opening up to women entrepreneurs and management teams access to new sources of human capital and expertise through the investor network. As one of the people involved in Scale, I can say what we’re after is women-led enterprises that are interested in global domination. The basis of a new digital economy is only limited by our imagination.’

Women have all the skills to go from start-up to global enterprise. The barriers to entry are now easier to overcome, and there is more competency and a developing ecosystem that is more supportive of female success. Investors presumably will invest more because there will be better opportunities available.

This time around women are in the game.

Kristi Mansfield is managing director of Fifth Quadrant. She raises capital for start-ups, particularly those with potential for social and environmental impact through her impact investment advisory firm, Greenstone Group. She was a Telstra Young Business Women of the Year finalist for her role in the rapid growth of start-up, SpeechWorks (now Nuance Communications) in Asia Pacific and Australia, during the dotcom boom. Her essay ‘Back to base’ was published in Griffith REVIEW 40: WOMEN AND POWER.
FIT IN OR F**K OFF

ELIZABETH WOODS

I DIDN’T UNDERSTAND what the Pilbara was. I didn’t even know how to spell Karratha properly. I didn’t care about shell middens and Aboriginal petroglyphs and preservation; I just wanted money.

‘Welcome to K-Town, Lil,’ my uncle releases me from a stiff high-vis grip. ‘You’re in for a bit of a shock.’ We both laugh and look out to the garden as if to reassure ourselves we’re in the middle of nowhere. The garden is balding, patches of red soil push over the foreign greenery and the black dog is dead-still under the shade of my cousin’s trampoline. ‘We’ll take you to the pub tonight, now that will be your real shock.’

‘Like, heaps of guys?’
‘Yeah Lil, heaps.’ He walks into the kitchen laughing.

THE FIRST TWO weeks we drink and explore. My aunty is a residential ‘miner’s wife’ relocated from Perth by the company and my aunty is bored. We drive out to see the ancient rock art. My arm aches after five minutes of swatting about my face and it’s stupid hot, but then I see them. Faint, five thousand-year-old kangaroos and emus etched on the flat sides of terracotta rock, the strange white man with the hat on. I grasp in some way the vastness, the infinitesimal
scrape of my pink Adidas trainers on these brick-ish boulders, my silly mark on a meaningful landscape and the flies don’t piss me off anymore.

I didn’t know the earth could be so red, like ground cinnamon and it clusters under my unpainted nails.

The land is flat but for the boulder clusters and faint brown hills in the distance. Not long after knockoff, the sky boasts scattered pink and rusty sunsets you only see pictures of in Perth’s high-rise offices. The rawness is unexpected and doesn’t always seem real. I talk to my aunty and uncle about it later, the surreal feeling of the place: the big money, the big drinking and the thousands of fluoro vests flying into this small red town every week. My uncle leans forward,

‘This isn’t real life, you have to remember that.’

WE ALL LOOK the same. We hear the reverse bleep of utes whilst we brush our teeth in the bathroom light and burn our tongues on coffee hastily made before the horn outside. We half clamber in untied steel-caps down the driveway to the backseat. An engineer and contracts manager pick me up before 4.30 am and I can smell their sleep and breath from the backseat, like a teenage boy’s bedroom in the morning. The closeness of men is becoming normal.

The dead straight causeway to the gas plant is a fifteen kilometre queue of flagpoles glowing orange in headlights; those that aren’t driving, sleep, or grin and tell another passenger they’ve only got three or four days until they can, ‘fly the fuck out of this shithole’. Drivers peek through smears of condensation on windscreens, its nearly 30 degrees outside and the time display on the dash hasn’t cracked 5 am. They avoid speed limits, stay on the safe side, they don’t want to ‘get the window seat’ home. They don’t stay slow for the fauna. They don’t remember the locals and what Karratha means; sacred earth, God’s country.

KPI’s and Take-5’s and JHA’s and Excel spreadsheets; there isn’t much room for creativity. There’s time to work hard and count the hours until we pool back to town in the utes, sparking cigarettes the moment we get through the site gates because of the smoking regulations.

We buy roadies from a bottle shop in Dampier; I learn the phonetic alphabet and how to crack my beer open with a lighter. There’s time
to get to the Tambrey and find a table in the shade with the boys from work. You’re usually one of two girls at the table but mostly you’re the only one. ‘Cunt’ doesn’t offend you anymore and you learn quickly not to mention the heat because you sit in an air-conditioned office all day and you, ‘don’t fucking know what real heat is’. There’s time to drink five or six pints at $12.50 a pop and you’re in on the rounds without question, there’s no time to be a Pilbara Princess.

It takes a few weeks to realise how many beers you can have after work before you blow numbers in the morning. Alcohol readings must be 0.00. Older blokes tell you their tricks for urine tests; how they keep fake piss in their jocks to keep it warm if they’re randomly selected for testing. What doesn’t take long is for me to realise I like it here, a lot.

ONE OF OUR supervisors throws an after-party at a company house; he’s one of the few that doesn’t live in camp. The Tambrey kicks us out at 12 am and groups of us stagger, run and laugh across the main road to his house. We filter out around 3 am to a bus our superintendent organised with a designated driver. I’m one of the last to walk down the side of the house to the gate, but Lee pushes me up against the wall and kisses me hard. We both reek of too many Stellas and fags but the wetness of his tongue excites me. It’s not until the morning and the fizz of Berocca that I remember he’s married.

I scold him the next day as we walk around the office dongers on site pretending to talk about a member of his crew on a 457-visa from the UK that has heat stress and misses home. I tell him I’m not that person and remind him of his three kids. Two nights later we collapse, slick with sweat on the sofa in his house provided by the company.

We fall into a routine; I head to his house after work and sit out the back while he phones his wife inside. Then we drink a six-pack each and fuck in his single bed. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night to his wife’s voice.

‘Are you having a fucking affair?’

‘Don’t be so fucking stupid,’ he hisses. ‘I go to work, I come home, talk to you, eat dinner and go to bed, how do I have time to have a fucking affair?’

I slide out of bed and sit on the toilet naked, until he finishes.
THE BOYS AT the pub tell me about the camp-bicycle Renee and I feel sorry for her. One of the safety supervisors speaks up.

‘Come on boys, what about the rape of that chick at camp? Renee needs to be careful.’

‘What rape?’

‘Naww, Lizzy love, you don’t want to know.’

I do.

‘FIFO bloke, out of Brisbane apparently, pretty much kept this lass captive in his donger and blokes came and paid him…to fuck her.’

‘Rape her,’ I correct him.

‘Yeah sorry, rape her.’

Our rowdy table is the quietest I’ve ever heard it and I get Lee to walk me home.

It’s the start of the cyclone season and a ‘Toolbox Meeting’ is held on site by the safety advisors.

‘Listen boys, locals are making complaints after every RDO weekend regarding the behaviour of site-workers in town. Two people from another company got a window seat last weekend for fighting in the tavern. We have to remember that this is their town and we have to respect that.’

One of the men mumbles something and those around him snigger. Safety-advisor Ed cocks his head.

‘Something you wanna share, Dave?’

‘Yeah, actually mate, I said they shouldn’t be complaining. They’d have fuck all if it wasn’t for us working here and spending money in their town.’

THE COMPANY’S CONTRACT on the project finishes and demobilisation starts. I cry every time someone leaves, we’re family now and I’m a greenie. A ‘peggy’ (cleaner) gives me a hug and tells me she was exactly the same on her first project but now she’s used to it. Then Lee gets his ticket and I drive him to the airport. He grabs my knee in the car.

‘I’d never get a girl like you back home, it’s just not real life up here – gonna try my fuckin’ hardest to get back up though, don’t worry.’

I write him a letter and go to Bali on a cheap plane full of FIFO’s to get over it.
Lima Echo Echo,
I must write this, in case. In case I don’t.
I don’t think I loved you. Smoke got in my eyes. It’s a childhood thing. Not getting what I wanted and not knowing or getting to know if I ever really wanted it anyway. Because you don’t belong to me, and you won’t. So let’s clink Harry Potter goblets of Stella and kiss in our red, dusty dream. Let’s fuck on a bed of Ted’s hair and Sylvia’s bones. Let’s argue about a radio station that never existed. We’ll meet in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, smiling without wrinkles at a groundhog Pilbara sunset we pretended wasn’t tempting, beautiful. And we’ll love the uncertain certainty of that sore orgasm that never happened because of timing. But we knew it would, eventually.

We’ll be the great pretenders like lonely boys and I’ll buy you twenty-dollar cigarettes in a service station on a cloud. You can pay me back in Monopoly money. We’ll be as selfish as we proclaimed selfishly in the transit donger we crashed without a skeleton key, once upon a time in Never Never Land. Let’s pretend we both left with a six-pack. We booked a follow-up appointment. We understood the ending from a plane ride, a beer and a fag in.

But we didn’t. I took the wrong exit on the North West Coastal Highway and couldn’t afford the petrol anyway.

Echo Lima Indigo Zulu Alpha Bravo Echo Tango Hotel.

Flying back, I almost yearn for the red soil and it feels something like home when I walk down the stairs from the plane and the humidity smacks my face and prickles my scalp.

Elizabeth Woods is currently based in Perth, Western Australia. Her short fiction has been published in *Voiceworks* and Griffith University’s creative writing anthology *Talent Implied*. She was shortlisted for the award, Best Fiction piece in an Express Media publication, in 2012.
MEMOIR

Cross cultural keys to meaning
Perspiration versus inspiration
Gillian Bouras

I like work; it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours.
Jerome K. Jerome

SOME YEARS BEFORE her death at the age of eighty-eight, Aphrodite, my Greek mother-in-law, gave up walking. There was no physical or medical reason for this; she simply decided that she didn’t want to walk any more and so developed a pattern of moving between chair and bed. Her family was slow to realise that this was one of the first signs of the cloaking dementia that settled on her incrementally but inexorably. I myself came late to the understanding that she associated walking with work. But I did know she had certainly had more than enough of the latter.

One of the things that struck me in rural Greece, which I first visited on holiday in 1975, was the general appearance of the old village women. It was difficult to define or estimate ‘old’, for so many were simply worn out before their time – too many children, too often, along with too much worry, and a great deal of deprivation. Wrinkles had multiplied quickly on faces that had never known makeup; backs were most often bent from the effects of carrying heaps of olive branches and sacks of potatoes from the gardens that were usually miles away; and many apparently old women had peculiarly bowed legs from the effects of rickets, a disease that affects the bones and is usually caused by lack of vitamin D or by malnutrition. In Greece it always had to be
caused by malnutrition. All this added up to work. And work that had very little reward beyond survival at a level that initially shocked me.

In a cruel irony, the only rest a traditional Greek woman ever had was the period of forty days after she had given birth. In religious terms, this period was attached to the tradition of Christ’s presentation at the temple; in practical terms, it helped reduce the possibility of infection. The new mother was forbidden to leave the house. Her duty was to look after herself and her baby, but one can well imagine the amount of ‘rest’ she had when there were other children to look after. Of course the older daughters of the house were inured to work from an early age. It was their task to care for their younger siblings. My eldest sister-in-law, married at twenty-one, told me she was so tired by then that she could not face the thought of raising her own. She raised three.

The boys in the family also had their jobs. When he was young, my husband had to load the donkey with barrels and fetch water from the well. In summer he bitterly resented having to get up before dawn in order to help his priest-father water the vegetable garden. The boys also had to gather mulberry leaves for the silkworms. In one of the ironies of war, my sisters-in-law, though they went barefoot, wore pure silk dresses, produced by Aphrodite from the start of the process to the finish. Even if she had had money to buy dresses for her daughters, there were none to buy in war-torn rural Greece.

APHRODITE WAS BORN in 1908. She was the youngest and favorite daughter of a priest who made sure that in the fullness of time she married another priest, a man of good reputation and a distant relative. Aphrodite’s life, from the very start, was strictly prescribed. No deviation from the set pattern was ever contemplated, let alone put into practice. Education was not part of this pattern; she received so little schooling that in later life it was all she could do to sign her name, very laboriously, on her pension cheques.

The way of life that Aphrodite inherited had scarcely changed in a thousand years and work was the most important part of it, for unremitting labour was the only way of guaranteeing basic food and shelter. Emotional fulfillment and security came through attachment to family and church, and
the brief interludes of rest and recreation were connected with both. There was also a certain security in the programmed life, in knowing precisely what it was you had to do on each particular day. Each season had its rituals; three were spent in the valley, but the summers saw a retreat to the coolness of the upper village in the mountains: flocks were taken up there, and it was a time for harvesting wheat, walnuts and figs. This life resembled peasant life the world over: such a life is a type of cultural continuum, with each generation picking up the threads left behind, so that the same weave is forever repeated.

I, on the other hand, was descended from pioneer stock, and I can see now that Aphrodite’s view of work and mine were bound to collide. The people who came to the New World had to break patterns and invent the day, rather than repeat it. There were no convenient threads left lying around for them to pick up. Both pioneer and peasant were forced to work extremely hard, but in different ways and with different attitudes towards work. A couple of my ancestors, Richard Trevithick, inventor of the steam pump, and HV McKay, inventor of the combine harvester, were hard-working maverick lateral thinkers, the sort of people who rural peasantry does not usually encourage, but most other forebears were, like so many Anglo-Celts of the nineteenth century, victims of forces beyond their control.

Some were forced into emigration by the Highland Clearances, while the Cornishmen saw the tin run out. My ancestor from Norfolk and the one from County Down had bouts of bad temper to blame for their relocation; the former quarrelled with his mill-owner father, and was disinherited, while the Ulsterman, a sailor, took to a tyrannical petty officer with a deck scrubber, thought he’d killed him, and jumped overboard. It was fortunate that this drama was enacted in the Port of Adelaide. And also fortunate that authority was not as concerned then about illegal immigrants. All these people settled down and made reasonable lives for themselves and their families, although I don’t know if they made much money.

Nor do I know whether there was ever any actual money in the household when Aphrodite was a child. Though I do know that the man who became her father-in-law bought his fustanella and the rest of the traditional garb of elaborate many-pocketed leather belt and embroidered waistcoat with six goatskins of olive oil that he himself had produced: this was a weight of
at least two hundred kilograms, worth two hundred thousand drachmae. He walked three loaded mules to Tripoli, a distance of ninety kilometres away, in order to make the purchase.

FOR A VERY long time, wealth was measured in olive trees and what they could yield and earn; if there happened to be any excess oil, then it could be sold for cash, or exchanged for other goods. The olive harvest still goes on, of course, I used to dread that period: not only did it mean sweated labour, involving blistered hands and aching backs, to one unaccustomed to it, but it was then that Aphrodite was at her most tyrannical. 'You can’t do it; you don’t know how,’ was her oft-repeated refrain to me. And she was right. But I tried to do it; I tried to learn.

I used to have a fairly steady stream of visitors, mainly women from Australia. They had read my newspaper pieces and would often simply appear: we did not have a phone for ten years, and Hellenic Post was often erratic. On one occasion I recall, I took two of these women to see Aphrodite. I am short, these women were tall and statuesque. Whereas I have three sons, these women were the mothers of daughters. Aphrodite was so impressed that she, often quite taciturn, became positively loquacious.

‘What beautiful women. And they have daughters.’

All of Aphrodite’s daughters-in-law had produced sons, and it was a sore point with her that her name would thus die out.

She kept on. ‘What strong and beautiful women. Look how tall and well-made they are. Not like you, you poor, short, skinny little thing.’

I huffed and puffed in great indignation. ‘I’m not skinny. And you’re shorter than I am!’

‘Never mind that. That doesn’t matter. Aren’t they lovely?’ The paean continued indefinitely.

Later, one of my visitors became thoughtful. ‘What all this means,’ she said, ‘is that your mother-in-law assesses women, at least on a first meeting, in terms of their ability to work, and to work hard. Now you, you’re not really built for physical labour.’

I worked in the village, though. I had three cross-cultural sons to raise, and was determined that they would speak English and have an attitude to
women that was not the stereotypical village one. It took effort to suggest that there was nothing demeaning about washing dishes and cleaning bathrooms. It took more effort to convince them of the value of rosters for household chores. And sometimes bribery had to be added to the endeavour.

I taught English for ten hours every week. Small groups of children came to the house and I think I managed to convince a few of them that learning did not have to be a dull slog. Then there was the matter of my writing, which had become my ruling passion. I tried to do a certain amount every day. When my youngest son started kindergarten I would take him to the building and race back in the hope of having an uninterrupted two hours, which was the length of time at my disposal before I had to return to bring my child home.

But, and it was a big but, the key to the house had always to be left in the front door: it was more than my life was worth to remove it. Aphrodite would stroll in three or four times a day, often bearing a little saucepan of something or other for her deprived son: ‘I know you don’t make this, because you’re foreign’. Her favorite time of day for calls was the precious morning.

The whole matter of time was another area of culture clash. American historian and philosopher of technology Lewis Mumford considered the clock the key machine of the industrial age: he wrote extensively about it and pointed out that medieval monks had first used it. It was obvious, Mumford said, that clocks accelerated the human separation from Nature. Aphrodite did not have a clock; someone had given her a watch once, she said, but she had lost it. Time, other than sunset and sunrise, meant little to her.

But I had been raised by time-obsessed people; my grandfather and father were schoolteachers who had been in the army, and my mother was also a teacher. Our whole lives were dominated by schedules, whether we liked them or not: my father, for years, had the dreaded task of organising the timetable for a very large secondary school. With this background, I was hopelessly mismatched with traditional society where things got done in their own rhythm and where the notion of solitary work was a bizarre one.

On those school mornings when my time was precious, Aphrodite would pad in softly and remove the books and newspapers scattered on the chair nearest to where I was hunched over my old English-language typewriter.
She would then sit down and say airily, ‘Don’t mind me, just go on with your work.’ But it was clear that to her writing was not work at all. Her sister-in-law, yet another woman bound upon the traditional wheel, took a dim view of her teacher-son appearing after school and wearing collar and tie. ‘Get that tie off,’ Theia Vaso would say, ‘and do some proper work, for the love of Panagia.’

I am an inveterate list-maker, and it now occurs to me to make a list of all the things that Aphrodite could do, which is the same list of things I signally couldn’t do.

She could: raise silkworms, spin, weave all sorts of items from donkey rugs to sheets to mats for the floor, prepare olives in brine. She could make bread, soap, cheese and yoghurt, pasto, salt pork, noodles, cordials from various fruits, tomato paste and puree.

Aphrodite also raised a pig a year, and no part of that pig was ever wasted.

She had goats, chickens and a donkey, and knew how to look after them all.

She delivered the kids when the nanny got into difficulties. I saw her do it once. She then went on to coddle the undersized kid, which was bottle-fed and placed near the kitchen hearth, in full knowledge that the same animal would be killed and eaten at Easter. She could wring a chicken’s or a rabbit’s neck in the twinkling of an eye, and thought me very strange because I turned away from the sight. She had a flourishing vegetable garden always, and could not believe my ignorance; when she asked me to help her plant garlic and I had to ask her which end of the bulb went in the ground, the incredulous silence was thunderous.

IN THE EARLY stage of my unexpected immigration, my friend June came to stay, briefly, from Australia. We had been colleagues and June was an incurable traveller and a great philhellene. But she had never stayed in a traditional village before. She quietly observed the scene and came to her own conclusions. ‘What all this means,’ she said, ‘is that your mother-in-law could emerge from a nuclear fallout shelter and start again, whereas we wouldn’t have a hope.’ I was forced, reluctantly, to agree.
It seems to me now that the various cultures have their separate attitudes towards work. I had been raised by Nonconformists, so the idea of industry being a form of virtue was very much present. Inevitably a puritan at heart, I still hold to the notion that I can cope with most difficulties in life as long as my work is ticking over satisfactorily. In the past, a recalcitrant class at school would cause me much heartache, soul-searching and many dark nights. In childhood and adolescence we had never been allowed to give up on tasks, no matter how onerous. ‘Just nibble away at it,’ my father would instruct if we ever complained that something was too hard. ‘Always remember that genius is one per cent inspiration, and ninety-nine per cent perspiration,’ my mother would chime in.

Grandfather delivered a more insidious message: ‘Work hard and you will get what you want out of life.’ What a snare and a delusion that notion turned out to be. For him it had been the solution to an unsatisfactory early life. Born in gold-producing Rutherglen, Victoria in 1893, he was never able to get on with his irresponsible publican father and hated serving in the hotel bar. He escaped because of an interested teacher and his own dedication to relentless study. Because of his example, his brothers also shed their early life: one became a teacher, like my grandfather and two went into journalism.

For that generation and for my father’s, work, at its most successful, meant a job for life, financial security and a chance of some upwardly social mobility. And you managed all these things by being honest, keeping your head down, filling in your tax returns, going to church and doing your best in your chosen field. The securing of jobs via connections and bribery came as a great shock to me when I came to Greece, naive creature that I was. Another shock was the acceptance of ‘the system’. ‘That’s just the way it is,’ was a phrase that I came to hear all too often.

ON THE VILLAGE scene, nobody worries too much about the amount of time men spend sitting with their cups of coffee and their worry beads at one or other of the local kafeneions. My father would view this scene at ten o’clock in the morning and begin a puritanical rant: ‘Wouldn’t you think they’d all be working?’ It was useless for me to suggest that the men might have been in the olive groves since five.
But village women have to be seen to be working; the concept of invisible work, such as writing, is alien to them and it doesn’t do to show that you have too much leisure time. I take long walks every day as a matter of routine and one day I walked four kilometres up a mountain path to a village I had visited only once or twice before. I sat outside a modest taverna and ordered a drink before setting off down the mountain on my return home. Solitude is hard to achieve here, so sure enough the serving woman sat down beside me and demanded chapter and verse. Who was I? Where had I come from? And why? I established my identity and explained that I had come up the mountain. It took some time and effort to convince her, but in the end I managed it, only to have her sniff and say, ‘Well, since you have no work to do at all…’

I have reached the stage at which I am nominally retired, but in fact I become jittery if I am too long away from work, which is mainly writing these days. Writers never take holidays, not really, although they often wish they could. It is mainly people to whom work is a psychological necessity that keep on. A teaching colleague of mine once said that she was going to work until she dropped, and indeed my grandfather retired briefly but then went back to work for five more years as a school librarian. He would have kept on had my grandmother not become ill. As it was, he started as a junior teacher at the age of fifteen and gave up work, finally, when he was seventy. He fitted in active war service in France and Belgium at the relevant time. That too, one has to say, was work…of a very particular kind.

A friend of mine says he intends to die in harness. I intend to do the same. But it saddens me to think that Aphrodite’s way of escaping a harness that she did not choose was to give up walking.

Gillian Bouras is an Australian writer who has been based in the Peloponnese, Greece, for more than thirty years. She has had eight books published and has published journalism in six countries. In her Australian life she taught in Victorian secondary schools, and for many years taught English as a Foreign Language in Greece. Her memoir ‘Like Mother, Like Son’ featured in Griffith REVIEW 6: Our Global Face.
ESSAY

Two men and a picture palace
An ode to friendship
Dmetri Kakmi

Wishing to be friends is quick work, but friendship is a slow ripening fruit.
– Aristotle

MANY MOONS AGO, before editing books was a glimmer at the end of my nib, I worked as an usher at Hoyts Midcity Cinemas on Bourke Street in Melbourne. It was the mid 1980s, which puts me in my mid-twenties.

I don’t know how I landed the job. More likely than not, I asked and was given. You could do that in those days. You walked into an establishment that looked vaguely desirable and wouldn’t be too soul destroying and you asked if there was a vacancy. People rarely turned you down and if one day you didn’t show up they presumed you’d given up and moved to Frankston to live on the dole.

I had no idea what I wanted to do. Not much was expected of me and I expected less of myself. Drifting from one dead-end job to another was habitual. I tried it all: shoe salesman, car salesman, storeman’s assistant in a factory, and a brief stint as a model. On it went. I was not overly interested or very good at any of it and nothing lasted for long.

The only passion was movies. Reality was an adjunct to be tolerated between wondrous, magical bouts of cinema. During high school, I played truant many times to stay home and watch the midday movie. Though I was well versed in contemporary cinema, I had a soft spot for Hollywood movies from the 1940s. European cinema, especially French and Italian, ranked high, as did horror movies. I was an eclectic viewer and an insufferable film snob. Anyone who fell into my sphere of influence was inducted to the cause and
browbeaten into appreciating the films I held in high esteem, whether they wanted to or not.

I don’t recall how I became an usher, but I know why: free movies, day in, day out, dusk till dawn. And you got paid to watch them. To live forever in that flickering, ghostly world and to rarely encounter daylight is paradise for a nascent cinephile.

What I couldn’t have known was that Hoyts Midcity Cinemas was a rough place. The multiplex backed on Chinatown, which was pretty seedy, and it screened a lower class of film than the Cinema Centre up the road and Greater Union round the corner. It was a safe bet that if a film had a number after the title, Midcity screened it. Gems like 9 1/2 Weeks, Runaway Train and Blue Velvet were rarities and, much to my disgust, played to near empty houses. How we ended up with the revival of Some Like It Hot is anyone’s guess.

Our patrons reflected the content perfectly. No one in their right minds could mistake them for ‘discerning’ filmgoers. They were more likely to stab you than discuss Stroheim’s influence on Peter Greenaway.

Security was tight. Burly uniformed bouncers were employed to keep the ushers safe and to stop patrons from hurting each other during Chuck Norris and Charles Bronson extravaganzas. You never knew where or when violence would erupt.

The volatile environment fostered strong relationships between employees. We were a close-knit group. There was Trish at the candy bar; Peter, the manager; James, the uni student making ends meet; Ross, a young upstart who did god knows what in head office; an unemployed actor with attitude; and Ivan, the projectionist who looked like the biker from Village People. When a session was underway, we gathered in the foyer to gossip and philosophise, the air rich with the stench of popcorn, Fantales and Coke.

Many things were uttered in the best tradition of standing around and gabbing. Most if not all was hot air, filling the hours as we waited for a shift to end. Being a cool customer, I didn’t seek out friends. Nor did I particularly want to talk to anyone. Yet talk sought me out. Happiness was watching films in the dark and walking to my flat at midnight. As to what impression I left
on the minds of my colleagues, I didn’t give it a thought. I was detached and floating, knowing the job would soon be over.

AT MIDCITY CINEMAS ushers had absolute power. We were entrusted with collecting tickets at the entrance, seating late arrivals, cleaning up between sessions, and patrolling the premises. Rules were strictly enforced. Recalcitrants punished without mercy.

I was the usher from hell. No one got away with playing up on my beat. Bad behaviour was met with worse behaviour from me. Tempers flared, voices were raised, threats were made. If anyone looked disruptive during a movie I was on to them like Thor’s hammer.

Once a ‘hood’ pulled a knife when I tried to confiscate his alcohol during a screening of a bloodstained epic. A bop on the head with the plastic torch quickly put him out of action. Security took care of the rest. On another occasion a man stole a packet of chips from the candy bar. Trish yelled ‘Stop thief!’, as if she were in a bad movie. The thief dashed across the orange and brown foyer and I gave chase. Just as it looked like he would escape, I leapt on his back and brought my torch down on his skull. He collapsed beneath me like a sack of potatoes. Security magically appeared to toss him into the cold night. It was never clear to me how the security guys knew where the action was. They were never there when you needed them, yet they always appeared to clean up the mess.

Later I discovered that the head usher and the manager sat in the back office, watching my antics on strategically placed security cameras. It appears my unorthodox customer relations were relished for their entertainment value. Though it must be said, I was lenient on teenagers who sat up the back during screenings of Re-animator to canoodle.

Two incidents stand out from this time. Both involve lavatories.

One Saturday evening – it was the last session of the night – a man approached me in the foyer. ‘You better go check out the dunnies up the back,’ he said. ‘Something fishy going on there.’

I alerted security and, without waiting for them to arrive, headed to the facilities. They were at the rear of the building – perfect for shenanigans. Tinny muzak accompanied by the automatic flushing of urinals greeted my
ears as I entered the smelly sanctum. Of the three cubicles against the wall only one presented a closed door. A peek under the gap revealed one pair of feet—bare and not in a position that indicated a seated individual. Feeling silly, I asked if everything was alright. When an answer was not forthcoming, I entered the next cubicle, stood on the toilet seat and peered over the partition. A stark naked man was in a frenzy of excitation.

‘Excuse me,’ I said. ‘Sorry to disturb, but security’s on the way. If I were you I’d leave.’ Turned out he was a sailor. He couldn’t find a girl and didn’t want to waste money on a brothel. So he thought, why not...? The truncated history of his life to this point was related to me as he quickly pulled on his clothes. ‘But jeez mate, you sure gave me a scare appearing like that outta the blue,’ he finished off.

‘You better go out the back door,’ I advised. ‘Otherwise you’ll bump into security.’ The look of gratitude in his eyes added to the farce. ‘Thanks, mate. See ya later.’

Needless to say management was not amused when my Good Samaritan act flashed up on the ever-watchful security cameras. Though they were infinitely grateful when I was drawn into a greater, more tragic drama in the women’s toilets some time later.

I was obliged to enter the forbidden zone, sequestered behind Trish’s sugary kingdom, when a patron reported blood seeping from under a cubicle. When the individual locked inside did not respond to my knocking, I again entered the next cubicle, stood on the toilet seat and peered over the partition.

A young woman was wedged between the wall and the toilet bowl. Both wrists were sliced open and she lay in an expanding pool of blood. When the ambulance arrived, I was inducted into service. It fell to me to open the cubicle door. I clambered over the partition, lowered myself into the space with the body and unlocked the door from inside. The floor was slick with gore. Of course, I slipped and fell. As I did so, the inevitable happened: our eyes met. I had avoided looking at her face, and especially her eyes, until this point. I was in survival mode. The situation dictated detachment in aid of getting the job done. To look directly at the face would be to acknowledge her, to humanise and to be involved. I didn’t want that. It would undo swift efficiency.

I don’t know if she was dead or hanging by a thread as we lay on the
floor, eyeballing each other, for a split second that turned, like a cliché, into eternity. The thing that haunts is the unblinking fixedness of the eyes and the absence of life in the face.

‘Why,’ I thought, ‘would you cast your life away in a toilet?’

She broke my heart. But I was also angry with her for flinging away her life, and for having such contempt for herself that she’d do it in a crapper.

IT’S SAID THAT all things come to an end – and so they do. The leave-taking from the inglorious movie palace is as hazy as how I came to be there in the first place. One thing is certain: ambition, a desire for bigger, better things, had nothing to do with it. Boredom and restlessness probably did. The long and the short of it is that one day I was there, the next day I wasn’t. I did not step inside the building again, nor did I keep in touch with former colleagues. Like Lot, I knew better than to look back.

IN THE BEST filmic tradition, we will now deploy a slow dissolve. The image fades, the music is suggestive of time passing, and when the picture returns to focus, we will move twenty-three years forward in time. Out of respect for Brian de Palma, it’s a split-screen sequence. Yours truly is framed on the left side of the screen; an unknown man’s head with short dark hair fills the right side. The face has a desk phone stuck to its ear and it’s listening intently as the phone rings at the other end. I pick up the receiver and put on my best professional voice.


‘Dude, I finally found you.’

‘Hello. Who is this please?’

‘Dude, it’s Ross B—. I’ve been trying to find you for years.’

‘That’s nice. How may I help you,’ says me, doing my best to sound like Maggie Smith in *Downton Abbey*.

‘You don’t remember me, do you?’

‘No. Sorry.’

‘We used to work together at Hoyts.’

‘That was a long time ago…’

‘Yes, but…’
The enthusiastic chatterbox gives me a *Reader’s Digest* version of his life since we last sniffed popcorn together. How he’s been scouring the Internet to find me. How our conversations in the cinema foyer meant a lot to him. How I taught him to appreciate good filmmaking, which, in turn, influenced him to become an actor and filmmaker. On it went. And I still had no idea who he was. His name didn’t ring a bell. Meanwhile, the manuscript I was editing grew cold on the desk.

‘I’ve wanted to invite you to things I’ve done,’ he went on, ‘but I didn’t know how to find you.’

‘How did you find me?’ I ask, dreading the reply.

‘I saw your book in the Brunswick Street Bookshop. The author bio says you work at Penguin.’

Mental note to self: *Don’t announce workplace in next book.*

Uttering flattering remarks about my book *Mother Land* was a clever strategy on his part. The praise stroked the ego and melted my defences a smidgeon. It also brought home a pertinent fact: writers often toss stones into a pond, but rarely do they think about the shores the ripples will one day touch. I wrote *Mother Land* out of deep imperative. It did not cross my mind that it may affect people or cause readers to congregate ’round it. It turns out that’s exactly what happened. If the book is my conduit between past and present, a bridge built over time and space, it’s logical to conclude that a reader can use it to trace a lost acquaintance. That much made sense.

What I could not fathom, as I listened to Ross speak, was why someone would keep a friendship alive, fan it and allow it to grow, for twenty-three years. The issue is complicated when you consider that the beneficiary of the friendship is ignorant of the individual who bestows the gift. Was the caller a dewy-eyed sop, excessively sentimental and nostalgic?

Then came the clincher: ‘Man, I’d really like to catch up. Can we meet for a drink?’

Try as I might, I could not get out of it without hurting his feelings. He sounded genuine and harmless, but so does the average serial killer. I agreed on the proviso we meet in a public place. If he was going to stab me, I wanted witnesses. Then I made sure those closest to me knew where the rendezvous was taking place and with whom. One hour would define the limits of my
generosity.

Later I walked into the agreed upon bar in the city, feeling vulnerable and uncertain: Ross had confidently stated that he would recognise me, but I had no idea what he looked like. It felt dangerous. *Fatal Attraction* came to mind. On the one hand I was curious and on the other I was reluctant to open the door to the past. I knew from experience that calling upon the ghosts of former selves can cause regret, embarrassment and discomfort. The thought of attending a high school reunion is my idea of a nightmare.

The bar’s outdoor smokers’ area was packed and noisy, the lighting dim and the atmosphere oppressive. I stood at the entrance, looking for a phantom.

A bulky form rose out of the melee, moved towards me and, before I knew it, I was caught in a tight embrace. ‘This is it,’ I thought. ‘Mother, I will soon join you in the afterworld.’

When he released me and stood back, I was presented with a beaming face, topped with dark hair and bristly chin. He was a big bloke. Towered over me by a foot. In black T-shirt and checked red-and-black shirt he was a man I did not want to mess with. Yet there was something of the gentle giant about him – Little John, from *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, came to mind.

My hope that seeing him would bring back the association vanished in an instant. He was not in the least familiar. He could have been anyone pretending to know me. We sat at a small table. He offered me a drink. And, in the blink of an eye, four hours passed. Possibly because we were both aware of the unusual circumstances, we spoke to each other in a heightened state of excitement and awareness. I was on my best behaviour. Inordinate courtesy ruled the day, even when his views about certain films were gold-plated malarkey. On the other hand I was thrilled to learn more about Chinese and Taiwanese cinema – his obsession. The conversation was wide-ranging. Not at all restricted, as I feared, to reminiscences about ‘the good old days’. It was, as he later observed, like ‘twenty years melted and we were talking again, just like we used to in 1987.’

‘Only I couldn’t remember talking to him in 1987.

When we parted that evening, with promises to meet again, two thoughts ran through my head. The first was that Ross made a mistake; I am not the person he thinks I am, he’s thinking of someone else. Yet the
utterances he attributed to me – the words, expressions, observations on this or that film – were definitely mine.

The other thought came to me on the train. We go through life, it seems, meeting people, spouting words, sallying forth with views and opinions, yet we rarely think about the impact our words have on others. If someone told me at the age of twenty-six that my candy-coloured philosophising was going to influence a boy from provincial Lara, I would have laughed. Only the middle-aged man I am now appreciates the implications.

For various reasons, I have lived life cut off from the past. I’m good at compartmentalising, segregating, making sure people see only a small piece of the totality, never the entire picture. Only in the unlikely event that all my friends gather in the same room (perhaps at my funeral?) will the pieces come together. When a part of my life is over, I close the door and move on, never to think on it again. There is no room for sentimentality. It’s a defence mechanism. But life is full of surprises and there is no controlling it.

IT ALWAYS COMES back to movies. Which is why I see Ross’s return as if it were a film script, a narrative, with a beginning, a middle and an end. Life is not like that. But is it a mistake to expect his reappearance to have purpose, reason?

I call Ross the ‘returner’. He is a ghost from the past, a voice that will not be silenced, an influence that will not go away. Other than family, I have not kept in touch with anyone from my early years. Ross is the only one. He knew me when I was young and struggling to come to terms with life. That’s as close to the original as it gets. His presence holds up a mirror to a fragmented self. It makes integration and wholeness possible. I don’t know why we didn’t remain friends after Hoyts Midcity, but I know he came back at the right time.
‘THERE WOULDN’T BE a day goes by that I don’t think about giving up.’ It’s a cold winter’s morning as we huddle together over an early breakfast. Doctor X speaks rapidly, fidgets incessantly with her spoon, and darts looks over her shoulder occasionally to see if she will be overheard. ‘It is probably not a good week to be interviewing me,’ she says. ‘I have just been doing my financials and it’s not stacking up. I don’t know how I’m going to afford to keep practicing.’

I have agreed to do this interview anonymously and I have the sense that I am about to hear a darker story about the practice of medicine. Sure enough, Dr X begins by telling me about a female colleague who took her own life a decade ago. This catastrophic event led her to review her own stress and a year off. She never went back to the group clinic. ‘I like to spend time with people. I couldn’t negotiate that with the people I was working with; I was getting three hours behind and more and more stressed. I was basically told that I needed a medical certificate from my doctor if I was to have what I wanted, in terms of time to practice longer consults, which I wasn’t prepared to do. I was also forced to work at the local hospital emergency department, even though I didn’t feel I had the skills. That was what really did me in. So I just left and went out on my own.’

Dr X is passionate about the evidence-base with which she works, using nutrition, individual biochemistry and humanism to effect significant changes...
in the wellbeing of her patients. It is big picture medicine underpinned by additional study, with fantastic patient outcomes. Her methods, however, are unconventional. She has long consultations, prescribes significantly less pharmaceuticals and does significantly more pathology testing. These elements make her a blip on Medicare statistics. ‘I will be investigated, it is only a matter of time,’ she confides. She is sweating and asks me if it is hot in the café. It is not. ‘I don’t know why I haven’t been investigated yet. My total cost to Medicare per patient would be less than the average. I do longer consultations but over the course of twelve months I probably save them hospital admissions. But Medicare works with statistics. They could investigate me and shut me down, just because my statistics are different. They’re not interested in looking at the whole picture. Not even once they investigate. They say you are practicing inappropriately, just because you are different. I know lots of doctors who have been investigated.’

Now I am hot under the collar. I am sitting in this cold café because my husband, also a general practitioner, has, through a painful process of burnout and reclamation of his passion for medicine, felt very alone at times. He too is fed by and sees the healing properties of longer consultations and a broader toolkit of remedies to those he first studied. He too has moments of wondering where he fits, although he connects with it as a calling and would know no other life. His patients love his open-hearted, open-minded approach. Which is why I started interviewing doctors about the ways they work, the ways they make meaning in their work, and the ways they sustain themselves in the job. I wanted to know why doctors who are incorporating more humanist and holistic ways of working were being investigated or challenged by their colleagues. I wanted to know why humanism and compassion weren’t, in practical terms, the highest ideals in medicine. And I wanted to know why doctors were taking their own lives at higher rates than the rest of us.

WHAT STARTED AS a slightly angry investigation on my part has led me around Australia and New Zealand and has, in fact, become an extraordinarily affirming exercise. I have given up trying to have an opinion about the complexities of the Medicare system (or the New Zealand equivalent) and the economics which underpin it, or about ‘preferable’ ways to practice. I do not have any answer about why someone might take their own life. Instead, I
have collected an inspiring array of raw and hopeful stories from those doing that most sacred work: doctoring.

We rarely consider the wellbeing and the experiences of the person opposite when we need help. I wish to bow before those in this profession who are expected to be both humane and inhuman – God-like, machine-like, arms-length – at the same time. The weight is heavy, as I have learned from living with it and from listening. And yet, it seems that practicing medicine from an open-hearted place not only feeds the patient, but the practitioner as well. As one interviewee put it: ‘The degree to which the work takes me away from who I really am is the degree to which it is tiring.’

American doctor and author Rachel Naomi Remen calls this ‘falling away from wholeness’ and suggests that the professional training often wounds doctors. ‘It encourages us to repress certain parts of our human wholeness and focus ourselves more narrowly and cognitively on the grounds that this will make us more useful and effective... Often parts we have repressed...are human strengths – the heart, the soul, the intuition, aspects of ourselves that are our resources in times of stress and crisis and enable us to understand and strengthen others. Few people realise how repressive medical training can be... every doctor can give you examples of falling away from wholeness.’

My husband’s realisation that he had fallen away from wholeness was a slow dawning. I remember one conversation which served as a turning point. It was the end of another long day and he was in the mood for talking. ‘I felt sold out by my profession today,’ he told me, propping himself up on the bench seat next to where I was chopping vegetables. ‘I had this lady who came in with menopausal symptoms and was wondering about having hormone replacement therapy. I looked at her list of problems. She had high cholesterol so was on medication for that, which probably explained the increased difficulties with menopause. She was also on antidepressants and, just before we ended the consult, she said she needed her script for thyroid – another hormone area. When we look at the whole system, there is probably a chance she started with high cholesterol and if we’d looked at lifestyle choices instead of medicating... There’s such pressure to medicate people but then we end up killing them slowly by effectively upsetting the whole system, putting her on one drug which leads to another drug and she probably ends up feeling sicker, not better! It’s ridiculous.’
‘What did you do?’ I asked.
‘Gave her the drugs. I didn’t know what else to do. That’s what I’ve been trained to do. I just felt part of a useless treadmill of irresponsible lack of real care. I’ve had some great connections with patients, but when I do that I’m worried that the practice thinks I spend too long with patients and they’re probably not making enough money out of me. I just feel a bit alone in the way I see it all. I don’t know if I’m being a “real” doctor. I don’t know if I really want to be.’

The conversation continued on and off into the night. It was not the first time we had had these discussions. Richard had left the small town clinic where he started his career and burned out. He was temporarily filling in for other doctors at various clinics and loved, for a time, the limited responsibility of it all. He was free of the accumulating piles of paperwork, free from getting intricately involved in messy small town family webs, free from building relationships, expectations or neediness. It gave him some insights into how different practices manage workloads and a bird’s-eye perspective into how he was practicing and wanted to practice medicine.

Ironically though, the fulfilling element of his work was actually about those human intricacies, the relationships, his own hopes, fears and needs, and those of his patients. I had watched him grow and struggle in his work. I had watched and admired his earnest toil and genuine care for people. I had watched him lose and reclaim his compassion. It seemed cruel to watch him again sinking.

It was a moment of clarity for me: ‘I am so sure you are not alone. I am sure other doctors think this way and practice more heart-based and holistic medicine. That’s where the world is going. That’s what the patients want. You are not alone. I am going to go and find them’.

A COUPLE OF years later those words had taken me to New Zealand, where I met a doctor whose book of poetry about doctoring, Playing God (Steele Roberts, 2002), had been sitting on our bookshelf for years. Dr Glenn Colquhoun is an intense and captivating character. Over lunch, and a string of sentences tied together with swear words, laughter and the odd pause for a mouthful of breath and food, Glenn’s colleague and I barely get a word in. We don’t want to though. I hang on every word, deeply moved by his raw honesty, exquisitely articulated insights and irreverent pragmatism. His
colleague, whose home I am staying in, and who is edging towards burnout, leaves the lunch feeling moved and healed by the power of shared experiences.

Glenn shares how he started at medical school with an evangelist, do-good streak and was delighted by the academic challenge. ‘But by the time I finished my studies, I no longer felt the missionary zeal – I had come to recognise what dangers the profession contains and I was full of doubt. I was horrified during my final years of med school and first couple of years of being a house surgeon that I wasn’t prepared to make the sorts of decisions I was being asked to make. I was scared and I thought I was going to kill everybody. That was why I wrote Playing God. But by the time I got to the end of writing the book, I had got over that hump of fear and doubt. It is a steep learning curve but you do learn quite quickly. Plus, I was discovering the very beginning of that process of – wow, I really love these patients and their stories, what else is going to get me into the stories? Medicine to me is like one big poem which I find profoundly moving.’

He is a good example of how attitude influences experience of work. This can’t always override the systems issues though. Glenn doesn’t hold back about these. ‘I don’t know many doctors who work full-time. We’ve grafted this economic model onto community and care, and it doesn’t work. You almost have to do what you’re not taught at med school, just to get through a day. It becomes almost a siege mentality because we’ve lost the joy of medicine, because we’ve stopped seeing, because we haven’t got time to see. It becomes about the waiting room and keeping it ticking. It’s like a teacher in a classroom thinking: I used to love poems and now I’m teaching this poem again for the twentieth year in a row to these kids who don’t care, and all of a sudden I don’t care either anymore.

‘I’ve been at my current clinic for five or six years now and there are some I saw on the day I started and I’m still finding things out about them now, which I didn’t in a million years know about them, and I’m embarrassed. But taking a full social and family history, which can be hugely revealing, is very inefficient and just not economic at all. In the long term it has efficiencies, but in the short term it means you get through a quarter of the patients. But, general practice without that, you’d want to stab yourself in the eye wouldn’t you?

‘Waiting room economics really does drive a lot. It’s a continual deficit model – you’re here on my terms because something’s wrong with you
and I’ll fix it. I feel dirty almost sometimes, going to do a home visit. Like somehow I’m letting my colleagues down because it’s not an efficient use of my time. For example, I might go and see an elderly Samoan man who has just been diagnosed with motor neurone disease and I think to myself: Is this an efficient use of resource? Should I be doing this? I think that’s sad. You see so much when you see people on their terms. And you’re humbled – you’re surrounded by their photos, their power, their television, their music, their cup of tea, and you give them mana [the Polynesian word for power] because they’re looking after you. They bake you a biscuit, or make you a cake, and make you take the lot when you leave; and you let them do something for you. Its deeply humbling, and enriching. But its extraordinarily inefficient if you’re counting the beans. Possibly not if you count them in ten years time, but if you count them at the end of this year...yeah.’

THIS ‘TIME TO care’ issue is a recurring theme in the stories doctors tell. I have met and interviewed too many doctors who have either given up, or who work in much compromised (and underpaid) circumstances, because of their yearning for more time to connect with their patients, which includes seeing issues as going deeper than the presenting symptom. Sadly some of them see it as their own personal failing, rather than an empowered and empowering way of practicing.

Another doctor I interviewed in New Zealand, was so passionate about this issue that he wrote a book about it – Time to Care: how to love your patients and your job (Rebelheart, 2012) – and started an online international community called Hearts in Healthcare. It started for Dr Robin Youngson when he was asked to present at a conference of the Australasian Integrative Medical Association about his passion. At the time, his credentials amounted to being part of a redevelopment leadership team at a major hospital serving a very underprivileged, multicultural community. The team was charged with looking at changing the culture to make it more people friendly, caring and compassionate. He was anxious about the invitation because, while he had presented at many medical conferences, he felt out of his depth with this group of people practicing mostly ‘alternative’ and complementary forms of medicine. Ten minutes before he was due to go on stage for a forty-five minute presentation, he threw away his notes. ‘So in a state of fright, I stood
up there, and gathered myself and began to speak. Something extraordinary happened – there was an unbelievably profound connection with the audience. Many people cried at some of the stories that I shared, and there was just something really remarkable happening. Many of them had fled from mainstream healthcare – they could not sustain themselves in that system, so they were trying out some kind of different practice in different settings that see people and not just diseases and technology. I think it was very powerful for them to hear a mainstream hospital-based specialist, let alone an anaesthetist, talk about care and compassion and love and vulnerability. I think it blew people away. It was a life changing moment for me. In a mainstream hospital setting it is absolutely taboo to talk about caring and compassion and love and vulnerability.

‘Why is it taboo, do you think?’ I ask in the basement of his Auckland home where he is fresh off a flight from the UK and giving me fifteen precious minutes of his time. It is time well spent and his dynamism and passion sing to me; I can’t wait to share with my husband.

‘In a mainstream hospital setting, if you look at all the people who work in the health services, I believe that the most vulnerable are the most senior, especially the specialists. I think it is to do with the nature of our training. We really have a technologically-driven and disease-focused practice. We objectify patients – it is a process of brutalisation and dehumanisation. We’re kind of created to be gods who are supposed to fix and cure everyone and we feel very vulnerable when we can’t fix or cure. I mean, the worst thing for a hospital specialist is to say: Well, I’m very sorry but there’s nothing else I can do. That feels like a devastating failure of professional purpose. Equally, if you make a mistake, if you harm a patient through an error, that’s an awful feeling irreconcilable with your idea of yourself as an expert who is supposed to fix and cure. In our training we don’t have the opportunity to learn or develop any of the skills or attitudes or practices to support people as human beings, to bring compassion and caring and mindfulness to our practice. We are then left completely bereft of any source of self-esteem when things go wrong. Difficult patients are infuriating because you feel so incompetent. The more I see arrogance these days, the more I look for the fear behind it. I think people are extremely vulnerable and it’s absolutely taboo to discuss anything about personal feelings about vulnerability, about caring for your patients, let alone caring for yourself.'
‘To give you an illustration, I’ve worked at the North Shore Hospital here in Auckland for about ten years as a specialist and in that whole time I’ve only heard one specialist, once, talk about things vulnerably with his colleagues. I was anaesthetising an obstetric patient for him and the day before he had been doing a caesarean which had gone terribly wrong and the patient had ended up having a life threatening haemorrhage. They had operated for six hours, she had a huge blood transfusion and everyone thought she was going to bleed to death and die on the table. Somehow they managed to get it under control and she survived. He said to me: Robin, that was such a harrowing experience I really didn’t want to get up and come to work today, because I couldn’t face the possibility that someone might die on my table. That’s the only specialist I’ve ever heard in ten years share this kind of story.’

ANOTHER DOCTOR WHO has had to push against the tide to instill her yearning for more humanism and compassion in her workplace is Dr Catherine Crock. She works in paediatric oncology at a large children’s hospital. We first meet in a café on the busy road directly opposite the hospital where she works. It is stolen time, as it is for many of these doctors I interview. I get the feeling she doesn’t steal time for cafés, or even for food, very often. She is one of those slim, highly active types who speak fast, live fast, achieve an enormous amount, and leave me wondering if they ever sleep. We are literally in the shadow of the shadow which she so passionately challenges almost daily.

‘I’ve always been really shy and never spoken up, never made a fuss or anything,’ she tells me, ‘but when I came back to work after having my own children [she has five], I started doing bone marrow tests and lumbar punctures on children. On my first morning back on the job the nurse said: We’ve soundproofed the treatment room, it’s much better now. I thought, what is going on here? I would not want someone to do this to one of my kids, so how come I’m now complicit with us holding these kids down, week after week, not just once, but fifty times over three years, and they’re screaming in the waiting room because they know what’s going to happen when they come in. It was a turning point for me. I just felt something has to be done about this and this is really urgent.’

Initially she went about making changes quietly, chatting to people and researching different methods of pain relief for these children. ‘The anaesthetists had an enormous amount of knowledge but they were disconnected
with what was going on in treatment rooms because they just deal with pain in theatre. They were quite surprised to hear what was happening and within days they’d worked out a solution with me.’

This was the first of many small changes Cath initiated to make the experiences of the patients and their families less traumatic. These have included staggered admission times so there is less waiting giving patients pagers so they can go for a walk while they are waiting and introducing a music therapist to the team to help enhance a soothing environment for the children. This work led to Cath co-creating the first Hush CD, designed to soothe and minimise trauma for children in hospital waiting rooms and procedures. She and a team of composers, musicians and music therapists have now made thirteen widely acclaimed CD’s, with the most recent making it into the respected Limelight Top Twenty chart for classical music. In the fifteen years since her turning point moment, Cath has also been awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study patient and family centred care around the world and is now considered an Australian leader in the field, having initiated the Australian Institute for Patient and Family Centred Care.

Her crusading (which has gotten louder over the years) has come at a cost and she has been criticised for her lack of boundaries with patients. She has been told she’s providing ‘gold class service’, which is setting the bar too high and that such service takes too long and is unsustainable. ‘But my experience,’ she tells me, ‘has been that if you treat people just like a normal person and talk to them genuinely, I don’t feel like it’s getting too close, or them too dependent on you or anything. I think you just make them feel safer and more secure and you can help them a bit more. These kids have a long term relationship with the hospital. When I spend time with a child and their family, I’m building the trust of the family – it’s an investment for the next time and the next time and the next time; each time it will be quicker because the child will be less traumatised. Sometimes within the hospital machine, it’s like we’re speaking a totally different language – I’m speaking about truth and kindness and trust, they’re speaking about accountability and other management speak. It’s a very strange conversation. It seems so ridiculous to me that patient-centred work is the work of crusaders. It’s sort of embarrassing.’

Another refreshingly ballsy pioneer, psychiatrist, Dr Elizabeth Lewis, believes she would be kicked out these days with the attitude she brought as
a young doctor. Again, it is hard to believe that the philosophy underpinning her work: ‘treating people as humans’ could rock the boat. Perhaps it was her ‘rage at seeing people not treated as humans’ which made her stand out.

‘I am totally uncompromising in my ethos that we have a responsibility to ourselves and to every individual in the world. I treat my patients as if they are a member of my family. I have an integrity that is sacred and I can’t deviate from that. I was so appalled as a young doctor by the way in which people are disembodied and treated as a disease, not as a person in a context. For example, the concept of “the liver in bed 9”. I would say: *Excuse me, does the liver have a name?’

Liz’s husky laugh fills the space in the small, dilapidated kitchen of her humble clinic in the regional city where she works. Her mind works quickly on my questions and she breaks into laughter often. Her airiness is in stark contrast to her dark looks and the dark room, in a place where she has borne witness to so many stories of human suffering over so many years.

‘How to be so uncompromising is a bit of a minefield sometimes. It took me a long time to do my psych exams because I didn’t want to do it at the expense of anyone I was treating at the time. So that meant avoiding a lot of the requirements, for example all the various placemts, because that sort of rotational system provided discontinuity to the patients. When people talk to you about their stories, their lives – that is an extraordinary gift. It is almost a sacred agreement and you can’t trash it by saying: *Yep, thanks, that was an interesting story...I’ll be working at X for the next couple of months and so I’ll hand you onto Joe Blogs and you can perhaps deal with this, this and this*. If people are going to tell you really weird and scary and dreadful things that are happening to them, it’s as intimate as if you are talking about their sex life. You can’t just bandy that around, like it’s something to mock them with, which is what often happens in an institutional setting. You’ve got to treat their world with some sort of reverence.’

Liz bulk bills all her patients, as part of her belief that there should not be two tiers of health care. ‘I’ve always believed that the disenfranchised and the world’s underclass deserve as good a care as people who can afford the best health care. I can’t offer any kind of treatment that I can’t offer across the board. That’s part of the uncompromising bit in me,’ she tells me.

I ask her how she, this headstrong, deeply compassionate woman has coped in a system that says that it cares, but where care is so often clearly
lacking. ‘In the early years,’ she tells me, ‘it was a very haphazard thing. I just became an activist whenever something provoked me. I nearly went into obstetrics because I really objected to the fact that unmarried women putting their babies up for adoption, would have their babies in absolute silence. There was no talking, no discussion, no excitement. Then the baby was taken away, often without the mother even being told what sex her baby was, and she would be put in a ward with twenty or thirty women, amongst them women who had had stillbirths. These were the things that seemed so obviously wrong to me and so easy to fix. If I had a focus, I could cope with a system that had so much wrong with it. If I could at least dignify anyone that I came into contact with, then I could survive.

‘I guess you make as much difference as you can, hammer away at the edges. Sometimes it’s just the simple things that can make a difference. At one stage when I was working on a long-stay neglected ward, I figured that the best thing I could do was look at the notes and find out who had visited. Sometimes you had to go back a long, long way in the notes to find that anyone had visited. So I tried to get hold of all the people who had visited and tried to encourage them to visit more. I thought: I can’t change any of this, but I need to do something, so maybe if I can encourage visitors I can start to help with breaking down the barriers. The stigma of mental illness is wicked. There were people who just didn’t have visitors at all. They had no one in their lives. All you can ever do is just extend kindness in those situations. So, I may not have changed the world but I have survived and it’s been a good journey. The little changes on an individual level have been important along the way. It is the little changes that keep you kicking.’

FOR MANY OF the doctors I have interviewed, the thing that keeps them ‘kicking’ is the human exchange of medicine. I suspect this keeps their patients going also. Dr Glenn Colquhoun articulates this beautifully: ‘I have come to realise that the bedrock of all consultations is the art of story. Listening to someone’s story gives you a feel for the shape of it – it is almost a tangible shape – almost like palpating an abdomen but it is existential, spiritual. You can feel the ridges and the sorrows, the aches, the things they carry with them – their fears, quite often. Almost everybody is carrying something when they talk to a doctor – even if its just nervousness about talking to a professional.
And you can sense that, allay it, and get to the core of what is going on for
them. And that connection then guides everything else.’

Glenn is quick to point out that he doesn’t discredit the science of medicine.
‘If I’ve had a pain for two days in my right iliac fossa, I don’t want someone who is
kind to me, I want a bloody good surgeon. If I break my leg, or if my daughter
falls off the jungle gym, these are times when you want a body mechanic. But in
general practice, ninety-nine times out of a hundred that is not what is going on;
what is going on is a whole lot of other stuff, and spirituality is much more part
of your medicine. I can’t stop you having diabetes. I can’t un-renal fail your renal
failure. I can choose to use some medications, which might squeeze an extra per
cent out of you, but even then, I might get that wrong and make things worse.
I’m much more attuned to the way medicine feels, than to the way it thinks. The
arts tell you where and what science to use, rather than the other way around.
The art of the doctor is the art of story.’

The art of a meaningful and sustainable work life is that of maintaining
ourselves in the narrative, of not ‘falling away from wholeness’. Perhaps the
greatest art of all is the art of maintaining compassion in the face of the pain,
trauma and neediness of others. And in the context of the economisation
of care. The current ‘medical system’ is failing both doctors and patients.
Doctors who recognise this and attempt to humanise the process achieve
their positive outcomes at considerable risk to their professional standing.
The government is struggling to keep up with ever ballooning health costs
and the Australian Medical Association continues to worry about the failing
health of its own profession. Einstein is famously quoted as saying: ‘We cannot
solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them.’

I would like to humbly suggest that part of the solution may not lie in
science, mechanics and economics, but instead in the politically challenging
intangibles of faith and investment in the extraordinary healing power of
humanism. The art of story sharing is as ancient and healing as the art of
medicine. It is my hope that the sharing of these artful and powerful stories
honours and feeds the fine art of humanism in medicine.

---

Lucy Mayes is a writer, social worker, massage therapist and former lawyer. She writes
and runs workshops on her interests and skills in economic, community, sustainable,
health, youth, personal and spiritual development. She is currently working on a book
called Beyond the Stethoscope: Restoring Hope, Heart and Healing in Medicine.
FOR AS LONG as she could remember, Tania had carried a canister of capsicum spray in her workbag. She’d never had cause to use it but she believed it was only a matter of time. Last Christmas Eve, Sheila from the Dandenong office, had been verbally abused by a customer – some derro who said her mouth looked like a cat’s arse and that he wanted to slash her from ear to ear. Poor thing had to take three whole months off work. And when she did come back – at significantly reduced hours – she only managed one shift before breaking down and begging her manager for a transfer.

Anna from accounts said that even now, almost a year down the track, Sheila couldn’t sleep unless she drank a whiskey or took a sleeping pill. Post-traumatic stress, they called it, like what soldiers get after the war. Which made a lot of sense to Tania. Because sometimes that’s what it felt like. War. Tania vs. the guy done for drunk driving who came in early for his licence. Tania vs. the taxi driver from Pakistan who slipped her a fifty in the sleeve of his road rules book. Tania vs. the pensioner with cloudy corneas, who recited the eye chart from memory. They made her sick. She tried to hide it behind smiling eyes and a gentle I-give-a-shit voice but she knew that one day, when she wasn’t on top of her game – when she had come down with a cold or
MELANIE CHENG

hadn’t had enough sleep or was late getting out to lunch – one of the smarter ones would see her distaste like a crack across her broken face and they would snap like the derro had with Sheila that day in the Dandennong office and that’s when she would be waiting, like a cowboy in the movies, with her hand on the cold metal canister of capsicum spray.

TANIA PARKED HER Daihatsu and swiped herself through the back door. Thank God for the back door. Once upon a time she had had to plough through the mob at the front entrance, all bitching and smoking as they counted down the minutes to 9 am.

Counter 3. Her office: an eighty-centimetre square of bench-space between two thick Perspex plates. They were not supposed to have personal items cluttering the area – random spot inspections occurred approximately twice a year – but Tania had made it her own with a crumpled photo of her two-year-old granddaughter and a picture of a beach she’d ripped out of a *Women’s Weekly*.

Ticket holder number 5 drove a 2008 Honda sedan. She had the frightened look of someone surviving on shots of espresso and adrenaline.

‘How can I help you today?’ Tania asked with a smile.

‘My husband is dead.’ Her voice was flat and lifeless as if it had died along with her husband.

Tania pulled out the box of tissues she kept for such occasions in the top drawer of her desk.

‘The car was in his name.’

For what seemed like a long time, the widow sat and stared at an invisible spot behind Tania’s head.

‘And you would like the vehicle’s registration transferred into your name,’ Tania suggested after several minutes had passed.

‘Yes.’

Tania licked the bulb of her index finger and retrieved the relevant form – easily recognisable by its lime-green colour – from the organiser on her desk. ‘You’ll need to fill this out and bring it back, together with your husband’s original death certificate.’ She cleared her throat. ‘Plus the one hundred and twenty dollar transfer fee.’
The woman took the form in her bony, blue-veined hands. She frowned, as if contemplating what to do with it: eat it, preserve it or, in an angry rage, destroy it.

Tania looked at her watch. Nine twenty-three. The queue was making its frustration known with dramatic sighs and shifts of restless feet. She would have to move this widow along and quickly.

She had just composed her concluding remark — a perfect amalgamation of sensitivity and no-nonsense expediency — when she heard it. A loud plopping sound, like the first fat drops of rain. But it was not rain. It was tears. The widow’s tears, exploding on the green canopy of paper.

‘I have certified copies of his death certificate,’ she said, placing two crumpled documents onto the desk. ‘But the person I spoke to on the phone didn’t say I’d need the original too.’

Tania shifted the tissue box a little closer to the woman’s hand.

‘I have a three-year-old at home. Brie. And I’m thirteen weeks pregnant.’ She touched a spot below her navel. ‘We just bought a house and we have two hundred thousand dollars of debt and even though I know he’s dead, I can’t stop saying we.’

Tania held out a tissue and implored the woman to wipe her melting face.

‘I need to sell the car. But I can’t do it unless it’s in my name.’

People had cried in front of Tania before, many times, on average once per week, but she had never given in to their mucousy demands, no matter how sad the story. On the odd occasion that she had felt herself softening, like ripe fruit, as she listened to their sorry tale, she reminded herself of her own struggle: her father’s handprint, a bloodied stamp across her mother’s sunken face; raising Leah from the age of two as a divorced and essentially single mum; waking up empty after having her womb and its mango-sized cancer removed at the premature age of thirty-one. Nobody had cut her any slack and she had managed to survive. She was probably even better for it. Hardened. Inured. Unbreakable, almost.

But today was different. There was something about this widow and her spiky words that struck at Tania’s heart like a mace. And the
overall effect was one of disorientation; of being bombarded with so many emotions at once that it was impossible to focus on just one. Tania’s daughter, a psych nurse, said it happened to doctors and their patients – one person, usually the patient, causing the doctor to feel and act in a certain way. She even had a fancy name for it. But Tania didn’t care what it was called. All she wanted to do was get away; get to some place where she could breathe again. And in her desperation to escape, she broke a cardinal rule of customer service. She said, ‘I’ll see what I can do.’

THE TEA-ROOM WAS empty. Relieved, Tania steadied herself at the sink. Her boss spent Sunday nights screwing Anna from accounts and Monday mornings sleeping in. He didn’t answer his phone before 10 am and even if he did, Tania wasn’t going to call him. She wasn’t going to beg him for a concession she knew he would never make; a concession that she – hard-arse Tania as he liked to call her, before giving her a good slap on the bum – would never request.

She called Leah instead.

‘I told you not to call me at work.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Is it an emergency?’

‘No. It was a mistake.’

‘What was a mistake?’

‘Calling you.’

‘Are you sure everything’s OK?’

‘I dunno Leah, you’re the psych nurse. You tell me.’

‘Mum…’

‘Nothing’s wrong. Just checking in, making sure that little Ella’s ok.’

‘She’s fine.’

‘And Eric?’

‘Since when did you give a shit about Eric?’

‘Never mind.’

‘Now you really have got me worried.’ There was a scream followed by a loud metallic bang. ‘Look mum I’ve gotta go, but I’ll
come round when I finish work. I’ll bring leftovers. We’ll have coffee, watch Farmer Wants a Wife.’

WHEN TANIA RETURNED, the woman had wiped the mascara from her cheeks and was sitting straight-backed in the chair.
    ‘I can go home and get the original.’
    ‘That won’t be necessary,’ Tania said, surprised at the pleasure she gleaned from the disbelief on the widow’s face. ‘I’ve sighted the original. And I’m satisfied.’
    ‘But…’
    Tania held up her hand. She stamped the documents. ‘You’ll receive a sticker in the mail. It should be there by the end of the week.’
    An ever so faint pink colour, like rose water, flushed the widow’s eggshell cheeks.
    ‘Thank you.’
    But Tania couldn’t bear to look at her.
    ‘Thank you,’ she said again.
    Brian, from the adjacent cubicle, leaned back in his chair and pointed to his Casio watch. He was fastidious about his appearance, from his bushranger hair and thick-framed glasses all the way down to his Astro Boy socks.
    ‘I was starting to worry that Tania the great had taken a fall from her golden perch.’
    He had not yet forgiven her for displacing him as employee of the month.
    ‘It’s all under control Brian.’
    ‘And then I saw who you were dealing with.’
    ‘I have work to do Brian.’
    ‘I forget the name. Alice, or Alicia, or something equally pedestrian.’
    Alice Pickering.
    ‘She was in here last week. Some sob story about her mum dying in a car crash and needing the rego transferred into her name.’ Brian laughed. ‘No documents. Nothing. Just unwashed hair and one hell of a performance.’
Tania gripped the edge of the desk. She watched the slow bleach of her jagged knuckles.

‘She should’ve gone into acting. Better than those waifs, Cate Blanchett and Nicole bloody Kidman. Almost had me fooled. Really…’ Brian chewed on his lip as he searched for the perfect word, ‘authentic’.

In the queue, a teenager with a spider tattoo was cursing his girlfriend on the phone. A frazzled mother looked poised to strike a toddler, who was pounding sultanas into the floor. A pensioner’s malfunctioning hearing aid stabbed the air with its high-pitched ring.

Tania pressed the big red button which directed the next ticket-holder to her desk. As she waited, she forced herself to think of Sheila and the derro in the Dandenong office. She willed herself to remember the man’s needless declaration of violence and Sheila’s long and sleepless nights. She forced herself to imagine that it had been Leah, or a grown-up Ella, whose face the derro had threatened to slash from ear to ear. And then, with her head full of indignation, she plunged her hand inside her workbag and felt for the cold metal canister of capsicum spray.

Melanie Cheng is a Melbourne-based writer and GP. In 2010 she was runner-up in the VWC Grace Marion Wilson Emerging Writers’ Competition. Her short stories have been published in The Victorian Writer, The Medical Journal of Australia, The Medical Observer, Peril Magazine and Parenting Express.
Applying life’s lessons
Challenging a sacred cow
Julie James Bailey

LAST WINTER I was lying in the red dirt in the middle of the Sandover Highway two hundred kilometres northeast of Alice Springs. I was trying to get the jack under my Hilux campervan after a blowout. I remembered the quizzical expression on my gym instructor’s face some months before. I had just told her I wanted to come to the Gym for the Ageing so I could crawl under my truck. Her eyes flickered down to the birth date on my application form as she tried to calculate my seventy-eight years.

Now all those leg and arm-strengthening exercises were being tested. This was the fourteenth year I had driven north in the winter to volunteer in remote Aboriginal communities. But this year I was on a mission to solve some educational issues and was about to visit a community that had a possible answer.

Since retiring, I have volunteered in the Pacific and Indonesia on short assignments with Australian Business Volunteers teaching governance. I have been a welcomed guest helping to empower participants with a course on the responsibilities of a board director. In return I have acquired insights into country and culture. During the winter months I have volunteered in Aboriginal communities, mainly to teach video in art and women’s centres and to rangers. Here I am initially regarded with suspicion as one of a passing parade of ‘white fellas’ telling them what to do.
It has taken me many years and return visits to remote communities in Western Australia and the Northern Territory to begin to understand some of the different and complex issues in each community. I have questioned why the white fellas are in all the powerful positions when it appears many have little qualifications, apart from their knowledge of English. Why aren’t they trained in capacity building and cultural awareness, which is compulsory for overseas aid workers?

In Aboriginal communities I have had to build up trust and mutual respect with the local people to get over being pigeon-holed as yet another fly-in white fella come to tell them what to do. I have never forgotten, or been allowed to forget, that as a white fella I carry generations of historical racial baggage that will be held against me if I step out of line. Little by little I have felt more confident about discussing policy issues with the local women. But even as we become comfortable with one another, they can put me in my place – usually gently with humour, but at times of stress the years of hurt are thrown in my face.

Five years ago, my seven-year-old grandson flew from Brisbane to join me in Alice Springs, before I headed a thousand kilometres up the Stuart Highway and off to the west to Wadeye to teach video to the rangers. Lewin and I had been tourists in Uluru and I had taken him to the local Mutujulu community were I had previously worked. On his last day we decided to join the tourists and visit the School of the Air in Alice Springs.

This is an iconic tourist attraction and hosts hundreds of visitors a year in a centre decorated with children’s artworks, souvenirs and postcards. Many visitors from overseas marvel at the service that the Northern Territory Education Department provides for isolated children. Alice Springs is the pioneer and in 2011 it was to celebrate its sixtieth anniversary.

We were shown a promotional video explaining the school’s development from the 1930s, when it pioneered correspondence courses – as School in a Mailbox – to isolated children on remote properties.

It became School of the Air by sharing the Alice Springs Royal Flying Doctor Service’s two-way HF radio service into isolated homesteads in central Australia in 1951. The broadcasts supported the correspondence courses and enabled children to talk to their teacher about their work, the brainchild of
Adelaide Miethke, who was on the Council of the Flying Doctor Service of South Australia. She wanted to break the children’s social isolation.

In 1978, the Alice Springs School of the Air moved to its own purpose-built radio studio building. In 2005, IDL (Interactive Distance Learning) provided audio and visual access for students via two-way satellite systems. Each student site has a satellite dish and associated computer equipment, allowing students to see and hear their teachers in real time, as well as to speak and be heard by other students in the class. Students can work simultaneously on their computers, sharing learning materials with the teacher and other students. The Northern Territory has developed a software program known as REACT (Remote Educational and Conferencing Tool) specifically for distance education.

There are now sixteen Schools of the Air in five states. The equipment and teaching varies with each state education department.

At the visitors’ centre we watched, in two studios, teachers giving lessons to students from preschool to Year 6. The students can see the teachers demonstrating their lessons and the teachers can see and hear the individual pupils in their remote homesteads and monitor their work. The school sends out regular packages of lessons, books, CDs and DVDs that these studio sessions support.

In the homesteads, parents or ‘govies’ – governesses, many of them are retired teachers or students in their gap year before going to university – supervise the children’s work and there are weekly instructional sessions for these home tutors. Once a fortnight, in the Alice Springs studio, there is school ‘assembly’ for the one hundred enrolled students. The teachers gather in the studio and recognise birthdays and celebrate good work.

There appeared to be no Aboriginal presence in the visitors’ centre, in the students’ work, or on the staff and yet it was serving children living in one of the most culturally rich areas of Australia. I asked what classes School of the Air provided for Indigenous students. I was told that there were a few children in a remote community in Corella Creek, a thousand kilometres north-east on the Barkly Tableland, where the children spoke English and took some classes, but all the other primary Aboriginal students were catered for in schools. Historically, Aboriginal children were not included in any education system, and only an exceptional station family would consider educating the children of their workers.
ALL MY WORKING life I have been involved in various aspects of educational television. In the early ‘60s I was in the United States working at an educational television station and visited MPATI (Midwest Programs in Airborne Television Instruction) at Purdue. This was before domestic satellites. Each day, a plane flew round five states beaming down instructional television to remote schools. Later, in Britain, I taught teachers in training colleges to use television to cope with the baby boomer students and produced a pilot program with Exeter University, a trial for The Open University.

In the ’80s I was a member of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal and we were taken out to Kintore, a remote community in the central desert, to hear evidence from the surrounding communities on what the domestic satellite could do for them – education and health were key issues. We granted a commercial television licence to the Aboriginal company Imparja because it promised to train and employ Aboriginal staff and make programs – to become the training ground for a generation of filmmakers. In the ’90s at Griffith University we produced one of the first educational programs broadcast by ABC Open Learning.

I was concerned that School of the Air, a technically sophisticated resource, appeared to be trapped in a ‘60s culture. It was only being used for a hundred isolated white children who were in the state school system and a few Aboriginal children in a remote community who spoke English. It did not appear to acknowledge or reference Indigenous culture or languages that are integral to the land where the white students were living.

I knew there was a shortage of teachers in the Northern Territory, so I decided to concentrate my volunteering in remote schools to find out more. I discovered that there are hundreds of Aboriginal children who go to school, but who cannot speak English. In fact I later learned that in 2014 fifty-eight per cent, more than six thousand primary school children, spoke a language other than English at home. Most of their teachers have no training in Teaching English as a Second or Other Language (TESOL) and there are no dedicated English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as Additional Language (EAL) teachers in remote community schools. To add to the problem, the children do not speak English in the playground or in the community, unlike ESL students in the cities, where there are dedicated teachers.
In 2008 the NT Government decided on a quick fix – English had to be taught in all schools in the first four hours of the day. But the central problem of no trained teachers in TESOL was not addressed.

This policy failed. It totally sidelined the Indigenous Assistant Teachers: their bilingual and two-way learning cultural classes were abandoned and they were relegated to classroom discipline, making lunches and playground duty. After persistent lobbying the policy was quietly removed in 2012 but not before damage had been done to the role of Indigenous Assistant Teachers and school attendance. The Territory Education Department has now reinstated bilingual learning and has a policy framework for Learning English as an Additional Language, but does not provide training or resources to implement it.

THE NT EDUCATION Department recruits teachers from interstate for its eighty-three very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools. Its website asks ‘Have you got what it takes?’ and outlines all the financial benefits – additional loadings, airfares, study leave and a free house. But there is little about the educational issues. This year it has cut the five-day orientation course in Darwin for teachers taking up positions in remote schools and I am told there is no introduction to cultural awareness; no instruction of how to teach with Indigenous Assistant Teachers; no requirement to have the basics for TESOL; no understanding of the tension between preserving the first language and culture and learning English, and no prerequisite to learn even a few words of the local language of the community they are posted to.

The overworked principals are required to provide any orientation they regard as necessary. A common complaint from teachers is, ‘I had no idea what it would mean to be faced with a class of children who cannot speak English.’ The education department offers an online TESOL course, but it is not compulsory, and I have met very few teachers who have done it.

The result: many young, ill-equipped teachers launch into teaching literacy and numeracy as if they were teaching English speakers. Committed to following the new national curriculum, they are not trained to teach spoken English and do not understand that children must learn to speak English by practising over and over again before they can read and write. Although
bilingual education can now again be used in the schools, the teachers have little idea of how to use the language and cultural expertise of their assistants. In the 1980s, bilingual education was showing improved English literacy results in the upper classes when a student’s first language was supported in the early years and English was gradually introduced. But since then, teachers say there has been continuous chopping and changing between different English literacy programs and none with trained ESL support. Teachers are now teaching literacy and numeracy for Year 3 NAPLAN as if English was the students’ first language and the results are poor.

In a remote school storeroom full of discarded resources, I found Language Power, consisting of three books designed ‘to achieve more effective language and literacy programs in Aboriginal Schools’, for ‘Aboriginal and non Aboriginal teachers in team teaching situations’. They were dated 1988. This was a time when the Territory Education Department recognised two-way learning (also known as both-way learning) and assistant teachers as authorities in their local language and culture; provided a place for their knowledge in the curriculum and understood that they are an important link between the community and the school. The booklets are full of useful ways of crossing the language and cultural divide using community references. A struggling teacher exclaimed, ‘Why didn’t they give us these booklets in our orientation?’

The federal funding for preschools and childcare provides a great opportunity to support bilingual and two-way learning, so that children come to school speaking English as well as their own language.

Sadly, the NT Government does not appear to recognise that there is a major spoken English language problem in its remote communities. The emphasis is all on literacy and numeracy.

In one remote community where I volunteered, the government had outsourced the running of the crèche to a Perth organisation that operates suburban kindergartens. This organisation has no experience in remote communities where the children do not speak English. Unsurprisingly, they were having great trouble finding and keeping qualified staff. Last year they recruited a director from Britain who had never been to Australia, let alone a remote community. The one Aboriginal trainee teacher left.
The Gonski Education Report highlighted areas of inequality and disadvantage. The Northern Territory tops three of these – Indigenous, 40.6 per cent (6.6 per cent in Queensland); remote area, 45.5 per cent (WA 6.9 per cent); LOTE (Language Other Than English), 29.2 per cent (WA 15.2 per cent) – and the NT Government did not sign up for the Gonski funding and has slashed $16.5 million from the education budget for year 2013–14.

I REALISED THAT teaching English as a Second Language was far more important than teaching either video or governance. The communities want their children to be able to speak English as well as retain their own language and culture. They know that to get anywhere in this country you have to be able to speak English; they don’t want them to feel shame every time they have to approach a whitefella; they understand that the children who go away to school and learn how to live in the English-speaking towns have more confidence. But they want them to be able to learn in their community so they do not lose their language and culture. So three years ago I took myself off to a TESOL course in Sydney. I was twice the age of most of the students who planned to teach English overseas. I also did an immersion course in Spanish and learned just what it was like to walk into a classroom and not speak the language.

The next year I offered my new skills to a school where I had taught video. The principal was concerned that her inexperienced teachers would be unable to cope with another teacher’s presence and said that her need was coaching for the Indigenous Assistant Teachers (IATs). She suggested I make contact with the tutor at Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education responsible for the Vocational Education Training certificate courses in Education Support and Early Childhood that her IATs were doing. The tutor was enthusiastic and for the past couple of years I have accompanied her to communities where she runs workshops for IATs. I have stayed on to coach them in what are essentially correspondence courses written for students with English as a first language. The IATs were enrolled without an assessment of their English and there were no prerequisite English classes for them. It is not surprising that they are struggling and desperately need resident coaches and release from their classes.
Coaching has also taken me into Catholic schools. As a non Catholic I am impressed with the degree of support for the schools from their community. Clearly the church provides important cohesion between the community and the school and a meeting point for both. The Aboriginal teachers are respected; coaching time is scheduled into their timetable, as is team teaching meetings. The Aboriginal teachers conduct classes in Religious Education ‘in language’ and the two schools I visited both had Aboriginal deputy principals.

These schools also have links with the wider Catholic community. Classes of students from city schools visit regularly; teachers get leave from their schools in other states to teach remotely and one teacher had done her prac teaching in the school.

As in the public schools, the teachers are not required to have ESL training or to sit in on the religious language classes to experience what it is like to be taught in another language. But the Catholic Education Office in Darwin appeared to be receptive to some basic ESL ideas which could be incorporated into their professional development.

OVER THE PAST five years I have regularly visited School of the Air to keep in touch with what they are doing. I am impressed with the technology and appreciative of the dedication of the teachers to their isolated white students. In addition to teaching them from the studio, they organise their learning packages and mark their work, visit each of their students once a term and mount sporting and other activities for the whole school in Alice Springs three times a year. A couple of years ago I asked about the use of school facilities after hours and was told that there had been one or two approaches to hire the bandwidth, but nothing had come of it.

The school has increased its number of Aboriginal students to 32 out of 134. It now teaches Aboriginal students in Years 7, 8 and 9. They continue to go to their one-teacher remote primary schools and take School of the Air classes. But there is very little support in the classroom. In the school I visited, a television was set up in what was the teacher’s office and the students were left to struggle with the lesson coming from the Alice Springs studio. There was no ‘govie’ equivalent as it was assumed that the students’ English was good enough. This was not so. It appeared to be an added function that the
overworked teacher and two assistant teachers had to deal with. The older students were not coping.

Last year I talked about the ESL problems to remote school principals and teachers, academics, tutors, the union and the Department of Education in Alice Springs.

I floated the idea of recruiting volunteer coaches from baby boomer teachers who were now beginning to retire. A great idea, but no accommodation. A campervan stationed in Alice Springs that volunteers could use. No money. I suggested that School of the Air could be used after school hours for teachers’ professional development to learn to teach ESL. A different area. Remote state schools in Central Australia use REACT, the conferencing facility for professional learning for teachers and assistant teachers. REACT often has a problem with bandwidth. It is a state school and remote Catholic schools cannot access it. However, I noted that the children of Catholic teachers can use School of the Air and have a satellite dish outside their houses adjoining the school.

This year teachers were telling me that the situation in the state schools was the worst it had ever been. They could see no resolution to the ESL problem, there were funding cuts and larger students-to-staff ratios. The department had cut the position of its tutor to support the Batchelor tutor; assistant teachers were taking on unsupervised teaching roles in split classes, and there was no time for team teaching meetings.

One of the assistant teachers did a research project for her diploma. She talked to past and present teachers. In a letter she has circulated she states: ‘Many [teachers] do not have any idea how to teach Indigenous children who do not speak English as a first language… I think it is very important that the Education Department sends teachers who have training in English as a Second Language… We need teachers who are qualified to teach ESL to a wide range of students and who have English as a second language. The teachers who work out in the Homelands schools work with Aboriginal assistant teachers who are also ESL speakers. Most of the new teachers had no experience working in this way. The teachers need some professional development to help them understand how to work as a team with IATs.

Additionally many Aboriginal children suffer from hearing problems. Teachers need to have an understanding of how to address these problems in class.’
THERE CLEARLY IS a crisis. In 1961 Fidel Castro solved the literacy problem in Cuba. He sent university students out to the country to teach the illiterate farmers to read and write. They had the advantage of speaking the same language, but they solved the literacy problem in Cuba. In 2012 a Cuban teacher came to Wilcannia to teach the Aboriginal adults to read and write English using the Cuban method.

The Khan Academy is a US based, global, online classroom offering free resources and teaching for Maths. It would be simple to teach phonetics using the internet. With my video and a friend’s speech training skills, we are looking at this.

Teaching adults to speak, read and write English is not all that difficult. In the short term there could be a team of ESL teachers trained to teach spoken English, in a culturally respectful way, visiting communities as the dentists and doctors do.

But School of the Air is the obvious answer. It could broadcast classes in spoken English by a trained ESL teacher to remote communities and the Interactive Distance Learning system would enable students to talk to the teacher and get immediate feedback. The teachers could act as ‘govies’ and at the same time see how to teach spoken English and be instructed how to continue it in the classroom.

With each visit I could see how the wonderful teaching facilities of School of the Air could be extended after school hours and used at weekends and in the holidays to help solve a number of education problems. The preschool teacher shortage: it could provide relevant spoken English language classes for the communities and support the Families as First Teacher Program to assist the children to come to school bilingual. ESL teacher shortage: professional development TESOL courses to all remote Indigenous schools. The lack of cultural awareness courses: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers could provide these classes, both for teachers’ professional development and also during the school term for all the School of the Air students. The shortage of VET coaches: English classes for IATs. The reduction in VET workshops: classes by the Batchelor tutors.

SO I DECIDED to drive to Corella Creek, the remote Aboriginal school that takes School of the Air. It is five hundred kilometres from Tennant
Creek, the nearest town. It was on my way there that I had to change my heavy wheel. I did it with the help of a handy bladder that lifts the wheel on to the hub, a job I could never do without it, despite my gym exercises.

The community has about ten houses. Their families came from Brunette Downs Station and speak Aboriginal English. Now they live in their own community and provide a jackaroo service to stations. There is no store, but there is a clinic that nurses attend once a week.

Six years ago the community agitated for the school to be re-opened. There are about twenty-six children signed up for School of the Air, two qualified teachers and two IATs and last year it became a School of the Air annex, the first of its kind. This means the students visit Alice Springs twice a year and take part in the games and activities with all the other children. Importantly, they get special classes from Alice Springs to prepare them for the main School of the Air class.

I saw the special Year 3 maths class, which provides additional coaching to the four Corella Creek students who work round a table watching and responding to the big screen. It was later followed by the normal School of the Air Year 3 maths class. The Corella Creek students then sat at their individual computer screens, like all the other isolated Year 3 students. They responded to the lesson through the chat box, spoke up when asked and were part of ‘the largest classroom in the world’.

These are very tentative first steps to include Aboriginal students. The children have to be able to speak English but at least School of the Air is providing specific support for students who have special needs and they are learning and sharing sports days in Alice Springs on an equal footing with their white contemporaries.

Could this be a model for the one-teacher Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools? Would future tourists visiting the School of the Air studios in Alice Springs be able to see local children’s drawings and stories about their remote culture, life and language? Would they see Aboriginal teachers teaching in the studios?

Could Alice Springs School of the Air be the game changer to break down the educational bureaucratic barriers? To provide a facility for all students and teachers in all remote places of learning to learn from each other.
School of the Air had the vision to break down the tyranny of distance for the white settlers in the ’50s. The domestic satellite launched in the ’80s made that vision much more sophisticated for remote white Australia, but the hope that it raised in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to service their educational and cultural needs has not been met.

What prevents the Alice Springs School of the Air being used to its full potential for assisting all remote children? Is it policy denial that there are children with unique needs, with different languages and culture, exacerbated by the tyranny of distance? Is it the bureaucratic silos between governments and within the education departments? The fiercely defended funding empires within the education departments? Or is it racism?

Sixty-three years on, a sophisticated technical facility, built to provide teaching expertise to remote students, is not being used to its full potential and arguably where it is most needed.

Last year the NT Education Department set up a review of its Indigenous education. Its terms of reference included reviewing the independent sectors’ successes but there was no mention of School of the Air. The draft report published in 2014 acknowledged that distance education was relevant to the delivery of education to Aboriginal students but it was beyond the terms of reference. Although it went on to mention distance education, in relation to its secondary recommendations, there was no recognition that it could be used for Aboriginal primary, early childhood or teacher development.

Julie James Bailey spent all her working life in various aspects of television – acting, writing, directing, teaching and media policy. Since retiring as professor of film and media at Griffith University she has driven her campervan over 250,000 kilometres into remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia teaching video, governance and coaching English. She is the author of Reel Women: Working in Film and Television (AFTRS, 1999).
MICK FELT EXCITED coming down on the train but got cornered in the carriage by a tall heavy-boned old man with grey hair, who plonked himself down with a suitcase on wheels as they pulled out of Kerang. The man was a slow-talker but nevertheless up for a chat, and straightaway he offered Mick a sugarfree gum and made it known that he was a retired school principal off to visit his daughter and grandchildren in Malmsbury. When Mick made the mistake of telling him that he too was a teacher, currently in Mildura, the retired principal began to describe how ‘perfectly content’ he’d been during his years in education – mainly country schools, from Portland to Wodonga – and how every day in the job had been ‘a gift’ he derived ‘an enormous amount of satisfaction from’. By the time the old bloke had stood up to tip his luggage onto its wheels and get off at Kyneton Station, Mick was himself ‘perfectly content’ to see the back of him.

Mick was meeting Kathy in Geelong. She was working these days in Werribee and together they’d drive down to the B&B, which was on a property Mick knew well. James Secombe, a farmer turned greenie who’d helped them out every year with the school vege garden during Mick’s years on the coast, had bought the place back in the late ’80s with the idea of creating a permaculture model. By 2000, with scars all over his big-browed head from bashing it against the brick wall of shire regulations, James had given up and taken his ecological vision up to the Riverina. Last Mick’d heard of him he’d built himself a houseboat, had a hothouse on board, no-dig veges on the roof, a compost dunny, and was sailing the Murray west towards South Australia to highlight the demise of the river.
As Mick and Kathy drove the back route along the Crimea Road the churning began. Mick felt like they had been his kids. Four or five generations of them. He’d watched them crying for their mummies on the first day of prep, watched them overcome lisps before the onset of speech therapists, saw them assemble their first alphabets, sentences and paragraphs, and grow into pre-puberties of truancy or talent, or both. For better or worse he’d been privy to the family tragedies, the post-romantic fallouts of the parents, the petty neuroses behind the small town faces. And when their time had finally come to leave the education bubble and go out into the big bad world he’d always remembered to sit down with a shiraz in the poolroom and write them personal and, he liked to think, perceptive letters of congratulations and encouragement for the future.

Kathy had been there too, though only for the last vicious winter. She was brought in by the department as a ‘coach’, ostensibly to observe the tensions within the staff and to grease the wheels of transition. But Kathy and he had hit it off. And not just professionally. In the end when she went in to make her report she’d had to admit to the regional officer that she’d become a little biased. It was a shame, Mick thought, because otherwise she may have had some influence. But Kathy couldn’t pretend. It was impossible for her to tell a fib or be ‘unethical’. She was one of those women for whom dishonesty meant a bright crimson blush from head to toe, even before the thought had formed in her mind to tell a lie.

_Gimme Shelter_ was what old James Secombe had called his property, but when they eventually swung out of the back road and were approaching the gate Mick noticed that the old sign, which had been slashed out of a slab of ironbark with a chainsaw, had been removed. In its place were slanting lino tiles designating the road number and below that a small sign signalling the B&B – _Downtime_.

They drove over the cattle grid and down the drive. As they rounded the bend under the old ficifolia Mick was pleased to discover that despite the new sign the place looked relatively unchanged. When James Secombe had shacked up with Toni, the Croatian widow he’d met doing amateur theatre in Kuarka Dorla, together they’d turned
THE TEACHER

the stockbitten acres into a food-producing haven. From the passenger seat Mick could see the leaves of Toni’s olive rows still flicking in the breeze on the slope, the stone fruit and dams looked healthy as ever. It made sense, he thought, that old James had made sure the place had sold to sympathetic types.

At the front door of the main house they discovered the new owners were on holiday and the place was being looked after by the son and daughter-in-law. They were friendly enough but seemed a little stymied by the fact that Mick had a prior connection to the place. They pointed out the new straw-bale cabin on the other side of the lily pad dam, took Mick and Kathy through a rigmarole about the solar hot water from the rainwater tanks, handed over the key and the wi-fi password and left them to it.

Mick and Kathy went straight to bed. They tore at each other like there was a war on and afterwards Mick noticed his churning had gone. They sat out on the narrow verandah with fresh blue towels wrapped around, looking across the lily pads James had nurtured in the dam, the swans and coots and moorhens upon it. They had a complimentary locally-brewed stubby each, breathing out in sighs and small jokes after the drive and the lovemaking.

LATER ON THEY drove into Kuarka Dorla for tea. There was a nice Portuguese place there which Mick used to book for staff break-up nights. He’d checked online that the same family still owned it, the Montelusas, and indeed they greeted him at the door as if they hadn’t even noticed he’d gone. Which was kind of unnerving, but saved any awkward conversation.

The next morning he woke early as a nor’-easterly pinged in the cabin’s new roofing iron. He got up and sat on the verandah in his underwear with another stubby from the minibar, though this one wasn’t complimentary.

When Kathy woke up she called him in. He put the half-drunk stubby on the glass-topped table and took her from behind. Then he went down on her until he thought she’d wake the couple in the main house clear across the dam. Then she did the same to him. By the time
they walked out to the car with sunglasses on and the furry blue bath
towels slung over their shoulders, the wind had really whipped up.
Mick said a swim in the ocean first thing was one of the things he
missed most. They drove out past the ficifolia, over the grid at the gate,
and onto the main road.

At the beach under the bluff the car park was empty but for one
Wicked van, its window shades still up and the thick atmosphere of
sleep all around it. As they got out of their car Kathy pointed at the
message: *This van is rented by f**kwits to f**kwits*. Mick laughed and
told her if push ever came to shove he could drive off into the sunset
in something like that. Kathy screwed up her face and said he’d be
driving alone.

As it turned out she was the first into the water. Overcome by the
sight of the ocean Mick had laid out his bath towel on the sand and
flopped down in the familiar smell of kelp and marram grass. He shut
his eyes on the sting of the salt and tuned instead to the memories it
triggered.

Eventually he propped up on an elbow and watched her go about
it. She stood for ages in the marbled slack of the white water, wincing
at each new wave. Then finally she dove headlong and came up like a
seal in her black one-piece, her hair slicked perfectly back. The sight
of her swimming on a fine morning was enough to do his head in.
Nothing in Mildura touched him like that. Nothing was that attractive
and nothing felt that bad.

He stood up from his towel. The wind had died off a bit. An
occasional frisk of spray flung back off the waves was the only sign
now. No whitecaps further out. No oblique angle to the swell.

AT THE LAST meeting, when it was clear he was done and dusted,
he’d said straight-out to the new principal that if she wasn’t a woman
he’d deck her. Well, it was too late for niceties. The union rep was in
the room with them, he was both safe and unsafe. So he said it. He told
the union rep too that with friends like him he didn’t need enemies.
He knew that such behaviour would justify in their own minds the
decision that had been made, but he said it anyway. Somewhere inside,
he figured, if they were at least half-human, the truth would stick. They would know. At some later junction in their lives perhaps, when the passage of time demanded a different perspective, they would recall how brutal and compromised they had been.

What they wouldn’t know, what they couldn’t see, was the magic of the ordinary little school they were wrecking. He’d not only set the agendas, he’d mowed the oval, cleaned the spouting, fixed the aquarium, run the fairy-floss machine at the fair. He’d liaised with the local children’s author, the local bobcat driver, the Red Cross and the library bus. He’d protected his staff through deaths and breakdowns, knew way too much about everyone in the town, but never betrayed a trust. Yet the department couldn’t know all that, it wouldn’t show up on any website’s data, they weren’t interested in fact. They’d sent their drones in from some other planet and nothing he could say would stop them inheriting the earth.

He walked towards the water. This wasn’t what the HR guy in Mildura called ‘closure’. It was more like a saltwater boil. The beauty of the day made him shudder now and he broke into a jog. In a clatter of slapping flesh he swam right past Kathy and kept going, pounding the waves through the offshore spray and up and over the welling of his dreams, until he slowed off and began weeping as he swam.

THAT NIGHT, ON the way to the Montelusa’s, Mick got Kathy to drive there ‘the ugly way’, down past the gravel pits on the Messmate Road. In the early years, before the campus merger, he had decided to take the students to the pits for an excursion. No one was happy about it. Roughly speaking the parents were divided into two groups: what he called the Na’s (New Aspirationals) and the Ol’s (Old Locals). The Na’s thought visiting the pits was a totally redneck idea and the Ol’s thought the gravel pits were the kind of place you only went to on the weekends. Or maybe after dark to pinch some for your garden. But Mick knew the kids would love it and when they came home with their projects outlining the colourful history of the nearby Jarosite mine and the way the local ochres were traded amongst the Aboriginal tribes before white settlement, the scales fell from the parents’ eyes.
What first appeared to be some blokey bias towards Tonka trucks and ecological vandalism had ended up being a cultural and environmental history lesson. He knew that none of them, Na’s nor Ol’s, would drive the gravel-paved local roads the same way ever again.

So it was, he said in the car now, concluding his description of the excursion to Kathy as they passed the pits, and so it shall be. She took her hand from the gearstick and put it tenderly on his thigh.

At the restaurant, Frank Montelusa, the father of Nita who ran the kitchen with her ex-comedian husband Slim, made a beeline for Mick as soon as they’d sat down. Old Frank had taken an interest in Mick years before, when he learnt how respected he was as a teacher on the coast and had always, in that old European way, asked him for his opinion on federal politics or controversies in the local area. They’d had some good laughs in the past too and the old Portuguese man, short and pale but still with an auspicious crop of thick black hair, was delighted to see Mick again. They both commended each other on their appearance. Then Frank recommended the cuttlefish pasta. He brought a bottle of his own wine to their table, ‘on the house’, and said he’d sit down for a chat after they’d eaten.

Over the meal Mick explained to Kathy how Frank Montelusa had fought with the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War and had then been forced to leave Portugal in the terrible days under Salazar. He has stories, Mick told her, lots of stories.

The pasta was delicious and Kathy had the rabbit, which was every bit as good. When old Frank came by to sit with them afterwards Mick said that he’d just been complaining to Kathy that there was no food as good up on the Murray. Frank frowned enigmatically at the compliment. He set three glasses of Madeira down on the table, and pulling up a chair he said: You get beautiful wine up there, no? And oranges?

Mick chuckled darkly, raising his glass and saying something to the effect that you can’t live on wine and oranges alone.

Frank Montelusa was very courteous towards Kathy but it wasn’t long before he’d called his wife Marta over to free him up for a conversation with Mick. Their talk turned to Mick’s dismissal, his unhappiness at his new school up north. In response Frank unrolled
THE TEACHER

a long yarn about events leading up to his coming to Australia. His hometown, the town of his birth, had become dominated by Salazar’s troops. They knew what side he was on and in a midnight raid he’d barely escaped with his life. He described the long journey he took, the tears he wept into the moonlit wake of the ship. And then he talked about the racism he encountered when he’d arrived in Geelong. It had confused him, he said, made him terribly homesick. He’d worked around the clock in a fish-processing factory on Corio Bay and it was only when his brother Santo followed him out and he met Marta, that the pain began to ease. The wrench in his guts. The diarrhoea. The nausea. But still, he said, shaking his head in sad remembrance of difficult times, even still I have nightmares. Not about Spain or Salazar’s thugs or leaving my parents behind but about those fellas in that factory in Geelong.

Mick and Kathy felt like honoured guests that night and they also caught up with Tony Oberman, who’d been the PE teacher in the last days of Mick’s tenure. Tony was in for takeaway dessert but joined them at the table to catch up on old times. He was still at the school he said, still taking orders from ‘Maggie’ – the nickname the new principal had got due to her Thatcheresque management style – but said that as the PE teacher he wasn’t so badly affected. She doesn’t really care what happens out on the oval, Tony told them. There might be a bit of ‘numery’ involved in the scoring but there’s bugger all ‘literacy’, and she doesn’t care about anything else, we all know that.

They laughed and when they were leaving Tony swapped mobile numbers with both Mick and Kathy and promised to stay in touch. There were no such promises from Frank Montelusa, just warm double-handed handshakes and a deep wet sadness in his eyes. Mick promised he’d follow up on the book Frank had recommended on the Carnation Revolution and also that he wouldn’t leave it so long next time before coming back to visit.

AFTER THE DAY on the beach and the wine and Madeira, Mick and Kathy were both pooped when they got back to Downtime. They fell asleep on their own sides of the bed. In the darkness before dawn
Mick woke with a dull pain down his left arm and panicked. He groped his way out onto the verandah with a glass of water. Tried to breathe deeply. When the sky above the dam lightened with a foretaste of the dawn he calmed down, figuring he’d just slept awkwardly. He watched the sun come up through the trees and the swans untuck their necks from the wings of night.

When the light came on strong it reminded him of the Sunraysia’s dry heat. He dreaded having to go back. Perhaps he could forget teaching altogether. Maybe the Montelusas would give him some work in the restaurant. Just until he got on his feet.

By eight o’clock, James Secombe’s lily pad dam looked muddy and forlorn and the swans had flown off like cumbersome jumbos. He could no sooner be a waiter in a restaurant than swim to King Island. He was a one-trick-pony. They were starting to appreciate his methods up north but the problem was all that angry red dirt. The riverbanks cracked and exposed, the country worn out by the dry surmise of farmers who lacked James Secombe’s vision. He rose brusquely from his chair and strode purposefully down the verandah stairs to the dam.

Kathy slept deeply until after nine and only awoke to the sound of Mick in the shower. She took that to mean they weren’t heading to the beach first thing. When he appeared in his blue towel he asked whether she might like a drive around the road to Minapre for breakfast. Kathy felt tired still from Frank Montelusa’s wine, she thought a swim was what she needed, but she nodded and said she’d take along her togs. A drive around the coast for muesli and a coffee was hardly an awful prospect.

By the time they’d climbed the bends into the beginnings of the Otways, Mick was silently staring away from her, out to sea. And when they were descending through the S-bends onto St Patrick’s Rock he asked her to stop the car.

What’s up? she said.
I don’t want to go to Minapre.
Okay, we’ll turn around. We can get something somewhere else.
No. I don’t want to turn around.

Kathy looked through the windscreen. A black stick-figure was riding a wave across the point. Mick looked too, but saw nothing. He
would bump into people he knew in Minapre. It would be like when somebody died: the commiserations, the faltering condolences, life marching on regardless. Any honesty he could muster to the inevitable enquiries about his new situation would have to be lousy with dark humour. The jokes would remind people how fond they were of him, they’d relax and clap him on the shoulder, then carry on down the street. Get on with their lives. But he couldn’t get on with things. He was at a bloody B&B for chrissakes, he had no place to be on the coast anymore.

Kathy was waiting. Her hands in her lap. The mood was familiar to her. She thought of her father and his brothers standing speechless around the gyros on the day her grandfather had died. She recognised the unfathomable feeling, of something irreversible, unquenchable too. The sadness of men was like the Mariana trench. Silent, blue to black, the deepest thing on earth.

The surfer flicked off the wave and another rolled in behind it. The Great Ocean Couriers truck went by. She recognised the logo. They’d brought a couch down for her when she’d first been posted. They were friendly blokes but now the truck passed too close and the car shuddered where she’d parked it beside the road.

Eventually they agreed to drive right through and beyond to Wye River. Passing the swing bridge in Minapre on the way Mick switched on the radio. They crawled up the main street and by the time they were rounding the point at the southern end of the town he seemed to be breathing easier. They cruised along, with the road to themselves, over the succession of falling creeks. With eyes closed he recited the names to himself, like players from the footy record: St George, Sheoak, Cumberland, Jamieson. Then, as an olive branch, he remarked how dumb it was to feel so lost in a landscape you knew so well. Kathy nodded, relieved, and said that was well put.

At Wye River a front of westerly cloud had moved in and the breakfast was expensive compared to Mildura or Werribee prices. Mick explained how Wye was almost a childless town, being so far from a primary school, but that in summer all that changed. The caravan park on the riverbanks rang with hordes of city kids running
wild from dawn to dusk. But in the café now there were only couples like them, reading the papers, tapping at their phones. It was convivial but morbidly sedate. When they finished their food they both agreed to a walk on the beach. But just as they got up to pay it started raining.

They stood under the covered deck of the café looking out across the road onto the river mouth. The chemistry of the air had changed, the light had lowered through the she-oaks, the slant of the rain was a charcoal drawing. She touched Mick’s arm. He had been powerfully thwarted. He was holidaying as a ghost. Each new bend of the road, each shift of weather, each wave rolling in held a memory and therefore a freshly painful connotation. She knew the drive back would be worse.

She shouldered deep into him and hugged him tight. But she knew immediately it was the wrong thing. The press of her body seemed to quarry some greater gulf between them. Kathy’s hands eventually fell to her side and she watched as he stepped silently away, out from under the awning. He paused briefly at the roadside for a few cars to pass, then crossed alone to the beach.

ON THEIR WAY back, as the car crested a shoulder and they began the descent towards the St George River bridge, Kathy saw a young woman standing in the middle of the road urgently waving her arms. She quickly accelerated and veered across the white lines to pull over into the dirt parking bay beside the bridge.

They both got out. The air was genuinely cold now, and the young woman’s face was flushed. She was wearing only tights with thongs but had a puffy gold coloured Michelin-man jacket on top. She’d been fishing with her boyfriend on the rocks below the road, she said, and she’d seen something strange wash up in the waves. She’d told her boyfriend, but he was concentrating on catching snapper. She’d clambered over herself to take a look, she wasn’t sure whether it was alive or dead, whether it was human, or what it was. She thought she’d seen it move but was too scared to go close enough to find out.

Kathy looked at Mick. He showed no reaction, his face was pale, completely blank.
What do you think, Mick? she said at last, after explaining to the young woman that he was local.

It was as the words had passed her lips that something in him finally woke up. That’s how he told the story later on. He’d taken a deep breath, blinked, and said calmly: I think we should go and have a look. Then, turning to the young woman, he’d smiled and added: You were probably wise giving whatever it is a wide berth. Well done. Let’s go see.

They went down the steps to the beach, Mick and Kathy following the woman’s directions along the tea-coloured curl of the river and across the shallow braided mouth. Even from a distance they could see a suspicious shape on the rocks where she pointed, but as they drew nearer Mick put their minds to rest when he said that he thought it was a leatherback turtle. Very rare, he explained. Deepest diving reptile on earth. They quickened their steps towards the rocks.

When they got to it the turtle was lying belly down, its flippers splayed out to either side of its enormous carapace. Even as she experienced the initial shock of its size, the turtle reminded Kathy of a flying thing, something that had flown and crashed, but to Mick it seemed somehow recumbent, like a person in an armchair. Its leathery shell was covered in spots but marked by five clear lines running longways and inward to a point at its tail. Its head was huge and crinkly and seemed inflamed, its eyes small, open, and terribly still. It was obvious, even to the young woman in the Michelin-man jacket, that the creature was dead.

It was also obvious that they were in the presence of something out of the ordinary, something great. They all felt it.

Mick began to wonder aloud just how recently, and how exactly, it had died. There were no obvious wounds, no sign of plastic or trawler lines. It was washed up as if perfect, on to the complete imperviousness of the shore. He said that he’d been told once that leatherbacks can live to three hundred years old.

There was a silence then, but for the sibilance of the sea. Finally the young woman in the Michelin-man jacket grew overwhelmed. Turning towards Kathy she began to cry softly on her shoulder. Kathy
tenderly stroked her hair. Mick looked at the two of them, then at the turtle, then raised his eyes beyond. Sighting the young woman’s boyfriend still fishing further out on the rocks, he felt suddenly that the whole world had become a mirror. Or, as he described it later, a prism through which he could see things as they really were. The dead turtle, the sadness of the women, the man fishing as if oblivious on the rocks. A clarity came over him like the sea itself. He closed his eyes and felt it washing him clean.
I’D HEARD OF Bob Dylan long before I met him.

At the time, in the early ’60s, I was reviewing jazz and folk and pop music for the Sydney Morning Herald and playing folk songs with my brothers, and I was a good mate of Don Henderson, who was establishing himself as the leading writer of contemporary folk songs in Australia. The folk rock wave was in full strength, both here and overseas and Dylan was acclaimed as one of the key figures in the movement. But the mainstream media and disc jockeys still dismissed him as just another protest singer, even some members of the folk fraternity were worried about his fusion of popular and folk music. I wasn’t; I had listened, hard, to his songs and admired their conjunction of folk integrity (blues, made-over folk melodies) and the almost R&B energy of pop music.

Peter, Paul and Mary and The Byrds had turned some of his early songs into hits, in fact most people knew of his work mainly through other artists, so when Albert Grossman, Dylan’s manager, decided that it was time he toured Australia the publicity street posters declared NOBODY SINGS BOB DYLAN LIKE DYLAN. I persuaded John Moses, then news editor of the Herald, to let me go and see Dylan when he arrived. So in April, 1966 I found myself jumping into a taxi equipped with a reporter’s notebook to see Bob Dylan.
Sydney Airport. Early morning. Gulls, bitumen tarmac, hip kids in knee-high boots, camel-hair jeans, Zapata moustaches. Boeing 707, in from Honolulu. Pause. Doors open, the first passengers disgorged, blinking in the unfamiliar sunlight. Another pause. Then Dylan. I assumed it must be him, though he looked smaller and frailer than I’d imagined. Descending from the gangplank he was talking to some of The Band, but walking across the tarmac he was by himself: a tiny, lonely figure. Customs. Then, at last, into the main hall, where fans besieged him. He gallantly accepted a fifty-foot pop art fan letter glued together from magazine and newspaper clippings, signed himself ‘The Phantom’. Black corduroy suit, black suede high-heeled calf-length zipper-sided boots, dark glasses, a halo of long ringleted hair: Dylan, 1966. He held up his hands (look no stigmata!), turned away and made it across to the press room where the TV cameras and reporters were waiting. The Band, wearing dark glasses and sombreros, and the greying bulk of Albert Grossman followed. Dylan was smiling, being obliging. He settled himself down on a sofa for the press conference. The arc lights switched on. I sat down beside him, to his left. Downcast eyes, hooked Jewish nose. The crucifixion was about to begin.

It was soon obvious that nearly everyone there had already made up his mind about Dylan. Or their editors had. He was either a Protest Singer, or a Phony, or preferably both; and they weren’t going to be put off by any of that shit about him just being someone who wrote songs. Nobody welcomed him: the first questions were hostile, brutal, stupid. Dylan tried to answer seriously at first, but it was a lost cause. A few mumbles. Nobody listened. A young man from the Sun kept interrupting with a line of questions drilled into him by his paper: get him to admit he’s a phony, that all this protest stuff is bullshit. It went on and on; Dylan finally gave up trying to give serious answers and improvised a hilarious spoof of his questioners, but by this time I was laughing too much to take notes. And I had to get home; I’d decided to write something about it all. Next day the staid Herald ran on the front page the article I wrote about Dylan. The sub-editors cut it in half, but they kept the title (‘Bob Dylan’s Anti-Interview’) and all the stuff about Dylan putting down the press and parodying the whole performance. They even left the last paragraph intact: ‘Like I said to Albert, this boy’s got talent. Why don’t you put him on the stage
sometime? He could be as big as – well, as big as Robert Zimmerman nee Dylan, who happens to be, quite simply, the most creative and original songwriter in the world today.’ I was still at home when the telephone rang. It was Dylan’s road manager. Was I going to Bob’s concert at the Stadium that night? Hell yes, I was going to review it. Well, Bob wanted to meet me.

Then started my up-and-down relationship with Dylan, which has lasted (sort of) for most of my life. The concert that night was held in the Stadium, a giant ramshackle hangover from the turn of the century, which had been turned into an entertainment centre with a revolving stage. As I walk with my wife into the main arena, Dylan’s road manager, who had been waiting at the entrance, catches me by the arm. Come backstage at interval, OK?

We do so. Dylan is squatting down on his heels on the floor, electric guitar already around his neck. Grossman and The Band are there. Dylan mumbles hello. Yeah, he dug what I wrote. People don’t understand what he’s into. He is jumpy, nervous, unable to keep still. I have to bend down to talk to him, end up squatting alongside like a courtier.

Next night I see the show again and go up to Dylan’s hotel room afterwards. Amazingly, Dylan plays me the acetates of his two-disc album *Blonde on Blonde*, which had not yet been released. His next show is in Melbourne. Then Perth. Last stop in Australia before that climactic tour of England, which Martin Scorsese has filmed so brilliantly in *No Direction Home*. Dylan sends a message to me, via another writer. Try and make it to the States, man.

The States? Oh sure, like fucking hell.

**STANZA 2**

**FIVE YEARS LATER,** I was awarded a two-year Harkness Fellowship to the United States and my family and I found ourselves living in an apartment on the edge of Harlem in New York. America was in turmoil: it was the time of the massive anti-Vietnam protests, Black Power, the Black Panthers, the civil rights marches and the hippie/Woodstock/Haight Ashbury movement. In Dylan’s memorable description:

There was music in the cafés at night
And revolution in the air – ‘Tangled Up In Blue’
Keeping in mind Dylan’s invitation, I managed with great difficulty to find a telephone number for him in Greenwich Village where he was living, and left several messages for him, but never got an answer. Finally, months and months later, I got through to someone and thought I recognised Dylan’s voice. But for some reason my professionalism deserted me and I was overcome with my old teenage shyness and instead I left a message with him for Bob Neuwirth, an old music friend of Dylan’s, and Dylan hung up.

So much for Craig the intrepid journalist.

Nevertheless I was so admiring of Dylan’s music, the sheer scale of his achievement and the intensity of his inspiration, I decided to write a book about him. In the time I had left in the United States it would have been impossible to write a full-scale biography, and anyhow I have always been wary of the biography as a literary form (who can really know another person?). So I thought I would compile a retrospective of all the significant interviews Dylan had done at that stage and the major essays written about him, then preface it with a long introduction which I would write myself about the major themes and sources in his work. Everyone I approached was very willing to be included in the book, including Robert Shelton, the music critic from the New York Times whose review of Dylan’s first performance at Gerde’s Folk City set the twenty-year-old songwriter on his way, and dozens of other writers including Nat Hentoff, Studs Terkel, Jon Landau, Lillian Roxon, Nik Cohn, Jann Wenner and Wilfrid Mellers. It was only the second book ever to be written on Dylan and was published in the United States, Australia, Britain and Holland. When it first came out in 1972, titled Bob Dylan: A Retrospective, many people asked: ‘Why a book on a songwriter?’

They don’t ask that any more.

STANZA 3

TWELVE YEARS AFTER his first tour of Australia, Bob Dylan is back again, in Brisbane, sitting curled up in a chair with his long toenails and longer guitarist’s thumbnail, scruffy, unprepossessing, laid-back, apparently together, with a four hour realer-than-reality film Renaldo and Clara out in the States and a tour of worshipful Japan behind him. Outside in the humid
police-stricken streets of Brisbane, kids half his age are already lying around the Festival Theatre, beneath lights which say BOB DYLAN GEORGE BENSON WRESTLING, to see if Bob Dylan is what they think he is, like, you know, idol of millions, spokesman for his generation, genius, trapeze artist.

He looks much the same. Shaved most of his beard off, remnants straggle down the sides of his mouth. Soft, gentle voice. Still got his sense of humour, though it’s hard to make him smile. Short pants. Romance? Looks like he needs mothering. Like he keeps saying, he’s been through a lot of changes.

‘Please, Mr Dylan,’ repeat the two girls who have been waiting outside the Crest International for his autograph, no parlour groupies these but high school kids, like many in the audience later that night. ‘Not tonight,’ says Dylan, and strolls on through the city square. He is dressed, conservatively, in a black-and-white floral shirt, pants with coloured knee-patches, waistcoat and gym shoes. His bodyguard is in white pants and shirt, moustache, brown felt top hat with a joker stuck on the brim, looking like he could have strolled off Sam Peckinpah’s Pat Garrett and Billy The Kid, which had Dylan in a similar role. The sound man is in funeral black.

‘Jesus, look at ‘em!’ says a redneck voice from a cab at the lights. Straight Oz, circa 1950. Jeers from other cars. ‘They let ‘em out once a year’. Beery, raspy, undertone of violence. Yesterday the Queensland cops broke up the women’s march, threw truckloads into cells.

Dylan strides on. Yeah, Brisbane reminds him of Mobile.

Oh, mama, can this really be the end
To be stuck inside of Mobile with the
Memphis blues again
Tonight is the opening of his Australian tour, his first since that tense, spaced-out, disaster-edge tour of 1966. Dylan of Blonde on Blonde. A frail, anguished puppet in a brown check suit, chemicals in his blood and visions in his brain, just before the crack-up. He’s still frail, but cool.

Back in the hotel he looks much the same as I remember him. I remind him of the trouble I had getting through to him in New York. He smiles, shrugs, mumbles something about being ‘very busy’ at the time. There’s a tall black woman, who looks like one of his back-up singers, drifting around in
the background. He wants to know how my book about him went. Alright, I reply. I turn on the tape recorder and ask him: ‘What would you like to talk about?’

What follows is the longest interview – and one of the most revealing – Dylan has given. As it goes on I feel my old rapport with him surfacing; he is friendly, fairly serious, straightforward. About halfway through I manage to make him laugh when I ask him, bluntly:

Do you feel very Jewish, Bob?
‘I don’t know what Jewish people feel like!’
That’s a nice answer! For Christ’s sake, you know what I mean…as a New York…’
‘As a New York Jew?’
Yeah.
(Laughing) ‘I’m not from New York!’

That night the concert hall is packed. Hip, moustached, kurta-topped acolytes in their twenties. Onstage a string octet of ladies in long evening gowns and men in dinner suits is playing its Bach out. Australian content (Muso Union rules). They bow. Everyone claps. The oval stage darkens, the band runs on, plugs in, blasts off on a rhythm-and-blues version of ‘Hard Rain’. More claps. Enter Dylan: white blouse, grey waistcoat, Regency curls. Ovation. He picks up his guitar and starts into an up-tempo ‘Mr Tambourine Man’.

It’s a puzzle. The tune is familiar, but the song isn’t. Dylan sings it in a deep, fuzzy voice. Then ‘I Threw It All Away’. Rock’n’roll version, with a three-girl back-up chorus in the wings and the chords crudified into rock raunch. ‘Shelter from the Storm’. He declaims it rather than sings it. Same with several other songs. The audience claps loyally, but they are obviously taken aback. The old, anguished Dylan (and his songs) has disappeared. In his place is Mr Bob Dylan the Conjuror, the Magic Man, Ole Mr Vaudeville with his box of Roles and Tricks, manipulating the songs and scenarios like a Circus Master: I am reminded of Fellini, all those clowns and masks and illusions of reality and the Rolling Thunder Revue (‘It was like a carnival,’ says someone), Renaldo and Clara, top hats and make-up and make-believe. ‘Mankind cannot bear too much reality.’ TS Eliot said that.
We have lost Dylan the troubadour, I am thinking. The man who spun songs out of himself. Instead we have gained Dylan the music man, the performer, leader of the troupe, Shakespeare’s strolling band of players. The diminution is clear. But the songs…the songs are still among the finest written this century, anywhere, by anyone. Dylan’s first film: Don’t Look Back. He’s got more sense than to try to photocopy himself.

INTERVAL. SWEET SCENT of grass in the aisles.

The lights go down again. Dylan starts singing while the crowd is still filing back from the soft drinks. He seems looser, more relaxed and the band sounds funkier. The concert is beginning to warm up. ‘One More Cup Of Coffee’ gets a terrific reception.

The turning point is ‘Don’t Think Twice, It’s Alright’. It’s a classic early song of Dylan’s, both slow and bitchy, but he has rearranged it as a jaunty reggae number: and it is such a daring, disrespectful thing to do, so irreverent, Dylan standing his own music on its head and making it funny and mocking at the same time, affectionately satirising the man who wrote it, that I suddenly realise: he’s become the Old Master of American music, utterly reworking his original material, making it not better but different, caring not a damn what he loses in the process, or gains, and what anyone thinks. ‘It’s life, and life only...’ The audience is stunned, elated. It’s like watching the Magician, the Magic Man, Captain Goodvibes trapezing along the Never-Ending Wave…

After the show Dylan goes back to The Crest, has a shower, joins the rest of the circus in the downstairs bar. He’s pleased with the reception, but tired. Sits around. Doesn’t talk much. He isn’t travelling with anyone.

I leave him at the table with a half-empty can of beer. The night is coming down. So is the concert high. The bar is emptying. Dylan’s the one in white.

‘Yeah, it knocks me around. Usually when you’re caught up in the turmoil of some personal event and you can’t seem to work it out…you become impatient, and then you decide to get angry… That’s what’s happened to me, anyway. I still get booted around in my personal life, here and there, but er…I just try to understand that tomorrow is another day.’
He delivers the line with the faintest hint of Scarlett O’Hara/Vivien Leigh anguish. The self-parody is perfect. Going up in the lift, I notice that on the program note he’s listed himself as BOB DYLAN, Entertainer. Hmm.

About a month later Dylan is recording his songs for his Street Legal album. The last song is entitled, ‘Where Are You Tonight?(Journey Through Dark Heat)’. In the first stanza Dylan sings:

There’s a neon light ablaze
in this green smoky haze
Laughter down on Elizabeth Street…

Elizabeth Street? Brisbane? He’s not gazing out the window of the St James Hotel, as he is in ‘Blind Willie McTell’ (one of Dylan’s undoubted masterpieces) but in a different hotel, in a strange city, writing an agonised love song, which ends, Dylan’s voice breaking into high register:

you’ll know I’ve survived…
I can’t believe I’m alive…
Oh, where are you tonight?’

STANZA 4

SINCE THAT BRISBANE concert and interview I’ve heard Dylan perform at each of his subsequent tours of Australia, more as an act of homage than anything else. His voice has deteriorated but he is still writing mature, astonishing songs. The most recent concert I saw was at the Byron Bay Bluesfest. Many people were disappointed at that performance, but I wasn’t. I accept him for what he is. My brother Adrian wrote me a typically perceptive and ambivalent account of the concert: ‘Dylan racing, rasping, at furious speed, and at what seemed almost an identical rhythm, through songs known and unknown, turning the stage lights down after every song, no large screens for those at the rear, and outside people standing in the vast paddock of ankle-deep mud just to be there. To bear witness. And I thought, what a contrast to when you first met him. In Byron we came, we saw, we heard him, but his presence was almost mythic. Maybe he isn’t the same man. Who is?’

During that performance I was a fair way back in the crowd and when I finally stood up on a raised platform I was astonished by the reception he
was getting. There were thousands of people there, many of them young or middle-aged, shouting and waving their arms in the air, who seemed to know the words of the songs, and when Dylan launched into ‘Like A Rolling Stone’ the place erupted and the lyrics blasted out of that huge marquee like a multi-voiced tumult of emotion, like an anthem:

How does it feel
How does it feel…
To be on your own
Like a rolling stone

STANZA 5

SOME TIME AGO I wrote: ‘Bob Dylan is the greatest songwriter since Homer’. Christopher Ricks, former professor of English at Cambridge University, regards him as an almost Shakespearian figure. Because of the breadth and richness of Dylan’s oeuvre (over six hundred songs), his visionary imagination, and his dazzling use of the entire panoply of American music, I am inclined to agree…as far as popular culture is concerned. Dylan turned the pop song serious and he helped transform it into the most universal art form of our time. These days most poetry is sung – which it always has been, until the invention of the printing press turned it, temporarily, into a written form. The new prophets are the song poets.

But since Homer? Most people don’t realise that the epic Homeric myths we know as the Odyssey and the Iliad were actually sung. Leaving aside the question of whether Homer actually existed, or whether it was the name given to the amazing series of song cycles which the Greeks developed over pre-classical times and were synthesised by ‘Homer’, they represent one of the greatest achievements of the human tradition of sung art.

What about other modern songwriters? In the last century Gershwin, certainly, was a fine composer, but his output was restricted by the same commercial and cultural considerations that restricted the Tin Pan Alley melodists who followed, such as Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Rodgers & Hammerstein, etc. They were victims of narrowcasting, their horizons limited by what they thought pop songs should be about (romance); it took
the song poets of the ’60s and ’70s, including Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen, to liberate Tin Pan Alley. The Beatles? The music critic for The Times, William Mann, who once memorably referred to the Beatles as the Beatles Quartet, once claimed Lennon and McCartney were the greatest songwriters since Schubert. Possibly. But Schubert was similarly constrained by the conventions of German Lieder and the Romantic movement which were in their way as narrow as those of the American and English popular song.

The Middle Ages produced a substantial body of folk songs and troubadour songs, some of which had Dylanesque subtexts of social commentary, but few of them have survived musically. Going back further, Hebrew culture created the marvel of the Psalms and the Song of Solomon and much else, but again it is generally regarded as a corpus of work which was the product of a strong oral tradition (like British, Irish and American folk song) handed down from generation to generation. It is not until we reach back to Homer that we arrive at an individual songwriter against whom Dylan’s achievement pales.

Dylan’s songwriting career has now spilled over into the second decade of the twenty-first century. I wonder, sometimes, what further surprises are in store from the Jewish kid from Hibbing who exploded the art of the popular song and made it capable of dealing with…well, everything in the world.

Craig McGregor’s latest book is Left Hand Drive: a social and political memoir (Affirm Press, 2013). He is currently writing a novella and another book on Bob Dylan, titled Twelve Dylan Masterpieces.
John Watson

**The persistence of February 1st 2012**

Yesterday Wislawa Szymborska, eight-eight, died. It is the least we can do to return to this announcement and contemplate whether to end or begin the line with this verb.

Ten years ago in 2002 she published *A Few Words on The Soul* noting its selective or infrequent appearances, unwilling to help for instance in ‘uphill tasks like moving furniture’ but always present ‘when joy and sorrow are joined’. Yesterday was such a day.

She had recently been pondering the paradox, *If the product of two negatives is positive, shouldn’t the product of two positives be negative?* Now it is resolved.

And all that former shuttling along the time-line in positive and negative directions – in the long-jump from present to past and the hop-step-and-jump from past to present to future has now been left behind by the mystery tour at right angles.

The loop-the-loop joy flight by Spitfire at right angles into hyperpoetry leaves, far below, a grazing goat tethered at the number line’s midpoint.

When the cabbage moth, flitting sideways on its air cam, settles (quite) suddenly on a snapdragon.
as if it were the hand of history
leaning heavily, if briefly,
on a warm column of the Parthenon,

it mimics the deference
to The Religions of Experiential Variety
her light and lingering lines invoke.

In Barsotti’s New Yorker cartoon
a young dog says to an older dog
‘We do all those old tricks electronically now.’

She may well have seen this
since her poems frequently appeared on those pages
looking just right and dressed for the ball.

Now her future poems are streaming
so easily, so adventurously, from stars,
luxuriously, hyper-electronically.

‘The happiness of skating on thin ice’ –
is remarkably close to her former CV;
To select from the plethora of other things
which should be mentioned in her presence
it would be helpful to have her eagle eye.

‘Some invisibility would come in handy’:
She has it now and will undoubtedly
use it to maximum effect
summoning comet tails of ideas
auroras of special effects
sun showers of particular articulations –
now that she is able to see
as a complete and turning sphere
‘this sleepy backwater.’
If the making of poems
resembles juggling (which surely it should)
she would be well-placed now
to keep a startling number of vases in the air
each with its bouquet of flowers intact
tiger alstroemerias, blushing geraniums –
and not to spill more than a greeting of water
while managing ‘to keep on not knowing
something important’.

In a beautiful poem she imagines
a poet reading his work
to a gallery of blind people.

He realises all too late that he is mentioning
a cascade of visual effects –
colours, shapes, architectural features
odd aspects of light and shade
but is touched by the forbearance
and patience of his audience
who in many cases must have difficulties
in attaching meaning to his lines –
as touched as are we by the life
of Wisława Szymborska which is now complete
like a restored amphora. He is even more
affected when one of his audience approaches
with the book proffered wrong side out
for an invisible autograph.

And I would now always approach the waterfall
or the geyser or the jet stream
in the hope that her signature
would be imprinted on each.

John Watson lives in the Blue Mountains of NSW. He has published numerous anthologies of poems since 2003. He won the Blake Prize for Poetry in 2009 and the Bruce Dawe Poetry Prize in 2012. This poem was the winner of the Josephine Ulrick Prize for Poetry in 2014.
I am not pitying myself, because I chose it. Evidently this is the way it has to be. I am committed. It is a question of writing or not writing. There is no other way. If there is, I missed it.

Mavis Gallant, *The Hunger Diaries* 1952

THIS IS NEW to me, this sound of a car bogged in snow. Three floors down in the unplowed street, the vehicle in question is trying like crazy to free itself, tyres spinning the clean drift to grey-brown slush and the engine giving a plaintive, animal whine. It’s new to me, being of the North American winter, which is also new to me. But the sound calls to some familiar and unnameable despair. It brings on a tangible anxiety that I cannot find the logical reason for and so cannot talk myself away from.

It’s been going like this for four or five minutes, and now that the battery is audibly starting to die the sound is more distressing. Like listening to a trapped animal howling and howling and howling until you are sure it will do itself some irreparable damage.

Spring comes into Québec from the west. It is the warm Japan Current that brings the change of season to the West coast of Canada, then the West Wind picks it up. It comes across the prairies in the breath of the Chinook, waking up the grain and caves of bears.

This comes from Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*, but it was his *Poems 1956–1968* that made me fall in love with Montreal. Or at least the idea of
it that I pieced together, as a fourteen-year-old stranded in outer suburban Melbourne. There is still some part of Montreal that is and will always be wine-coloured carpets and nude women lighting cigarettes from the gas range, holding back their long hair. Behemoth nuns lumbering down St Catherine Street. Someone dreaming of Nijinsky. Dirty nylons tucked into the fireplace.

In Montréal spring is like an autopsy. Everyone wants to see the inside of the frozen mammoth. Girls rip off their sleeves and the flesh is sweet and white, like wood under green bark.

But I already know that spring in Montreal will smell like tar, like roadworks; the perennial army of machinery deployed to patch up the pot holes and cracks that opened during the deep freeze and now pit and fissure the streets. Spring will be heralded by bright orange barricades and toxic smoke, molten asphalt, which we will welcome with jokes about Mafia-metered contract work; there's a hole on St Denis where all the money goes. Pont Champlain is shaking apart and chunks of cement are falling off the Turcotte Interchange like lumps of snow melting from bumpers.

But I didn’t come here for the infrastructure. Rather, the disrepair and latent corruption are symptomatic of a larger economic malaise that makes Montreal a wonderfully liveable city in other respects: in rental costs, for instance. And, by extension, in art. I came here – convinced my husband to come here – to write. I came here because I had a small amount of money that I figured might stretch twice as far in Montreal as in Melbourne, buying me twice as much writing time. And because I wanted to live differently for a while. I wanted to live differently despite knowing, with uncomfortable acuity, that wherever you go, there you are.

WE ARRIVED IN September, in the lead-up to Montreal’s immense, mythological winter. We opened bank accounts, and the clerk pointed to a postcard of Sydney tacked to her wall.

‘You leave paradise? For the Montreal winter? You are insane?’

‘People keep telling us,’ I said. And people did keep telling us. The
conversation took the same route every time: *Where are you from? How long have you been here? How long are you staying? Are you crazy?* And I would feel the little flutter of terror when they went on, *The winter, well you know, it’s not so good for your head.*

When Patrick and I moved into le Plateau the ash trees were turning gold and orange and red, and their leaves rained down suddenly, like a city-wide dream of money, as we bicycled to the Mont for which the city is named, the autumnal riot spreading around it like a rumor. The leaves blew into the apartment and were so beautiful, so tactile, gathering in the corners of the unfurnished rooms that I didn’t want to chase them out again. And in any case, we had no broom. We had no couch, no desks. In the lounge room there was just a digital projector aimed at a bare white wall and two folding wooden chairs and the yellow leaves heaped in the corners. It felt like camping inside an art installation.

From the back balcony of our third-floor apartment, and from those of surrounding buildings, the spirals of iron staircases ribboned down three or four storeys, spindly as swizzle sticks. Some were painted white or aqua, as if filched from a fleet of scrapped ocean liners and they gave the impression that we were only docked here, waiting for winter to freeze us in, like the *Erebus.* On the last warm days I perched at the top of ours with book in hand and my bare feet on the sun-warmed iron steps, feeling a little whir of vertigo as I peered down to the garden three storeys below, where cats stalked squirrels through the greenery.

Now in winter such staircases are beautiful death traps from which elderly Québécois need to be guided down by the gloved hand of whoever happens to be walking past at the crucial moment. All the leaves have fallen away and on clear days you can stand in the kitchen and see through three miles of naked branches to the Cross on the Mont, lit up ghostly and lonely atop the now white and black hill, somehow further away than it was in November.

I watch warily as the concave roof of the blocky two-storey next door quietly fills with snow. One morning I look down and see a man shadow-boxing in the street, pivoting lightly over the rat-poison green of sidewalk salt, like a fever dream.
HOW STRIPPED DOWN life becomes. I am alone most days. I stop wearing my watch. I let my phone run flat, neglect to buy credit. Hardly anyone has the number anyway. I rarely see myself full-length. I mean this in both the literal and metaphoric sense; the only mirror in our apartment is at face level. But also, I mean that I find it difficult to see myself at any kind of remove, to gauge what others think of me. The insularity of the Montreal winter is bodily. In inclement weather everybody is bundled up into goose-down coats with periscope-like hoods that reduce peripheries. It’s as though we’re all walking around in our own little travelling caves, turning pantomimically at intersections to watch for oncoming traffic. On clear days the glare is so punishingly bright it outstrips that of a Perth summer and you have to either shade your eyes or stare at the ground so as not to be dazzled. I write long emails and letters to a handful of people in other parts of the world, but rarely speak beyond the walls of this apartment. I feel more substantial in correspondence than I do in my skin. My voice has become so soft here that nearly every interaction, English or French, begins with the request to speak up.

The windows of this apartment look out to the windows of dozens of other apartments, calling to mind two stories – ‘The Persimmon Tree’ by Marjorie Barnard, and Carson McCullers’, ‘Court in the West Eighties’ – in which the quietude of both narrators’ lives is rounded out by the imagined lives of their neighbours. Revisiting these stories, I realise that each anticipates spring in its first sentence: I saw the spring come once, and I won’t forget it (Barnard); It was not until spring that I began to think about the man who lived in the room directly opposite to mine (McCullers). Both imply a dormancy and a re-emerging, the self mirroring the season. I read in Rebecca Solnit’s The Faraway Nearby (Viking, 2013) about the Icelandic mindset to live the winter as though it were a long night and the summer a long day. I arm myself with such stories, of what it is reasonable to feel. Sometimes when I cannot sleep I get up and try to write and there’ll be a lit rectangle framing somebody else who is also not asleep, just there on the other side of Rue Chabot. And it does make it easier. And I do feel – as in the Barnard story – as if I am recovering from something. Or perhaps the better word is untangling. Learning how to need less and less.
Perhaps age twenty-nine is the horse latitudes, a becalmed region where nothing escapes the scrutiny of its worth versus its weight, and I’ll enter my thirtieth year with only what I can carry.

DURING THE FIRST few weeks of living here, I spent most evenings in the bath, reading the Montreal-based stories of Mavis Gallant. Trying to form a fuller sense of the city, if a somewhat outdated one. These stories are set mostly between the 1930s and 1960s; old maps in which many of the coastlines have shifted. But what has once been is never wholly divorceable from what is.

I was on book-buying rations – the worst kind! – printing out what I could from the digital archives of The New Yorker, where Gallant published over a hundred stories. When I’d exhausted their backlog of the Montreal works, I tried a second-hand bookshop on Saint Laurent, run by a birdlike old man murmuring constantly, adoringly to the two cats that stalk amongst the shelves. The man, the cats, the shop itself would not be out of place in Gallant’s Montreal. I was prepared to spend an hour there, hunting through the precarious towers of freckled and crenulated paperbacks. But the collection I wanted was right there waiting in the window, as in a children’s story.

After the Montreal stories, I moved onto ‘The Hunger Diaries’ (The New Yorker, 2012), excerpts from the journal Gallant kept in Spain in the 1950s when she was the same age as I am now, and had just left Canada for a country with comparatively cheaper cost of living, in the pursuit of a career as a short story writer.

I was filled with ice-cold despair because she had touched on the thing I only sometimes let myself suspect might be true: that I have gambled on something and have failed.

The entries span four months of Gallant broke and close to starvation, documenting the grim public face of Francoist Barcelona and Madrid. Between hopeful daily trips to American Express, she sheds possessions to pawnshops and flea markets in order to buy food (and the occasional movie ticket). The first sacrifice is her typewriter (fifteen hundred pesetas), followed by her clock (value unmentioned) her tweed coat (thirteen pesetas) and all of her books (forty pesetas, which is later filched from her pocket).

This travelogue of poverty and quotidian dreariness is interspersed with
small joys, small wonders – being sideswiped by euphoria in the middle of the street, then watching its taillights shrink to pinholes and disappear – and with reports on her novel-in-progress which echo the patterns of invincibility and despair typical of such endeavours:

‘This novel, this bird in my mind.’
‘The novel now a series of rooms all connected.’
‘No one is as real to me as people in the novel.’
‘Told Frederick I no longer believe in the novel.’
‘Something in me was lacking, or I would have kept it alive.’

All the while she is being steadily fleeced by her agent, Jacques Chambrun, whose list of other fleecees is impressive, and extends to the likes of Somerset Maugham, Grace Metalious and H.G. Wells. Chambrun was withholding both the news that The New Yorker had purchased two of Gallant’s stories, and the corresponding cheques amounting to $1,535.

I’m reading all this as my own bank account drains to double figures and comparatively modest invoices for stories and permissions go unpaid. Of course the consequences of my funds hitting absolute zero are considerably less life-threatening: I’m not alone here. And here is not Francoist Spain. You are safe, you are warm, you are loved, I remind myself in moments of panic. Still, and in spite of my discomfiture with such comparisons, I begin to form a mental inventory as to the ways in which I am, and am not, like Mavis Gallant in 1952. Which if I were to be gauche enough to lay out on paper would look something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>29</th>
<th>29</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>short stories</td>
<td>short stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unstable, alienating childhood</td>
<td>unstable, alienating childhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>newly arrived in a foreign country</td>
<td>newly arrived in a foreign country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no degree</td>
<td>no degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unscrupulous agent</td>
<td>hahaha, agent…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>so broke she was selling her possessions</td>
<td>typewriter would fetch about 15 bucks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but then…</td>
<td>this isn’t the ’50s and you’re not Mavis Gallant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the meantime, there is a lot I cannot afford and more still that I am prepared not to afford if it means I can keep going this way: waking each morning with the words already there, fizzing, aflame, with nothing to keep me from carrying them to the desk.

‘Being poor is boring,’ someone once told me bitterly. This comes back to me, in the bath with my sheaf of damp-edged print-outs. I blast more hot water into the tub. There are worse things.

IN DECEMBER THERE is the Incident with Dallaire and the Lamppost. Roméo Dallaire — the Canadian senator and retired general best known for not being able to stop the Rwandan genocide — falls asleep at the wheel of his BMW one morning and collides with a lamppost on Parliament Hill. It is approaching the twentieth anniversary of the genocide. Every day I’m reliving Rwanda… I simply ran out of steam and fell asleep and crashed my car. The Lamppost Incident arrives on the heels of the suicides of three Canadian soldiers, all veterans of the Afghan War. There is a lot of discussion on CBC, in the week that begins with the bent lamppost on Parliament Hill and ends with military suicide graphs in The Globe and Mail. I stand halfway down the hallway, between the kitchen radio and my desk at the other end of the apartment, listening to interviews with both former and active soldiers whose profound shame and fear about ‘coming out’ as suffering from post traumatic stress disorder is palpable. Then the discussion dies away and the next time war is mentioned, it is the closing down of regional Veterans’ Affairs offices across the country.

For the past year I’ve been trying to write about war, specifically about the war after the war; a fictional work informed by my own experience of growing up in a household all but demolished by PTSD. (I hesitated on ‘demolished’ but perhaps demolished is a fair term. We didn’t all survive it.) Sometimes I look at my younger sister and I wonder how we ever grew into anything other than clear mirrors for what we started with. And I look at my father and I want, very much, to understand. I want to be able to reconcile these two versions: the violent, drunken tyrant who punched holes in every door of our commission house, who threw my mother into walls, who walked out repeatedly in the last months of her life, leaving me to radiation burns I did not know how to dress. And the man who would now give whatever he
had if I were to ask. Who in my late teens and early twenties helped me to move all of my inherited furniture (including the piano) from house to house, up and down stairwells, in spite of his bad back. Who would show up sometimes at my door, following his repet appointments in the city, with a carton of mismatched eggs – ‘real free range!’ – from the Russian lady in the mountains and a bottle of shiraz purchased because the girl on the label, with her old-fashioned dress and bicycle, reminded him of me.

I have kept a small recycling plant in business, running off copies of everything from first-hand accounts to ministerial speeches and Royal Commission reports on chemical agents. Reading more and more on epigenetics, on the anxieties and compromised coping skills of PTSD war veterans, and those of their children. Symptoms I recognise as my own, as my sister’s. Intergenerational, is the word that keeps jumping up to bite me. In spite of the parade of Veterans’ Affairs-affiliated psychiatrists I was referred to between the ages of twelve and twenty, no one ever handed me this term.

Armloads of information, and I’m unsure where to put it all: is it my job to do something with it? If I see a lack in public perception and governmental concern and I have the means to address it – not amend it, but simply to speak to it – is it then my responsibility to do so, to talk about this thing that people continue to not talk about?

What exactly is my responsibility? I’m in the rare position of writing my own job description, so I’ll say that it’s this: to be honest, via whatever means. Sometimes it’s easier to be honest in fiction and poetry. I don’t necessarily mean in the sense of smuggling autobiography in at a safe remove (though, sometimes, that too). I mean that within the reader–writer pact that is fiction, one can get nearer to crueller truths and people don’t turn away so easily. One hopes. I hope. But when the possibility of truth is introduced to fiction, when the two are enmeshed and are not cleanly extricable from one another, it presents another dilemma. People want to know; did this happen? did this really happen? so that they know how they should feel about it.

RECENTLY A PHOTOGRAPHER friend began writing unflinching dispatches from her more debilitating stouges with depression. I met Leah through the magazine Patrick used to edit. I would gravitate towards her at
the launch parties because she is warm and funny and genuine, and has that incredible gift of making people feel more comfortable in themselves, in spite of large bright rooms full of strangers. It’s a useful trait for a photographer, but an admirable quality regardless of trade.

Her blog posts from the thick of things have been wrenching to read in both the concern they provoke and their familiarity:

‘Yesterday wasn’t good. I slept on and off from maybe 4 am until 2 pm. A sweet dream trailed me out into the afternoon and was knocked out within a few seconds by a boulder that pinned everything to the mattress. And so I stayed there for another eight hours until my boyfriend came home. I tried to get up and shower four times but failed so gave up. A couple of days before I had gotten there on the third attempt so knew it was possible.

So yesterday, I would lower myself out of bed and onto my knees on the carpet. I’d wait for the strength to come then crawl forward a few lengths, maybe getting to the bedroom door. At some point there’d be a dilemma – I could crawl further forward and try to reach the kitchen and a snack that might sustain me through the shower process, or I could lay down. Exhausted, I would likely lay down, or if I made it to the kitchen I’d lay down there. And by this point the snack and the shower were not worth it, so after recuperating on the ground I’d make the reverse journey back to bed. The closest I came was my final effort, when I made it to a jar of golden syrup and spooned it in like a desperate woman throwing petrol at a cold fire.’

I have tried before to write as directly as this, but have run short of achieving something communicable and/or publishable. Moxie, I suppose; I ran short of that. A couple of years ago I attempted to write openly about a breakdown I had at the end of 2007. I’m trying to write openly about it now and I just attempted to sneak it under the wire as a breakdown, which is about as limp-wristed as calling it a turn or spell. This is an unpromising way to start. Let me try again. Here is how it went: I stopped sleeping, then
I stopped eating and the fog that rolled in was so dense and dark I could not see my way through it, and the idea that it would ever lift seemed as remote as Ittoqqortoormiit. It hung over everything for weeks, a drenching despair, until I became desperate enough to agree to medication. In the past, medication and I had not gotten along terribly well, in some instances the side effects had rivalled the symptoms. The last time I’d sought pharmaceutical help was four or five years earlier. Sitting in a very grand room in Prahran, opposite a woman I knew was going to bill me a very grand amount of money, I tried to come to the point.

‘If I could just…it’s just there’s this very physical…like an ache? Like a tightness in my chest, but more solid? And I can’t get a proper breath around it? Right here,’ I said, pressing three fingers to my solar plexus as though feeling for a pulse. ‘I feel like if I could just get a proper breath around it. If it wasn’t so physical, I might be able to… Do you know what I’m talking about?’

But she didn’t. I don’t actually think she was listening. This suspicion was confirmed when she wrote me a repeat script for sleeping pills I’d already said I didn’t want, because they gave me strange, sinister dreams that slipped out into the mornings as hallucinations, and because they made it impossible to think clearly, to write, to even get up in the mornings. I left frustrated, disillusioned and out-of-pocket. I felt rooked. But in December of 2007 I was back at the bottom of things. It seemed of secondary concern that whatever antidepressants or antipsychotics they threw at me would inevitably muddy my thinking. I figured at worst the drugs might switch me off for a while – a sort of mental defibrillation – and I would wake up from intellectual and creative hibernation with no real damage done, just some lost time to make up for.

The medications, or the particular combination of them, pushed sleep even further away, further smudged the line between paranoia and reality. They made my skin crawl so that I couldn’t stand to be touched, couldn’t stand to have anyone near me and made the notion of food even more repulsive, so that to even think about eating would be enough to make me gag. At some point I decided that the only reasonable course of action would to be to take all of the medication that was not helping me to sleep, eat or to be a moderately functional human, and to put it to more emphatic use. I remember
the relief, the lucidity of that decision, the fog clearing for a moment. I woke up in a hospital I remember little of, save the hard-arsed counsellor who called me an idiot, in a good-natured sort of way, and whose directness I was glad of. When I was released the following morning my younger sister made the eight hour drive from Sydney in less than seven to find me baking Christmas biscuits and listening to the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack on loop. *(I'm fine I'm fine, really – here, eat a dinosaur.)* I was still having to hold myself upright on furniture and benchtops as my body tried to process whatever chemicals were lingering in my system. I didn’t do a very good job of talking about it at the time, instead relying on analogies like rickety crutches, like the benchtops and the backs of chairs.

What I later wrote, in response to a prompt from an artist, was this:

I never saw my eyes in those moments (how could I have?) but I imagined something animal there, something unreasonable; the wrong kind of wildness. When people spoke to me it was as though they were trying to coax me out of a confined space. But it was something else that coaxed me out in the end, something voiceless.

There isn’t much left of that year. Everything small enough to hold in a closed fist. The smell of gingerbread. *Big Rock Candy Mountain.* Another plastic bracelet with my name on it.

**AT THE TIME** I worried that it was too much, too confessional, although an editor would later point out that I was essentially holding up a gingerbread biscuit and a hospital bracelet and expecting people to make sense of this. I agreed to tuck in another couple of lines, somewhere in the middle there:

I woke alone in a house where all of my clothes were too big. I thought: *Somebody has swapped all my clothes.* Outside my window a potted lemon tree had died of thirst. I threw a bucket of water on it and it came back to life, just like that.

Speaking about depression without the filter of poetry or fiction is much like my attempts at speaking a foreign language: the words evaporate, or they turn to rocks that roll out of my mouth and pile up uselessly around my feet, because I am desperately afraid of sounding foolish. This fear of foolishness is trumped by my fear of being a hypocrite by not talking openly about mental
illness, when it is still so under- and misrepresented. My fear of hypocrisy is in
turn trumped by my fear of further stigmatising depression and adding truck
to the Troubled Female Writer stereotype. The kind of thing that VICE sees
fit to parody in a fashion shoot.

I don’t mean to represent depression as an occupational hazard of
writing, or of any artform for that matter. There are those of us who come
here – to storytelling, to art – simply because they want to entertain, or
because they want to make beautiful, important things that make the world
a better, more thoughtful place. Then there are those who come here for
the glory – the money, the women, the canapés! (Cue my mother, loud and clear
as she was sixteen years ago, informing me that sarcasm is the lowest form
of wit.)

And there are those of us who come here because it is the best means we
have of making sense of ourselves, of making something worthwhile from
the things that would otherwise bury us. To run all the dread and guilt and
hopelessness through some wonderful, unlikely machine that spins it into an
entirely different fabric.

Whatever niggling uncertainties I had about working from this place
disintegrated at a Louise Bourgeois exhibition I visited last year when, after
being moved beyond tears, beyond even speech, by the subtlest depiction of
mortality charted in cloth and thread, I read the following:

What counts, our whole purpose, is to try to understand what we are about, to
scrutinise ourselves… Every day you have to abandon your past or accept it, and then,
if you cannot accept it, you become a sculptor.

The work itself is an alleviation, a kind of ‘negative reinforcement’, the
removal of a harmful stimulus. But somehow it goes beyond that – becomes
something that races ahead of us into the greater world, to places and to
people we might never have otherwise encountered. It is received, engaged with,
connected to. It becomes the antithesis of the alienation that sparked it, becomes
its own answer to the question we repeat in myriad ways: how is it we do
this? How is it again?

For so many of us, this is the why. This boulder that pins everything to
mattress is at other times a driving force. Writing sometimes feels to me like
a Hitchcockian chase scene, in which I am pulling down chairs and tables
and fully-laden tea trolleys and hat-racks behind myself as I bolt towards
some imagined safety. Throwing as much distance and as many obstacles
as possible between myself and this constant other, whose exact shape I still
cannot distinguish.

Is it enough to get up every morning and lunge hopefully, stubbornly
towards the intangible? To try to build something meaningful, something
that will last, using the most notoriously unreliable of tools? To ask the same
questions, again and again, no longer hoping for answers, but to better under-
stand the shapes of those questions?

One day riding the metro my husband and I stand next to an old man
pencilling grey-lead notes on a typewritten philosophy manuscript. Yellowed,
marked with peeling sticky notes, the document is perhaps a decade old or
older: *Paradoxes Absurdes de la Société Moderne*. Something like that. After leaving
the train we speculate: where was it bound for, this manuscript, this dog-eared
relic? When would it become what its author wanted it to be? Would it reach
the audience he hoped for it to reach? Did he want for any audience?

For some reason the image of this man flares up all winter. Stopping in
doorways along l’avenue du Mont Royal, attacking an onionskin page with a
frozen ballpoint held in a bulky glove. I might as well be writing in the dark
for all that it’s legible.

SO WHAT IS it about the car in the street, spinning uselessly in the snow,
its battery running down; what is it about it that pulls at me? I’ve written my
way towards an explanation, and I’m not sure how to feel about it.

It is Wednesday, February 19. The day after Mavis Gallant died. The only
diary I keep is a slender burnt-orange planner with the days marked by blue
crosses or by blue stars: crosses for the days I was steamrolled by melancholia
or dread; stars for the days that I was not. I started with the crosses and stars
in the (admittedly futile) hope of finding some kind of intelligible pattern. As
though the discovery of some hidden binary might help me to better under-
stand this thing that feels bigger and older than me; *inherited*, perhaps. Genetic,
epigenetic, some chemical skewiffness? I don’t know and it doesn’t matter – I
was born shaking with it and will likely go on shaking. It’s a plucked wire
that trembles at different frequencies, but there is always the sound of it; the
high-pitched whine or the low hum or the lower still *whum whum whum*, like a bullroarer. It isn’t a question of getting better, of *conquering*, as people like to say and to sell. It’s a question of becoming a better navigator, of adjusting one’s gait as when walking over ice, a slack bridge, something treacherous.

Here, the winter is showing signs of closing down. Molecules are speeding up. I keep going to the window, watching for the boxer in the snow. I keep thinking about Dallaire and the Lamppost, how it takes a car crash to talk about a war. And about how sleeplessness becomes its own strange cure for whatever keeps us awake, a dull blanket thrown over the things you can no longer stand to look at. *I simply ran out of steam and fell asleep and crashed my car.*

You’ll come to dread the clear days, people told me at the start. Meaning: the bright fierce winter light, unfiltered. Those mornings we can see clear to the Cross on the Mont, and everything leading up to it.

Down in the street, the car still churns the snow. In a small wooden wine crate that serves as a temporary bookshelf, there are about two dozen books. Equal parts those we brought here from Australia, and those that were purchased from the man with the cats. Amongst them is Sarah Holland-Batt’s poetry collection, *Aria* (UQP, 2008). I may not open it for months, but I like to know it’s there. So that I can go to it, like now, and find something like an answer waiting faithfully in the last lines of the last poem:

*So tell the car idling in the street to go on;*
*tell the skirmish of chess pieces to go on;*
*tell the scraps of paper, the lines to go on.*

*It is winter: that means the blossoms are gone,*
*that means the days are getting shorter.*

*And the dark water flows endlessly on.*

And the car is gone, suddenly. I didn’t see it go. And here is the gloaming, the deep beautiful aquatic blue of it. Spring isn’t so far away. *We’re gaining a minute each evening,* we keep reminding ourselves. How to spend it, then?

---

Josephine Rowe is the author of the short story collections *How a Moth Becomes a Boat* (Hunter Publishers, 2010) and *Tarcutta Wake* (UQP, 2012). Her fiction has appeared in journals around the world. She is a 2014–2016 Stegner Fellow in fiction at Stanford University.
Iconic journalist and television presenter
GERALDINE DOOGUE
explores an issue central to our times.

How are women, represented at the top levels of power?

Candid and insightful interviews with fourteen trailblazing women
including Julie Bishop, Heather Ridout and Gai Waterhouse.

An inspirational, empowering and important portrait of modern Australia.
2014 marks the fortieth anniversary of Cyclone Tracy.

Acclaimed writer and editor Sophie Cunningham provides the definitive account.

An exhilarating, thought-provoking and deeply moving national story.
Save over 20% with a 1 or 2 Year Subscription plus receive a FREE copy of a past edition of your choice*

☐ I would like to subscribe  ☐ I wish to give a subscription to: (please tick ☑ one)

Name: _____________________________________________________________
Address: ___________________________________________________________
___________________________________________  Postcode: ______________
Email:_______________________________ Telephone: ____________________

Please choose your subscription package (please tick ☑ one below)

☐ 1 year within Australia: $88.00 (inc gst)  ☐ 2 years within Australia: $165.00 (inc gst)
☐ 1 year outside Australia: $143.00 AUD  ☐ 2 years outside Australia: $275.00 AUD

I wish the subscription to begin with (please tick ☑ one below)

☐ CURRENT EDITION*  ☐ NEXT EDITION

For my FREE past edition, please send it to ☐ me  ☐ my gift recipient (please tick ☑ one)

EDITION TITLE* ___________________________________________
Select from past editions at www.griffithreview.com * While past edition copies remain in stock.

PAYMENT DETAILS
Purchaser’s Address (if not the subscription recipient):
__________________________________________________________________________  Postcode: _____
Email:_______________________________ Telephone: ____________________

☐ I have enclosed a cheque/money order for $ __________ made payable to Griffith REVIEW (Payable in Australian Dollars only)

☐ Card Type (please circle one): Visa / Mastercard
Card Number: ____________ ____________ ____________ ____________
CVV number (3 digit security code on the back of your card): _______ Expiry Date: ___/___
Cardholder name: ____________________________________________________
Cardholder Signature: _________________________________________________

MAIL TO:  
Business Manager - Griffith REVIEW
REPLY PAID 61015
NATHAN QLD 4111 Australia

FAX TO: 
Business Manager - Griffith REVIEW
07 3735 3272 (within Australia)
+61 7 3735 3272 (International)

* The details given above will only be used for the subscription collection and distribution of Griffith REVIEW and will not be passed to a third party for other uses. For further information consult Griffith University’s Privacy Plan at www.griffith.edu.au/ua/aa/vc/pp.

* Current Edition only available for subscriptions received up until 2 weeks before Next Edition release date. See www.griffithreview.com for release dates.