

online
DisAbility

New Writing from
Western Australia
Creative Non-Fiction
Poetry
Essay

In this Issue
Jane Monson
Jessica White
Andy Jackson
Heather Taylor-Johnson

Westerly



'Erstwhile: On Water'
Heather Taylor-Johnson

Something has died,
is missing, and then you find
it again, like a ghost sign,
and then it is something new;
you are something new.

Westerly

Online Special Issue 7,
'DisAbility', 2019

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Westerly is pleased to acknowledge
the contribution of artist and poet

OLIVER MILLS

through his artwork
'Oliver's Choice'
reproduced on the cover of this issue.

From the Editor

As a writer and academic with a long-standing disability, I was both delighted and apprehensive at the thought of acting as editor for a collection of works themed on disability. Delighted, as the voices of disability have historically been under-represented and under-valued. Apprehensive, because these voices have traditionally been muted or warped by existing socio-cultural beliefs and expectations. I wanted to handle the material with a light touch; treat the experiences of the writers with respect; suspend my own attitudes and opinions around disability within a group of voices that brimmed with embodied knowledge and creativity.

To enter the world of disability studies is to encounter a wealth of ideas and a multitude of models—medical, social, minority, cultural affiliation, economic, charity, functional solutions, feminist/queer/crip... Here is a fertile and dynamic community who dispute, support, and challenge current knowledge and each other, often exploring the ways in which the marginalisation experienced by those with disability intersects with other forms of exclusion or oppression. The overall effect is one of disparate voices sharing a common understanding of what is at stake, both privately and publicly, for disability, and for those who identify as disabled. With one in five Australians living with some form of disability (Australian Network on Disability), and no doubt similar figures internationally, how those with a disability are seen and treated is a critical everyday matter, with communal, cultural and political implications.

How do such concerns enter into literary writing and, specifically, into this Online Special Issue? To answer in a roundabout way...

As is the case in all *Westerly* issues, 'DisAbility' attracted submissions in large number and of high quality. Uncharacteristically, fiction constituted only a handful of submissions. The bulk of the writing submitted was creative non-fiction—especially life-writing—and poetry—commonly with an overtly autobiographical focus and intent. It was clear that an overwhelming impulse to tell the story of a distinct and distinctive form of disability drove the authors, and that most felt a direct voice invested their account with verity. This sense of urgency speaks to an individual and collective pressure to

articulate that which has previously been marginalised, made 'other', or captured in inadequate narratives. As such, the most difficult element of receiving such worthy submissions, each carrying a story that both demands and deserves to be heard, was having to select from among them.

The quality of writing was, as always, a primary concern in selection, with impressive yet restrained intelligence and heart shining through in the selected pieces. As editor, while I felt intimately the responsibility of representing diverse voices and forms of writing, curating a volume that worked as a whole was also critical. Yet, I was reminded of the need to resist homogenising varied experience: of the writers represented here, each has a unique perspective on their disability, or the disability with which they are engaging, that is valid and important. Further, an internal tension between alternative perspectives on, and attitudes towards, disability is often palpable in individual pieces—even essential to them—the writing itself generating a creative response to an insoluble impasse or paradox. Driven by anger, acceptance, frustration and/or joy, each writer represented here finds words that express an intimate connection between disability and creativity.

It is easy—automatic, seemingly 'natural'—to think of ability and disability as contingent upon each other, or as opposing forces: the greater the disability the less the ability. But as this collection demonstrates, such reductive and binaried conceptualisations fail to hold. Disability shows itself here to be a continuum upon which we are all scattered, an inescapable, even indispensable, part of life; we are all only ever one step away from being significantly disabled through accident, the onset of disease, the eruption of disorder, the infirmity of age. The domain of disability is forever shifting and always dynamic. And ability? As this issue shows, ability strikes its own lightning trajectory, leaping from and criss-crossing paralysis, impairment and pain; writing wholeness from the place that is most deeply wounded.

No issue of *Westerly* emerges without a team, and 'DisAbility' has proved no exception. From the support of external reviewers, and past and present interns; to the expert work of Becky Chilcott at Chil3 and Keith Feltham at Lasertype; to the broader editorial *Westerly* team, especially our General Editor, Catherine Noske—all have contributed to this volume, and I am indebted to them for their input. Most properly, however, my thanks are directed towards the writers featured here. Their willingness to place their disability and their ability in my hands has been a gift that I will treasure; I commend the gift of these writers to you, their readers, in the warmest terms.

Josephine Taylor, May 2019

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Prescriptions Andy Jackson

Andy Jackson has featured as a poet and a performer at literary events and arts festivals in Ireland, India, the USA and Australia. His most recent collection, *Music our bodies can't hold* (Hunter Publishers, 2017), consists of portrait poems of other people with Marfan Syndrome, and was recently featured on ABC Radio National's *Earshot*.

Are words like these stimulants or anaesthetics?
Where there is no struggle, there is no strength.

You can't feel that from the stale cell of your bed.
I don't, as another load is thrown onto my back.

Where is there *no struggle*? Is there no strength
in succumbing, in the collapse? Do we have to fight?

I don't—as another load is thrown onto my back,
whether insult or pity—welcome that weight.

In succumbing, in the collapse, do we have to fight
the impulse to fight? Being different is exhausting.

Whether insult or pity, welcome that weight,
I keep telling myself, as if repeating makes it true.

The impulse to fight being different is exhausting.
Be feeble. Be ignorant. Lose. This is what

I keep telling myself. As if repeating makes it true,
experts prescribe affirmations, courage. Instead, I'll

be feeble. Be ignorant. Lose. This is what
flesh and bone want—to hold, to dissolve. Still,

experts prescribe affirmations, courage. Instead, I'll
think, *where is bird song, where is human touch?*

Flesh and bone want to hold, to dissolve. Still,
you can't feel that. From the stale cell of your bed,

think—*here is bird song, here is human touch.*

Are words like these stimulants or anaesthetics?

Erstwhile: On Water Heather Taylor-Johnson

Heather Taylor-Johnson's latest books are the novel *Jean Harley was Here* and the poetry collection *Meanwhile, the Oak*, as well as *Shaping the Fractured Self: Poetry of Chronic Illness and Pain*, which she edited. She is an Adjunct Research Fellow at the J. M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice at the University of Adelaide.

I'm walking down the street with Gay, a friend who often theorises then says, 'Don't you think?', so I have to listen closely. We're on a psychogeographic walk with thirteen strangers, all bonded together through reading and this small regional writers' festival. Everyone's enjoying themselves, might be the weather because, indeed, it is a beautiful day, but Gay and I think this session's lacking. A man takes us around corners into car parks and alleyways to show us ghost signs—words on buildings that once spoke with bold and solid strokes but have since been painted over, and because that painting-over has itself faded, the original signs are showing through once again. Though barely. Almost invisibly. I love the concept but our guide is failing it. He's left out the stories behind the words.

'Moose painted this.'

Who's Moose?

Moose, we are sure, is more than a barely-there, almost-invisible character who has painted over an erstwhile sign to update the décor. *Erstwhile: that which was once there and isn't anymore.* In making us see that which isn't there anymore, our guide is performing a kind of resurrection, but without stories he is killing the ghosts.

Gay talks into my bad ear and the sensitivity is outrageous. I cringe. I am a tense mess of raised shoulders and tilted head and an aching expression because the fullness in my ear and the noise of it is a kind of pain. Since I've returned from time alone to consider art and illness and where the two connect and how, I've had weeks of relatively good health, a rare reprieve, random stability, which is clearly coming to an end. For seventeen years I've lived with Meniere's disease and I know the signs: the louder the whooshing, the worse the vertigo. So when Gay says, 'Don't you think?' and I'm suddenly hyperaware of my ear and I've stopped listening to the man who's forgetting to tell stories, I realise I'm

settling in for the inevitable return of everyday-Meniere's. *Everyday: that which is regular, like breathing. Meniere's disease: that which has formed, is always forming, my identity.*

If you took my illness away from me, would I miss it? Like Mother, Illness is an identity my mind, soul and body harbours. Like Middle-Aged or American. My American culture and landscape (erstwhile) are things I've chosen to live without, even though they've formed me, are always forming me, are part of my identity. I grew up on spam and casseroles. I've stared into the eyes of a bear. I know snow; long summers, summer camps, camping in the forest by a creek and toasting S'mores. I know the scent of cherry blossom. I like blues, jazz and rock 'n' roll. My favourite baseball team was the Chicago Cubs when it wasn't the Atlanta Braves. Television was central to my family. Popcorn at movies. Falling asleep to a riot of crickets rubbing their legs together. And a helicopter spotlighting my neighbourhood. For all of its brutality, there is great beauty, but I don't miss America; I *long* for America. The difference between the two words is more than semantic. I find 'missing' to be surface, 'longing' much deeper. 'To miss' is to make a list; 'to long for' is to have hunger, objects on the list being the nourishment. Both, for me, begin with water.

I have seen the wakes of tail-swishes
from fish-built water bridges so long
you can't imagine. I have swum with the tide,
heard fish-sniffles and seen the ebb,
their sneezing caused the flow.
I know the lake's lap is the heartbeat of a womb—
mine, my mother's, half of the salmon
and all of the stars. Everything begins with water.

•••

Whenever I camp in America I need to be by fresh water. A lake, a river, a creek. Wading, dipping or plunging in, then carrying buckets of it to the campsite for cooking and cleaning, and splashing the cold of it on my face after waking in the morning. When I camp in South Australia, or in much of this country, it's difficult to find fresh water, and camping, then, is slightly off, sort of lesser. In the surrounds of my chosen home, fresh water is a gift, and I know that this town, this town I'm now discovering with Gay on a psychogeographical walk, this town founded on an old-fashioned urban sensibility fuelled by an instinct to survive, this town has a river. I'm thinking I should casually walk away from this crowd, cool

and blameless as ever, and head down to it. I could search for ghost signs written by the Latje Latje people, who needed fresh water, too.

The first time I introduced my Australian-born family to the Great American Road Trip I introduced them to the everydayness of water. We'd driven too long. Guthrow, four, needed to run, and his brother needed to chase him (fall and rise and chase again). Colorado Springs was another four hours away.

'I'll just look at a map and find us a lake nearby so we can camp.'

'You'll just "find us a lake"? You can't just "find us a lake".'

'Yes. I can.'

On the side trip we hadn't planned, my family and I camped three days on the lake in Kansas, with no-one else in sight. Naked boys' bottoms, mother's buoyant breasts and unbelieving father full of nerves because of the swampy-sunken floor (he is Australian, grew up with sand and shells). I was in love with the closeness of our family, unaware that one day there would be a baby girl who would balance us even more, but this, us, we were perfect and so was the water which accepted our newly scented fish-bodies every day. *That which is regular, like breathing.* I can tell you quite easily that I miss fresh water but it's much more difficult to express my longing for it. Why I've told you this story. Why I've peeled off the painted layer of the word 'water' to show you a ghost sign. Here is a story that lies beneath.

When I left my water-splotched, rushing country for this thirsty, dust-choked island, I carried water within me. I held it in the depths of my left ear, where Meniere's lives. It swirls helplessly and frantically, every day. *That which is always there.* It causes vertigo, a shifting earth beneath my feet, and it's noisy and a nuisance. Today, as Gay and I question the 'psycho' of our geographical walk, she tells me she's 'ready to fuck off and find a bookstore,' and my illness is trying to push her voice away. I ask to swap sides. I do this at least four more times as we naturally drift apart and then back together with her on my left side, my left ear, and I know the Meniere's I've been happy to ignore for the past month-and-a-bit will no longer remain a ghost, just barely there, almost invisible. *Fuck!* (I love that word as much as Gay does. I say it too much. Perhaps we both do. Or not enough.)

I didn't know I carried America's water in my body when I left, and by the time I'd figured it out, it was making me sick. All I'd wanted was to leave behind the early-twenties torture of losing my first love and start fresh, focus on writing (a novel about him) and get a Master's degree in the process, the student visa being my ticket in. I wanted to skydive on weekends, and during school breaks I wanted to travel this land by

bicycle. My plan was to spend every cent of my student loan in the two years it took me to do all of this. Was it too much to ask and did I care if it was? If ever I was going to be indulgent, 1999 seemed like the right time.

When I got sick only months after arriving, I thought about America, the comfort of the familiar and the care of my family. I thought about labelling my sojourn to the other side of the world 'An Experiment' and getting a one-way flight back to my folks. But I wanted, badly, to see my plan through. I had chosen Adelaide, the modest city with the brick buildings and a back path along a skanky river (the Torrens looked much better in photos), and though my body wasn't in agreement, the essence of the person I knew myself to be felt eerily at home. As if every place I'd ever lived before made a staircase for me to climb and at the top was Adelaide, which housed my people (who weren't my people, but were). In the very brief time that I'd lost a part of my American identity—the active part, the part that is filled with forward momentum—I'd replaced it with a wannabe Australian one, and it fit. Besides, the health care system in the States was atrocious and in Australia it was socialised. I was in the right place for my body to be tested and interrogated and medicated and made an example of, even if the problem stemmed from carrying my home country's water in my ear.

Then there was Dash. One night in the small kitchen that became smaller as we stood in the centre of it, we embraced. With my wonky ear and his one-leg-shorter-than-the-other—the most enduring reminder of his failed parachute, of the day he died (twice)—we began to fall. Laminate flooring unswept for days; the grit from our walk-on-air feet deeply embedded, and the lighter, more mischievous grit layered on top of that; the stove that could've hurt a head; the bruises. But the tighter we held onto one another, the easier it was to rise. We were two halves of a broken wing that had come together to make a whole, and so we flew. Parachute-less. We called it love and got matching tattoos around our fingers to remind us of that night. We called them wedding rings on the day we were married. And we owe it all to illness.

When I was only Dash's friend and tenant renting a room, when I was being diagnosed, when I was scared sick and sick and depressed, he cared for me. If I hadn't been ill, would we have fallen in love? When I was listless, frantic, vomiting, angry, he never left my side. And I will not leave his. I'll never live in America again. I know my parents and my brother mourn this, mourn me as I do them, because when I go back for a visit, it is just a visit. As soon as I board the aeroplane to carry me over the monster Pacific, our time together is erstwhile. Our memories become ghost signs, hidden behind everyday experiences that are Australian, foreign to them,

and occasionally to me. It is proof I've lost something pivotal, and I blame myself. There is real guilt. But I can recall these lines:

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster. (Bishop)

Loss is integral to growth. Something has died, is missing, and then you find it again, like a ghost sign, and then it is something new; you are something new. Slightly broken, but bigger. After my visits to America, I step off the plane in Adelaide and swallow the air, breathe my own out, the *hereness* and the *thereness* intermingling until it solidifies into a *now* and a *this*, and I feel whole, though slightly broken, always broken.

I broke something today and I realized I should break
something once a week... to remind me how fragile life is.
(Warhol)

•••

I'm thinking it's time to head northwest if we're to visit the river, but our guide is taking a lot of left turns, and now we're talking about the clock tower, built in the 1920s. We passed by it earlier. We're covering old territory. A little bit of history: it was originally an insurance building. What ghosts live inside those walls? No doubt they are male ghosts with life stories, and what might those stories be? How might those stories contribute to the history of the town, what it is today, the town's enduring character, the culture, the land? How many Aboriginal ghosts are protecting the clock tower's sacred ground? Let's get at the everydayness of this place.

The return to the everydayness of Meniere's is frustrating but familiar, and in that way like a homecoming. Not like returning to America, because that is not a homecoming anymore. 'There's a quality of masquerade when I return, as if I were putting on my wedding suit, to see if it still fits' (Wood 4). I love the wedding suit, which is the wedding dress, but it doesn't fit. I've had Australian babies so my breasts spill over and my stomach stretches the seams. I can't get comfortable in it.

The return to the everydayness of Meniere's is more like a return to my ancestors and their heirs, those I call the remission society, as Arthur Frank does (8). Those who were once whole then became broken, and those who understand that it is precisely the brokenness that now makes them whole. I am writing about the brokenness to make sense of my whole. The sick me who lost something; the ex-pat me who lost something.

Many members of the remission society feel a need to claim their visa status in an active voice. Those who work to express this voice are not only postmodern but, more specifically, post-colonial in their construction of self. Just as political and economic colonialism took over geographic areas, modernist medicine claimed the body of its patient as territory, at least for the duration of the treatment. (Frank 10)

The sick me; the ex-pat me. The me who hated specialist appointments because they would not let me tell a story, couldn't see the ghost signs behind the diagnosed signs. Because when I was only twenty-five, one told me I'd have this disease forever. Because he told me there was nothing he could do. My illness is within and without. The specialist should have looked closer. He should have listened.

•••

'This citrus sign is a famous ghost sign.' We wait to hear why; maybe now we'll get a story. 'This town is known for its citrus.' Is it famous for citrus because of the river? If I stare at the sign hard enough, can I smell the citrus juice? If I close my eyes can I smell the earthy grime of the river? Will I feel my feet in the clay of the Colorado? The plastic of the inner tube stuck to my legs as I float down the Chattahoochee? Will my mind make the swift transition from river to lake and will I be back at the one in Kansas? Pyschogeographer says we were supposed to begin this walk there, at the river, but there wasn't enough time if we wanted to see this famous ghost sign of lemons and oranges. My disappointment is tangle as I turn my head to catch Gay's eyes. *Why the fuck didn't we go to the river?* I think. *Fucked if I know*, she thinks back.

•••

I love rivers almost as much as I love lakes and slightly more than creeks, but Australians love the ocean. Dash wants a beach shack for our family; he grew up on the coast of the Eyre Peninsula, learned to swim amid crashing waves and the ever-present threat of sharks, so along with the blood of countless others who saved his life the day he died (twice), his blood runs strong with the saltwater of his youth. Most Australians are this way, and I am not. My children want the ocean, and I do not. I want a holiday home by a river or lake and am willing to drive days to get there: fresh water to remind me of home. But we will buy a beach shack, I know. Because the active part of my cultural identity, that which has forward momentum, that which is everyday, not erstwhile, is Australian, full of

sharks and jellyfish and an inland desert. 'It's like listening to a seashell,' I always tell my friends when they ask about the noise in my ear, so maybe it's not America in my ear. Maybe there's an ocean in my ear. Maybe it's why Australia is my home.

The river, after all, dumps itself into the ocean. This river here, that I've had to ignore but cannot ignore while on this walk, this river that's only a few blocks away from where we stand at the town's mall, this river where I could sit for hours and begin to gain a truer sense of place—this river dumps itself into the very ocean where my children swim, my dog swims, my husband and I wade watching over them all. And maybe this is what I'm trying to say, what I keep trying to say, what I will never be able to say in any way that expresses it wholly: Dash and our three children and our dog live within me and without me as much as my illness does, and it is because of them, all of them, that I can write about Meniere's with any joy, that I can accept breathing it in and breathing it out, recall an erstwhile night where we ate camp food and watched the sun go down over a lake in Kansas and long for water, fresh water, and know that it is within me as much as it is without me and that all of this, the family, the illness, the longing, the water, is everything whole and broken in my body and in the essence of me. It is every story I will tell you.

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Absence Embodied

Allis Hamilton

after Chiharu Shiota's installation

Allis Hamilton creates poetry, art, and music. Her poems appear in journals such as *Poetry Review*, *Overland*, *Southerly* and *Australian Poetry Journal*, as well as in various anthologies. Allis was a finalist in this year's Adelaide Perry Prize for Drawing.

I walk into my brain,
its map of intricate paths etched
by all my days, all my breaths.
There to the right
in this red room
is the detour sign,
a patch of streets with no lights.
My sheet music flaps in frigid wind
—well-leafed pages stained
by fingers, now neglect.
I creep below the sign and peer
up the thread to where
the puncture occurred.
I can map it to here,
to the glitch in this dark street.
Ghosts of my former self
howl around corners.

Body Language

Bree Alexander

Bree Alexander has been moving between Australia and India over the past few years and has a keen interest in art as activism. Her work has appeared (under the pseudonym Lika Posamari) with *Girls Will Be Girls* and *Rabbit*, among others, and she has a chapbook of poetry, 'The eye as it inhales onions' (in case of emergency press, 2018).

CAST

In order of appearance:

ME	AUDIENCE MEMBER #2 (AUD#2)
DANCER	AUDIENCE MEMBER #3 (AUD#3)
DANCE TEACHER (TEACHER)	AUDIENCE MEMBER #4 (AUD#4)
STUDIO DIRECTOR (DIRECTOR)	AUDIENCE MEMBER #5 (AUD#5)
INTERPRETER #1 (INTERP#1)	AUDIENCE MEMBER #6 (AUD#6)
VISHAL	AUDIENCE MEMBER #7 (AUD#7)
AVANTIKA	INTERPRETER #2 (INTERP#2)
AUDIENCE MEMBER #1 (AUD#1)	

•••

[Studio of Gati Dance Forum, Khirkee Extension, New Delhi. Evening time. I make my way through the large metal door into the tiny entrance hall. The space is already well occupied. A young woman catches my eye, her face beaming. She herself looks ready to break out in dance. I approach her.]

ME: You are a dancer?
[She nods vehemently and smiles.]

ME: Oh that's great. What style of dance?

DANCER: Indian classical. I have after a long time decided to dedicate to this and I am pursuing a Master's. You also dance?

ME: I have over the years.

DANCER: That's great. Which type of dance did you do?

ME: Western contemporary, hip hop, jazz... a few different styles. So if I were to start dancing right now it would be a fusion really.

DANCER: Haan yes, I see.
[Dancer smiles.]

ME: Do you perform too?

DANCER: Well... I am just getting back into it since a few months ago. But my teacher is encouraging me to start performing already. I have just come to know about Gati Dance as she told me to come here tonight.
[Dancer motions her head toward a woman to my right.]

DANCER: This is my dance teacher.

TEACHER: Hello, nice to meet you.

ME: Likewise.

TEACHER: Yes, I am the one who gives her a good push.
[Laughs. Teacher moves away and enters conversation with another woman.]

DANCER: You are working here?

ME: No, I am actually visiting at the moment. I studied in Delhi in 2015 and I came to a few performances then at this studio, which I found amazing. So I am back for more! I just submitted my minor thesis for a Master of International Development. I thought it may bring clarity as to where to next but I think it has given me many more questions than answers.
[Laughs.]

DANCER: That's a good thing! Now you have so many options.

ME: Well... Yes. I hadn't thought of it like that, but that sounds a lot better than angst!
[Laughs.]

DANCER: You are from which country?

ME: Australia.

DANCER: So how do you find the heat in Delhi?

ME: It's been okay. Apparently, it's been cooler since I arrived.
[Laughs.]

ME: So do you plan to teach too?

DANCER: Oh, yes... That is what I would like. There is so much to learn. Not only the dance itself but now looking into the theory and all. There is so much to know about *Bharatanatyam*.

ME: Ohhhh, yes, like history, origins of different *mudras* and that sort of thing?

DANCER: Haan... All of that.
[We are ushered into the small studio where the performance is to take place, and settle upon some cushions.]

DANCER: It's been so nice to have this conversation with you!

ME: Yes... You too.
[The murmuring settles as the late arrivals squeeze onto the last available cushions. Director moves onto the stage.]

DIRECTOR: Welcome to this performance of *Say, What?* The performance will be conducted in complete silence, so we ask that you please turn off your mobile phones now and refrain from speaking. Thank you and enjoy the show.

[Two dancers, Avantika and Vishal, engage in a silent conversation in sign language. Sometimes they seem to be in a heated conversation and at others talking across each other. Over time, the sign extends to movements through their bodies. Sometimes they gesture wildly from opposite sides of the stage and sometimes in close proximity, at times testing boundaries of physical closeness in the space. There is a sense of urgency, that they have a lot to say, as the conversation builds over the course of the next fifty minutes.]

DIRECTOR: We will break for five minutes and return for the Q&A with the dancers Avantika and Vishal.
[During the break, the audience remains seated. Avantika distributes a small blurb about the performance. The interpreter to the left of the stage, Interpreter #1, is introduced. Audience Member #1 begins to sign.]

INTERP#1: Both of you are non-hearing?

AVANTIKA: No... I am hearing and Vishal is deaf.
[Interpreter #1 interprets. Audience Member #1 looks surprised and begins to sign.]

INTERP#1: How did you come to meet?

AVANTIKA: I was studying sign for about a year and I asked my sign teacher if she knew any deaf dancers and she said there was one I had to meet. And so we met and started to communicate about dance and sign, and the meeting of the two.
[Vishal signs.]

INTERP#1: The body becomes really important... and we can still communicate.

AVANTIKA: Oh, I think Delhi sign is a bit different from Bombay sign. What Vishal is saying is that people who hear rely heavily

on their hearing; I cannot hear, so expression through my body is really important.
[Vishal signs and motions towards Avantika.]

AVANTIKA: *[Interprets]* In the beginning sometimes she didn't get the signs as she wasn't looking at me enough. I don't hear sound. She does hear sound. But we can still communicate.

AUD#2: What made you decide to use no sound in the performance?

AVANTIKA: We got feedback on the work as we went along and from there came the idea to remove sound completely.
[Audience Member #2 signs.]

INTERP#1: We could understand the signs but these people *[she points to members of the audience]* could not. How did they find the performance?
[Silence as hearing members of the audience exchange glances.]

AUD#3: Well... I don't really know much about dance or sign, but I found it to be a very engaging and interesting performance. I couldn't get the meaning of the signs but I still really liked it.
[Nods from the dancers on stage.]

AUD#4: Can you tell us about your process in creating this work?

AVANTIKA: We have been working on this for about a year, so it has really evolved through our conversations over time, through the building of our relationship and exploring these different aspects of communication.
[Audience Member #5 begins to sign.]

INTERP#1: When we have tried to give performances without sound, people always want sound. Do you have any suggestions to help in this?

AVANTIKA: It comes back to a question of art equality. It is not just a question of sound or absence of sound but creating this space that is accessible for all. This is the idea we hope to share through the work.
[Audience Member #6 signs.]

INTERP#1: But people prefer sound. What do we do?

AVANTIKA: Send them to see this performance!
[Vishal signs.]

AVANTIKA: *[Interprets]* We are showing that communication is possible. This different way of communicating. Communication through our bodies. It becomes a question of finding a space where hearing and deaf can meet.

[Audience Member #7 signs.]

INTERP#1: What do you plan to do with the performance from here?

AVANTIKA: Take it to as many places as possible!
[Big applause. People start to shuffle out, some signing emphatically, others talking softly. Dancer and I reunite in the hall.]

DANCER: Wow, that was amazing.

ME: Yeah... Very powerful. Really showed communication as it comes through the body... How effective this is.

DANCER: Some of the signs I could follow but, yes... The physicality was really something. It brings a new meaning to hearing.

ME: Yeah... I found if I tried to concentrate on the signs I missed out on what was going on between the bodies. We were challenged to hear through our own bodies too.

DANCER: Oh, yes... As dancers we can appreciate that in this work. And it really challenged our own privilege in hearing. And also all that we miss out on because we rely on it so much...
[Looks at phone.]

ME: You have to go?

DANCER: Yes... Far to go.

ME: North side?

DANCER: No, east.

ME: Okay, well it was lovely talking to you... And I hope to see you dance sometime!

DANCER: Haha, yes, was really nice... Good luck figuring out what you want to do with your life! Enjoy it. I will add you on Facebook.

[The tiny entrance hall is bustling with people signing as I too head towards the door. There is a group that seem to know each other so as I step out, I change my mind and return. I catch the attention of Interpreter #2, who appears to be leading them. I start talking; she gestures toward the phone in my hand with a typing motion. I begin to type.]

ME: Are you all from a particular college/group?
[She rolls her eyes and looks somewhat disappointed at my question. She points to my phone and motions for me to give it to her.]

INTERP#2: *[Types]* We are from a deaf adult centre that focuses on empowerment.

[I nod and smile. I am surrounded by people signing and I am the one amongst them who is not able to communicate with ease. Good! After a few more exchanges of messages via telephone screen I farewell the group and depart.]

Note

Say, What? has been performed across ten cities in India since it premiered in March 2017. This piece in its current form is thanks to the careful reading and permissions of *Say, What?* choreographer and performer Avantika Bahl, collaborator and performer Vishal Sarvaiya, and Niharika Kasturi ('DANCER').

Six Poets, Many Voices

aetiology unknown
Elinor Cleghorn

nothing's gone just hidden.

Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.

Mary Oliver

Orchestrating this feature was a gift—from the initial swift and positive responses, to the conversations and possibilities that emerged between the poets and poems themselves. Here are six poets, all based in the United Kingdom, who refresh, surprise, write fluently with *and* against assumptions around disability. They share an individual but symbiotic approach to health, medical narratives, social stigma, illness and disability through the original ways they merge experience, poetry, teaching and critical research. On a personal and scholarly level the poets give way to a host of contexts for relevant writing and discussion, and through this process translate to themselves and others private and social experiences of discrimination and breakthroughs. The poems are memorable, unusual, lit-up—as well as grounded—explorations of life and language. We hope this feature demonstrates how seamlessly combined critical and creative approaches to disability have significant potential to move conversations beyond neurotypical constructions of the able-bodied and minded.

Further to this, the contributors strike a deft balance between reflection, humour and gravitas. We learn of poetry and the body as condition, code, music, weathervane, botanic, alternative, hidden—as a dichotomy of sudden language and rhyming silences. Humour plays an important role¹, close to the surface or further embedded, and all of the poets—through wit and otherwise—re-frame and dismantle unhelpful and destructive boundaries between ‘able’ and ‘unable’.

These poets prioritise and value difference, and in their poetry and research turn perceptions and assumptions around dis-abling differences away from themselves and towards possibility; lights straight out of Oliver’s box. Cleghorn’s line ‘*nothing’s gone just hidden*’ will resonate with writers and readers alike whose experience of disability, both through

self and others, is composed of layered and manifold invisibilities. These poems and poets both start and continue changes for the transparent good, rather than the vague, just good enough, or not at all.

Jane Monson
Feature Editor

Note

- 1 See Jess Thom’s ‘Laughter as a Catalyst for Change’, in which she discusses humour as an empowering ‘catalyst for social change’, and the potential of ‘shared laughter to change attitudes’, society and ‘the balance of power’.

Works Cited

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rest stop
Khairani Barokka

Khairani Barokka is an Indonesian writer, poet and artist in London whose work has been presented extensively, in fifteen countries. Okka has received seven residencies and multiple grants and award nominations. Her most recent books are *Stairs and Whispers* (co-editor), *Indigenous Species* and *Rope*.

body reminds me to love myself
with a harpsichord of crowing nerves

and so

the beats

for rest

and so

reminds

alive alive

and now with medicine (finally)
body a kinder weathervane:

body is everything underneath and between the weather. the weather is what, everything, it withstands. and so not a droplet of hate for body since breaking began in it, only, when called for, infernos of: weather.

laughingly, I realise that this is what's meant by 'under the weather' (for me).

by 'weathering'.

pain—imprint of and on unique bodymind—crackles, stutters within

and so

the beats

for rest

and so

'Ma'am, what is productivity unit of self'

is not *alive alive*

dear body, one body, slight body, ephemeral mass.

i hum not to weather, to rush of lost seeking, to abled assumptions
spoonfed to the mob—

timeticking markets of stock at the altar of rainforests used as pawns
this is not the song—

to body goes humming
goes all the hum.

chiuso morbo
Dorothy Lehane

Dorothy Lehane is the author of four poetry publications: *Ephemeris* (Nine Arches Press, 2014), *Places of Articulation* (dancing girl press, 2014), *Umwelt* (Leafe Press, 2016), and *Bettbehandlung* (Muscaliet, 2018). She is currently engaging in a study exploring questions surrounding the social, ethical and perceptual implications of communicating and confessing the aberrant body in poetic practice.

honeysuckle paste

formless. around the soaring aches
by hip & sitz baths. the ladies of rank call out
eyes in oscillatory movements

begonia infusion

bacilli eating inward. to the bone
mama's raiments burned in the fire &

bellis perennis

who cares this afternoon. who cares

snake's head fritillary

warn out. lepra bell flower
in the warp. in the woof
peeling & scaling in the linen & wool

california poppies

quintessentially femme
with palms crusting white

chrysanthemum tea

we'll pull the fever right out of you

rock rose

in the basin. the mama
in mother tincture
light wax coverings to her face & hands

snapdragon

mama sleeps with the stamen
wants to be buried. without welts

hyssop

tiny whites. waiting for the water cure

What is Poetry? Joanne Limburg

Joanne Limburg is a writer and creative writing lecturer. She has published three books of poetry—most recently *The Autistic Alice*—as well as two memoirs and a novel. She teaches Creative Writing at De Montfort University. She was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome in 2012.

Poetry is a lifelong condition that affects how people perceive the world and interact with language.

Poets see, hear and feel the world differently to other people.

If you are a poet you are poetic for life; poetry is not an illness or disease and cannot be 'cured'. Often people feel that being a poet is a fundamental aspect of their identity.

Poetry is much more common than most people think. It used to be thought that poetry predominantly affected white, middle-class men, but it is now understood that poets from other groups tended to go undiagnosed.

Poets often do not 'look' like poets—they may, for example, have neither flashing eyes nor floating hair. Some parents of poets say that other people simply think their child is naughty, while adults find that they are misunderstood.

Poets have exceptional language skills, but they may still find it hard to make themselves understood by others. They have a tendency to hyperfocus on the physical qualities of language, often repeating words or phrases. Poetic language is also characterised by its unusual prosody, and excessive use of neologisms.

Poets' unusual and highly-focused interests can make it very hard for them to navigate the social world. They may find it hard to form friendships or maintain healthy relationships with partners and family.

Some poets say the world feels overwhelming and this can cause them considerable anxiety. This is another reason why taking part in everyday family, school, work and social life, can be harder for them.

Other common comorbidities include depression and substance abuse.

The exact cause of poetry is still being investigated. Research suggests that a combination of factors—genetic and environmental—may account for differences in development. Poetry is not caused by a person's upbringing or their social circumstances and is not the fault of the individual with the condition.

There is no 'cure' for poetry. However, with the right sort of support and encouragement, poets can learn to channel at least some of their energies into occupations which are productive, and do not cause difficulties in social interaction every time they are mentioned.

Note

This poem is made from text taken from the National Autistic Society website, and subject to alterations and erasures.

Barking
Lindsay Fursland

Lindsay Fursland lives in Cambridge where he gives occasional talks on the rude bits in Shakespeare, and on other literary topics, for the Workers' Educational Association. He runs the Cambridge branch of the Poetry Society's writers' workshop, and has been published in various magazines and anthologies in the UK.

My parents brave it out: *Well, you've a private room...*
& so we come to *Ravenhill*—de luxe asylum.

Pretending they're not at all collateral damage,
they shoo themselves out from my gilded cage.

O, how we learn to feel at home in the oubliettes
of our hang-ups! Four years ago: *Tourettes?*
(a chin-stroking shrink) *Oh, I very much doubt it's Tourettes.*

Dismissive certitude—an Oxbridge oaf,
bedside manner of a troll. *Woof! Woof! Woof! Woof! Woof!*

From fifteen, I bark my way through a cornered adolescence,
with bristling, helpless belligerence

of an intruder alert, or abandoned outside a shop.
They prescribe yoga-breath; try lithium to make me stop.

Five percussive yaps: a two-second peal,
then, breath, then again, and again—unbrake-able

by pills—undateably mad for nearly four years,
despite my *sexy, feminist, don't-betray-me eyes*

(one hottie tells my friends). I treated her like a princess
for a full hour, turning all the heads in Pizza Express.

Risible? Sure. You'd see their eyes begin to shade,
the bollards rising from a clear-seeming road,
the fair conclusion I was just too sad.

Only one (once), endeared, mercifully led me back
to hers: evidently, only the tenderest shock
could stifle and stymie my baying tic

with a humaner OCD: as two bodies rhyme
into silence—but you can't be doing that all the time...

The Undersound Jane Monson

Jane Monson is a mentor at the University of Cambridge for students with disabilities. She also runs Creative Writing Workshops, is the author of two prose poetry collections, and edited the first anthology of contemporary *British Prose Poetry* (Cinnamon Press) and *British Prose Poetry: The Poems Without Lines* (Palgrave, 2018).

There is a place from which she intends to move. Where her listless breath on the glass has made a stranger of the view outside; the left and right movement of people beyond the gate pure murmur. She doesn't watch paint dry, she hears it. There goes the cheap white gloss stretch and snap off the sill and skirting, the rust chafes between the gate and fence, working in shrill intervals through the letter box. And across it all the white noise of indoored-words: ceiling, curtain, tap, cupboard, cup, banister, water. They used to pop round, check-in. Then one day, she assured them in her stage regalia that she was fine and they could sign her off on the promise of a mood diary, a text, repeat prescriptions, reviews. She soon ran out of journals, found herself approaching the walls. Began scratching at the layers when her voice failed, peeling her paper throat down to the floor; marking in red the daily targets that charged, ambled or slept through the corridors; jumped screaming from the bed. Now each room a graphic novel of her as past, present and potential—she plays them out at random, switching the order of the rooms and stories, choosing her own adventure. Sometimes she hears the sea as through a shell. Sometimes it's the tinnitus, growing inside and under her from the absence of door-bells, of wind through willows, a bird hatching, planes blooming near the roof, cars screeching through red lights. She hears the sounds without the instruments. Always drowns in them first, from where they come, later.

aetiology unknown Elinor Cleghorn

Elinor Cleghorn is a writer, researcher and poet working across film, feminism, and the medical humanities. Her debut chapbook, *Lupercalia*, a series of sick-bed reflections woven through feminist mythologies, was published by Litmus Press in the UK in 2017. Cleghorn is currently researching the history of autoimmunity and the phenomenon of idiopathic illnesses.

Nana was a codebreaker Colossus girl
sharp tongue algebra heart pulsed two-step
for the man with gentle-eyed occult predilections
carrying his mother's luggage clean for the journey.
Swift to marry service issue trench and trouser
Cypher cells enfolded under warm flesh under sweet love
progeny will untie.
Mama was a telex secretary city cigarette girl.
Kohl-rimmed father eyes slang slip mother mouth
'60s babe on a Vesper with records torn pockets
laid out on the kitchen table saw it after in the porcelain.
Married no. Afghan coat Biba threads very of the day
intent to wander. chaos in the water dysentery on the boat home.
Are you hot or are you cold? Fever spikes upset grave beds.
Baby will comfort.
Daughter cryptographic magic intelligence girl
Lazarus heartbeat counterfeit eavesdropping
the stenographer's call sheet her skin screens his trick shot.
What's she got? She got noname pain she got nopromises she got

irondark vials spinning syncopated data tapping
sympathetic impulse
they say they don't know but the body knows and it won't teleprint
secrets
for the bad power man the Axis man thumbing out blisters
punch card middleman.
Daughter telegraphic obscure prognosis girl
Heliographic organs playing parlour songs like
Who's that knocking at my door? double-bass suicide
fenland hysteria pyromancing sisters
lunatic drunk barn eye-droop milkmaids' grip
aunt delivered sleeping.
Close throat synovial floods come
benedictions for the unborn the notborn
son will be. a one-time walnut shell her alpha-beta séance child.
nothing's gone just hidden.

'Fighting Time'
Family dialogue on ageing,
disability, death
Suzanne Ingelbrecht

Suzanne Ingelbrecht is a performed and published award-winning Western Australian playwright, whose extended family comes from New Zealand. She is founder and director of Fragmented Artists, a WA professional theatre ensemble that actively engages performing artists and communities of disability and/or disadvantage.

As we get older, our bodies inevitably change. Grey hair; age spots, wrinkles and lines erupting on our skin; more pronounced signs of impairment, or disabling conditions such as arthritis or osteoporosis. Researchers Laura Hurd Clarke and Alexandra Korotchenko remind us that 'in and through our bodies [...] we most immediately experience the social and physical realities of growing older' (495). Yet mostly, we are woefully unprepared for the reality of our own corporeal fragility and the bodily disintegration of those we love most: our grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, partners, friends. How can independence and our desire to age well reconcile, or not, with stooped and straining bodies, pain sweeping through nerves and tissues, and the increasing need for support and care? How can the existential dilemma of asking who would want to continue like this be responded to pragmatically, positively, ethically, in an individual, family and societal context?

This essay takes a personal and reflective approach to such rhetorical questions through dialogue and bearing witness with my aunt Marie and my uncle Des over a period of several months. Both are now severely physically impaired, the result of creeping old age and the accrual of various debilitating illnesses, including rheumatoid arthritis. Des is in an aged care home, and visits Marie every Sunday; Marie still lives independently at their home in Waikanae, New Zealand. In a series of online Messenger chats over a period of several months, I explore with them what their lives have become and how they find the will and impetus to carry on. As a playwright and former journalist, I use dialogue—the actual words spoken by individuals in question-answer, action-reaction context—at intervals throughout this essay. For me, dialogue interviews are a particularly immediate form of reflective process, bringing remembrances into present time. Marie is also keeping a diary of her daily life—what happens, what she feels—to share with others. Such acts

witness and respond to the current condition of two individuals for whom life has become an ever-decreasing circle, but for whom living still very much matters: for each other, for their family and for their friends.

Bearing witness in a professional caring context is highly regarded, writes Sandra Bunkers. Nurse theorists such as Rosemarie Parse discuss the concept as 'true presence' or an 'intentional reflective love' (*Human Becoming* 71), recognising that each person in a witnessing situation knows their own way, 'which is both alike and different from the ways of others'. True presence is lived in 'face-to-face discussions, silent immersions and lingering presence' (Parse 'Humanbecoming' 84). As Bunkers extrapolates, 'witnessing speaks to the power of humanuniverse cocreation'; of the 'response-ability' to embrace the suffering and joy of others (194). It is also, I believe, an appropriate ethical response to the notions of lack, limitation and negativity that ageing, illness and disability implicitly suggest.

Ageing and disability: the notion of 'biographical disruption'

Uncle Des has been trawling back through time, remembering his past. It's a favourite occupation, and quite often happens in that relaxed hiatus between wakefulness and sleep. Since our last online chat, I've been asking him to try and keep a mental note of what pops up for him in memory (unworkable hands mean he can no longer write).

His daughter Rosemary wheels him in from the next-door room to chat, props the iPad into position on his knees so that I can see him. Sometimes the iPad slides down and all that is visible is the top of his head. Des is oblivious to such vicarious technical machinations. He continues talking regardless—until the moment I tell him I can't see him anymore!

So, what came up for you in memory this week?

I went back to Seddon [in the Marlborough region of New Zealand's South Island]. I must have been about three, going on four. I was talking and walking down to the shops and wanting to buy things. I had a big collection of cars and always wanted more. When we left Seddon, I was pissed off that I had to leave my cars behind.

What else did you remember?

The time the family cow got into my parents' bedroom [chuckles]. And I remembered when a workman threw a sack full of newborn kittens into the river because the old man [Des's father] told him to get rid of them. I remember thinking 'why?'.

Were you a free spirit?

I think I was more of a free spirit when I was in Dunedin. I flew kites in Dunedin.

I ask Des to describe what flying a kite used to be like. He's only too happy to oblige. It is 1936, he is nine years old, the wind lifting his white pine and brown paper kite high into the sky at the Forbury Park racecourse, where his grandfather has allowed him to roam free on this weekend afternoon. There are no crowds, no trotting horses—only Des on the grassy oval in the middle of the horse track, running solo. The wind arcs the kite across the sandhills ringing St Clair beach, sends it soaring out to sea.

How high could it fly?

I don't know.

He screws up his eyes, thinking.

It went bloody high!

Des's son-in-law Ian shows me a Google Earth photo of Forbury Park today.

Wow!

The Pacific Ocean, which in Des's memory lay just beyond the dunes, is clearly visible. Meanwhile, the sandhills themselves have been turned into the grassy mounds of a public golf course. Time marches on, even if one's memories remain on rewind and repeat.

These days, Des's memories very often blur into his sleeping dreams, where he's working the family farms at Tikokino and Waipawa, with his (dead) brother Bill usually beside him. Marie's dreams are more anxiety ridden: being late for teaching or wandering through some mysterious house trying to find her way out. Separately, I ask them whether they are disabled in their dreams. (I have to speak to them separately because their physical incapacities mean they can't cuddle up together in front of the tiny eye of the iPad webcam.) I tell them I've been reading a paper on the dreams of amputees that reveal their bodies as intact entities, despite the sometimes lengthy passage of time that has elapsed from the loss of their limb(s) (Mulder et al.). Marie and Des are fascinated. The amputees' experiences correlate exactly with their own dreams of being abled and moving around, empowered, beings with purpose and agency. Perhaps, I muse, it's part of the optimism one needs to continue inside a body that will no longer do what you want it to.

The sociologist Michael Bury has written that the sudden onset of chronic illness is akin to a kind of ‘biographical disruption’ (169). In a 1982 paper, Bury described three aspects of such disruption: the disruption to taken-for-granted assumptions and behaviours; the disruption to one’s self-concept; and the necessary mobilisation of resources to face an altered personal situation. Such notions of disruption to selfhood don’t necessarily apply merely to those with chronic illness, however. They are just as relatable to anyone living through the sudden or gradual loss of faculties previously taken for granted: hearing, sight, smell, movement. When they were young, neither Des nor Marie gave a second thought to potentially losing the use of their ears or legs or any other physical capacity. Only through acquiring disability over the course of their advancing years has the extent of the disruption to their lives become apparent and their adaptability to change become tested. In 1982, Bury wrote of how little was known about the ‘limits of tolerance’ within families and workplaces, and how these might vary between different social groups and settings (180).

If there is one trend that links my family’s members, apart from their tenacity, it is tolerance: their ability to endure unpleasant circumstances. It is emblematic of the ancient philosophy of the Stoics that one should submit without complaint to unavoidable necessity. Both Marie and Des have proved adept at pushing against the limits of tolerance that the disabling properties of rheumatoid arthritis have imposed upon their physical lives. Des has had the illness since the 1990s, but its effects have become more profound and pronounced as he has aged. Nowadays his hands splay outwards like a seal’s flippers, and the fine motor skills that once enabled him to hold pencils or unscrew jam jars have faded into memory. The wonder drug methotrexate, so powerful that the dosage is just one tablet once a week, used to be ‘bloody good’ in keeping Des mobile and able to work as a builder. But along the way it may also have clogged up his lungs. In 2011, a diagnosis of pulmonary fibrosis revealed lungs apparently so damaged and scarred, his oxygen intake so low that he’d become the equivalent of a deep-sea diver. Then three years ago, in the aftermath of a gall bladder operation, he suddenly found himself unable to walk.

How did you feel about that?

I thought it would go away. I thought, she’ll be right. I don’t know. It always has been in the past. But it didn’t work this time.

His voice trails off as he remembers, and discovers he doesn’t actually want to remember—not at this time, not at this moment.

I change tack: **What do you think about your life now?**

I don’t like to think of it. Too morbid. Life is still pretty good.

Do you mean life was pretty good or life now is pretty good?

Now, it’s pretty good.

Rosemary adjusts the tubes that connect him to a machine pumping oxygen into his depleted airways. His wife of sixty-eight years picks up the baton, patiently relaying her own debilitating conditions. Since her mid-thirties, Marie has been taking one tablet twice a day to keep ‘the silent killer’ (high blood pressure) and its migraine fallout at bay. In 1977, viral pneumonia and a collapsed lung kept her in hospital for a month. She was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis nine years ago. Blood tests confirmed the presence of the chronic progressive illness that inflames joints and deforms body parts.

I ask her what she has noticed most about her changing body.

My biggest challenge is that I can’t walk as much as I used to. Everything is an effort.

Tell me what your usual day is like.

Well, I get up about eight, shower, dress, make my bed, do the crossword, do any ringing that might be necessary. At eleven I’ll have a coffee and have lunch and then at about two or half past I come down to the [care] home and see Des. I stay a couple of hours. Sometimes I drop off to sleep in the chair and then I come home, make my dinner, watch television. I try to do something every day. So, I’ll bake sometimes; and Rosemary and Ian come over every Thursday night. Sometimes I think routine is the grave of the soul. But it also disciplines me, keeps me going.

Marie reveals how at times she must make Herculean efforts to make sure she doesn’t lose any more physicality. Sometimes she has to make herself get out of bed, and the inflammation of the rheumatoid arthritis and the pain she’s in because of it (she has to take four to six Panadol a day) impedes her walking.

I have a pusher and I still walk. I’m not giving up. As long as I can walk I can stay on my own.

As long as she can walk she is independent.

As long as she can walk she won’t have to follow Des into care.

Disability and Death: Turning negative(s) into positive(s)

We've been discussing another 'D' word today.

Des cracks a joke about all the people dying at the care home: 'Happens fairly regularly. They try to hide the body bags so as not to upset people.' Marie is more whimsical, more personally philosophical about dying: 'If I die, I won't know what's going to happen to my children, or the grandchildren.'

I ask her: ***So living is preferable to dying?***

Oh yes, as long as I don't get any worse.

Even if you're locked inside your body—like Des?

Not like that.

Marie quite often berates her uselessness, unconsciously mirroring the official geriatric medical opinion of the 20th century that seemingly had no patience for the elderly. The father of geriatric medicine, Ignaz Nascher, wrote in the first geriatric medicine textbook of 1914 that the aged 'are often a burden to themselves, their families and the community at large' (O'Neill 440). Negative characteristics leak into contemporary geriatric medical literature, according to Desmond O'Neill; or conversely in idealised stereotypes of the ageing human, 'a form of gero-eugenics that does not readily incorporate the existential vulnerability of old age and the adaptation and life satisfaction of older people with varying states of physical and cognitive disability' (440).

John Rowe and Robert Kahn's still widely referenced health model of 'successful ageing' (Successful Aging 433), which denotes an actively engaged individual who has low probability of disease and disease-related disability coupled with high cognitive and physical functional capacity, is manifestly problematic for people with severe disabilities (Minkler and Fadem 229). As Sandra Richardson, Sathya Karunanatham and Howard Bergman also suggest, the Rowe and Kahn model implicitly makes vulnerability and frailty an incompatible part of any successful ageing process: 'Many investigators, as well as older persons themselves, would disagree' (26).

In recent years, some critical disability studies debate has more forcefully challenged the prism of 'ableism' which makes the disabled person 'other' and the ableist agenda dominant (Goodley 637). Notably, in this arena, disability researcher and activist Fiona Kumari Campbell has spoken against the notion of disability as something to be overcome:

Impairment is the foreign invader, an injury or parasite that replaces the authentic self—no wonder many seek non-envelopment and are encouraged to partition impairment from the rest of our *relevant* selves. (216)

More useful, Kumari Campbell suggests, would be a counter-ableist version of impairment that could 'explore what the experience of impairment produces and ask how does disability *productively colour* our lives' (216).

With World Health Organisation figures showing that the world's proportion of older people is growing dramatically and correlatively their likelihood of developing some sort of disability (2015), a different approach to acknowledging the power of physical disintegration over the ageing human spirit seems appropriate. Learning to adapt and grow into disability as my uncle Des has, rather than partitioning it off from his individuality, may be crucial to continued well-being and happiness.

What have you been up to today?

I've been home [to see Marie]. Came [back here] at eleven, watched television, had a Subway lunch. Now? Not much. I'm watching the Secret Army on television at the moment.

He loves travel shows—Joanna Lumley cruising down the Nile is the latest. He reads a lot, part of his still voracious curiosity for knowledge. He doesn't need glasses since an operation to remove a cataract from his left eye five years ago. He doesn't need large script writing either, just a normal book propped up on the bedside table, on his abled side.

What's the best part of living now?

I come home on [Sundays]. I get some freedom in this vehicle.

Des has a new electric wheelchair now, which allows him some mobile independence.

What would you most like to be able to do now, if you could?

I'd like to walk again... a little bit.

How about a lot!

Marie rolls her eyes. She finds Des's will to live extraordinary—even the fact that he finds the thought of fish and chips on Fridays exciting.

I ask her: ***What makes life worth living even when you're in chronic pain? What makes you carry on?***

She thinks for a moment. In an earlier chat, she has coined the expression 'fighting time' to manifest her determination to live.

Probably my optimism, hoping that tomorrow it'll all be gone and I'll be all right. I know I'm not going to get better, but I hope I'm not going to get a lot worse. I'll probably die before that. Well at ninety you don't have too many options.

An ethics of care and caregiving: a family perspective

Des has established a warm, interested relationship with the staff who look after him in the care home. He knows them by name, asks them about their families, listens to their stories.

Do you enjoy being looked after by other people?

Not particularly. I've got a lot of Filipina girls looking after me... and from Kiribati.

I know... and you like them. You like them a lot.

They're bloody good. Can't fault them.

Today, Rosemary has taken Des for a walk, leaving Marie to try and work out the technology of the iPad so she can chat to me. At one point, she does something (neither of us know what) and a figuratively decorative armchair suddenly fills the frame. Marie has disappeared.

I try and help her autocorrect from my office in Western Australia. The technology is as complex as its user and I realise it's useless attempting to work out what has happened. I may as well accept Marie's wonderfully hilarious inability to troubleshoot the unfathomable. I feel her vulnerability, her sense of stupidity in that moment. But it should not, need not matter. As the critical disability studies theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson reminds us, disability should be the 'essential characteristic' of being human: 'Our bodies need care; we need assistance to live; we are fragile, limited, and pliable in the face of life itself' (342).

Our frailty begins at birth. The human baby is utterly dependent on its mother and other adults to live and to grow; impaired and vulnerable within that dependency. Reimagining dependency and interdependency as natural, essential elements of being human—as individually, familiarly and societally acceptable across one's lifetime—should be part of human progress, and part of a process therefore of mutual caregiving throughout

life. When Rosemary returns from her walk, she gently takes the iPad from her mother's hands, reverses the frame so that Marie and I can once again see each other as we talk. Our moment of incapacity has passed. But there are many other moments in our lifetimes, when compassion, when care is as natural as sleep and is as gladly given as received.

I remember when I received the news of Des's pulmonary fibrosis diagnosis. It was 2011 and I was in Dunedin as the William Evans Playwriting Fellow at Otago University, in the kind of job that could give me compassionate leave when I asked for it. I wrote to my head of school, explaining that the woman I regard as like a mother to me and who herself had recently been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis was finding it difficult to cope with domestic tasks.

I flew to Wellington and caught a bus to Masterton, and for the following week Marie and I shared the camaraderie of familiar connection, while Des was laid up in hospital. She regaled me with stories—the time my grandmother 'encouraged' the pathetic-looking copper beech tree at the family farm to grow by weeing in a chamber pot and scattering the urine round its roots. Or, nearer to home, that her friends number 'a Noreen, a Doreen and two Maureens!' We laughed and hugged a lot, and reminisced about the births of both my sons in the Masterton maternity hospital. When my husband Nick couldn't make it for our second son's birth, because Jack was premature, Marie was there, of course she was, to hold my hand when I pushed Jack scared and howling into the world.

These family events, one from a possible end-of-life scene, one from a beginning-of-life tableau, reinforce caregiving within the family unit as normative (Bailey and Gordon 229): that our family members will step up to help and support one another when needed. Nowadays, support for Marie and Des is multi-faceted and genuine. A few months before Des got his electric wheelchair, he and Marie made—by any standard—a journey of epic proportions to view Peter Jackson's Great War Exhibition at the Dominion Museum in Wellington. Rosemary and Ian brought Marie up to Des's care home and all four of them went by wheelchair taxi from Waikanae to Wellington.

Marie wrote in her diary: *We were quite a procession at the exhibition. Ian [first] pushing Des in the wheelchair, Rosemary next wheeling the oxygen, while I was in the rear pushing my walking frame!! Desperately tired and sore at the end of it all, but it was well worth it.*

Marie and I discuss interdependency and how, at a societal level, we are all interdependent upon each other.

What does that word interdependence mean for you?

Probably being dependent on my family, depending on their support I suppose.

Anything else?

I don't know. I like going out and meeting people, doing things. You know I play mahjong and I go to afternoon tea parties.

I know.

I visit Des every day and I need to do those things. But when you get old, Suzanne, you need to make yourself do them. I could quite easily just lie in bed all day or all morning and do nothing. The minute I start feeling like that, I say 'get out of that bed, and into the bathroom!'

I'm sure it'll get harder and harder, but at the moment I'm still winning the fight.

She smiles wryly. Marie has always acknowledged the backdrop importance of family to enable her and Des to continue doing things together, maintain their psychosocial balance of wellbeing and their worthiness to be part of the world. Literature on ageing highlights the importance of individuals finding resilience, 'from emotional support from others, a sense of personal worthiness, self-efficacy, trust in others, hope for the future, appraising things positively, a sense of humour and having a sense of purpose' (Hochhalter et al. 21). Marie and Des's resilience clearly stems in large part from family and the emotional love and care both get from family interaction.

Family care comes in many guises. Rosemary and Ian dine with Marie every Thursday, son Mark does Marie's cleaning for her, son Ricky and daughter-in-law Sarndra visit from Auckland for long periods whenever they can. Then there's the procession of siblings, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, cousins that stop by for a chat, quite often on a Sunday afternoon when Des is home for the day: part of the fabric of an active social life that maintains their purpose and positivity.

At around 5pm on Sunday, the wheelchair taxi arrives to collect Des and take him back to the care home. Marie accompanies him onto their driveway, leans over his wheelchair to kiss him on the lips, pats him on the shoulder. There's an emotional connection between these two that is touching, and which marks this moment of physical departure, as it has all their many other moments of departure.

See you tomorrow.

See you tomorrow.

The wheelchair taxi pulls away into the quiet residential street.

Marie waves after it.

It's impossible to know whether Des can see her or not. His hat is veiling his eyes. But Marie is smiling, looking forward to another tomorrow, and quite possibly also to the brandy and soda she can enjoy in the here and now.

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'clockwise is off'
Kevin Gillam

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in this convalescence—good word that with its gauze-like length and syllabic wrap—been practicing that lost art of waiting, bus and train stations, doctors' rooms, never enough shade or new *New Ideas*, been watching, the wizened and the upright, figs ripening, footpaths that flow like prose then trip like misspellings, been rubbing paperbark trees, listening in on frogs, been mulling over the difference between learned and remembered, the venn intersects, making a mantra of 'clockwise is off' while pondering the origin of knowns, the mind that did the choosing, hands that shape our days

K. and the NDIS
Jessica White

Jessica is the author of *A Curious Intimacy* and *Entitlement*. Her short stories, essays and poems have appeared widely in Australian and international literary journals and she has won awards, funding and residencies. Her memoir, *Hearing Maud*, will be published in 2019.

When K. arrives at the unnamed village in Kafka's *The Castle*, the village is 'deep in snow' (3). The hill on which the Castle stands is 'hidden, veiled in mist and darkness' (3). There isn't even 'a glimmer of light to show that a castle was there' (3). K. stands on a wooden bridge that leads into the village, 'gazing into the illusory emptiness above him' (3). The snow and dark winter trail K. through the narrative as he encounters people in the village. Most of the denizens are obfuscatory, and none can give him clear advice on how to reach the Castle.

•••

In July 2018, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) becomes available in Brisbane. Administered by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) it will, according to the NDIS website, 'provide all Australians under the age of 65 with a permanent and significant disability with the reasonable and necessary supports they need to enjoy an ordinary life' ('What is the NDIS?'). It stemmed from a 2010 Productivity Commission inquiry into a long-term disability care and support scheme. In 2013, NDIS legislation was passed and the NDIS Act 2013 was created. Pilot studies were conducted for three years, then the national rollout began on 1st July 2016.

I lost most of my hearing to meningitis when I was four. I am now forty-one and I've relied upon a hearing aid for thirty-seven years. As a school student, I used a wireless frequency-modulation (FM) system to hear my teachers. This was a small walkie-talkie system which involved the teacher wearing a microphone clipped to their blouse or shirt. I wore a receiver—a loop around my neck which picked up the radio waves and transmitted them to my hearing aid.

These days, as an academic, I am the teacher rather than the student. Hearing systems have become more sophisticated, and I now use a Roger

pen, which involves similar technology to an FM. The pen contains the microphone, while the receiver, a small cube, clips onto the end of my hearing aid. When my students speak, I point the microphone in their direction to pick up their voices.

This doesn't mean that I can hear all the time in class, or that the discussions are seamless. I ask my students to raise their hands if they want to speak, as I can't tell where sound is coming from and I need to focus on their faces to lip-read them. Sometimes, though, they forget to raise their hands, and when I hear a sound (or see a row of expectant faces that means someone has said something, I just can't tell where or what it is), I have to scan the room to see whose mouth is moving, match the shape of their lips to the sound they're making, work out their meaning, respond, then ask another question. For an hour and a half, my muscles are coiled tight with attentiveness, my brain working twice as hard as a person with all their hearing.

There are roughly four levels of hearing loss: mild, moderate, severe and profound. People with a moderate hearing loss use forty per cent of their working memory while they're listening, but I have a moderate-to-severe hearing loss in one ear and a profound hearing loss in the other. As both ears work together, the fact that my left ear doesn't work at all means that my right also struggles with the hearing it has. By the time I get home after my classes, I am limp with fatigue.

If I have another hearing system in my classroom, the strain on my body might lessen. My hearing aid is also nearing the term of its natural life. They usually last between eight to ten years and cost two thousand dollars and upwards. Mine is now nearly ten years old, although it's in good condition because I'm careful with it. I also don't have a spare, which means that if I lose this hearing aid, I'll have to quickly find the cash for a new one.

I became a writer and academic because I have an aptitude for words, and writing and researching require little hearing. I am lucky to have a job. Data from the 2015 Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that people with disability have lower rates of employment than people without disability. Fifty-three per cent of working-age people with disability were participating in the workforce, compared to eighty-three per cent of those without disability. Almost one in twelve Australians with disability aged fifteen years and over and living in households reported they had experienced discrimination or unfair treatment because of their disability in the last twelve months, and forty-six per cent of those aged fifteen to sixty-four years in full-time employment, and thirty-five per cent of those employed part-time, reported their employer as the source of discrimination (Australian Bureau of Statistics).

Neither writing nor academia pay particularly well, as the gigs are so sporadic. Having been a writer for twenty-five years, a student for nearly fifteen years, a part-time sessional tutor for five years, a researcher on a contract (my first full-time job) for three years and the breadwinner while my partner studies, my savings are minimal. I decide to apply to the NDIS for a new hearing aid, as well as another FM system to help me hear in my classes.

An *Access Request—Supporting Evidence Form* arrives in the mail. I read it carefully. The form is in three sections. I am allowed to fill out the first, which relates to my name, address, date of birth and phone number. It does not ask for my email address, which is my primary mode of communication. I find listening on the phone highly stressful because I have to rely on my hearing rather than lip-reading.

Sections Two and Three of the form relate to the details and functional impact of my deafness. The questions are straightforward: *What is the person's primary impairment? Is the impairment likely to be lifelong?* Details must be provided in relation to *Being understood in spoken, written or sign language and ability to understand language and express needs and wants by gesture, speech or context appropriate for age.* The form provides checkboxes and some space for longer responses. These sections must be completed by a health or educational professional. Nowhere is there space to describe my disability and its impact in my own words.

I consult with my audiologist. On my form, he writes,

To understand spoken English at one metre, Jessica requires a right hearing aid (left is unaidable). Because Jessica relies on one ear, any level of noise or reverberation reduces speech perception. A[n] FM system overcomes noise and helps her speech.

He fills in the rest of the form and attaches a copy of my most recent audiogram, a graph which shows my hearing loss, and notes that my hearing acuity score is 42.5 decibels. This is an average of the frequencies at which I can hear in my right ear.

As the form doesn't allow for email as a mode of contact, I write a cover letter which concludes, 'If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me as I find hearing on the phone a bit difficult.' I sign it 'Dr Jessica White'.

Two weeks later, on 15th August, a call from an unknown number appears on my phone. I don't answer it; these calls are usually from telemarketers and I don't have enough hearing or energy to engage with them. I let it go to voicemail, then listen to the message. It's an assessor

from the NDIS who tells me a decision has been made on my application. I call back immediately, but despite the assessor having phoned me only five minutes previously, she is no longer available to tell me what the decision is. The call centre operator to whom I'm speaking refuses to divulge any information. She tells me the NDIS assessor will call me back.

The next day a letter arrives in the post. My application has been rejected. Although I have worn a hearing aid for thirty-seven years, the NDIS has decided that it does not constitute a 'reasonable or necessary support'.

•••

When K. tries to phone the Castle to make an appointment with the Castellan, the receiver in his hand emits

a buzz of a kind that K. had never before heard on a telephone. It was like the hum of countless children's voices—but yet not a hum, the echo rather of voices singing at an infinite distance—blended by the impossibility into one high but resonant sound which vibrated the ear as if it were trying to penetrate beyond mere hearing. (Kafka 21–22)

Later, he is told that this humming and singing is 'the only reliable thing you'll hear. Everything else is deceptive. There's no fixed connection with The Castle, no central exchange which transmits our calls further' (Kafka 74).

•••

The day after I receive the letter from the NDIS, I call back for more detailed information as to why my application was declined. I am told an assessor will contact me. Five days later, I haven't received a response. I phone again, and once more ask for the assessor to contact me.

She calls in the afternoon two days later, but I don't hear the phone ring. I'm asleep because I need to gather energy to listen at a friend's book launch that evening. As soon as I wake up and see the missed call, I phone back. I leave a message for the assessor to contact me. Five days later, I still haven't heard anything so I phone again. Instead of leaving another message, I try to get some information out of the call centre operator.

'Do you know anything about the guidelines on which they based the assessment?'

'I know a bit.'

I quote from the guidelines, which I've found on the NDIS site. 'What does this mean: "Generally, the NDIA will be satisfied that hearing

impairments of 65 decibels or more in the better ear (pure tone average of 500 Hz, 1000 Hz, 2000 Hz and 4000 Hz) may result in substantially reduced functional capacity to perform one or more activities." What do they mean by "pure tone average"?'

He mutters something that doesn't sound like a reply, because I don't recognise any of the words that I've just read out to him. I hear the tapping of his keyboard. He tells me an assessor will call me back.

'Can't they email me? I'm deaf, so I can't always hear the phone ring.'

'I'll put down email as your preferred method of communication. If you don't hear back in one or two days, call again.'

Twelve days later, despite my request to be emailed, the assessor calls again. I'm in Western Australia for my research. It's 7:37am and I'm in the shower, so I don't hear the phone ring. The assessor leaves a message and says that she'll call again.

She phones the next day. I'm on a trek in the middle of the bush and I don't have reception, so I don't get the message until later. This time, the assessor leaves a lengthy message to say she is leaving the department the next day. She explains that the reason why I didn't meet the access requirements is because my average hearing loss in my better ear is 42.5 dB and this needs to be 65 dB or more. She adds that I can contact her before she leaves, but I still need to show a loss of 65 dB or more in my better ear in order to access funding.

Mid-morning the next day I'm still on my trek, but when I have a few bars of reception I phone the NDIS. I am angry, stressed, and concentrating on walking across a lengthy patch of Western Australian sand without falling over. I ask if the assessor can call me back that day, even though I may not have reception again. I also explain that I'll be putting in an application for a review because it is patently absurd that I cannot live my life without a hearing aid. The operator gives me the instructions for putting together a review.

Furious, I hang up and pound across millions of slippery grains of limestone.

•••

Not only does K. find that the phones are not connected directly to the Castle, but there is so much paperwork that the Superintendent, one of the Castle's employees, cannot find the piece of paper which confirms K.'s position as a Land Surveyor. When the Superintendent's wife opens his cabinet of papers, 'two large packages rolled out, tied in round bundles, as one usually binds firewood' (Kafka 61). The wife catches them and takes out the rest of the papers. Soon, the papers cover half the floor.

The Superintendent's wife never finds the document. Instead, she and two assistants collect the papers, shove them back in the cabinet, lie the cabinet on its back and sit on the door to make it shut.

•••

Back in Brisbane, I set about gathering information for the review. I play the assessor's message on my phone four times, but I still can't hear it clearly. I phone the NDIS again for clarification. We go through the assessor's notes until I'm sure I understand everything.

As far as I can work out, the NDIS assessor has based her decision upon one figure in my application: the hearing acuity score of 42.5 decibels. As this is an average, it doesn't account for the 65 decibel loss that I have in particular registers in my right ear. It also doesn't take into account the hearing loss in my left ear, even though this impacts on my right ear.

This one figure doesn't translate my years of loneliness because I didn't have the skills to communicate with people; of sitting on a bench at school by myself reading because I didn't know how to start a conversation; of my chronic anxiety about trying to catch every word in a conversation so I didn't miss out, or make someone feel bad by supposedly ignoring them.

I ask the call centre operator, 'Why can't someone email me so I can talk to them about this? I find it hard to hear on the phone.'

'The NDIS isn't emailing people at the moment because emails are being corrupted.'

'What do you mean by "corrupted"?'

'Not all of the message is getting through.' She reads my file. 'You need to provide more detail of how your disability impacts on your life.'

'My audiologist says this on the form: I can't hear at one metre without a hearing aid and this impacts on my ability to communicate and learn. I also can't run my classes without it.' Besides, I want to add, there is no space on the form for articulating in my own words how my disability impacts on me.

'You have to meet all of the criteria,' the customer service provider continues.

'No, the form says you have to meet one or more criteria, not all of them.'

'I'm not an expert. A specialist will call you.'

'How long will this take? I can't always hear the phone ring.'

'I can't predict that, but it will be at least two working days. There's just one other thing—your title—I haven't seen that before. Is it a typo?'

'No, I'm a doctor. People with disabilities can be doctors.' I hang up, swearing.

•••

On 20th April 2018, the NDIS announced in a media release that it had 'engaged Serco Citizen Services Pty Ltd (Serco) as its service delivery partner for contact centre services in a two year contract' ('NDIA Contact Centre'). Serco is a British provider of public services, operating in six sectors of public service provision: health, transport, justice, immigration, defence, and citizen services. In Australia, Serco runs a suite of prisons, which includes detention centres on Christmas Island and Villawood. At the Christmas Island Detention Centre, Serco presided over an increase of deaths in custody and instances of self-harm, and the deterioration of facilities and the physical and mental health of their detainees.

The NDIS's reasoning for contracting Serco for their customer service is that 'it is critical that the Contact Centre is able to provide fast, accurate and effective advice to callers' ('NDIA Contact Centre'). So far, the advice I've received is that which was already included on the piece of paper rejecting my application, the repeated refrain that an assessor will call me, and what former Human Rights and Disability Discrimination Commissioner Graeme Innes terms 'the soft bigotry of low expectations' (60). In other words, the assumption that people with disabilities cannot achieve excellence, such as gaining a PhD.

The Contact Centre's provision of 'fast, accurate and effective advice', the media release continues,

is in line with the NDIA's commitment to continuously improve so that the NDIS offers participants a quality experience that makes a difference to their lives; which encourages a vibrant provider market that will progressively be deregulated; while ensuring that the Scheme is financially sustainable. ('NDIA Contact Centre')

If Serco's track record is anything to go by, they are again engineering the deterioration of their 'customers'' mental health.

•••

As my job is only a contract, I am under enormous pressure not only to carry out my research (the main stipulation of my funding), but also to continue publishing, supervising students, and teaching. Jobs in academia, particularly in the humanities, are few and far between, and if I want to get another job my CV needs to be outstanding.

My energy reserves are already depleted from the massive physical requirements of teaching. The mounting strain of my job begins to impact

on my body. I contract colds, flu and coughs, one after the other. I get better for a month and then I fall ill again. I can't remember what it's like not to be tired.

Eventually, after delivering a lecture with a cold, I get an ear infection in my good ear. My ear throbs with unbearable pain, then my eardrum ruptures. Fluid trickles out my ear canal and down my lobe. Terrified about losing the remainder of my hearing, I hightail it to the doctor, who prescribes me with antibiotics. I begin to wonder if my job is worth it, even though I have few other options for employment.

For a month I am almost completely deaf, even with my hearing aid turned to its maximum volume. I am miserable, isolated and exhausted. However, as this experience can't be captured by a checkbox, and as the NDIS doesn't trust the words of a deaf author of two decades' standing, I was unable to include it in my original application to the NDIS.

When I look over the guidelines for the review, I find that they have allowed space for the person with the disability to describe how the NDIS's decision impacts them. I lay out the impact in no uncertain terms.

•••

K., always desperate for communication from the Castellan, is overjoyed to receive a letter via one of the Castle's messengers. He reads, 'The surveying work which you have carried out thus far has been appreciated by me' (Kafka 120).

He looks up from the letter to the messenger and says, 'There's been a misunderstanding [...] I haven't done any surveying at all' (Kafka 120–121).

K. has not been able to work. All he has done is tried to reach the Castle. He is overcome with immense weariness.

•••

A friend of a friend offers to help me with my review. She suggests that I contact the NDIS through their online enquiries form to request that they communicate with me by email. I write to them on 1st October. Two weeks later, there's still no response.

Despite my constant fog of tiredness, I realise I need to make an appointment with my audiologist for another assessment. I doubt, given the strictures of the first form, that the NDIS will give my personal account much weight, and I think the ear infection has damaged my hearing. As I'm so busy with work, it takes me a while to make the appointment. The three-month deadline for a review looms. Seeing as no-one from the NDIS will communicate with me by email, I phone to request an extension.

Between the call centre operator reading the notes on my file, and me explaining my situation, it takes twenty minutes for him to understand that I would like an extension.

'But your review is already underway,' he says at last.

'How can it be? I haven't sent in any paperwork.'

•••

I call my state representative organisation for deaf people for advice.

'Is my experience uncommon?'

'No, not at all.'

'So this is happening to lots of deaf people?'

'Yes. They keep calling the NDIS and they never get a call back.'

If I were less resilient, I would give up, but my parents have taught me to advocate for myself. I think about all the people who, even more tired than I am, have given up. The NDIS was designed to help them. Instead, it's doing the opposite.

On 28th September 2018, *The Guardian* reports that underspending on the NDIS is projected to run to as much as five billion dollars by the end of the financial year. Professor Bruce Bonyhardy, the inaugural chair of the NDIA, says that the current underspend 'strikes at one of the fundamental principles of the scheme, which is that it is about equality and being fair to people with disabilities as quickly as possible' (Davey). According to Treasury, this reflects lower than expected numbers of participants entering the scheme and lower use of individual support packages. The assumption seems to be that people are not taking up the NDIS because they don't need it.

I wonder how many of them are too exhausted to keep phoning.

•••

When I return to my audiologist, he assesses me for an auditory processing disorder, which is when the brain is unable to process sound in the usual way, because the ear and brain do not coordinate. He runs me through a Time Compressed and Reverberant Test, in which I have to identify rapid speech and words that are distorted. A result of seventy-three per cent or better is considered to be within normal limits.

Before we begin, my audiologist explains, 'The person will be speaking very fast, with an accent. Don't feel bad if you can't get all of the words.'

I smile, assuming that he's just being nice. As we proceed, however, I realise he's unfurled a safety net. The fifteen words which he plays are guttural. Even concentrating hard, I can only catch three of them. I am taken back to childhood, to when I stood outside a group of my classmates,

unable to catch the quick to-and-fro of their conversation. I was left out and alone.

My result in the test is twenty per cent, six standard deviations below the norm. In order to qualify for the NDIS, I must prove that I am a failure.

•••

Kafka died of tuberculosis before he could finish *The Castle*. The novel ends mid-sentence, so K. remains trapped in the village with its small-minded citizens, who dare not challenge the Castle's rules. He never makes it to the Castle. When he asks the barmaid of the hotel he frequents, 'How much longer is it till spring?', she replies, 'In memory, now, spring and summer seem as short as though they didn't last much longer than two days, and even on those days, even during the most beautiful day, even then sometimes snow falls' (Kafka 317).

The air swirls with snowflakes, millions of tiny pieces of torn paper.

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Departmental Staple Remover Kristian Patruno

Kristian Patruno is an Australian poet whose works have appeared in *Southerly*, *Cordite*, *Rabbit*, *Otoliths*. Additionally, Kristian's visual poetry was exhibited in POETRY 2017, an exhibition of text-based works that bear a formal relationship to the space they occupy (George Paton Gallery, University of Melbourne, Australia).

... over the last year and a half your department's lack of capacity to professionally deal with my application in an efficacious and timely manner, regards my disability, does not instil me with confidence that I will not receive prejudicial treatment at interview. Given the paper-trailed record of your department's treatment, regards my disability, I have engaged the Anti-Discrimination Board to advocate the success of my application with your department. Please further be advised that I have sent a copy of this letter and an outline of my application experience with your department to both the sitting and shadow minister. I have done this in the hope that the department will rectify any wantings for best practice in its processing of all job applicants—particularly those with disabilities. Henceforth, I will only accept written correspondence with the department.

my letter to the Head of Applications:
it's just

perfect. How their eyes will bulge / hearts skip a beat
on reading that a cripple dares stand up as the able-
bodied in photo-shoots, smiling with their department's
anti-discrimination policies buried somewhere in their desk;
perhaps beneath that snake-fang looking thing
that pulls out staples from pantries of rheumatic dads.

Write-ability

Write-ability is funded by the Australian Government. Over the years, partners in the development of Write-ability have included Arts Access Victoria, the Australia Council for the Arts, The Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation and Creative Victoria.



Write-ability is an award-winning program supporting disabled writers to develop their skills and writing careers. It began as a partnership between Arts Access Victoria (AAV) and Writers Victoria (WV) in 2012, with mentor-in-residence Fiona Tuomy and Kate Larsen, then Writers Victoria director, developing an effective, flexible and ground-breaking program based on the Social Model of Disability. Writers Victoria is now solely responsible for the program, but collaboration with arts, literary and disability organisations are vital to the program's ongoing self-renewal.

Grass roots mentoring, effective access and professional development for writers at all levels are the bedrock of the Write-ability program. In the six years that the program has run, an exciting range of events, activities and initiatives have been established. What began with free mentoring and city-centred writing workshops went on to encompass disability training; dedicated funding to improve access for all writers; the Write-ability Fellowships, which have recognised thirty writers since 2013; Publish-ability, which is supporting four emerging writers to develop their manuscripts and connect with publishers; and our Write-ability Goes Regional and Online program (WGRO), which underlines our commitment to access and inclusivity regardless of distance.

Write-ability actively recruits from within its ranks, commissioning work, enlisting writers for spoken word performances and for the recent Border Stories podcasts, and employing disabled writers as tutors, guest speakers and project officers. The writers featured here are a small sample of the many career paths, genres and writing styles Write-ability has fostered over the last six years. Poet and children's author Jessica Walton now works as a Writers Victoria tutor. Performance poet Anthony Riddell self-published for years before becoming a 2018 Write-ability Fellow. Heidi Everett, an inaugural Write-ability Fellow, continues her connection with Write-ability through monthly meetings of her lived experience arts group, Schizy Inc., at Writers Victoria.

Write-ability book launches are becoming more frequent—2014 Write-ability Fellow Sarah Widdup launched *Blue in the Red House* in December 2018, and 2013 Fellow Carly Findlay's *Say Hello* was launched in January 2019. Write-ability 2016 Fellow Vincent Silk published *Sisters of No Mercy* in 2018. The list of published alumni continues to grow. This, perhaps, is at the heart of Write-ability's unique contribution to Australia's literary heritage: our early and ongoing recognition and encouragement of these new and exciting voices that demand we read, understand and enjoy.

Lyndel Caffrey
Feature Editor, and Write-ability Project Manager

My Friend Fox Heidi Everett

Heidi Everett identifies as neuro-diverse and has amassed a collection of professional skills and achievements in the creative arts industry, with writing being her favourite medium. Heidi was awarded one of the inaugural Writers Victoria Write-ability Fellowships in 2014 for her unpublished memoir about life with schizoaffective disorder, *My Friend Fox*, of which the following is an extract.

Phokoje go tsela o dithetsenya! they say in Botswana: *Only the muddy fox lives!* If there's ever an animal famous in folklore for being able to do whatever is necessary to outwit its adversaries, it's the fox. You and I aren't foxes but I'm sure we can relate. We can only change our lives if we're prepared to get dirty.

I grew up in fox country. I used to watch them on hot, sullied evenings in the cattle fields near home, leaping like little impala onto invisible bugs. They're stunning animals and their tails are extraordinary. I can't imagine them taking sweet field mice and the family's pet chook, but they do, and that's why they're outlawed. It gives me some comfort to read about a study in Russia in which wild foxes turned themselves into allies, ending the cold war between our species.

The fox in this story is a wild red fox. He sits on the outer waiting for me to discover him. For that to happen, I will begin my story.

•••

I love animals. Growing up I was always attached to a dog, cat or guinea pig. So it was no big surprise that I ended up calling a little red dog my absolute best friend for almost sixteen years. I got him as a young tearaway canine backpacker, our eyes meeting through the crossbars of a dog shelter. It turns out we both had many issues to sort out, so ours became a symbiotic friendship. He: a dog that relied on me for food, shelter and protection. Me: a human scraped out, needing this dog's affection and loyalty.

Tigger studied my ways to secure his status in our tiny pack. He shared my experiences of being chased by UFOs and police helicopters and

the confusion of sleeping in random parks when home would've been warm and safe. He became an expert psychologist and social worker. Among intensely painful episodes we had many, many great times and adventures together. It was my due to pay him back tenfold in joy for what I took away during the worry times.

My way of being was tough for Tigger to understand at times. But he did get it, better than any psych support I was offered. When the mental health crisis team came to my house to take me to hospital, yet again, he'd put his paw up on my shoulder, look straight into my unhappy grey eyes and give me all the courage I needed. He could see the mess we were in with my fading soul, and he knew the team were here to help us get happy again. When I did come home from hospital, oh, what sweet reunion! I booked little holidays in remote places, where I'd cook majestic egg and bacon breakfasts to share with him on the sunlit morning veranda, and we'd spend our days traipsing through rain-soaked forests or along storm-bashed coastlines. Together we'd climb precarious rock faces and stalk sea birds, chasing them like banshees back up into the sky. We'd meander down wild forest streams and over granite boulders, sneak through slippery mosslands, and look for scary bunyips. Tigger always managed to stay a few strides ahead of me, somehow reading my intention to lead the way.

If our human understanding of life is like a dog in a library, then love is like a happy dog in his favourite park. My dog held no university degree. He hadn't read a thousand books on human pathology. If I was happy, he was happy. The main ingredient in our success was pure, universal, unconditional, unbounded, respectful, naive love.

My kitchen, 1.17am.

There are cameras in the wall plaster. They're filming my every move; capturing my thoughts and sending the footage back to the control office. I tear off little corners of toilet paper, lick and stick them over tiny holes in the plaster. There's so many of them! I lie in bed and stare up at the ceiling. There's more up there. I climb onto my bed and spend ages scouting for holes and sticking down bits of torn paper. Tigger watches me quietly from his mat, letting me redecorate without question.

A 'friend' drops in the next evening and sits on the third chair from the right. She places her bag very carefully on her left. That's peculiar. She asks me, 'How are you?' I feel coldness in her tone. Her eyes scan me with a blank stare and I realise she's faking it. They've got her and she's on a mission to trap me. I'm angry with myself. They're in the room now; how stupid of me to let Them in!

'I'll be back in a minute,' I tell the fake friend in my most casual voice.

I walk quietly out the front door, Tigger following. It's 9pm and dark. The middle of winter has set in and it's cold. I'm wearing jeans and a light shirt. I'm not dressed to go out but I can't go back. This is an emergency; I've got to get out of here. I walk to the end of my road, turn left and keep walking. Tigger and I don't stop walking for the next two weeks.

The night passes in jumps and starts, much like my sense of direction. I meander through nearby housing estates and end up in a playground on a hill. The cold air makes my skin burn and there's speckles of rain fritzing about. I see Tigger is shivering too, so I find a concrete pipe and we crawl in to get some rest. But the wind blows through the open-ended tunnel and makes for an inhospitable sleeping place. We crawl out the other end. My feet aren't as tired as my body, so I keep walking. My mind is stuck on a mantra. It's reminding me, *Keep moving, or They'll find you*. I tell myself I'll go home as soon as it's light.

Dawn unfolds. I'm not going home. They'll all be there by now, swarming through my flat like bees in a hive, collecting information. They'll be taking fingerprints off my teacup and swiping DNA data from my cereal bowl. They'll see that I found the cameras in the wall. I must keep going. My thoughts have become my enemies. I must not think.

The next day, I head into town. I snake through shopping malls, turning randomly left or right at each corner. I do my best not to touch anything. If I do, it's through the cloth of my shirt, or the back of my hand. I don't look at anyone or anything. Even the bricks of the buildings threaten me. This town is too dangerous. I need to go into the country. Night is coming back but I'm not tired. I'm a fugitive and fugitives can't sleep. Hunting eyes are everywhere. Tigger doesn't lead the way on this long walk. He stays behind me with his nose at my heel. I only take a few resting moments here and there on park benches during the day. Tigger coils up with his nose under his tail and takes no real offence at the indignity of another snooze without his mat.

That's how it is for a long while. When I'm in the country, my thoughts get stuck and tangled in tree limbs. When I'm in the town, the concrete path records my footprints. I'm frightened of murderers lurking in the shadows, but the shadows are where I find my only refuge. Strong wind and saturating rain are my only counsellors. At night I fold myself up inside squares and triangles of shelter. I can't sleep: my racing ideas and the loud voices of recrimination are too animated to ignore. I get food for the two of us and coffee for me from sanctified places like church drop-ins

and mass welfare charities. I can't get used to these never-ending fractals of existence, but it all feels normal after a while.

After many days of nowhere, we end up at the beach. It's the middle of the night, so the colour and contrasts of daytime have been reduced to grey and black. The weather is horrendous. A gale from no particular direction carries a vomit of sea in its mouth. It punches out chunks of the air with its furious fists, even attacking itself in its rage. I stare out along the void and see a line of beach boxes much further down the shoreline. They hint at the faraway idea of a summer holiday, so I trudge my way across the heavy, unfriendly sand.

At this point I really feel Tigger wanting to go home. He hangs back. His reluctance drags at me like an anchor. But he follows, trusting me, and we battle on like Scott or Mawson, venturing further and deeper into the icy remoteness. I yearn for a calm, cosy place for Tigger to rest. I can't let him suffer like this.

As we scale the heaving shoreline, the wind grabs my hair and tries to rip it from my scalp, then throws it back into my face. Sharp bits of sand mixed with sideways rain stonewash my bare skin and stick to my lips. A stampede of angry waves attack the beach. The avalanche of noise is almost too much for my senses. It outplays the pandemonium of my inner turmoil and gives me agonising respite from my own self.

I battle on until I find the first ramshackle beach box. There's space under the steps that I could fit in, yet it offers no protection from the wind, so I move on to the next one. This seems better but then I get a vivid mental picture of drug needles and druggie poo and suddenly the thought of crawling under any beach box seems filthy. My final chance is a small shed with a broken door. I step cautiously inside, not knowing what to expect. It's dark. The pitching noise outside drops slightly and I feel a moment's relief until I make out two small figures camped on the murky floor. They look up, startled; I apologise and go back out into the wild night. For the first time in weeks, I feel deeply exhausted. My emotions are ragged and they erupt. I struggle my body back along the tyrannical beach. The rain and the wind take my tears away before they've even left my brain. Tigger is at my heel. I arrive back at the car park like an old broken car. Puddles of muddy water form in giant potholes and I want to climb down into one and let the earth soak me up. I can't go home, I can't stay here. I can't go on. I stand useless in the dark, with the rain and wind flowing through me. Tigger waits for my decision.

It's times like this I have to accept that Life doesn't stop, even if my mind decides it should. It just ticks on. My left foot eventually takes a step forward, then my right, then another left, then another right again. My wobbly legs drag me one by one along a little gravel track weaving up through the dunes. I finally reach a surf lifesaving club built on sandy ground. I see a dimly lit area out the back of the building and my feet become moths. Here I can finally get away from the weather and pounding surf. Safe at last.

I push my spine down into the corner of the dry space and huddle my creaking wet knees up to my numb chin. Tigger folds his belongings into a tight-fisted knot beside me. It's freezing cold, but dry. The orange glow of the small outside light gives me a sense of warmth. I blankly stare my aching eyes into the inky space of a sand dune covered in prickly bushes. I crave my darling bed. My lovely warm blankets, my soft dry pillow. Now I really wish I was home. My mantra fires back: *Keep moving, or They'll find you!* Shut up, you stupid, stupid voice. *No, you're the stupid one, for letting them catch you,* it snaps back. I'm too tired and sad to argue, so I let it win. Again.

At this point I see a shape shift in the darkness in front of me. I expect it's another black bear or slinky black puma. I've seen so many lately. Tigger doesn't stir so I wait for another shifty shape to mumble across my senses. To my surprise, and in one quick unfussy movement, a powerful Red Fox is sitting right opposite me. He looks directly at my face. He's no more than three metres from my feet and I can clearly see everything about him. I can't believe it! A wild red fox is sitting *right in front of me!* This is *not* a hallucination, I defiantly inform myself. I tell the fox so as well. Even Tigger has noticed him and clambers up into a seated position. He doesn't make a noise or raise a single hackle air. He sits and looks, like me, like the fox. We stare at each other.

The orange light and the rain make the fox's red coat glow. A brush-like tail flows out around his side, and then curls to rest in front of him. I look at his all-too-close facial features. A tiny, pointy black nose sweeps out into flashes of white fur on each cheek. I look at his two oversized ears, pointing directly to the night sky. His gemstone eyes are locked on mine; I see they could be made from parts of the universe itself. I get lost in their exhilarating intensity and then realise I've been staring far too long. I feel like I've offended him so I politely look away. He doesn't flinch. I wonder how much longer this wild animal is going to stay sitting there in front of a pathetic shivery human. I cast numerous sideways glances at him, filling up my memory. But he still doesn't move.



I start to feel very uncomfortable. Do foxes eat people? Especially bedraggled paranoid wanderers, in the middle of night; in the middle of winter; in the middle of nowhere?

I have thoughts of my last moments on earth: a wild fox in my face, biting into my jugular vein and pulling out bits of my throat. The surf lifesavers will only find parts of me next time they meet. Which is six months away, in summer. Oh boy, this is going to be long and painful. Then I compare it to my recent life on earth and my even more recent prayer to disappear into a pothole. I come to the frightening conclusion that God is real and he does answer the prayers of the completely desperate. With a dash of Catholic drama, of course.

I wait a while, then decide to relax. I let go of my tight grasp on my knees. I slowly, slowly stretch my aching legs in front of me and cross one on top of the other to show how casual I am. The fox still doesn't move. I'm beginning to wonder aloud if this fox is in fact a big old classic hallucination, just like the bears and the pumas.

As if the fox understands my words, he gently shakes his majestic head, then says, *I don't see many humans here at this time of year. Why are you out in the middle of this cold night?*

Nothing really shocks me anymore; I've become the Queen of Cool around the unexpected. So I play along, 'Because I can't go home. They're after me and I'm not safe anywhere anymore.'

Why are they after you? You seem quite harmless. Did you steal a chicken?

'No, I did not steal a chicken!' I snap. Foxes are predictable after all, I think. 'They're after me because They think I'm unwell. But I'm not unwell, I just have a different way of doing things to Them and They don't want to understand.'

Yes, I actually know that story well. Humans don't like me either.

'Do you know you're in the wrong country for foxes?' I ask, expecting it won't.

Yes. I live every day knowing that I'm on the wrong earth, and I try to tread very carefully. I know my ways don't suit humans at all. But I can't go home either. What is a fox to do?

'You could make friends with humans,' I offer. 'Then you'll sleep on soft earth, with plenty of warmth and food. Humans will look after you instead of chasing you away.'

If I make friends with you humans, and I become a common dog, what will happen to the way of the fox? Will it become instead the way of the human?

'I think you'll change the way you do things, but you'll still be known as a fox,' I reply.

So, I will wag my beautiful fox tail instead of using it for warmth and as a symbol of pride; I'll bark and whimper when I see humans, instead of using my many skills in quiet subtlety; my earth will turn against me and become hard concrete instead of gentle grass; and the many seasons of dirt I learned from my mother will become one long dry summer granted me from humans.

Is it really worth it?

I think about my answer carefully. 'If you want to live.' It's all I can come up with.

There is your answer.

With that, the fox stands up. He stretches his regal neck, turns back onto his beautiful tail, and vanishes into the deep unknown of the windswept dunes.

I follow the animal with my eyes but the surging night quickly consumes the fading reverie. Tigger has fallen asleep, curled up in a ball beside my leg. I look down at his fur, little tufts catching in the choppy air. I don't know if he's really asleep or pretending, but I imagine he's thinking of his bed, the morning and the two of us heading out to his favourite park.



Illustrations: © Heidi Everett

Jolyon Jessica Walton

Jessica Walton is the author of *Introducing Teddy* (Bloomsbury, 2016). In 2017, Jess completed a Write-ability Fellowship focused on poetry about disability, cancer and pain. She has co-written an episode of *Get Crack'n* focused on disability. Her short story about a disabled teen was published in *Meet Me at the Intersection* (Fremantle Press, 2018).

I want four, I said.

I want three, she said.

We settled on three and said we would wait and see.

Now we have two,
and we've given all the baby clothes away.

Pain has a say in every decision.

I let you go.

You're an idea, but your name makes you feel real,
and your nickname, so solid: Jo.

I think about what it would be like
to reach for my partner's hand in the night, like she did mine:
'The baby is kicking!'
to feel the kicks from the inside instead of the outside.

I console myself:
There are things I can nurture now
that may have been lost in the chaos of three.
I am birthing words in the small gaps, the scraps of time.

Still, you are a thought I entertain in the grey light of morning,
before my youngest calls me from my room.

Egg
Anthony Riddell

Anthony Riddell was born in Adelaide (Kaurana country), maimed in Sydney (Eora country), and is jolly in Melbourne (Wurundjeri country). His books include *Putrid Canal*, *Thumb*, *Betrayed by the senses*, *Pain is a sign of life*, *Fingerprints on the surface of the brain*, *dog god*, and many more. 'Egg' is an extract from *Animalcule*, which is as yet unpublished.

Dr Bing-Bang stared sadly at a glass tube that contained creatures wriggling in what was probably water.

'I don't know why I'm holding this,' it continued. 'I am more interested in mammals.'

Dr Bing-Bang was addressing a murmuring collection of creatures with tentacles and coiled shells. If politely quizzed as to their nature they would firmly have identified themselves as 'ammonites'. If the interaction had been less polite they probably would have claimed identification as *Manx nautili*. Dr Bing-Bang had heard no news of ammonites for some time. It was still something of a shock to learn that they were extinct.

It was a matter of pride for someone called Ichabod Snell to be able to point to a distinctly ammonite component in his ancestry. Occasionally there were chuckles. Ichabod watched as a procession composed only of bees slowly filed past.

Ichabod accidentally spilt blood onto his finger. He saw this and soon imagined a carnivorous goat. This wore an old hat as it chewed with some emotion upon a large but anonymous chunk of meat. Ichabod's dream goat then commenced to fly around the room. Terrible sounds emerged from its digestive system.

Bladderland felt the region of her spine commonly known as 'the coccyx'. For some time she had had pains that she could not explain. It was almost as if something wished to emerge from there. The strange pains could sometimes be explained as 'super-rectal'—occurring in a region immediately beyond the coccyx.

She was witness to occasional glimpses of a pink thing. After much internal debate she remained watching. It soon assumed a permanence

and a quite definite shape. Bladderland found it irritatingly familiar. Finally it was seen to be a top hat worn by someone ascending stairs. Beneath this was a face designed to frustrate enthusiasts of a binary nature. This face was not fully female. Neither was it fully male. It was however very old. Bladderland was familiar with this individual.

'Good morning Dr Bing-Bang,' she guiltily began.

'Why the guilt?' came the response.

'O.O.O.O. Pleistocene,' came the strangled reply. Bladderland could only see two solutions to any challenge. There were in fact many solutions—various permutations of the permitted duo plus unseen ones.

Small pink domes, each one like half a pink sphere, lay upon the plain. Members of the large and notoriously hungry Tater family foraged for snacks. Mildred Tater saw some flashes of fur. She alerted Johann Tater. Working as a team, the Taters were able to lure a number of furry televisions onto a rude natural platform called 'the chopping board'. Appropriately, they were chopped up here. Taters roughly thrust the still-quivering parts into their greedy mouths and pressed their teeth down. They slowly brought them up again. This process was repeated a number of times. Now swallowing happened. Blood described an approximate circle around Johann Tater's mouth as he fastened clothes pegs on his lips. He failed to explain this action.

An unseen horn wailed over equally unseen dales. Bladderland periodically and neatly crossed and uncrossed her legs. An anonymous onlooker peered at what seemed to be a pair of spiked hands lying on an adjacent cushion. After confusedly staring at them for more or less a while our onlooker excitedly realised that they were gloves. Pins had been inserted from the inside. It was possible that someone donning them would be harmed. Bladderland slowly edged away from them. She absentmindedly placed some fingers back at the base of her spine. There was a distinct bump beneath the pus-bearing redness. Using her fingers to probe the site made her wince but doing so brought knowledge of herself that she was not otherwise privy to. Dr Bing-Bang 'just happened' to be convulsing in the next room.

'Dr Bing-Bang!' she hotly exclaimed. 'Kindly justify your presence.'

'Um. Ar. Um. Ar,' managed Dr Bing-Bang, looking more like a treacle-handed child than an ancient sage. This boded ill for future activities. Could Bladderland trust this learned individual who was known to visit and to observe 'persons of interest'?

‘Rabbits from Hell,’ said Dr Bing-Bang. ‘Must fly.’ Dr Bing-Bang stood motionlessly and stared intently at the wall in front of it. With no warning the ground fell rapidly downward from the dubious one. It fell so far that Dr Bing-Bang could not be seen.

Strawberrie’s fingers gently traversed the skin of the knuckles of the opposite hand. She totally failed to understand how generation after generation of children could be raised with no awareness of sensuality. How was this possible? She thought that this absence was a true tragedy of this or any other age. Strawberrie ignored the sixteen-strong teams of persons who were racing around while clutching handles. At the end of each handle was a decimetre-long dome-tipped cylinder. This was made of the same soft metal as the weights on fishing rods. This sport—whose name is not recorded—took place in yellow squares divided into lanes. Wrongdoers in many spheres cackled woefully.

Strawberrie sat down. She felt that the description of this action warranted further attention. There was of course ‘sitting down’ and ‘standing up’. There was also ‘standing down’ and ‘sitting up’. This worried her for an inordinately long time. She realised that such stuff was present in order to bring excitement into some otherwise dull lives.

Barking from many dogs commenced. It stopped just as quickly. An uneasy silence bathed the area with its uncertain tones. This was typical of events occurring around Strawberrie.

Ichabod came to the bottom of a container once holding cylinders. One was left. It was not marked but it had the *chutzpah* to smirk. He experienced dismay. An anonymous animal grasped his brain and he vehemently swallowed the cylinder’s contents. Now he turned the empty shape around and around. He wondered why he did that. This question was answered soon enough when he saw ‘purgatorial solution’ written on a nearby snail. Purgatory—where one had to endure the tortures of Hell until one received the joys of Heaven. Whatever reaction he had was a mere reaction—a fizzing thing, an irritating thing. This had to be endured until an abrupt betterment to whatever the painful situation possibly was occurred. Even if an embarrassing thing had to happen it was seen as immensely preferable to submitting to the grinding device that sought to reduce life to a series of smouldering stumps.

‘Happy goats,’ he gurgled, with no trace of anything that could incriminate him. But ‘no trace’ led one to either a disastrous end or a ruthlessly impractical Absolute. There were times when assistance was desirable but relevant persons undertook to impose some petty machinations.

‘Health is health,’ claimed a shadowy figure who lingered in an infrequently used portion of Ichabod’s brain. This vision quickly became one of a vomiting hamster.

Some mechanical tumbling could be heard. An image of a bright and gaseous object travelling within a kind of wheelbarrow persevered on Ichabod’s eye. Ichabod was curious regarding the possibility that this was the Crab Nebula visiting Earth in a wheelbarrow. All attempts to ascertain its nature were stymied when something turned so utterly bright that ‘extremely’ seemed too twee a description. This state of affairs persisted for too long a time. It abruptly stopped. Persons remained staggering around in a dazed stupor. The brightness began anew. It did not seem as intense this time. This bright/not bright dichotomy happened a few more times. The thing, whatever it was, moved on. Although Ichabod remained idealistic, the possibility that this was a nebula was not great. Somewhere stuck to the underside of someone’s foot was a series of parchments saying virtually nothing in eight different archaic languages. Ichabod was eventually dragged from the spot by persons who did not share his romantic vision.

Only gullible persons would have been fooled and Dr Bing-Bang was not gullible. There had been a few attempts in what is now called the Cretaceous period and during the civilisation of Mu. These experiences had helped to rigidify Dr Bing-Bang’s attitude. Dr Bing-Bang now regarded it as important to establish some sort of dialogue with *clothes*. Were these the new ammonites? No, because ammonites were extinct and clothes were not. It was argued that ammonites still existed (maybe in the guise of nautili) but our severely learned chum would have none of that and firmly stated that whatever the possibilities were, clothes blatantly existed. Some fabric, some slime and *voila!* Perhaps that is how opera was invented.

‘O no!’ cried an indignant Strawberrie. ‘Opera is the tokenistic modern form of the role-playing found in “shamanic” societies worldwide. In this, one *becomes* an animal, one *is* that animal to an extent that is not acknowledged in this hollow society. One tainted with our dubious values *does not know* what this means. *I* certainly don’t.’ Having said this her eyes became unfocused and her tongue protruded slightly.

The analogue mobile telephone lumbered peacefully through the undergrowth. Using a sense whose nature was unknown to researchers it detected a body of water. It was unfortunate that the amiable herbivore was not destined to go there. A pair of digital mobile phones leapt on it and ate it.

Dr Bing-Bang's dalliance with clothing leaned in interesting directions. Beneath the ancient one's regular pink top hat was a pair of the finest muslin dungarees. Its arms were encircled by bright green bands. These were but the surface of a sartorial tumult. The doctor had expanded several times larger than usual. Dr Bing-Bang's pathetic little hands were engulfed by several layers of fabric. It was not seen as good apparel for those intending to sing. Interestingly the combination of fabrics was seen as ideal to absorb external noises.

'Stop clacking.' The thought of enjoyment was a rarely considered notion at times. It seemed that jolly fun was illegal. There was an excessively polite tap on the door. When the door was opened a piece of celery was noticed. This seemed something of an anticlimax. Had the qualities of vigour and passion been reduced to the condition of cows with cardboard udders?

'I remember one time,' continued Dr Bing-Bang, 'when a *protoceratops* and I sat in a canoe in a murky pool of what was not quite water. At one point... No, the water was murky... At one cross-purpose... Who? Gladly... At one point we were surrounded by a menacing circle of rabbit ears... No—were rabbits invented then?' Bladderland listened patiently and did not exhibit signs of distress towards such conversational shenanigans. One day she would.

'Establish the foundations for a beautiful settlement.'

Quite what this statement referred to was a mystery. There was a possibility that it was an improperly digested saying from the future. For the sake of balance here is something from the past:

'After this period of weirdness, Mr Cough was relieved.'

And that was apparently that.

anabasis
Robin M. Eames

Robin M. Eames is a queercrip poet and historian living on Gadigal land. Their work has been published by *Cordite, Overland, Meanjin, and Deaf Poets Society*, among others.

In the hydrotherapy pool
sound echoes off the surface,
off the fogged-up windows, off the
slant of waterlight playing over ceiling.
I fall, and fall again,
and let the water catch me,
relearning muscles, relearning movement.
When my hip seizes
and sends me splashing to the side
I laugh, sputtering, and rest for a while.
Everyone here is much older than me.
Betty has dementia and tells me every time
she sees me that I am beautiful, to which I tell her
every time that she is beautiful, too.
Jim is quiet, a bit of a hippy, and has a huge tattoo
winging over his shoulders,
above the scars.
Gladys is finding her way back from a stroke
and she is always tired, but her ragged eyeliner
becomes neater every week.
Everyone is recovering
from something.

Choreography of Touch

Musée Rodin—Paris

Carolyn Abbs

Carolyn Abbs is a Western Australian poet. Her debut collection, *The Tiny Museums*, is published with UWA publishing, 2017.

I saw how they queued in twos
along the wall of the foyer—
nondescript clothes, plain hair
their faces animated, chatter lifting
as if tinkling in crystal chandeliers—
white canes poised
quivering with anticipation

They moved forward
orderly and processional
the gallery cleared for them
silent as a chapel
I saw how they dispersed soft-
shoed over wooden floor
white canes tap-tapping
probing for the edge of a plinth
arms out-stretched, to touch
the sculpture busts of clay

I saw joy on their faces—
how a hand settled light as a moth
on the shape of a head, spread
over the cool of clay, how they
studied texture, carved indentations—
skilled as sculptors, wise phrenologists
caring and gentle as mothers

How a hand cupped the shell of an ear
finger-tips exploring intricate detail
I saw how they caressed the slope
of a shoulder, like a lover—
gasped at an amputated arm
How fingers traced the arch
of a brow, a quiet choreography
down the delicate bridge of a nose

I saw them linger over an eyelid
the ridge of a fine cheek bone
as if feeling beneath skin, curve
of chin, the sensitivity of lips
I saw bliss on their faces
How their hearts danced—

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