

# ink

Self-Pub Magazine

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Emerging Writers

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by Jim Lemon  
Gerdette Rooney

## POEMS

by Sita Prem  
Anthony J Langford  
Mark Marusic

## Foreword

Welcome to ink. We have one aim: to give writers and artists the chance to publish their work. ink is a completely non-commercial, community venture. We hope you enjoy the works featured here, and please feel free to email us if you'd like more information about any of the authors. [selfpubaus@gmail.com](mailto:selfpubaus@gmail.com)

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## The Guilt Song

*by Jim Lemon*

I can hear the cuckoo from some distance. You have to sing your song loud and clear when your life depends upon it. Every parent will recognise its melody and cadence, because it's a variation on the theme of survival of the offspring. The repetitive phrases are subtly modified in search of the precise one that will lead to satisfaction of its demand. Gimmee jazz.

For some days the cuckoo has been chasing one of its adoptive parents around, whining to the much smaller magpie about how poorly it is being treated. Perhaps the magpie, a notoriously intelligent bird, has recognised its pretence for some time. Finally the auditory core of its brain can no longer override the clear vision of its cortex.

Too bad. cuckoo, you've muscled the little magpies out of the nest some time ago, their parents' hopes become food for whatever hungry animals waited below. The magpies have caught on to your game. Time to find your own worms and get yourself ready to give the glorious, stupid wheel of life another turn.

Your plaintive, give-me-one-more-chance cry would be but another voice in the polyphony of bird song if it didn't echo into my life so persistently. Individually you can be forgiven, for you are playing the game of nature. A lineage of winners, a dynasty of survivors, is all that matters. The losers are ground in the mill of life into the raw materials for future competitions. I wish I could look into the hard eye of the magpie and ask if it ever dreamed of escaping this gladiatorial circus. Wonderful for honing the weapons and tactics for the next battle.

The unfulfilled promise of that quavering plea is repeated all around me. All those messages trying to stick some irresistible emotive command deep in my brain. An unavoidable consequence of those commands convincing us to do uninspiring but necessary tasks like raising our young.

The reward comes when it lives up to its promise.

The cuckoo's guilt song has sensitised me to other versions of this tune. Not only the ones that try to burrow into the depths of ethnic existential fear, but those that masquerade as



**The Guilt Song (cont'd)**

less visceral longings. The ones that promote those nebulous, high-level concepts like fairness and justice while insisting that their outcomes need not be evaluated. The common theme is that they should not be critically examined, for their aspirations are so much more important than their effectiveness.

At this point, the 'you can't ignore me' complaint of the cuckoo comes to my rescue. That request for assistance is wrapped in a false promise. The cuckoo will never grow up to be a magpie, just another cuckoo. I noted that magpies are intelligent birds, and they can occasionally see through the cuckoo's promise. The more they do so, the greater the selection pressure upon cuckoos to evolve away from brood parasitism. No guarantees, for nature is an uncaring mother.

The cuckoo's guilt song also reminds me that I have not always refused things that I didn't deserve. I thank it for bringing those lapses to mind so that I can avoid them when good intentions try to seduce me into unthinking support for promises that are unlikely to be fulfilled. I hope that the magpies appreciate this.

**Why do you write?**

I want to earn millions  
And have fans and fame  
I'd rather have cash  
Than the critics' acclaim

I don't need to win  
Some big literary award  
So long as my readers  
Have fun and aren't bored

I write for enjoyment  
Not anguish and pain  
I write to make sad people  
Joyful again

Given the choice  
Between tears and laughter  
My characters will live  
Happy ever after

*by Anon*

**Personal story**

On a crazy whim  
We decided to get married  
It was over twenty years ago  
And we had few friends  
We did it  
In a field  
Amongst the long grasses  
With the soft rain  
And shifting images of smiles and beauty  
Whether it actually happened that way  
Is no longer important  
As I am unable to distinguish memory  
From fact  
But that's how I like to  
Remember it.

She's gone now  
And I'm on my way out  
And whether anyone  
Remembers our story  
Or cares enough to find out the truth  
Is not up to me  
But my days are fading  
With the best behind me.

I suspect  
Our beautiful  
And dramatic tale  
Will soon disappear  
Lost to that great removalist,  
Time  
As others continue on their own way.

Only the self  
In the Now  
Seems to matter.

*by Anthony J Langford*

## Ebb Tide

by Ross Venner

The tide runs viciously through the narrow entrance of Portsmouth Harbour. It will reach 6 knots on spring tides, and with an easterly wind... Well it's upset the plans of a few distinguished naval figures and ruined the career of one or two. There was just such a tide as I stood there by the old Still and West, a pub that's seen much coming and going over hundreds of years.

The lights coming down from the darkening harbour were an odd lot, frankly I couldn't work out the shapes as they approached, so in curiosity I wondered the few yards down to Bath Square where I would get a better view. As I went, I turned my collar up against the breeze and the salt tang of the little waves breaking their spray over the old, rounded stones. A blocky figure in a duffle coat was the only other living being in view. He was leaning on the rail, staring silently across the narrow harbour entrance.

The shapes emerged past the buildings quick enough with the ebb tide hurrying them on. Round the corner of the buildings they appeared and I could see that the formation now, one of the smaller harbour tugs with an old Ton class minesweeper; you remember them, I'm sure, lashed on each side. Bound for the scrapyard no doubt. Victims of obsolescence or defence cuts. I watched for a moment as the tug pulled the two dark shapes down through the narrows. The horse pulling the tumbril of the condemned. Why should I care? Who would?

Well the shape in the duffle coat cared. He straightened up as they passed him and came to something that perhaps passed for attention. His right hand went to his mouth and the shrill squeal of a bosun's pipe scared the twilight. The hand went down again for a moment and came back up in salute. The figure was not quite still, though. Even from a distance, I could now see the sobs wracking the solid frame.

The sad little procession was passed in less than a minute. The hand came down from the salute, but he stood there, suddenly, silently, forlorn.

Behind me I heard heavy footsteps on the cobbles, and a voice called, "That you John?"

The figure didn't move but the steps came closer and two dark shapes emerged from the shadows and stood a few paces from the first. I was ashamed to intrude on this very palpable grief, yet curiosity drew me a pace or two forward and I listened.

"She was a good'un mate." Said one of the new arrivals.

There was an audible sigh, then duffle coat said wearily, "Yeh, thanks for coming down, Dave,"

It seemed as if he would say no more but after perhaps a minute, he added, "You know I married Mary when we commissioned her?"

"Yes," there was warmth in Dave's voice now, "I remember it well, she looked gorgeous."

"So did the ship," said the second arrival.

"You know I buried her last week? Cancer."

Duffle coat turned, the others fell in beside him and three figures and walked side by side, into the darkness of one of the narrow lanes.

The sleet intensified and I stood looking across the narrows, alone...



*Fishermen at Sea (1796) – J M W Turner*

# ink

## Poppy's Perfect Present

by Julie Howard

TO: [poopydoodle@gmail.com](mailto:poopydoodle@gmail.com)

CC:

SUBJECT: Thank you

My Dear Poppy

Thank you for your thoughtful Christmas present. An iPad! How wonderful! At first, I didn't know what to do with it, but then I had an idea to take it along to my WEA class. A lovely gentleman, Herbert, kindly set it up for me.

I so miss you, but I am happy that you have met Luca and life in Italy is going well, although I do worry about COVID. Do stay safe my darling.

Love from your proud Nonna

TO: [poopydoodle@gmail.com](mailto:poopydoodle@gmail.com)

CC:

SUBJECT: Photos

My Dear Poppy

I was so excited to get your photos and instructions how to use Facebook. I did get a bit flustered and somehow the photos disappeared, but Herbert was able to come around for tea and he fixed it up for me. He also fixed up the leaking garden tap, so my tomatoes will get a drink. A lovely man.

I thought your boyfriend's name was Luca but perhaps I got it wrong. So please give my love to Antonio.

Your loving Nonna

TO: [poopydoodle@gmail.com](mailto:poopydoodle@gmail.com)

CC:

SUBJECT: I've been barred from Facebook

My dear Poppy

Oh my dear, what a time I have had. When I set up Facebook, I worried about security. You hear such terrible things, don't you? When it asked me how old I was I thought it was none of their business and put 0 years. It immediately shut me out, telling me I wasn't old enough to use facebook.

I didn't know what to do. I was upset because I love seeing your photos and getting your messages. Luckily, Herbert was able to come over and help out. He stayed for dinner and I sent him off with some lovely tomato salsa. After all he did rescue my tomatoes.

Roberto certainly is a handsome chap. Is he one of the Russo family? I think I knew a Ricardo Russo in my youth.

With love your Nonna

TO: [poopydoodle@gmail.com](mailto:poopydoodle@gmail.com)

CC:

SUBJECT: Oh what a Christmas present

My Dear Poppy

I know it is a bit sudden and you might be surprised but I have some Christmas news. Herbert and I are getting married. I love how you keep in touch with me through Facebook, but since Nonno passed life has been a bit lonely – and after all there's is nothing like a man tucking in his napkin and relishing his minestrone soup.

I hope you and Enzo are happy and that you will enjoy the Christmas festivities.

With love your Nanna



## Antarctic Odyssey

by Gerdette Rooney

*Excerpt from the Antarctic story 'The Beyonders' from the travel book Womadic Wanderers – stories of a compulsive traveller, with some of the author's wildlife photos.*



*King Haakon Bay 5 am 13 November 2006*

We came into view of South Georgia, a crescent-shaped island with a ridge of snow-capped peaks barely visible below the clouds. The deck was bustling with activity as the traverse team made final preparations. I peered up at the low dark sky, wondering how it would have been for Shackleton and his men sighting the same land under very different circumstances. They would have been soaked to the bone in clothes they'd worn for seven months — hands frostbitten, bloodied, and grimy from eating seal and penguin meat. Worn out after their incredible 16-day, 800-mile crossing from Elephant Island, they had no idea what lay ahead. The lives of many men depended on them reaching Stromness whaling station successfully.

Here was I, snug and warm in my layers of polar fleeces, down jacket, socked and gloved to the hilt. Giant petrels and cormorants dive-bombed for breakfast next to the ship, and the screeches of skuas filled the air. There was great joy on spotting our first wandering albatross gliding elegantly in the air currents as if performing for us.

'Is this for real?' I asked myself, remembering the Rime of the Ancient Mariner from school

days; where the albatross followed the ship for days only to get shot in the end. 'Soar away safely, my friend!' I yelled into the wind. Onboard, we'd all caught the addictive 'Antarctic fever', inundated with lectures on krill and phytoplankton, katabatic winds and converging currents, fragile lichen beds, and the facial characteristics of every penguin known to humanity. In other words, we were all fit contestants for the grand final of Mastermind with 'polar regions' being the topic.

At 9.30 am we said emotional farewells with the team who'd spent their days onboard practising crevasse rescue, ropework and erecting tents while the rest of us watched on or relaxed. As they disembarked, their hooded faces were a mix of apprehension, exuberance and relief that the moment had come. Our two Norwegian scouts, Rolf and Bjorn, had gone ahead to check out the ground conditions on the first ascent to Shackleton's Gap and give the okay to the others.

Gale force eight winds were blowing, and it looked unlikely that the rest of us could land, but suddenly the direction changed, and a roar of 'Yahoo!' went up with the great news that we could go ashore for a short time.

It was our first Zodiac landing, but we'd been drilled expertly in Ireland, and it went without mishap. I trained my binoculars on the stony shore where our trusty ship's crew were wielding thick sticks to ward off the giant elephant seals that were lazing on the beach. It was the breeding season when the bulls get aggressive and can often prevent landings. In our briefing, we were warned that their bites are vicious and if attacked, advised not to run but to poke them in the whiskers with our walking poles!



**Antarctic Odyssey (cont'd)**

On landing, we skirted around the snarling monsters, and gazed immediately up at the snowy slopes leading to Trident Tower on the ridge, to watch our comrades snaking slowly upwards, in small groups, towing sledges. Everyone mentally wished them well and then concentrated on the wildlife circus at our feet.

Elephant seals have to be amongst the ugliest of creatures with their astonishing proboscis and massive slug-like bodies. Several bulls were bloody-faced from fighting and many sported battle gashes on their bodies. They guarded their harems carefully and roared at our approach. I didn't blame them; perhaps we evoked memories of the mass slaughter of their ancestors that nearly rendered them extinct in the 1930s. In those days, their oil was much in demand and blended with whale oil to make an inferior, more economical mix. Early explorers ate the raw meat which is rich in iron and vitamin C and prevents scurvy. It might be considered the 'steak' of the day

King Haakon Bay was a bleak and lonesome spot, the pebbled beach giving way to scraggy tuft grass with beds of moss and lichen we were warned not to walk on. A little band of king penguins marched determinedly along the foreshore, as if on a critical mission, and ignored us completely.

A few of us wandered to the north end of the bay where Shackleton and his men landed at Peggotty Bluff, and lay on the stony ground, silently contemplating past and present under an icy sky. The Boss was renowned for his leadership skills and mingling with his men, perhaps a product of his Quaker upbringing, and I imagined him keeping his little band positive and optimistic. It was this spot where they made a temporary home under the upturned boat, the James Caird. I, on the other hand, found it comforting to see our ship peacefully anchored in the bay and know that I was returning to a warm cabin.

Our second landing of the day was at Salisbury Plain on the Bay of Isles, a rookery home to thousands of Emperor Penguins, dress-suited as if waiting for a concert to commence, huddled in gossiping groups making quite a racket. The smell was atrocious again, and I pinched my scarf to my nose in the wind. However, the beauty of the adult birds compensated for the stink — the egg yolk splash on their white breasts and earpads was so vibrant. The plain was awash mostly with brown, furry babies and several approached us curiously, sniffing at our boots, trying to fathom the strangers in their midst. Near me, a fur seal family rested, and a baby took a shine to me, waddled towards me and began suckling my knee! It was a shock, but I burst out laughing at the cute creature.



### Mixed Use Zone

An infill pair of terraces,  
 rezoned from light industrial,  
 they don't yet have a history  
 like surrounding older homes,  
 but stories are developing  
 in the curiosity of passersby;  
 in the front room at a desktop  
 a 20s something woman,  
 in the next door house the very same!  
 they're even sitting opposite each  
 other!  
 not that they would know -  
 a wall stands in between;  
 could one or both of them  
 be at work or study?  
 perhaps a bit of both,  
 plus a host of other purposes.

In this age of Covid,  
 home and work and study  
 are co-locating ever more,  
 a passerby would find it hard to tell -  
 paper-form materials  
 are nearly absent on these desks,  
 the computer's only company  
 some photographs in frames,  
 a cup of tea or coffee,  
 a glass of water  
 and a potted plant or two.

In many offices  
 of businesses and governments,  
 likewise light the paperload,  
 if it's not on screen it can't be seen,  
 the only clue to what such places do  
 is on the signs and logos  
 stuck on walls and pillars;  
 at least such surfaces  
 in our homes aren't plastered  
 with these reminders of our work!

*by Mark Marusic*

### Creative Zone

Art through the streets of industry,  
 both the new bespoke  
 and remaining 1900s workings,  
 buildings get repurposed  
 as older operations cease,  
 studios emerging past two decades  
 for painting, drawing, sculpting,  
 clothes design and sewing,  
 cutting, shaping wood,  
 jewellery design and making,  
 bakeries and breweries  
 have found a home here,  
 ditto gin distilleries,  
 coffee roasters,  
 small bars and cafes,  
 music venues, galleries,  
 creativity, epicurean,  
 and the nitty gritty  
 of life's more ordinary stuff,  
 intermingling  
 in a grimy  
 interurban milieu,  
 organically evolving  
 in existing buildings,  
 no need for knock down and rebuild.

So which way for suchlike places?  
 stay creative and productive,  
 or turn to Mirvac, Meriton?  
 "village of apartment blocks"  
 conceived by corporates,  
 lifestyles curated to a template,  
 same for anywhere in Sydney,  
 or just about around the world  
 character of place - so hard to save,  
 when property developers,  
 aided by their mates in power,  
 eye this off as merely real estate,  
 "far from full potentialising"  
 they tout this only can be realised  
 by dint of their designs!

*by Mark Marusic*



## Cheaters

by José Nodar

‘You know, sweetheart, she cheats! How is it she wins so often and besides, I saw her cheating! Yes, with my own eyes I saw her sleight of hand, cheating her way to a win!’

‘Are you sure, William? You could be mistaken. You know how your eyes are these days with cataracts. I just wish you get off the waiting list and onto the surgery table, so then you’ll stop making mistakes and seeing things not there.’

‘Darn it Michelle, I tell you she was cheating, and I saw her. A bit of dexterity for such a young girl, but yes, it was not a mistake. She was cheating!’

‘OK, now let’s simmer down a bit and tell me, slowly and with as much detail, what you think you saw.’

‘What I think I saw? I do not think I know. I saw what I saw. A little cheater plotting at every game, scheming would be a better word, in order to win at each round.’

‘Yes, you said that several times but you have not explained what you saw, darling, so take a deep breath and tell me what you saw.’

I took a deep breath as she suggested and calmed down a bit. I could sense a serenity coming over me, which would help me clearly describe this deceitful act perpetrated by this artful dodger. So, I detailed with as much fact as possible to my wife so she can see that I caught the little deceiver in the act.

‘At each end of each game whether she wins or loses, it does not matter, the little scoundrel turns over the dominoes so they can be shuffle and I thought little about it but after four wins in a row I thought I better inspect the shuffling of the dominoes and that is when I saw the deceiving manoeuvre she pulled every time.’

‘Now darling, that does not sound like cheating. You are supposed to turn over all the dominoes, shuffle them and then you get your seven pieces and start the next game. I see nothing that makes up cheating. I am surprised by your allegations.’

‘Yes, you are correct. The process at the end of each game is to turn the dominoes over, shuffle them and then select seven new dominos to play with at the next game, but that is not how she cheats!’

‘Well, William. tell me how does she cheat, then?’

‘Very cleaver that little one she is. When she turns over the dominoes, she quickly selects all the doubles, you know, the double sixes, the double fives, etc. and then a few strategically selected dominoes of the same number of the doubles she picked and she wins each time. Clever little devil.’



‘Darling, you know that all these offensive words you have used cheater, schemer, scoundrel, little devil — those words you are using are to describe our granddaughter. Our sweet little granddaughter that just celebrated her sixth birthday. ‘We gave the domino set to her for her birthday.’

‘I do Michelle and I will finish this conversation by again saying she cheats and we need to tell our daughter as soon as possible.’

‘And what do you want our daughter to do about it?’

‘I do not know. You are her mother. You think of something and tell her to fix it.’

‘Fix it? Our granddaughter is not broken. She is creative, I would say.’

‘Creative you say? Of course, you would say that. I never saw you cheat at Uno on the many occasions when we played, so which side of the family does she get it from? His side? Right?’

**Cheaters (cont'd)**

‘You know darling, if I did not know you, I would say you are impressed with our granddaughter and not offended that she has, let’s say, a quick hand that she inherited from us. Am I right? And no, she does not get it from his side of the family either and, how do you know I do not cheat in Uno? Maybe you have never caught me!’

Seeing her smile, I think for a moment about what my wife just pointed out. Am I impressed? Am I offended? Or am I disappointed that our granddaughter learned this sleight of hand all by herself and never asked us on how to do it?

‘You know, sweetheart, you are correct. Our granddaughter is not a cheater or a schemer or any of those words I used to describe her. Let’s say that she is a magician that knows the power of the sleight of hand and uses said power to win and never acquired the talent from any side of the family. His family or our family. Agree?’

‘Agree. Beautifully put, by the way. How about a game of Monopoly? Are you up to it?’

‘Sure, as long as we don’t invite Andrea.’



**Compost Bin**

Living, fertile and organic,  
 the compost from my backyard bin,  
 among the many things that made it -  
 financial documents  
 long no longer needed,  
 torn to pieces, just like most folk do  
 before depositing in council bins,  
 no passersby would pry  
 inside my compost bin,  
 it's not out on the street,  
 but still decomposition  
 hastened when the contents  
 torn to bits before,  
 just like orange, mango,  
 avocado, watermelon peels;  
 so some stuff the brain has dealt with  
 ends up just the same as stuff  
 that's been treated by the stomach.  
 And the substance that this dark,  
 damp bin makes  
 will be growing herbs and veggies,  
 so it could be said that I'll be eating  
 what once were words,  
 and some of these were written by  
 the hands  
 that has composed this poem.

*by Mark Marusic*



**Night Silhouette**

A pale moon high above  
 A twisted twig on a branch  
 Beckons  
 Like a witch's finger

*by Anon*



**Fight or Flight**

How to handle difficulty

Fight or Flight

To fight

It may be bleeding or losing Or can be a happy ending

Or the death father is waiting

To flight

It may be falling or breaking Or can be an easy journey

Or the storm is coming

The difficulty is full of responsibility

It is made for whom can change a history

*by Sita Prem*

**In Love**

Beginning

Trust seems so easy

Betrayal seems so far

Happy seems all-lasting

Pain seems never-existing

Then

Everyone wants to receive

No one cares how to give

Ending

Trust seems so far

Betrayal seems so easy

Happy seems never-existing

Pain seems all-lasting

Fall in love has a very deep meaning

A fool in love is a different thing

*by Sita Prem*



**Pure**

Pure is complete

Pure does not mean empty

A clear colour contains everything

Pure is simple

To love your joy as well as your sorrow

It looks like the sky

Allow the sunlight to burn and the moonlight to shine

*by Sita Prem*

## El Torerillo

by Conchita GarSantiago

The Spain of the sixties and seventies was a significantly different Spain from the one we have today.

With an unsophisticated mentality, people didn't have business in their minds and they acted more with the influence of their hearts. In such ways, it was quite common in Spain that transient circuses would perform in unostentatious places.

The area where I lived was a suburb built with lots of blocks of humble flats. A place that was still developing. Behind our block of flats, there was an immense cavity in which trucks full of trash that had been collected from all over the city unloaded.

One day, some people connected with one of these circuses arrived in our neighbourhood and looking at that cavity, they thought that it could make a good amphitheatre. So, out of timber, they set up a stage with a huge red curtain for the performers to come in and out of.

As soon as word got out, people prepared themselves to have a seat of honour in the "arena". Everybody looked for something strong and flat to put under their behinds, so they wouldn't be touching the rubbish.

Funnily enough, almost everyone had an old door that had been replaced. But nobody chucked the old ones away. Probably kept them under their beds.

As the time was approaching, you could see a procession of people carrying a door, as if it were a sort of penitence for an Easter procession.



*El Cid Campeador lanceando otro toro (1816) by Goya*

The function started and with a lot of colour and animated introductions, trapeze artists did their nimbleness and we all oohed and ahhhed in wonder in chorus.

When our rears were getting numb from sitting there so long, the clowns came out. After they did a few wisecracks of their own, they asked for a young volunteer to act with them.

My brother, Toño, six years old at that moment, was happily sitting on the door, without saying a word or making himself noticeable. Mum said: "Come on, go." He didn't move.

Suddenly, everyone around him was pushing him to go. "Come on, Toño go!"

"*Venga vete!*" so finally, with not much enthusiasm, he decided to please everyone.

Out of the hundreds of kids that went there wanting to be a star for the evening, my brother, who couldn't be more apathetic, was the one chosen.

They gave him two *banderillas*, (a decorated dart thrust that bullfighters put in the bull during a bullfight) one *banderilla* in each hand, lifting them as high as he could and they knelt him in front of the huge red curtain.

He was in that position for a few seconds until the curtain went up and a huge bull appeared. (Obviously there were two men inside). My brother, seeing the beast heading his way, threw away the *banderillas* and ran as fast as he could, like a headless chicken, going here and there.

The spectators were literally rolling on their doors in laughter, as my poor brother was "running for his life."

Mum asked my big brother to go to his rescue and when the two of them came back, my mother got him in her lap and said: "You silly. Didn't you see that it was a fake bull?"

To which my brother answered, very sure of himself: "Yeah yeah, but the horns were very real."

Despite his unwanted performance, he had his fame for the few following months and wherever he went, they would say: There goes "el torerillo" (little bullfighter).



*Durbar Square, Nepal*

### Her Decree

Take your preconceptions  
 Your unreachable benchmarks  
 Your bronzed idol  
 Your unfathomable  
 Paths of glory  
 And pave your own way  
 To disappointment.

I won't carry the cross  
 Of your fantasy  
 Cat o nine tails expectations  
 Flogging flesh  
 For ritualistic cat and mouse  
 games  
 Leading to your impenetrable wall.

I'll retreat  
 In apparent shame  
 Forgoing the attempt  
 Yet with a degree of integrity intact  
 Having not been subjected  
 To flimsy fickle whims  
 Of your ultimate undoing  
 Unlike those poor souls who  
 Gave it a  
*Red hot go.*

*by Anthony J Langford*

### Our Great Lives

The Greatest Part of Our Lives  
 Are Told  
 Not Lived  
 Remembered  
 Fragmented  
 Rearranged  
 In chunks  
 To suit  
 A need  
 A necessary one  
 To give meaning  
 Where there was little  
 To create purpose  
 To carve form  
 From plaster  
 To form poetry  
 From discarded paragraphs  
 And streamlined sentences.

Giving substance  
 To the past  
 Keeps us  
 Moving forward  
 Or at least  
 Gives us slight comfort  
 In the diminishing light.

*by Anthony J Langford*



*Photo by zenad nabil*

## Digital Air

by Anna Ceguerra

*Kutti, 2125*

Claire doubled over in pain, clutching her head. She never got used to that familiar feeling. Once the wave passed, she straightened her muscular body and continued trudging up the steep steps to one of the few places, in this thriving city of Eora, where she could find peace.

The fifth step from the top. She only needed to make it that far, then the cacophany of the Digital Air will stop. She counted backwards before reaching her goal. Then, silence from the relentless push of data by her transceiver buried in her shoulder. She and her colleagues joked all the time about the location of the chip.

Although she loved her job in information law enforcement, or ILE, there were disadvantages. They all loved the limitless information. They all hated the inevitable pain from information overload on their limited brains.

She kept walking to her normal place at the top of the cliff. The violence below was at odds with the soothing sound it made. She looked out to the endless sea, green today, and focused on her breathing. She just needed to get away from it all, even just for a little while.



After about an hour, she was ready to go back into the Digital Air. She turned slowly, only to face the barrel of a gun. She was startled at first,

then slowly put her hands up in the air. She smelled the scent of a man who hadn't washed in years, muted by the outdoors.

"I'm Rupert, nice to meet you. Please come with me," he said in a deep voice, motioning with the gun. He was exceedingly polite for someone with a gun, which she suspected was fake because the safety was fused, Claire thought fleetingly. She nodded, walked in front of him, and he followed.

When they reached back to the sixth step from the top, she suddenly crouched down, hands buried in her curly grey hair, stretching her forehead. She felt Rupert's slight presence close by until the episode passed. When her body relaxed, Rupert poked the fake gun into her back and encouraged her to keep going. Claire stood up and continued walking.

"Where are we going?" Claire asked him, still dizzy from the wave of pain earlier.

"Ummm... Cronulla?" he said, uncertain.

Claire calculated her words. He seemed to be using a strange pronunciation of Kurunulla.

"That's quite far. It's over an hour by public transport. May I suggest we go to my place, I only live a few blocks away."

She could imagine the cogs turning in his mind. If things went her way, she would have the tactical advantage to overpower him. She didn't know what else to say to sway him, so she kept silent as they continued walking.

Claire opened the door to her home. She had only lived there for a couple of years, but she could see the difference from her old home in Burramatta.

For one thing, the long-standing residents still called the suburb Watson's Bay, even though it had been formally recognised as Kutti again in The Second Great Renaming.

She had a choice when she was asked to move here to cover the Digital Air in this area. It seemed like a fair challenge. The last ILE officer that lived there was over thirty years ago.

Claire looked back. "Come in, Rupert," she said kindly, hoping to lull him into a false sense of security.

**Digital Air (cont'd)**

He stepped inside, scanning the modest surroundings before settling his eyes on the armchair in the next room. "Please, take a seat," he gestured again with his definitely fake gun.

Claire turned around, ready to place him into a headlock, only to lurch in pain again. She was unconscious by the time she crumpled to the floor.

*Respite*

Claire awoke in her bed. This was the most restful sleep she'd had in years. She went through her morning stretches before getting out of bed, ready to face the Digital Air. Only... there was nothing.

Thoughts raced through her mind as she ran the diagnostics. The hardware seemed fine. There seemed to be a malware installed on her chip, limiting the amount of data reaching her brain.

Then she remembered. Rupert. How long had she been out for? She pulled the bed covers off her, to find she was still wearing yesterday's clothes. She opened the door and rushed down the short hallway. Rupert was asleep in her armchair. She went up to him and shook his shoulder.

"Mummy?" he said, groggily.

"This isn't your house, Rupert. What did you do to me?" Claire demanded.

"Oh. I installed a filter with a switch. It's defaulted to 'off'. You just have to think with force to switch it on."

Claire tentatively followed his instructions, and the data swamped her mind. She squeezed the side of her head with her palms. "How do I switch it off!" she yelled.

"Same thing," Rupert said. Claire screamed in her mind then counted to ten, before lowering her arms.

"OK, you still haven't answered my question. What did you do to me?"

*ILE*

In the gathering dusk, Rupert completed his story of how he got here. He used to be an ILE officer as well, the same as Claire.

When the pain from information overload got too much for him, he started making deals with the hackers he caught to try to find a cure. The unit found out, his superiors thought he went rogue and tried to arrest him, but it was too late.

Rupert went into the massive dead zone in the outback with a group of hackers and disappeared from the tracers. Over the years, he developed the software to place on the chip on the shoulder.

"OK... but why me?" Claire asked.

"I've been watching your team. You seemed to be getting it worse than everyone else. Almost as bad as me. Did you notice that teams are all the same graduation age, and are all retired at the same time?"

Claire nodded.

"That's because of the pain. You blacked out yesterday. The pain would have only gotten worse until I intervened." He nodded, then changed the subject. "Here, let me show you how to use the filter."

Rupert taught her the commands to think with force. They were intuitive, but Claire noted them in her notetaking app in the chip anyway.

"Now that I've shown you how useful it is, there's something I want from you" Rupert cautiously said.

Claire readied herself. "Go on..."

He took a deep breath, then his words came out in a rush. "I want to go back to the ILE unit. I want to show them what I've learnt and that we don't have to live in pain from the Digital Air. I want to make Eora the place where people relax despite the Digital Air around us. To do this, I need to be reinstated as an officer."

Claire had to think of it at length. The circumstances under which he left were tricky. And who knows how long he'd been AWOL for. But then again, he had so much to offer. Rupert watched her as she weighed it all up. "OK, I'll ask." Then she crinkled her nose and said in a deadpan tone. "On one condition. You have to take a shower first."

## True Drug, True Story

by Garth Thomas

The bedroom door is closed. I know she's in there, but I don't hear her. I press my ear to the lacquered wood and listen; all I can make out is muted traffic from the highway. I detect a slight movement inside. A creak. Everyone has secrets, Dad tells me, and I can't expect to know everything, but I reckon he knows the answer to this mystery. Whenever I come to visit for the weekend, Nanna abandons me several times a day. She never divulges the reason and neither does Dad; there is some pact of secrecy between them. I know I can't go in because I heard the lock click after she shut the door ... well, I think I did. I shuffle back to the kitchen and wait. What is she doing in there?

We've been playing Monopoly, and I'm on a winning streak. I always seem to win at Nanna's; at home with Mum, Dad and my sister it's a different story. Nanna is a good sport about not winning and is resigned to it with cheerful acceptance. I hate losing and avoid it at all costs—all kids are the same.

Even by my rigorous standards, Nanna is cool. Nanna is cool because she saw Queen Victoria's funeral cortege in 1901 as a little girl. Nanna is cool because she was selected for the first intake of policewomen in London during World War One. Nanna is cool because she emigrated to Australia, alone, in the 1920s to start afresh. Nanna is also cool because of the pizzas she bakes, though they're different from the Pizza Hut variety. Her pizzas are really pies filled with sausages and gravy ... but for this nine-year-old grandson, nothing tastes so magical. Almost fifty years on, I still miss the flavour.

The kitchen is mostly painted wood; all white with glass doors displaying ancient cooking utensils; some appear to be medieval torture instruments. I study the prehistoric fridge—cracked and chipped—it replaced the old ice chest, now defunct and stored in the backyard shed. Nanna explained to me about the ice chest: a man would deliver a block of ice, every few days, to keep the cabinet chilled.

Technology has since moved on, she says, as all things must ... including human beings. Her sentiment haunts me—I know she's dwelling on the loss of her late husband and her own inevitable demise—but at my young age, the terror of my own mortality still hasn't registered. Time. Experience. Knowledge. What an amazing life she's had, whereas I've done so little. She's cool and wise. She's cooler and wiser than Mum and Dad.

And I wait; she's taking longer than normal.

I know most of Nanna's life story. Once she arrived in Australia, she got work as a housemaid on a big farm and married a shearer's cook. Dad tells me his father liked to drink a lot. Even at my early age, Dad has cautioned me about alcohol, how it's "a good friend, but a bad enemy". My grandfather was sober most of the time, but would sometimes disappear on a drinking binge and go missing for days. He would always return home after he ran out of money. Nanna would forgive him—it's what some women had to put up with in those days. We don't know why Grandfather was an alcoholic; it could have been his impoverished upbringing or running away to sea at fourteen. We do know that Grandfather served at Gallipoli and was wounded; he had to wear a truss for the remainder of his life. He died before I was born. He died in the very room where Nanna is in now.

I wander back to the bedroom door and stare at the white doorknob. The doorknob is testimony to another epoch, the handle sculpted like a large cut diamond. Nanna has proudly told me this house was built during The Great Depression of the 1930s. Construction was so rare that people would travel miles to see it being built. I find that hard to believe, but it's a nice story.

I think I hear more movement inside the bedroom, but I can't be sure. My fingers rest on the handle, and I feel it vibrate as I hear a large truck roar pass outside. The doorknob feels loose in my grasp. I rest my ear against the door, and wish I possessed x-ray vision.

I can feel my heart racing as my hand tests the doorknob; I'm able to twist the handle. I take in



**True Drug, True Story (cont'd)**

a deep breath. My grandfather died in this room. Dad told me that after Grandfather died, Nanna became truly independent. She's happy in her own company; she reads a lot of books, listens to the radio and enjoys television. She still has the same HMV television set from the early 1960s. Her exercise is shopping. The walk to the shops takes close to an hour, but she doesn't complain—the activity keeps her trim. She's a familiar sight around the area, pulling a cloth trolley behind her. She's never driven a car; women of her era usually left the driving to the men.

I continue to turn the handle. It's unlocked! The door eases open into the room. I'm startled by a cloud of vapour that appears to be enveloping Nanna. I observe her silhouette through the devouring haze, and I know I've discovered something forbidden: The Family Secret. The room reeks of cigarette smoke and the acrid smell seers my nasal passages; I know Dad opposes smoking and often gets bronchitis from others puffing away on public transport. So the mystery is solved: Nanna smokes.

She coughs, and croaks: "What are you doing in here?"

"Just seeing if you're okay ... "

Her face transforms into a scowl. "Get out!"

I jump back into the hall, slamming the door. When she comes out, a few minutes later, none of us mention what's happened. It's back to the certainty of me winning at Monopoly.

About a year later, Mum, Dad, my sister and I rush to the hospital. I witness Nanna in bed with an oxygen mask, and I instantly burst into tears. She is so withered and vulnerable in this alien environment. Her face is drawn as the green mask digs into her hollow cheeks. Her breathing is laboured; her forehead, lined in pain. I've never seen this kind of suffering before. On this day, mortality becomes a horrifying truth that I can never unlearn.

"Don't you worry," she rasps with a brave smile. "This one I'm going to win."

Nanna is upset by my crying and begs Dad to buy my sister and myself some toys to cheer us up. Her gnarled hands claw money from a worn purse. Getting a new Dinky toy is great—it's a spaceship—but I also feel I've lost something as well ... and I hate losing.

Nanna spends some time in hospital and then goes back to her house. She isn't quite the same after that, but she says she doesn't need to live in a nursing home. One day in 1975, my teacher tells me to go home and see my mum. Mum has a neighbour with her, drinking a cup of tea. Mum tells me Nanna has died. A doctor had come over to Nanna's and found the front door open. He found her in the bedroom lying on the mattress. She had died in the same room as Grandfather a couple of decades earlier. Cigarettes lay on the bedside table.

"Cigarettes shortened her life," Dad laments. "She knew what she was doing was bad for her, but she was hooked. Nicotine is a true drug. She didn't want you to see her smoking; she didn't want you to smoke."

From then on, Dad becomes virulent in his condemnation of smoking, subscribing to the Clean Air Clarion newsletter and supporting the anti-smoking movement. He always has a chuckle when he spots a vandalised billboard advertising cigarettes. Smoking has taken

Nanna from us when she should have had a few more years—and every minute of life is precious. In time, my sadness is joined by anger and then fear. Cigarettes have made mortality real.

Smoking has had many legal restrictions placed on it in Australia since then: it's been banned from television advertising, banned in trains and buses and banned in restaurants. But the addiction is still out there, young people are still taking it up, and the government is still collecting taxes from it. Nicotine is a true drug, as addictive as heroin, and responsible for killing millions of people. And this is a true story told with a sadness unaffected by the passing years. If only a smoker could read this, learn from it, and kick their habit, then Nanna's legacy can live on into the 21st Century.

## Interview: Helen Lyne, Poet

### Tell us about yourself

For almost forty years, I taught French and English at secondary and tertiary levels in Melbourne, Sydney, the prairie city of Winnipeg and the Champagne city of Reims. What an endless source of inspiration for fiction! Current work as a movie and television extra often gives me food for more drama than the actual scenes being filmed.

I write satirical and self-send-up poetry. Sometimes my keyboard is commandeered by a member of an endangered species, such as a platypus, a black-throated finch and, on one occasion, a fly. I present their and my poems at open mic venues such as the Au Chat Noir café in Paris, the Glebe Hotel in Sydney and at events such as the AGM of the 'Spill the Beans' Writing Community.

I live on Sydney's Northern Beaches with Caterina, my fantasy cat who ghost-writes my more controversial poems. See my website: [www.helenlyne.com.au](http://www.helenlyne.com.au)

### How did you start writing?

What does a teacher do in the last lesson of the year? Exams are over, Reports have been written. Holidays are about to begin. Students are in no mood to listen to any teacher. Well, this teacher used to write a poem that devoted one highly descriptive stanza to each student in the class. They listened!

### What are your biggest writing challenges?

Getting my two novels published.

### What are the best things that happened in relation to your writing?

Winning prizes in short story competitions and having a volume of short stories and a chapbook of poems published.

### What is your top advice for other writers?

Join a writers' group and listen to their advice. You might not always follow it, but it will be helpful one way or another. I love being a member of 'Spill the Beans'!



### Courage

If a croc flops in my swimming pool  
I'm always pleased to share.  
If a redback lurks beneath my bed  
I gladly leave him there.  
If a Tassie devil bites my bum  
I retaliate with flair.  
When a mouse runs through my kitchen  
I don't jump on a chair.

If a black snake eyes my picnic lunch  
I let him have a bite.  
If a shark swims near my surfboard  
I expect he's great and white.  
If a barman says I can't have more  
he's taking on a fight.  
If the taxman says I must pay more  
I say he's full of shite.

If a conman tries to charm me  
his smiling face I'll slash  
with techniques that I've borrowed  
from my good friend Madame Lash.  
If my bank increases charges  
I'll take out all my cash  
and beside the lurking redback  
my fortune I will stash.

My intrepidness in danger  
is not an idle boast  
but my courage flags and fails me  
when I meet your average ghost.

*By Helen Lyne*

Featured Writers



Anna Ceguerra lives in Sydney, Australia with her beloved dog, Patchy. Having spent many years building a career in science and software development, she loves weaving futuristic themes into unique and exciting stories.  
[annaceguerra.com](http://annaceguerra.com)



Conchita GarSantiago is a Sydney-based writer who was born, grew up and studied in Spain. Her stories have been published in different magazines and anthologies, with her greatest achievement her Spanish Civil War novel “A Cry for Home”.  
[Conchita at SelfPubAus](http://Conchita at SelfPubAus)



Jim Lemon, on his fourth life as a creative writer, still has pretensions of being a research psychologist. After over thirty years of research and writing books and journal articles on everything from drugs to risk-taking, he has self-published three books.  
[Jim Lemon on Amazon](http://Jim Lemon on Amazon)



Ross Venner grew up around the naval harbour of Portsmouth and Portchester and developed a love of sailing from an early age. He began writing fiction on retirement and is a founding member of Write on Water.  
[writeonwater.weebly.com](http://writeonwater.weebly.com)



Anthony hails from the Goulburn River in Victoria and now lives in Sydney. He produces short films and is a poet and writer of several novels, also collaborating on an erotic art and poetry coffee-table book.  
[anthonyjlangfordbooks.com](http://anthonyjlangfordbooks.com)



José was born in La Habana, Cuba, and migrated to the US as a child. He began his writing his debut novel after getting his feet wet in creative writing at a writers’ group in Camden New South Wales, Australia.  
[jfnodar.com.au](http://jfnodar.com.au)

# Writing Opportunities

## Poets at the Petersham Bowlo

This open mic soirée is held on the 3rd Thursday every month of the year – with a featured poet 3 or 4 times a year as well.

Presentations (own work or the works of others) of poetry, short story, anecdotes, comedy, acoustic music are all welcome.

The event runs from 6.30 till 9.30pm. From April 2023, it will be a hybrid event – simultaneously on Zoom.

There's no need to RSVP - Just add your name to the running sheet on the evening. Petersham Bowling Club, 77 Brighton St Petersham, NSW

Bar and bistro open. Free admission.

The next one will be 20<sup>th</sup> April, 2023

## Inner West Writers Group

Inner West Writers Group Write Club meets weekly in Marrickville Library, NSW on Saturdays from 10am to 12.

It's run by Maria Issaris, a writer and broadcaster who also produces audiobooks.

Writers and keen listeners wanting to hear new writers are all welcome.

Over time the group has created a hub of activity and information/skill exchange for everyone to help on another on the writing journey. It's all free - all self-help.

[MeetUp link here.](#)

The next event will be 28<sup>th</sup> April 2023.

## Spill the Beans

[Spill the Beans](#) online writing community was a COVID love child – unexpected, unplanned, and now much loved.

**Spill the Beans** welcomes writers regardless of writing experience, age or cultural background.

It sets regular writing challenges (free to enter) which are published on its website, with the most popular ones printed in physical books.

The group is always looking for people to help run its activities, from computing to editing and marketing.

Spill the Beans also offers membership with extra perks, for \$20 and \$10 concession. Spill the Beans is also offering an **April special** for **ink** readers – 14 months membership for the price of 12.

## Bonfire at Desire

Bonfire at Desire is a monthly open mic night at Desire Books in Manly.

Established in 2013, it's an opportunity for people to share their poems, stories, songs, performance art, wisecracks and hearts with total abandon in front of an art-loving and supportive audience.

It takes place at Desire Books, 3/3 Whistler St, Manly, NSW.

It's every last Tuesday of the month, "*from 7 until we collapse.*"

Entrance is free, but a gold coin donation is requested to keep expenses covered.

[Desire Books website](#)

The next event will be Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> March, 2023.