

2014 short story prize

# Time TO Write

30 short fictions



BACHELOR OF WRITING AND PUBLISHING



# Time <sup>TO</sup> WRite

**2014 short story prize**



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**BACHELOR OF WRITING AND PUBLISHING**

First published in 2014 by



Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE  
Bachelor of Writing and Publishing  
Yarra Bend Press  
email: [ybp@nmit.edu.au](mailto:ybp@nmit.edu.au)  
<http://www.nmit.edu.au/ybp>

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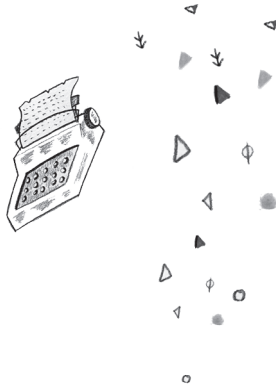
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National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Title: Time to Write: 2014 short story prize /  
editors Tom O'Connell, Nathalie Thomas; Zachary Grenfell, illustrator.  
ISBN: 9780987319227 (paperback)  
Notes: Includes bibliographical references.  
Subjects: Short stories, Australian--Victoria.  
Other Authors/Contributors:  
O'Connell, Tom, editor. Thomas, Nathalie, editor. Grenfell, Zachary, illustrator.  
Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE, issuing body.  
Dewey Number: A823.0108

Cover illustration by Zachary Grenfell  
Typeset in Helvetica Regular 11/14pt by Yarra Bend Press  
Printed and bound in Australia on 128gsm Matt Art by Trojan Press



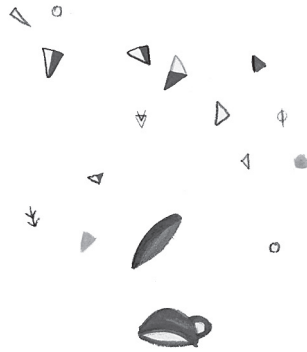


## THANK YOU

*Time to Write* would like to thank everyone who took the time to enter the 2014 short story prize. We commend our category winners, runners up, and honourable mentions who have made this publication possible.

Congratulations, you are now published writers!

# Time To Write



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# Time TO Write

## CATEGORY

### NMIT STAFF AND STUDENTS

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The *Time To Write* 2014 short story competition and anthology would not have been possible without the valued help of the Head of Program, Associate Professor Karen Simpson Nikakis, Lecturer Dr Alice Robinson and the Publishing Coordinator Mr Brad Webb, and for the on going commitment and diligence of Bachelor of Writing and Publishing students Mr Tom O'Connell and Ms Nathalie Thomas.

# Time TO Write



FOREWORD  
**ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR  
KAREN SIMPSON NIKAKIS**

Welcome to our third *Time to Write* short story anthology. Phew! This lovely publication is the result of two hardworking Bachelor of Writing and Publishing students' efforts and those of the supporting staff. Of course, this celebration of writing could not exist without you, the writer, or you the supporter of your writing friend or family member. This year's competition again attracted an excitingly diverse range of entries, which tells us that writers are not only alive and well out there, but are industriously wrangling their stories onto the screen or page.

Taking an idea, a vaguely formed feeling or even a dream from the ether, and building it into a narrative is never easy. What words to choose? What characters to create? What landscapes to painstakingly construct? Where is the action to start? How is it impelled? What heights of emotions are to be reached, or what depths plunged? How is it to end? To hang together? How is the narrative to engage and excite the reader? How is this new story, so hard in its birthing, to enrich the world?

These are just some of the questions that tumble through the head of the writer, alone with their thoughts and the narrative building blocks of a new story, as they struggle to meld one with the other. And of course the key question often is: why bother? Writers know that stories do not ask politely to be told, that they have no such manners: that they niggle and grizzle and nag and hanker and even shout and shriek until their voices are heard. And the world is grateful for them, these new versions of tales that are as old as humankind itself. So here they are, the new kids on the block: read and enjoy!

# Time <sup>TO</sup> Write





## EDITORIAL NATHALIE THOMAS

Working on *Time To Write* has been a wonderful opportunity to delve into the imaginations of some 100 or so writers Australia-wide, and what an amazing journey it's been.

Firstly, I'd like to congratulate the talented, courageous and creative writers who submitted to *Time To Write*. It was a pleasure to read all the entries, and a tough decision to choose which stories would make it into the anthology. It was especially rewarding to see and read the entries from our younger groups: the beautiful prose of *The Basket Weaver*, the haunting imagery of *The Witness* and the exceptionally crafted *A Red Dust Land* – all stand on their own as well-structured mature pieces of writing. And it gives me much joy to see that our future writers have a clear understanding of what makes a story worth reading. So, well done to you all, and keep up the good work.

Secondly, I'd like to mention how much fun I had editing the work of my peers. The NMIT Staff and Student category was filled with diversity, from the tram-surfing antics of *Surfing Joe* to the onslaught of progress in *The Road* to the poignancy of *Goodbye Old Friend*. It is special to be able to read stories that have been skilfully created by wordsmiths studying their craft.

And lastly, I'd also like to acknowledge the team behind *Time To Write*: Associate Professor Karen Simpson Nikakis, Dr Alice Robinson, Mr Brad Webb and my fellow student editor, Mr Tom O'Connell. Together we successfully dealt with the many issues that come from producing a publication, and I reaffirmed my dedication to the craft of editing.

So, to all who venture into these pages... enjoy the journey.

EDITORIAL  
TOM O'CONNELL

Welcome to the 2014 edition of our degree's flagship publication, *Time to Write*! It brings us great pleasure to present these thirty winning stories, which have arrived from all over the country and were culled from a submissions pool roughly three times that size.

Thanks to Karen, Brad and fellow student editor, Nathalie, for being such consummate professionals. And a special thanks to Alice Robinson for her support and enthusiasm, and for admirably taking on stressful administrative duties during the business end of her pregnancy. We wish her all the best with the birth of her second child!

I had a blast editing *Time to Write* and appreciated the freedom afforded to us as student editors; our ideas were valued, allowing us to truly influence the shape and tone of this publication. As a third-year student and aspiring editor, I welcomed this very practical experience and hope the young anthology continues to grow and flourish for years to come.

This wasn't my first time editing a publication, but it was the first time I'd read work by younger (teenaged) writers. I didn't know what to expect, but their work, which was so unexpectedly affecting and sophisticated, quickly wrested me on side. Early apprehension fell away and I sank into the warm, inviting worlds that had stemmed from these fertile minds. Even now, I struggle to recall adult writers who've penned something as pure and imaginative as Jiamei Hardy's *The Red Coat*, as sweetly endearing as Natasha Lee's *Waa* (I certainly won't look at crows the same

way!), or as original as Lucille Grasso's fusion of familial drama and speculative fiction. Similarly, I was deeply impressed by Sabina Donato's hypnotic vision of the afterlife, the bittersweet fable-like quality of Allanah Showell's *Of Flying or Falling*, and the arresting prose of Lizzie Harris, to name but a few.

Reading for *Time to Write*, I was struck by the fearlessness of these young writers. In each story, the purity of their authorial voices shines through. No one's trying to be Rowling or Cormac McCarthy; there is no pretence or affectation, no self-conscious comma arrangements, or fear of an audience's judgement. How refreshing that is! (And tragic – the adult world is relentless in its pursuit to instil doubt.)

I'm labouring too long on this point, so shall finish with a final reiteration: it was genuinely heartening to see young writers produce such high-quality work. Of course, none of this is to discredit the fine efforts by the other, more experienced writers in this collection, whose work was witty, poignant and written with verve. Similarly, it was a real boon reading work by my fellow students. I do hope, though, that these young wordsmiths, in particular, continue developing, experimenting and applying themselves through writing. Assuming they do, it's hard to be anything but optimistic about the future of literature.

# Time <sup>TO</sup> Write

CATEGORY  
12 TO 14 YEARS





Time <sup>TO</sup> Write

WINNER  
*THE RED COAT*  
**JIAMEI HARDY**

The red coat has many pockets.

Naomi is small and silent, slipping into her parents' room without disturbing either of the slumbering adults. She takes a moment to rub her face against the coat, delighting in the soft, velvety texture and rich, cinnamon fragrance.

"A man who has many pockets is hiding many things," Naomi's father had informed her solemnly as they stood together under the rain-flooded bus stop. He'd been observing a man across the slippery road. A scrawny rat, he was, deviously slipping objects out of an elderly woman's bag under the pretence of helping her with her lame leg. He indeed had a great number of pockets in his large black raincoat.

But did this apply to her mother with her stunning red coat, too?

Naomi slips her hand into an inside pocket of the jacket, keeping a wary eye on her sleeping parents.

In the first pocket, there is a small, snowy dog.

He looks cranky and ruffled from been rudely shaken from his nap. Naomi quickly apologises.

"Can you talk?" she asks him in a whisper.

"Woof," he says unconvincingly.

"I knew you could talk, mister!" she exclaims cheerfully.

# Time to Write

The small, fluffy white creature growls at her.

“And I knew you were touched in the head when I first saw you. How’d you know that I’m a boy, eh? I could be a girl, you misogynous idiot!” His voice is deep and reminds Naomi of her daddy.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” she whispers. “Do you want me to check? Daddy always turns dogs upside down to tell. I think it’s written on the bottom.”

“No, that’s quite all right,” he assures her. He looks at the coat, pondering. “D’you know if my pal Swordfish is in there?”

Naomi fumbles around in the pocket next to Dog’s. There is indeed a Swordfish, which Naomi holds proudly in front of Dog in a fist. Swordfish gives three feeble flops before he stops moving, dead.

“Oh no,” Naomi says, disappointed. “I’d better get him a glass of water.”

She hurries to the kitchen tap and turns the squeaky old thing on. A snake falls with a dramatic PLONK into the metal basin.

“How’d you get in there?” Naomi asks her in confusion.

The snake slides up Naomi’s arm and settles behind her neck, a scaly scarf. “It’s a funny story, darling,” she titters. “The coat was getting so stuffy and so I thought to myself: why not use those lovely gold buttons as a trampoline! And so I did. Only somehow I ended up in the plumbing and came out the tap,” she sighs theatrically. “My poor heart will never recover.”

“But I thought snakes couldn’t jump,” Naomi says, confused.

Snake raises her head to Naomi’s eye level and winks at her secretively, “But you see, dear. We snakes can curl our tails into delightful springs.”

Naomi’s mouth makes a small ‘o’ of understanding, while Dog just snorts sceptically, trying unsuccessfully to break free of her arms.

“We should get back,” he says. “What of poor Swordfish?”

Naomi gasps and quickly fills a glass with water, ignoring Snake’s hiss of displeasure.

She speeds down the carpeted hallway to her parents’ room, careful not to make noise. Unfortunately, Swordfish is still very much dead, even when Naomi pours water on him.

“Poor Swordfish!” Snake moans awfully. “We will all be just the same as him if we do not hurry and go back inside the coat!”

“Oh dear!” Naomi exclaims. She gently scoops poor Swordfish up and places him back in his pocket.

“I’ll miss you,” she says tearfully to Dog, ignoring his muttered ‘I won’t’ as she drops him back into his pocket.

Snake sniffs and dabs at her round yellow eyes with her tail. “And I’ll miss you!” she wails in despair. Naomi sadly lets Snake go back to her pocket.

A curious thought occurs to Naomi. The red coat has many pockets. And Naomi has only explored three.

Time <sup>TO</sup> Write



RUNNER UP  
WAA  
NATASHA LEE

*Dark and sinister*  
*Embodiment of evil*  
*Beady eyes watching*

Black bodies saunter across the cracked concrete and hurtle through the air. Beady eyes pierce my body like sharp but rusty blades.

“What the hell?” My yell competes with the harsh, grating screech of crows in the locker bay. “Stupid evil birds.” I groan, shielding my head from the swooping creatures and their spiteful glares as I pick my way through the rubbish strewn all over the ground. This doesn’t even make sense. It’s only halfway through period one; how were the bins so full and how have the crows managed to get so much out of them already?

I hate crows. They wander around, looking nefarious, making irritating sounds and watching you in an intimidating fashion. Then, after everyone’s gone inside, they invade any outdoor humanised areas that tickle their fancy and start wrecking the joint. They get into absolutely everything and ruin it. Comfortable outdoor cushion, you say. BAM! No more stuffing. A big bin to stop littering and pollution, you think. HA! Its contents will be scattered throughout town. As for their appalling calls, I prefer the sound of alarms – y’know, the ones determined to get you up at 6 am on freezing mornings with hideously cruel beeps.

I snatch my bag out, cursing Harry for forgetting his excursion note, forcing me to brave this daunting enclosure full of crazy birds alone.

# Time to Write

I slam my door shut, fumble with my lock and make a run for it. Suddenly, I'm on my back with tiny stones sticking into my hands and elbows. A Tiny Teddies wrapper was the offender – strategically left lying in wait by the damn crows, no doubt. I'd laugh if I wasn't nearly crying. I jump (well, struggle) to my feet and head for the toilets. Cool, crystal-clear water rushes from the tap, burns my wounds and pools in the stainless steel basin, the colour of fire, before swirling away. I run – no, speed walk – to the bus.

As I inspect my injuries, Mr Torres gives us our instructions and warnings before letting us loose in the museum.

“When we go in, you're free to explore wherever you want, but I want you back here at exactly 12.30. I know you all have phones, so no excuses. When you're all back, at 12.30, we'll eat lunch and go to the IMAX theatre. Remember, everyone has to do an *individual* report. I trust you will all be on your best behaviour; I swear to God there'll be hell to pay if you aren't. Rightio then, off with ya.”

As the rest of the group disperses, I look at a map to find out where the *Bunjilaka, First Peoples* centre is. Before I even walk in, I'm astounded by the beautiful artwork. I have to stop my eyes from devouring it all and give my mind time to fully appreciate the intricate designs. As I walk through the exhibition, my senses are bombarded with more and more beauty. I am profoundly affected by words, paintings, photos, sculptures, videos and old artefacts.

I walk into the exhibit called *Bunjil's Nest*. I sit down, mesmerised by the beauty held within the small dark room. Words and sounds weave their way through the sculpture's undulating wings, through images, colours and movement. Together, they tell me a very powerful story of how Bunjil (eagle) and the ancestors created the world.

Nearing the end of my journey, my eye is drawn to a sculpture of a crow. I cringe, thinking of my earlier encounter. The grazes on my hands are still stinging. Do Kulin people share my hatred of crows? What do they see in them? I look at the boards next to the sculpture

to find a Kulin Dreaming. It is the story of Waa (crow). During Creation, Waa the Protector and Bunjil the Creator were good friends. Waa was quite arrogant because he had wonderfully coloured feathers and a lovely song that all admired. However, he became jealous of Bunjil and left to learn a new trick: fire. He came back thinking he was really cool as he played with his fire. At first, he wouldn't share it with anyone else. In his selfishness, he accidentally set fire to everything. All of the land burned. He was caught up in the flames, which burnt all of his feathers, leaving them charred and black. He also inhaled lots of smoke, which is why he can only call his one croaky sound. Bunjil decided that the loss of Waa's beauty was a sufficient punishment for his greed; however, he must also share his fire. Waa gifted the people with fire, allowing them to keep warm and cook food.

I sit for a while and admire the beautiful statue of Waa engulfed in flames. Too soon, I feel the vibration of my phone telling me it's time to go back to the rest of the group.

I stumble off the bus, greeted by Waa's atrocious calls. They don't bother me so much now. I look up, scanning the treetops for the bird itself. My eyes latch onto a crow looking down at me from a big, picturesque gumtree. I look hard at it, trying to bury my long-held prejudices. For the second time today, I'm not sure whether to cry or laugh; the poor creature had never meant to harm anyone. Now I look at it again, it seems far more mischievous than malicious, and its eyes are full of sadness rather than evil. It flies to another branch and casts its forlorn gaze upon me again. I swear it gives a grim smile.

I begin my journey home and the crow follows alongside me. I turn into my driveway and catch one last glimpse of it.

*Bringer of fire*

*Once a picture of beauty*

*Punished and cheerless*

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HONOURABLE MENTION

*THE HILL*

**TOM WEDDING**

We sat watching the thriving streets below with its busy citizens going about their daily lives. We were about 100 metres above the city, on top of what we called 'the hill'. The hill was the tallest natural structure for miles around. It was the only place we could slow down and relax from the busy lifestyle below. There seemed to be no nature, just modernised structures everywhere. Ugly skyscrapers hung above us with their intimidating steel frames. I looked over at Paula as she stared into the sun. Her glowing gold hair swayed in the wind as we sat.

The year was 2024. Each year, the world became more and more complicated. What had happened to society, to the trees, animals and nature? Where had the happy, easy lifestyle gone? It seemed the world had been modernised. The government's mistakes had affected the world and its citizens. Now, each human had to struggle to survive. Each breath contained more fumes than natural oxygen. It was ruining our lives. Buildings, electricity, resources and cities all seemed to cover the face of the earth. Even the ocean consisted of hotels and resorts. Concrete covered every inch of ground in every city. Grass could only be seen on hills and, occasionally, as decorations in houses, though most of this grass was synthetic.

The hill was among the few with grass on it. The glossy, soft grass stood out among the dull greys of buildings. It smelt of freedom – freshness in such a corrupt world. The hill's grass was real: real, shiny, thick blades of green. It almost glowed like a beacon. It was one of the only things unaffected by the foul acrid fumes of modern living.

# Time To Write

“Look, a bloom!” Paula exclaimed, pointing towards a small green bud.

I was astonished to see, for the first time ever, a glimmer of hope, the hope of a natural beauty so rare. I thought of a world with flowers and trees, butterflies and caterpillars, natural and simply beautiful.

I imagined what it would have been like for the people who lived in the age before urbanisation. They had such clean ways of living, with farming and open air markets, which this world now lacks. So much freedom had been lost. It had been destroyed by this urban sprawl dominating all landscapes. The world struggled with the intake of modern influence. Like a drug destroying the brain, ever so slowly, the world was being forced into instability. Even now, fields and crops grew smaller and smaller as day after day passed by. Grass became scarce as urban areas filled streets like a plague. Only the occasional grass sprout could be seen through cracks in concrete. Yet that green bud, so small and fragile, held within it the promise of more. Another hill may yet emerge with a coat of natural beauty.

Paula and I smiled and slowly made our way down the side of the hill. Our every footstep was absorbed by the soft grass as we stepped towards the concrete below.

As my first footstep touched the ground, I felt wet concrete sink through my toes. I stopped and pulled Paula back with my outstretched arm. I quickly lifted my foot from the fresh cement and looked over at Paula. We both knew what was happening.

“The cement gets closer each week,” I stated, sitting down to put my shoes on.

The soft cushioning of my Nike shoes surrounded my feet as I watched the setting sun fall beneath the labyrinth of buildings.

“We should get going,” I said with concern.

“Wait,” Paula replied.

She kneeled down in front of the concrete as a cheeky grin fell across her face. I watched as she carefully manoeuvred a stick through the wet cement. Seconds later, she moved back, revealing her art. I laughed as I saw the words she had drawn.

They would remain there long after we had gone: 'Save the hill'.

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HONOURABLE MENTION

*ETHEREAL*

**SABINA DONATO**

I don't know where I am, I don't know where I'm going, but I'm walking.

All I see is white light. No obscenely lime-coloured wall I am condemned to stare at until my body heals. This, I'm betting, will never happen unless pigs fly. No painfully cringe-inducing kitten poster that says, 'Be pawsitive! Everything will turn out purrfectly!'

Now, my injuries appear to be absent.

I can't make out any colour.

I can't hear anything either. Nothing but a high-pitched buzzing seemingly just outside my ear. I assume it's just my brain trying to compensate for the lack of external noise. Although, for once, I don't have to listen to the obnoxious beeping of the heart monitor, the sound getting more and more painful to bear with time. It's like the universe wants me to die.

The only logical explanation I can foster is that I am dreaming, although somehow I feel aware of myself, as though I am still awake. Frankly, this is all so unnatural and, well, creepy, yet still I keep walking ahead.

The buzzing noise seems to be growing louder, and morphing into a scattered less-frequent sound. Now, being the antisocial sensitive loner that I am, I've grown accustomed to 'accidentally' eavesdropping on people's conversations at school, through wallowing in the fact that I have no friends there. I generally zone in on what the other girls around me are saying, which improves my hearing. It's a win-win!

# Time TO Write

The sound has now become unmistakeable. Only those who've spent their lives living under a rock couldn't recognise it. Staring across the bleak landscape of nothing, I view a mass of people, walking too, on the same path as I am. They are all surrounded by visible auras of different colours, pulsing out from them. They speak to each other in hushed tones, hustling through the colossal group, yet seemingly oblivious of our environment. Our lack of environment, more like.

As they grow increasingly close, I fall into step besides some people who are part of this crowd. Should I attempt to make contact? These people don't seem to be in tune with the general frequency of this place. I doubt they can see me.

Time is, apparently, non-existent here. But after what seems like an hour of pushing and shoving through the collective of zombies, darkness starts to flood into the area. The people disperse, disappearing. A pang of loneliness and fear suddenly shoots through me. These people, who I didn't know, are leaving me! Though disturbed, I'm grateful to have had at least some company.

A graveyard begins to come into vision. Crumbling statues of sobbing angels are positioned around the area. Gothic fences coil unnaturally around the graves, and crows perch atop the dark macabre-style coils letting out raspy caws. Black cats with glowing white eyes slink around the area, emitting eerie mournful vocalisations. A half-moon hangs in the sky, a multitude of stars littering the dark expanse. This place looks... how I feel. I slow my pace as bitterly cold winds buffet my face.

An elderly man in a scruffy black coat sits at the foot of a towering cross-monument. With a makeshift, mechanical hand, he proceeds to produce small, dead animals from his coat, prompting the ghostly feline inhabitants to snatch the foul meat from him and ravenously devour the pieces. Recoiling in disgust, I begin to head in the opposite direction.

"I wouldn't go that way, girl. You won't reach your death-  
stination."

A pulse of fear shoots through me. I whip around to find the freaky old hobo staring at me. I try to muster every speck of courage inside me. A considerably sparse amount.

“One, you... are really... um, horrible at puns. Two, what exactly do you mean by that?” My voice quivers with humiliation.

“Do gravediggers get their coffee from BURIAL grounds?” he avers, ignoring me, pausing for a moment to laugh at his own nonsensical joke.

“Sorry, what?”

“Conversely, the writer who used too many words was sentenced to death. Ha! Sentenced.”

Tentatively, I attempt to walk away from him yet again. Clearly, he’s harmless, yet deranged.

“Why are you here?”

In frustration, I turn around and look the demented old man straight in those ebony black eyes of his.

“I don’t know!” I yell, flustered levels reaching into the higher digits. “I’m confused! I’m afraid! I don’t know where to go or what to do anymore! My family is dead, I am probably never going to heal from that *stupid* car crash, and even if I did, what is there left for me to live for?” Tears stream down my face. Uncharacteristically, mind you. I’m not a wuss.

The cats are now wailing as violently as I am. It’s as if needles are piercing my body, needles of stress, depression, anxiety, anger and pure panic. Before I lose my mind, or the crazy man can kill me on the inside with more obscene puns, I flee. I don’t care where I’m going.

I just want to get away.

# Time To Write

I run for what seems like an eternity. Milky golden light fills my vision. After being exposed to negativity, I now feel strangely at peace. This is all I really want. To never have to go back to that stress again.

“You can come with me. You can let it all go, right now.” An angelic voice sounds from all around me. It’s nothing but an echoing whisper. “You can be with your parents, your little sister. You can rest forever...”

I feel so compelled to just collapse, start crying, and stop this hell of a life I have been forced to endure for 14 years. Now is my chance for salvation.

I know why I have had to come here. I have succumbed to those injuries after all.

It’s time to leave.

The flatline sounds. The heart rate monitor dies out.

HONOURABLE MENTION  
*AND SO I DON'T FORGET*  
TRISTAN SIMPSON

The stench of death hung heavily in the night air. Throughout the long and relentless day, cannons had pounded the landscape. Rapiers had clashed with bayonets and sabres had crossed blades with daggers. Most had been slaughtered mercilessly, or had fled with the setting of the sun. We few survivors had banded together, regardless of side, bonded through the horrors of war. A strange bunch, we were. The dying fire cast unearthly shadows upon our features, making the whole scene more frightening.

Across from me, by the fire, sat an old man. A ghastly cut on his abdomen had left him bleeding his life out into the soil. It was clear from the amount of crimson around him that he wouldn't survive the dawn. A young boy tended to him, repeating in vain, "Papa! Papa!" They spoke a language the rest of us didn't recognise. French perhaps.

Next to them leant a headless corpse, leering forward, grotesque in every aspect possible, like an idol to some ghastly demon. The head itself had rolled a few feet away from the body and grinned savagely upwards, paused forever in a grimace of bloodlust.

To my right sat a boy, hardly older than sixteen, no doubt a noble of some sort judging from his clothes. A rapier lay on his lap; one of the finest examples of smithing I had ever seen. An equally amazing parrying dagger hung from his belt. He was looking upwards at the stars, his lips faintly moving, almost as if reciting poetry to a long-lost lover. Brown hair fell over his shoulders and spilled onto the top of his clothes. His attire itself consisted of a rich red shirt and breeches with a sleeveless black doublet that was fitted tightly over the shirt. It was

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the gold embroidery that gave away the fact he was noble. I should know; I used to make those uniforms before the monster of war came and tore families and lives apart, leaving behind a generation of sallow-eyed veterans and suffering youngsters.

A few other men sat around: one Frenchman and a two of our side. They attempted conversation many times, a blending of the precious little they could scrape together of each other's language, making a bumbling yet somehow beautiful thing in such a place of destruction. The world as we knew it had ended; never again could we look at a landscape and see it as beautiful. Rather, we would look for the first place to take cover from cannon fire. Never again could we look at a town without imagining the flames and inevitable screams.

They would haunt us unto our very death. I turned to the boy and spoke.

"Who are you?" I asked very simply.

He turned his head to face me and, looking me in the eyes, replied, "I used to be a count – a young one, mind you – but now..." A shadow passed over his features. When it stopped, his eyes were downcast. "...I do not know. How can I be the same person when I have destroyed so much and created so little. War brings change – whether good or bad, short or permanent, I cannot say."

Confused, I slowly said, "What do you mean?"

"Take this," he said. "On a base level, the cannons have flattened a few hills. This, in turn, may make it easier for a new settlement to arise. While the cannons have killed many, rotting flesh helps the plants grow and makes the soil rich and fertile. War may cast down dictators and replace them with good leaders that eventually succumb to the evil they were originally fighting."

It was then that a long piercing note blew on a horn; at once mournful and boastful. It resounded across every hill and every facet in the rock. The boy slowly put his head to the ground and didn't move.

For a moment, I thought he had died. Then he lifted his head and stood up. Dawn had slowly crept across the land, like a thief fearing discovery, but now it was bold and it made its way over to the fire and beyond.

“A small group of horsemen and soldiers approaches on foot,” he announced. “Flee if you can.”

Before getting up, he turned to me and slipped a small piece of paper into my hand. “If you get home” was all he said.

We ran while the young boy simply sat weeping next to the corpse of the old man, and the noble walked slowly towards the enemy. Eventually, I turned to look back. He had felled many men already, but finally they had him facing four of them. Two more fell before the noble did, collapsing to the ground.

It was a long journey before coming home, but not for a second did I forget the boy’s sacrifice. I slowly unfolded the paper, which I have now read a hundred times. Inside it read:

*‘For whoever has possession of this paper comes a warning and a promise. War is a horrible mess; it is not like the grand adventure we read about in stories. Unless you dance with the devil, there is no romance in carnage. While war can do many things and bring change like no power on this earth can, it is abused and too often needed to prove a point or further selfish agendas. Whether war is worth waging cannot be answered by one man, but by all who take part in conflict; their reasons for so taking part shall give them their answer. We live in a beautiful world, but we too often forget this and that is how horrors such as war arrive.’*

And so I don’t forget.

Time <sup>TO</sup> Write



HONOURABLE MENTION  
*CHECKMATE*  
LUCILLE GRASSO

Life is unpredictable, sometimes overly so, but that was just the way Mark liked it. It kept things interesting. Still, this was a little *too* interesting for his taste. Never in his wildest dreams did he imagine this was how his life was going to end.

“Don’t do tha— *I SAID DON’T DO THAT!*”

Mark winced as the man sitting across the table roared. The victim of his verbal abuse – a teen on his laptop – looked like he wished the earth would open up beneath him and swallow him down. Cheeks flaming, the teen shakily moved his mouse cursor away from his rook. Everyone knew the weight of the world rested upon his shoulders and the result of this online chess game, but he didn’t look strong enough to carry it. The stares and thinly veiled insults of everyone in the premises didn’t help one bit.

His coffee tasted bland and watered down, but Mark didn’t mind. He’d forced down the same crummy coffee every day for the last two years; he wasn’t going to stop now just because the end of the world was nigh. He absentmindedly watched as the computer cursor flitted between a rook, knight and two pawns. Mark was no genius, but even he could see that Laptop Teen was hopeless when it came to chess. It sucked, having your fate in the hands of an idiot. He gulped down the rest of his coffee and—*What the heck was Laptop Teen doing with his queen?*

Mark, like almost everyone else in the packed diner, found himself joining in with his own versions of “Are you a freaking idiot?” and “Look at his BISHOP!”, albeit with more colourful language.

# Time to Write

Once convinced that Laptop Teen wasn't going to make that terrible move, Mark wondered what everyone else was up to. Cathy was probably with her family. Mark thought about calling his own dad. It had been a while since they last spoke. Six years, in fact, since he'd stormed out his parents' house with dreams of fame in his head and bitter words on his tongue. Not even at Mum's funeral did they exchange words, only heated glares. The phone in his pocket seemed to grow heavier with every thought. Should he call? What would he say? What would Dad say? In the end, Mark couldn't make up his mind. The blackened screen of his mobile now reflected the overhead lights from its spot on the table.

A waitress on roller-skates zipped past and Mark gestured for her to come over. The nametag pinned to her dress introduced her as Jane.

"Can I have a refill?" he asked, holding up his now-empty mug.

"Sure, won't be long," Jane replied with a grin before gliding off.

From the way her smile trembled to the way she gripped her arms, Mark could tell she was nervous about the chess game. Around the world, people generally savoured what could be their last day. Still, she worked. If they survived, life would go on. Bills waited for no one. If they didn't, she wouldn't have to worry about anything. Jane came back, a steaming pitcher of amber liquid in her hand.

"That'll be three dollars fifty," she said, fake smile in place. The scent of coffee filled his nostrils as she filled his cup.

Wondering why he visited this place with its overpriced and substandard food, he reached for his wallet. He swore. It wasn't there. Jane looked amused as Mark frantically emptied all his pockets of their goods: stick of gum; car keys; expired coupon, but no wallet. He swore again.

"I... I can't seem to find my wallet..." He trailed off.

"Don't worry," Jane reassured him, the grin on her face real this time. "I'm sure my boss won't mind if you pay tomorrow."

"If there is a tomorrow." He took a long draught from his mug and stopped when he felt Jane's eyes on him. "...I said that out loud, didn't I?" he said.

"Yep," she said, biting her lip. "Why so negative?"

It was Mark's turn to stare at her. "You did see the guy play, right? He's probably worse than me, and that's saying something."

Jane shrugged. "So?"

"So?" he exclaimed, "So we're screwed! You heard the broadcast; the aliens won't let anyone else play after the mustard incident. Our lives depend on the guy's chess skills. We. Are. Screwed."

Jane's attitude turned cold. "If you truly believe that, then what are you doing here? Don't you have better things to do before you die?" She walked off, head held high.

Mark looked towards the phone on his table. He did have better things to do.

The darkened street was almost completely devoid of life. Whether it was because of the impending doom or early hour, he didn't know. Both were viable options, considering he never usually saw people walking about at this time. The buttons on his phone lit up as he scrolled through his contacts. He found his father listed under a rather unflattering moniker.

*If he picks up, I'll rename him*, Mark mused as he held the phone up to his ear.

"Your call cannot be taken at the moment. Please leave a message after the beep."

Great. He wasn't expecting that. Mark took a deep breath.

"Hey, it's Mark," he said, "You know, your son... If you still think of me as that. Well, I just called to say... You know... Well, I guess you

## Time To Write

don't, but..." He sighed. Did he sound stupid? Because he sure felt stupid. "I'm sorry. Sorry for walking out, sorry for everything. There." He breathed out. "It's all out. Because, you know, end of world and everything... Well, if you hear this, call back. It'd be nice to just talk again. Just like old times."

He hung up and slipped the phone in his pocket. He had just opened the door to the diner when he froze.

His phone rang.

HONOURABLE MENTION  
*THE DOPPELGÄNGER EVACUEE*  
ELIZABETH MURDOCH

It was 1941 and there was a unanimous agreement among the villagers of the Scottish town of Kennet that this was the most exciting thing to happen to them since the beginning of the war.

Philip Miller begged to differ. The arrival of a train was something that happened every day and certainly wasn't new at all; he was confused at the anticipation of the village.

"This collar is far too tight, Mama," he whined, pulling at the collar of his Sunday bests (fancy wearing your Sunday bests on a Wednesday!) to make a point.

His mother's response was a very tired gaze.

He tried again.

"Mama—"

"Hush, littl'un. Not now."

A third time, then.

"*Mama—*"

"Oh, will you please be quiet!"

Mama was a very quick-tempered woman. Philip could see that she was 'not in the mood for one of his antics', as she put it.

She cleared her throat. "You need to mind your manners in front of the guests, dear."

# Time to Write

Philip could see now that the train had indeed come to a stop and people (Philip's mother had called them 'evacuees'. Philip was not entirely sure what evacuees were, but he thought they looked perfectly ordinary, so perhaps there was a chance that he himself was one, too) were now spilling out of the cart like a dropped bag of jellybeans.

Philip had been tasked with holding the welcoming sign that read Welcome Percival for their very own evacuee, who belonged to them, for keeps, along with everything that came with him.

The idea of a boy belonging to him and only him was exciting to Philip. He supposed that's why parents had their own children.

His mother scanned a beady eye over the crowd, searching for their charge. After a few moments of patronising inspecting, she abruptly bent a long, spindly arm and pulled a young boy from the crowd.

The boy was not much younger than Philip, who was eight-and-a-half years old. Philip recognised him as his old brother, Percy. But didn't he have to go away for a long time because he was sick? Philip wondered. Now he remembered that Percy had been gone for around three years. Was this why everyone was so excited about the train?

The boy interrupted his thoughts by bowing and saying, "Thank you for having me."

"Hi, Percy," Philip said.

"His name is *Percival*, Philip," his mother corrected.

"No, it's Percy," Philip replied obstinately, and he passed a remark to the placid boy standing in front of them. "You'd think a mother would know the name of her own son."

Percy nodded in a docile manner, eyeing the lady he knew only as Mrs Miller nervously.

Uncomfortably, their mother tutted, "He's not your brother, Philip," and that was that.

The Miller household was not particularly glamorous nor was it dilapidated. It was not to be looked back at with childhood memories, fond or otherwise; rather, it was just around the middle, in the middle of their middle-class neighbourhood.

Philip had made a show of stomping loudly up the stairs in just the way his mother hated, since as long as Percy was here, she didn't dare to punish him too badly. Philip could see the longing to give him a beating reflected in his mother's eyes, which filled him with some sort of panic-fuelled elation. He pulled young Percy by the hand quite dynamically until the younger boy had to suppress silent cries of pain and the fear of getting his arm pulled off.

Later on, after a lurid dinnertime, Percival quietly retired to his bedroom to sleep, leaving Philip to crow over his victories and later bedtime than his smaller brother until his mother had grabbed him by the wrist and finally given him the chastisement he had been asking for, amongst a verbal thrashing.

"You pert – giving your very own mother such cheek. What nerve! All to impress that Percival, I s'pose. I would've never agreed to house that rotten orphan if I'd known what effect he would have on my very own child." Philip's mother lectured to him as he sniffled.

"But Mama," Philip replied, "wasn't it like this when he was around before?"

His mother paused, now picking a considerably calmer tone of explanation. "Well, he wasn't around before, Philip."

"He was; he is! I know that it's Percy. I've seen him with my own two eyes, haven't I?"

"Percy's not..." his mother said. "The old Percy, I mean, he's not, you see, with us anymore. That is, he's... Well now, Philip." She couldn't bring herself to finish what she had begun.

Philip fished into his pocket and produced a creased-up photograph.

# Time to Write

His mother whipped it out of his grip. "I thought I told you to get rid of all of these!"

"I kept one. So I could remember what he looks like."

A tender finger trailed around the outline of the small boy in the picture before a cruel fist crushed the photograph until it furrowed. Philip let out a heartbroken cry and pawed at his mother wildly, but his mother pushed him back with a robust arm and threw the crumpled ball into the fireplace.

She left a sobbing Philip to cry into his arms and casually returned to her reading as if nothing had happened.

A sudden pang of panic sprung to Philip's chest. Not stopping to wipe his tear-streaked cheeks, he galloped to the room where dear Percy had taken rest, smacking open the door.

"Percy, Percy! Where are..." He trailed off and began to weep bitterly. "Mama, come quick!"

The room was empty.



HONOURABLE MENTION  
*THE FINAL AUTUMN*  
**JASMINE DOOLEY**

The wind sung blissfully as it danced through the waving, strong branches of the trees. The sound of footsteps bouncing around through the falling autumn leaves echoed through the woods, sending the resting birds flying from their nests.

A young boy came bounding through, arms outstretched as he twirled. His royal-blue collar was forced against his pure white shirt by the wind before he fell to the ground in a fit of laughter. The leaves crinkled under his weight and in his hands as he scrunched them together.

“Alexei, please slow down!” a distant voice boomed, shaking the world around it.

“Never! Never ever! I am a free boy!” the boy retorted, smiling and shutting his crystal eyes. He listened contently to the blowing of the wind and the rustling of the leaves. He was at peace.

The song of the wind echoed through the forest. The birds whistled contently as they preened their feathers in the peaceful autumn breeze. The young boy’s auburn hair matched some of the falling leaves. The September air was cool against his soft and pale face. He could sense the cold Russian winter approaching. The boy could not wait to run through the driven snow with his family, yet he treasured the autumn whilst he could. It only came once a year, after all.

A bird slowly flew down to greet the boy. Its long, black wings looked majestic against the patchy blue sky. The bird hopped through the

# Time to Write

decaying leaves towards the boy's gloved fingers before pecking at the ground in front of them. Peck, peck, peck. The boy smiled brightly. The bird was so pleasant. Russia was so pleasant. He watched the leaves swirl around him in the wind, smiling as he waited for his family. Their footsteps could be heard, but they could not be seen. He liked the freedom.

The rays of sunlight reflected against an unknown figure in the distance. The boy sat up, dusting off his blue collar. The material was soft against his frail hands. It smelled pleasant, too, like his mother's lavender perfume. Sweet and gentle, like the world around him. There was nothing he was not grateful for. He was grateful for his family. He was grateful for his life.

"Alexei! We found you!" a young girl called, almost attacking the boy and pushing him back to the ground. Her dark hair brushed against his face, forcing his eyes shut. She pinched his cheeks between her plump fingers and forced a smile to his face. The smell of roast potato filled the air, replacing the scent of fallen leaves and peeling tree bark.

"I can smell something nice for lunch!" the boy whispered, licking his lips. He could not wait to sink his teeth into what they had packed for the family picnic!

He could safely say that he was one of the happiest boys he could be at the time. The joy bubbled inside him. This had an effect on the family, for when he smiled, they smiled. For once, he could feel that they were all happy. For once, he could feel that they were all at peace.

The happiness filled the air as the birds sung sweet songs and flew around the forest. They spread their wings – some white, some black and some brown – as they swirled around and sang their songs. Peaceful and pure, they were. The slightly clouded sky was the limit for them. They could go on forever. The birds slowly left the forest, singing songs of farewell to the family. The boy stood up and chased after them as they flew away.

“Goodbye, birds! See you soon!” he called, grinning as his small hand waved through the wind.

That was so long ago now. Those were the days when the boy could run, smile, love and delight in the world around him. Those times had passed long ago. He wants those times back, but knows it is too late. He cannot move as he watches the blood trickle slowly from his chest. It is as bright as the armbands of the soldiers who stand before him. His family is all gone. Their lifeless bodies lie around him. He lets out a sorrowful whimper as he feels the pain. Even if he does survive, he will not have a family to go to. He will be lost. A soldier turns around, his beady eyes blazing with anger. He points towards the boy, who wants to take back the quiet noises and make them silence. He opens his eyes widely in fear as the tall soldier walks towards him.

The final sight he sees is the surrounding room with the bloodied wallpaper. The final sound he hears is a gunshot as the final bullet is fired.

Time <sup>TO</sup> Write

CATEGORY  
15 TO 17 YEARS



# Time TO Write

WINNER  
*OF FLYING OR FALLING*  
**ALLANAH SHOWELL**

She told me she wanted to be a raindrop. She said she wasn't afraid of falling; that she wanted to feel the rush, the wind, the freedom. But that she was scared of where she would land. And I told her that she didn't have to worry because I would catch her.

I remember that the sky had been clear that day and, like most other days in our town, it had been quiet. Too quiet; like the kind of silence that is only ever the prologue to a storm. To me, it was just another boring Sunday. I rode up the hill outside of town to the tree, which we had so whimsically christened the 'Holy Tree' on account of its slightly bent crucifix shape, and waited under the blanket of its eleven o'clock shadow.

The Holy Tree was our place. It ironically represented our acrimony for the rest of the town's rigid minds, so we made a promise to meet there every Sunday. While below, in the centre of an intolerant town, everyone else sat decomposing in church, we sat on the very top branch of the Holy Tree. This was where we shared our irrevocable reoccurring dream of flying. We longed to launch ourselves from the highest branch and soar into the clouds, leaving for a faraway place; not even sparing a second to glimpse back at our home.

I caught sight of her ribbon first, it was her identifier in town: the girl with the bright red ribbon and the huge smile. That day, her smile was missing.

"You are late, young lady!" I said in a pompous voice, imitating the churchgoers.

# Time TO Write

“Yeah,” she said. My attempt to make her smile return had failed.

Slightly put off by her dull reply, I tried again. I bowed, gesturing to the tree and offering her my hand.

“Ladies first,” I said with a wink.

She looked at my hand, looked down at her own and then replied, “A-actually I don’t want to climb today”. I gave her a look so she continued, trying to explain herself, “I, uh ... don’t want to get my new cardigan dirty”.

“Well then, you’ll just have to take it off,” I said simply, grabbing her arm to playfully pull her to the Holy Tree.

She yelled with pain.

I let go immediately but I still saw a glimpse of the reason behind her yell.

“Y-your arm!” I blurted out untactfully. “I’m sorry, I didn’t...”

“Just leave me alone!” She yelled; her face turning red as she backed away.

“I know you don’t mean that,” I said taking a step toward her.

“You don’t know *anything* about me!”

Then she turned to leave, and I let her.

I watched her wade through the tall weed-filled grass then follow the sketchy dirt path back into town until her red ribbon was drowned amongst the sea of houses. Those were the last words I ever heard her say. They are now etched into my very being.

As she left my field of vision, the rain began to fall. The prologue was over; the storm was now in reign, but the real tempest didn’t hit until I was told the news.



It happened during school. The chair next to me was empty when they called me to the office. I tried to ignore the thoughts that came hurling through my mind of all the possibilities. But I knew from their faces before I knew from their words.

The next Sunday was a town event displaying all of the people who she had joined me in despising. Moving slow, wearing black, checking times and whispering quiet words like ‘such a pity’.

I couldn’t bring myself to go. I couldn’t let them see me cry the tears that were meant for her. So instead I sat, like always, under the blanket of the Holy Tree’s eleven o’clock shadow waiting for her. But when the sun had completed its journey and the church bells ran, I knew the truth.

“You broke your promise,” I whispered. The only reply I received was the sound of raindrops as they came to their abrupt end.

“What are you doing?” asked a condescending voice.

I looked behind me to see that it was another kid from my class, dressed up in formal black like the others. I purposefully turned my head away.

“You were close with her, right? Why didn’t you go to church today?” The kid asked, moving closer perhaps in an effort to comfort me, but still keeping a fair distance between us.

“The murderer isn’t allowed to go to the funeral,” I stated.

The kid just gawked at me like I was mad.

“You can’t possibly blame yourself? Didn’t the police say it was ...” The kid trailed off, avoiding the final word.

I shook my head.

“You know, this one time we were talking; sat right up on the highest branch of this tree and watching the rain as it fell. She told me

# Time <sup>TO</sup> Write

she wanted to be a raindrop. She said she wasn't afraid of falling; that she wanted to feel the rush, the wind, and the freedom. But that she was scared of where she would land. And I told her that she didn't have to worry because I would catch her."

I inhaled slowly, trying to keep the tears brimming in my eyes from betraying me, and continued.

"That day, she was a raindrop. She fell ... but I wasn't there to catch her."

RUNNER UP  
*A RED DUST LAND*  
**SARAI TAYLOR**

“Til!” Maisie was screaming. “Til!”

The endless, shimmering land swallowed her words. With a toe, I nudged the last bit of poisoned wallaby – bait set out to stop the dingoes getting at the flock of sheep.

“Til!” From the house, Maisie’s sobs were faint. I cocked my head to one side, listening. Then I began to sprint, my bare feet scuffing the red dust.

“Maisie?” I yelled, swatting the fat flies, gorging on my sweat. My heart galloped like a herd of wild camels. “Maisie!” Fiery scarlet dirt billowed into the air behind me.

“Til.” Terrified, Maisie was on the porch. Her eyes were as big as Uluru. “It’s Mum!” I grabbed hold of her hand, and we ran.

The floor was crimson. Mum’s skin was white. Her eyes that were usually so sparkly when she talked about the baby were dull with pain. Mum lay on her side, her elbows propped up on a cushion Maisie had scavenged. She was moaning in agony.

“Fair dinkum,” I breathed.

Maisie whimpered. “Is Mum going to be alright?”

There are five of us kids already: Pat, Isla, Me, Maisie, and little Teddy, who’s only three. I was worried when Mum said there was another babe on the way.

# Time to Write

“I’ve done it before, haven’t I, Til?”

Mum had laughed at me, not unkindly. But Mum’s not as spritely as she used to be. She’s older than Ancient Nan, the emu who mooches out front in the shade.

“Who’s going to deliver the mite?” I had argued back. Pat had nicked off with Da this year, shearing further north, and Isla’s studying down in Sydney. Isla helped Mum deliver baby Ted, and the time before that Da was around for Maisie’s birth.

“We’ll do it together, Til,” Mum had grinned. “I’ll be my own midwife, you and me both.” She sighed at my troubled frown. “We’ll be fine, hon. You worry more than a bush turkey.”

Now, I looked down at Mum, swallowing. This is different. This is all wrong. And our closest neighbour is more than two hundred miles away.

“Til,” Mum gasped. “I’m fine... Ahh!” She grappled at her stomach in anguish.

“Mum,” I said, anxiously. “I don’t know what to do!”

Mum opened her mouth to say something, but I saw a fresh wave of pain wash over her eyes, and she lost consciousness. Maisie screamed.

“Shut your gob,” I bellowed. Maisie looked at me startled, and began to bawl. “Okay, okay,” I muttered soothingly. “Okay, Maise, it’s alright. Find Teddy. Put him in your room.”

Maisie snuffled heartbrokenly, and wiped at her tears. For an eight-year-old, she was a brave kid.

I began to run again. The kitchen was where our only contact with the outside world existed – the HF radio. I’d never worked it before in my life. But I’d watched Mum call for the Royal Flying Doctor Service when Pat got run over by a furious ewe and nearly had to have his arm amputated.

I fiddled with the frequency, hoping it would contact an RFDS base. With a finger, I pressed the emergency call button on the radio. Nothing happened. I'd forgotten what to do, and Mum was cactus. I took a steadying breath and prodded the button again, holding it down as I counted to twenty. My heart was thudding against my ribcage. There was the zinging of static. A voice crackled over. "...equipment has detected the call.... emergency help on the way." I slumped against the bench.

Maisie was crumpled next to Mum, stroking the pale golden hair spilling over Mum's damp cheeks.

"She's still breathing," Maisie whispered.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and felt like howling, dingo-like. I crouched next to my sister and lay a hand on Mum's pregnant belly. The contractions were weak, and spaced apart. I fought the terror.

"She's going to be good, Maisie. The flying doc's are coming." The bleeding had stopped. I found a cool cloth and wiped it gently across Mum's forehead.

There was roaring in my ears like a sandstorm. The wind it whipped up lashed hair across my cheeks. I peered up at the sky. Overhead, the massive metallic bird moved through the air towards me. Once, a cameleer – an old windbag up for a chat – stopped by for a drink and feed for his camels, he told me all about thrust and drag. I shaded my eyes, as the plane hovered in the sky. *How did it stay up there when it had no acceleration or force to keep it up? Gravity had nicked off, eh?*

As the plane suddenly dipped towards the burning red ground, my heart leapt like one of the green frogs that camp out in our dunny. But it landed safely. People emerged, like fire ants from their nest, and began to run towards me, gesturing wildly. Then we were all running to the house.

# Time <sup>TO</sup> Write

The world was blurry as Mum, the baby still in her swollen gut, was stretched into the flying contraption. I gripped Teddy's and Maisie's hands as we were hustled into the metallic belly too.

"Is she... Are we... Is it too late?"

A nurse smiled at me. "It's a close thing, darl." She patted me on the shoulder. "If it hadn't been for Rev. Johnno Flynn, and his little radios-and-planes notions, well..."

My nerves were like static, waiting. "But they're both going to be okay?"

HONOURABLE MENTION  
*THE BASKET WEAVER*  
**LIZZIE HARRIS**

Dexterous fingers slipped one under another. The pads on her fingertips were worn from years of twirling dried fronds into the most complex of patterns. The work was arduous, as weaving always was, but forgiving. In each of Kwezi's baskets, there was a flaw, of that she was sure, but not one that she ever felt ought to be corrected, or that should cause the basket to be unwoven and reincarnated.

The banks of flesh at the top of her palms had once been as tender as the rolling meadows of the Midlands, untouched by industry or the iron tracks which now traced the curvature of the land in bold lines. By now though, the stinging whip of copper telephone wire, having shod its vivid plastic covering, had scratched over her skin to make a graceful crosshatch of scars. The fingers of her grandchildren, exploring the crevices of her hands could push down on the flesh and not be greeted with raw cuts, but rather with proof of experience, which had left Kwezi weathered, but not harmed.

Her mother had named her deliberately: Kwezi – 'bright morning star'. Having come into life with a grin of knowing etched onto her face, in a time of dread, oppression and pass books, her being was saturated with hope.

"We are basket weavers," her mother would look down into her dark eyes with insistence, "and when I go on, to the other country, you will weave to remember me, and you will teach the weaving to your sons and daughters, so they remember you."

# Time to Write

Even as she said this, her fingers would be winding dried grass of slick black, ivory white and root brown. Her fingers were versed in their trade: omniscient.

The baskets were woven from their rim to their core, reaching further into themselves with each flip of the grass.

“This is how we learn to live,” said her mother. Lying on a straw pallet in the middle of the curved hut, she knew she was to go to the other country soon. “Towards our heart’s knowledge, we must live. There is no other core in our life.”

Her eyes wandered not to Kwezi’s hands, which confidently wove even at this time, but to the mud walls of the bare rondavel. She had asked to be laid in the middle and not buried out in the burial grounds: interred joyously in this centre-place.

Kwezi would not stay in her mother’s village. Her mourning soul wept for blooms of new colour.

In the township, sprawling out from the hilly edges of Durban, Kwezi lived well. There was little grass there. Everything had been cleared for homes of corrugated iron and clay brick to be erected – a strange medley of man and mountain. Those who were allowed by the government to live in the clean white suburbs saw this as a slum: a burden. Not in a sympathetic manner, but in that of the superior hobbled by something considered an inconvenient necessity.

Kwezi believed otherwise: Using those things that the ‘superior’ rejected – their ragged clothes, their chores, the old wires they allowed to be rolled up – these she did not mind. She was living as a basket weaver who knew it was her core, not the rim, to whose end all should be directed.

She was one of the first to leave behind the growing materials of the old-style baskets.



In the glow of morning, a youthful security guard returned from his shift in the bowels of the city. He carried a long stick, using it perhaps to walk, or to beat away intruders, she did not know. Seeing it, Kwezi hoped it served no purpose but its own being, for it had been made beautifully. The smooth wood, shucked of bark, was wound with wire of bright purple, blue, red, orange and green, making a vibrant and sturdy sheath. She let herself be drawn towards the man, surprised clouds of gingery dust bursting from under her bare heels.

Reaching him, she asked of what the sheath was made.

“Telephone wires; it’s too quiet and calm down there all through the night. This is my love.”

He said he would bring to her all of the colours he could find, for many coils of the old wires were to be found near his place of employ.

“It would be my pleasure, Kwezi.” He said her name with a slight click.

She knew he was bringing her both wire and the love she needed to move towards the rich centre of her spirit. She was still holding a wisp of grass, but she let it return to the dust, falling between herself and the man.

She wove with all the hues. On each strand of wire there were some small scratches and nicks, but overall their vibrancy excused these defects. She knew now, sitting beside the door of her hut, the mud brick supporting her curved back, that she would soon go to the other country to be with her mother, and that young man who too had become old. So she worked long hours into the night to finish the baskets she had waited with confidence throughout her life to make.

The first she finished was for her mother: green in homage to the grass she had picked, dried and woven with dedicated fingers. Paired with a pale blue, the wire was arranged in a stepped pattern, in the name of firmament.

## Time TO Write

The second she wove was for the man: glad yellow diamonds, which showed she was his woman, his only wife.

The third was for her children: a whirl of purple, deep blue, red and thankful orange spiralled from the core of the basket.

The final basket was for herself: a stairway to heaven. The stairway was yellow on a white background – as yellow as a star in the midnight sky. Triangles stacked upon one another led up to the rim of the basket, welcoming her to the other country.

HONOURABLE MENTION  
*FREAK SHOW*  
**CHRISTOPHER McNAUGHTON**

When I was a young boy, my father worked at the local carnival. He dreamed of one day managing the carnival to provide a better life for my mother and I. But the position my father had did not make him enough money. It was time for me to start working to help the family. I went job hunting over many weeks with not much luck.

One afternoon, I was looking through the ads for available positions and I came across an advertisement looking for circus performers to start a freak show. I had never heard of a freak show, and I spent the rest of my afternoon trying to figure out what it was.

My findings told me that a freak show was full of physically unusual humans, such as those uncommonly large or small. They presented performances that were shocking to the audience and people with extraordinary diseases and conditions were always the favourite. I was so intrigued by the concept of a freak show, and when I told my father about the it, he was more interested than I was. He came up with the idea of starting his own show. Three days later we went to the auditions and met so many talented people.

Unfortunately, they were all interested in joining the show they were auditioning for before being willing to consider ours. But just before we were about to leave, we met Frank, a 27-year-old man without arms or legs. He had just been rejected from the audition and we offered him a place in our freak show.

# Time to Write

More freaks came. First was Lucinda, a lady who had a beard the length of a cucumber. She and I became very close over time. Next we met Ursula and Umni who were brother and sister; the two were dwarfs and could rap each other's tongues together. Finally we met Randall, a man who weighed over four-hundred pounds. He might have been big, but he was the funniest and nicest guy I had ever met. Father and I were feeling very unsure, but it was a start.

Father was able to get us a room in the carnival to practice our acts. It was there that the crew and I had the best of times. After months of rehearsals, Father finally told his boss about the freak show and he didn't take it well. Father was fired from the carnival immediately. On that same day, Randal rounded up about fifty people in the streets to watch us perform. The cast and I panicked, but we were prepared. Ursula and Umni opened the act with their tongue-twisting trick, and Frank did flips around their tongues. So far we hadn't heard much laughter from the audience, but we continued to the next act.

Lucinda played with her beard and braided it into funny animals. Some children came up and began touching it. Father and I couldn't stop laughing. But the crowd got smaller, people were leaving and we were unsure of what to do next to do. It came to our final act, and it all depended on Randal. Father and I had doubts about whether he would be entertaining or interesting enough for people to stay, but we stuck with it. He started telling his life story in a series of jokes. The audience were really enjoying his stories and were laughing a lot. He eventually fell over on his back and began to cry. The audience was very interested and engaged. They were staring at Randall with confused expressions on their faces. A woman from the audience came over to help him up and asked what the problem was, he replied saying, "I'm just so pleased to tell my stories and make others happy".

Many audience members came up giving Randall hugs. Randall then continued to expand on his story and how his whole life

people had made fun of his size. He finished by bringing Father and I on stage to thank us for giving him a chance to perform. He reminded the audience that we should all have the courage to keep following our dreams. The crowd cheered and started donating money in appreciation of the show. Father's boss heard about our show in the street and decided it would be a worthwhile addition to the carnival. It was a fantastic result for us all.

# Time TO Write

HONOURABLE MENTION

*THE WITNESS*

LISA MILLS

She lay under the black sea of night, drowning in stars. Watching them dance in the sky – luminous and proud in their own right. A light breeze flowed through the fingers of the trees and the leaves danced along with the stars. She watched as the duo danced into the silent night. She pondered how beauty was not always bathed in sunlight, but at times cloaked by darkness like the hidden beauty she witnessed before her. If only everyone noticed the majestic beauty of night.

A man walked past, slowly and clumsily. She watched as he made his way to the abandoned park. Something struck her as peculiar. It was the way the man walked, as if in a trance.

Her eyes followed him as he traipsed down the solitary road, leaving a trail of silence behind him as if the trees and stars too had stopped to watch. Slowly her attention drifted to his crimson hands. She frowned, confused by their colour, and then gasped as she realised that they were dripping with blood. Momentarily dazed, she gathered her thoughts and ran out onto the street calling after him. But he continued to walk as if he had not heard her at all.

She stood, frozen, torn as to what to do. Should she go after him? It did not seem safe, but she was absent of fear and curiosity consumed her. She hesitated for a moment longer then began to run after the man.

Her heavy breath, pounding heart and the sound of her feet hitting the road shattered the silence that had been left behind her. The

# Time to Write

stars watching her disappear down the road with the echo of her feet ringing through the trees.

She found him sitting on a park bench. He was cradling something in his hands like a wounded bird. He stared at it sorrowfully as blood oozed from between his fingers.

She shivered in her skin and took a step forward. Her breath was hot on her lips. Another step, and the man did not move. Another slow step, another breath, this time she saw what he held. She raised a trembling hand to her mouth and gasped for air. Soft tears rolled silently down her cheeks, blurring the tragic scene before her.

The trees loomed over the man casting further darkness upon his figure as if deliberately shielding him from the moonlight. He seemed so small, nearly fading into the night. But he was all that she could see. Everything else no longer existed.

Their eyes were both drawn to the bleeding heart he cradled in his hands. A single tear slid down the man's cheek, reaching the point where it regretfully had to let go of his skin, falling.

She took another slow step forward. But still the man did not look at her. She stood in front of him like a shadow, helpless. Sadness crept over her body, enclosing her in its suffocating grasp. She found herself falling to her knees as if begging the man to look up, willing him to find some strength. But he didn't.

He was not strong enough, and she knew that he would never be on his own – no one is ever strong enough on their own.

Kneeling before him, she looked up into the man's sorrow-stained face. Slowly, ever so slowly, she placed her hands around his so that together they both held his bleeding heart.

This time the man raised his wet, desperate eyes to hers. She breathed in and whispered softly in his ear.

“Let me take it for a minute.”



The man blinked. She looked down at his bleeding heart in their hands and his eyes followed hers. Slowly, reluctantly, the man let go. Now his heart lay in her hands – heavy and cold.

Relieved, she looked up at the man. He looked at her. The stars looked down upon them both, the only witnesses to the beautifully tragic scene of that night. Then finally the man's face shattered into a smile and his eyes bled tears of relief.

# Time <sup>TO</sup> Write

HONOURABLE MENTION  
*THEOLOGY IS ANTHROPOLOGY*  
GEORGE COX

Aaron the organist stepped leisurely out into the cold air just after midnight followed closely by Reverend Gabe.

“Superb, Aaron, absolutely – I especially liked the Bach. I’ve never heard it played so well,” said Gabe, strolling happily down the dimly lit avenue. Naphtha light streaked across Aaron’s tailcoat, and Gabe’s ivory collar glinted in the night.

“Thank you, sir,” replied Aaron, clutching dark blue sheet music, “I’m glad you decided to attend.”

They had come from a concert at the Conservatoire, an organ recital; Aaron, a scholar of increasing renown, had been asked to perform and was now enjoying the post-performance high.

“I wouldn’t have missed it – you know I do love that sort of music. Very peaceful.”

Aaron was heading towards the Church of St. Catherine, where they both worked, to lock up after the choir had finished its evening rehearsal; Gabe was tired though, and bound for home. The years had settled on him, and the glamorous evening was now a stranger to the old clergyman. He would retire to the warm bed he shared with Madeleine, his wife of many years, but not before congratulating the consummate maestro.

“Again, well done to you. You always bring such... such life to the music, and to the message, the words. I’m proud and so lucky to work with you. I much enjoyed this evening. Ah, but I ramble –

# Time TO Write

it is late. I shall see you tomorrow, Aaron. Have a good night,” he said, almost slurring; Gabe still retained a few of his youthful habits, including a fondness for a particular vintage of Rioja before a concert.

“You are very kind, Reverend, but yes, perhaps you should be getting home. A goodnight to you too.”

The old priest ambled across the road, waving before turning out of sight, and with that the younger man was left alone.

He walked slowly, despite the frosty night ... *geduldig, für Allzeit* ... being warm at his core from the exertion of performance. The tree-lined streets were quiet now, and reminded Aaron of his childhood. He knew the place well, and had always found beauty in the interlocking regularity of the brick and mortar, the strong architecture ... *Ein feste Burg* ... in the walls he walked beside. The draped wisteria, the billowing purple clouds painted haphazardly over the dry orange – so untamed, so natural, but in the end so perfectly beautiful as to seem... inevitably painstakingly crafted.

Sometimes, Aaron would sit outside and read perched on grass verges; during the day the sultry air was everywhere, the wafting fragrances of frangipani, blossoming flower, pecan and sugary almond percolating beneath the orange trees’ sweet citrus. The night was different though, and winter more so: the cold was all you could smell.

Music again drifted through Aaron’s head as he recalled the concert; the Bach, he was writing about it, BWV 656, *O Lamm Gottes unschuldig*, the Leipzig chorale prelude – his personal favourite. There’s this passage towards the end, descending chromatic lines in the tenor and soprano, harmonised so meltingly, the ending so dulcet. *Soli Deo Gloria*.

Across the avenue, the church came into sight. Lit up with lamplight streaming through the stained glass, the stony ground dappled by refracting crystal. It was pretty at night, a jewel set in the street, topped by a lone spire and a cross, nothing more – *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* – enduring in its simplicity, sparingly decorated.

Aaron crossed the grounds, trudging over the ancient tufted grass and entered the building from the side, whereupon he was greeted by the sound of the church's organ being played, quite well it would seem. He walked quietly up to the organ loft, pausing for a moment; he couldn't quite place it, "... ah, Vaughan Williams, how unusual". A beautiful rendition, in fact, of the hymn prelude: the famous Rhosymedre. Aaron stopped and listened. He would confront the intruder in a moment. He had not heard this work in a long time. He himself used to relish playing it. It demanded great sensitivity: a subdued touch.

He continued up gingerly into the loft, and saw immediately that the interloper was Marie, a teenaged soprano from the choir. She sat entranced at the keyboard, playing very slowly. Aaron noticed she was handling the pedals adeptly; her indigo heels strewn on the ground and her stockinged feet gently caressed the bars of dark polished wood.

"This is my friend, in whose sweet praise. I all my days could gladly spend."

She held the final chord, the plangent harmony echoing, filling the church; Aaron's body resonated, it was warmed within. She removed her hands from the keyboard with reverence; the sound died away, everything was still.

"I didn't know you could play," he quietly offered.

Marie looked up with a start, suddenly flushed red.

"Mr Lefèvre! Oh – you don't mind my being here, do you? I just thought I might ... play, play a little ... I must have lost track ..." She spoke quickly with a small stutter.

"No, no of course it doesn't bother me. I'm only about to lock up. It's late, you know. I wasn't expecting anybody to be here."

She hurriedly put her shoes back on, taking down the cloth-bound music and seeing similar in Aaron's arms.

# Time To Write

“Oh, umm, you’ve just come from that concert, haven’t you?” she said. “For the third-years? How was it, what ... what did you play? I’m sorry I missed it.”

“It was quite good... yes, I think you would have liked it,” he said, smiling warmly. He held up his music. “Just a little Bach.”

She squinted at the title.

“Oh, yes! A wonderful piece – you don’t have to be anywhere, do you? Do you think you could play it, for me? Umm, if you wouldn’t mind,” she asked anxiously, innocent desire flashing in her pure blue eyes.

“Certainly, Marie,” said Aaron, settling himself at the instrument, adding peacefully. “I always have time for a little music.”

HONOURABLE MENTION

*DARKNESS*

**MATTHEW DUDLEY**

I have been a bit on edge lately. I don't know why, but lots of things have been on my mind. It's been a while since I got a good night's sleep. I have been waking up every couple of hours in a cold sweat and, whenever I try to get back to sleep, my mind is going at a million miles an hour.

It all started about three weeks ago, when it was cold and storming. I have never been very comfortable in the dark, but my brother Sam has always been there, ever since I was five and he was seven. He hears my restlessness because our walls are pretty thin and his room is next to mine. He always comes in and tells me to shut up; it may be tough love but it helps me to know that he is close.

I was trying to sleep, and I was being especially restless because the tree outside was cracking and I could see silhouettes moving in the window. He came in and closed my curtains, told me I was being ridiculous, and went back to his room. I could hear him sigh when he got back in bed, and I knew that he knew I could hear him; it was his way of telling me there was nothing to worry about and everything will be okay.

The storm went on for a week and I could hear in his voice every night: he was getting more annoyed with me, but he was still there every night.

He has never really been genuinely annoyed with me like that before, but if anyone didn't know my family they would say that my brother and I don't get on well. But we are always joking around and pretending to be annoyed at each other for stupid things. I like the relationship we have; he is harsh, but he's toughening me up for the real world.

# Time to Write

The storm got increasingly worse and I was starting to get worried because every night he was more irritated, and he grouched when he got in bed instead of sighing.

Mum and Dad never really noticed that he came into my bedroom most nights, so I didn't find it unusual that they weren't saying anything. The only thing that was strange to me was that they weren't making any contact with him during the day. It was almost like they were looking through him instead of at him. I didn't see them talk to him for days. They get like that sometimes when he does something bad.

Yesterday Mum told me I was going to go to therapy, and I was happy because I finally thought that I would get help to overcome my fear of darkness. The waiting room was cold and unwelcoming; the receptionist was blunt and large. I was nervous as I thought I might be thought of differently at school after seeking help. I started to doubt whether it would help me. I asked Mum if she really thought I needed help and told her that she could use the money to help us get by instead. She reassured me and gave my shoulder a squeeze, a gesture that said 'trust me'.

I walked in and the first things I noticed were the warmth of the room, the welcoming colours and the light. The therapist welcomed me and asked Mum to stay outside; she told me to make myself comfortable and asked some questions that seemed pretty out of the ordinary.

She said, "I know that Sam used to help you out with your fear of the dark, but he isn't with us anymore. I am here to help with your grieving and come to terms with his death."

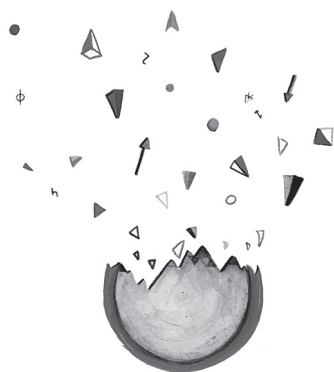
Suddenly the sun went behind a cloud and the room went dark, like someone had sucked the warmth and comfort from my world.

"Your mother thought that you weren't handling yourself well after the car crash. It's not your fault."

I felt my skin get littered with goose bumps as my eyes welled up with tears and I collapsed into sorrow.



CATEGORY  
OPEN



# Time TO Write

WINNER  
*AUTUMN DAYS*  
**ANNE MAHER**

He didn't want to park in the underground car park because it cost too much. It was \$18 an hour, but honestly, to feel the weight of him as we made our way up the street, avoiding people, looking out for uneven bits in the footpath, hearing his laboured breathing, his gasps, and knowing that his grip on my arm would be white-knuckled... I would have paid \$18 a minute, somehow. We reached the entrance, a victory in itself, and I didn't even flinch when he snapped at me for planting him in a chair so I could ask at Reception for instructions to Oncology.

We hadn't been there before. We knew the hospital – oh, yes – the Emergency Department, and even the Rehabilitation Centre down the road were familiar places. But that was when it was just a pain, a nuisance, that old problem, something that had better be checked out again – for good measure. That was then. This was now. A diagnosis had been made, described, accounted for, explained, accepted... Accepted? Who accepts a pronouncement like that?

In the lift, there were sideways glances at others like us, hunched over, avoiding eye contact. A youngish man in a wheelchair was being pushed by an elderly lady: his mother, perhaps.

We followed the blue line down the long corridor to another desk, another reception area and another kind-but-hurried nurse. This time, I found myself asked to stay seated in Reception while he was wheeled away. He didn't look back as the orderly manoeuvred him down another corridor.

## Time to Write

I tried the coffee machine for something to do. I flicked through old magazines. I was aware of others like me waiting, watching the clock. I was conscious of the flurry of activity by medical staff – busy important people with stethoscopes around their necks, worn like adornments. The nurses were laughing hilariously about some Easter eggs left on the desk. They crackled the foil wrappers as they ate them. One young nurse saw me watching and silently offered me an egg. I shook my head. I looked down at the magazine I was holding and read an advertisement for a holiday package deal in Fiji.

I don't know how long I sat there. A young male nurse finally approached and sat down on the green vinyl bench beside me. He looked directly at me and my stomach did its familiar clench. I might have even wondered fleetingly if there was a toilet nearby because suddenly I needed one. He was kind. He spoke evenly and clinically and told me I could come back tomorrow. In the afternoon.

In the park across the road from the hospital, the leaves on the trees were red, orange and yellow. Large brown oak leaves lay on the path and crunch underfoot. Smoke from a small fire made by a gardener hung in wisps in the air. Spiny chestnuts pricked my legs where I sat on the grass. I ate a pear, the last of the pears from our tree. We had removed the netting only yesterday. A bird had been caught in it. I looked at the dead bird and tried not to think about how it had died. He said we should put the nets on earlier next year, in spring. I put the netting with the bird in the bin. He didn't know. It was my job to put the bins out now. He said that pulling the bins out to the street made him wheeze.

At Christmas, he had spent most of the day in the chair watching the kids. He grumbled about the fish I cooked. He said I should have put it on the barbie. He told the kids they were noisy and he snapped at them when they said they wanted to go out to play cricket. They went out anyway. I stayed inside and put away the dishes. I think he snoozed. The kids left not long after that. We had a sandwich for tea; he said he wasn't hungry.

His pain got worse after that. There were long, hot days in the car driving to various appointments and different treatments. Each time we were hopeful. We had no idea, really, of what lay ahead of us. We ate outside on the veranda most evenings until the mozzies sent us inside. We got to drinking a glass of cider with dinner; it was cold and not too alcoholic. His painkillers were pretty strong, but not strong enough. He didn't sleep well. Neither did I. A couple of times I crept down the passage and slept on the couch with only the flywire door shut. I loved the feel of the cool air blowing in.

One night, I heard him shuffling up to find me. He wasn't upset. He understood.

He said, "I know I keep you awake. It's hard on you. I know that. But why don't you come back to bed, eh love?"

I didn't know then that we only had a few more weeks to sleep in the same bed, the bed we shared all of our married life. I didn't know that as the days got shorter and darker and colder, and the nights long, I would lie in our bed alone.

# Time TO Write

RUNNER UP  
*THE LAUNDRY*  
MICHELLE THOMAS

Fiona stretched, her back screaming with pain. When would this nightmare end? She looked down at her swollen belly; it couldn't be too much longer. Outside the lattice window, the dew of the morning frost sparkled in the dawn sunlight. It was so beautiful she almost forgot where she was. Almost.

A sound behind her. A slight creak of the floor boards over the din of the machines, the sense of being watched. She froze, heart pounding, and spun around.

"Here you are." It was Sister Anjelica, her tone flat and even.

Fiona's eyes riveted on a grimy laundry bag abandoned against the industrial washer behind the nun. She had to look somewhere. Anywhere but into those eyes. Hard, grey eyes. What was the matter with her? Sister Anjelica had never been unkind. Not directly. Surely she was just checking to see if she was all right. Simple explanation. Then why did her skin pebble as if she was standing outside on that frosty lawn instead of in here, in this steam-drenched industrial laundry.

"It is almost morning tea time," the nun informed her, as if she didn't know. Her stomach growled at the mere suggestion. No time for breakfast; the laundry never stopped.

Shame. Punishment. Purgatory.

Her throat dry. "Thank you, sister." A squeak. She swallowed. Or started to, but couldn't find a drop of saliva. She wiped the sweat from her brow.

# Time to Write

"You'll be leaving us soon," the sister suggested, looking at the swollen belly.

Fiona blinked. Leaving? Yes, she would be leaving. Leaving soon. If she didn't, she'd go mad. Just like Suzy. Poor little Suzy and all her crazy prattle. But it was just babble. Wasn't it? Hadn't it all been explained? Suzy was a bit touched. Then again, who wouldn't be?

She looked around, avoiding those eyes. An image reflected in the glass door of the washer, the golden rays of the morning sun high enough now to creep through the lattice window. Who was that girl? The frightened girl in the reflection? Once so rebellious. Now broken.

*I want my mummy.*

"You still haven't signed the papers, I see."

The legal documents appeared in those strong hands. There it was again. The pressure. The insistence. All she had to do was sign and the demands would stop. But how could she? How could she just hand over her baby? To strangers. To care for. Or not. Who knew where her baby would end up? Convent orphans. Home children, they called them. Societies' lepers.

"I've been thinking." Hesitant. Why hesitant? It was her baby, wasn't it? Who were they to tell her what to do? But she wasn't going to say that. Not to this woman. Her hands shaking, the panic rising, her voice as steady as possible under the circumstances. "I've been thinking," she said again. "I might keep the baby."

"They all say that." A simple statement. A pause. "But it's for the best." The pen pressed into Fiona's hand. The papers spread out onto the ironing board. "In the end, they all realise that it's for the best. You'll see."

An ironing board. As good a place as any to sign over her legal rights. As good a place as any to desert her child. It was crazy to think she



could resist. Wasn't that what Suzy said? Resistance was futile. Mad little Suzy.

"I can't!" A sob escaped her lips.

"You can. And you will." Relentless.

There had to be some way out. Fiona backed up, but was trapped by the folding bench. Interminable hours spent at this bench. Folding, folding, folding. Ironing and folding. Hospitals, restaurants, schools, hotels. Sheets, pillow cases, table linen, towels, uniforms. It never ended. The stink. The mould. The vomit. The rotting food. How had it come to this?

She reached behind her, her fingers closed around something hard. Cold. She felt it in her hand, its size belying its power. So compact. Barely larger than her small hand. The perfect size, which is why she'd chosen it. How long ago did she do that? Why had she thought she might need protection?

A scream split the air, cutting through the din of the industrial machinery. The sound, unreal. Searing pain tore through her body. The baby. It was time.

But that was many years ago. So many years. Those awful memories flooded back into her mind. Surely she should feel something for that poor little baby. Her baby. She placed the newspaper in the bin, the headline barely hidden amongst the vegetable scraps: bodies of 800 children, long dead, found in septic tank at former convent home for unwed mothers.

# Time TO Write

HONOURABLE MENTION

*IT'S TIME*

MELISSA WRAY

Can after can he chugs down. The amber liquid spills along his chin. His only other interest is watching the game on the big screen. The commentator's voice blares through the speakers, but I don't dare suggest it's too loud. He doesn't talk, except to order whoever is nearby to get another beer.

"How do you follow this?" I mutter.

He stares at me, confused by my question.

"I can't understand it," I say, shaking my head.

The atmosphere in the room thickens. Still. Tense. I should have kept my big mouth shut.

"It's just it seems to stop and start all the time," I explain.

"Thish game...' he slurs, "ish one you should reshpect." He slams his fist against the couch.

Mum clears her throat. "Abby, it's getting late," she says, with a look of warning.

She nods towards the doorway. I look back at him and realise my mistake. His eyes are foggy, clouded. They can't settle on their target: me. His head droops as he sits forward on the couch. Aluminium beer cans tinkle as he kicks them out of his way.

"Wha's wrong wif you, Abby? It'sh not hard to understand." His gaze doesn't waver, even if the focus does.

# Time To Write

“What’s da matter with ya daughter, Eileen? She stupid like you?”

Mum smiles at me. “Go to bed, sweetheart.”

She is calm and unfazed by his comments. But then this isn’t an unusual occurrence. She has dealt with him on many occasions. We both have.

Too many beers and that’s the end of the semi-decent guy that lives here. Monday to Friday one man lives here. He goes to work every day and helps around the house. He even gives me a lift when I need one. But as soon as the weekend comes round it’s like another bloke has moved in. When he arrives you make sure to clear out and give him space.

I collect my things, kiss Mum goodnight and walk toward my room.

“Ya take after yer mother, Abby.” He calls after me. “You bitches both think ya better ’an the rest of us. Well, you ain’t!”

I step over the threshold to my bedroom. A safe retreat.

*Crunch. Twang. Crunch. Twang.*

I cringe.

“Leave ’em alone, Eileen.” His muffled voice filters through the walls. “I’ll put ’em where I want.”

More bangs as he continues to throw what sounds like empty cans against the wall.

“Why don’t you bugger off with ya daughter and leave me alone.”

He’s yelling now. I hear the click as their bedroom door closes. Mum knows better than to hang around when he gets worked up.

He keeps muttering to himself with the occasional rant thrown in. Soon, he’ll fall asleep on the couch. He always sleeps there when he’s drunk. He also pisses where he passes out. No one ever sits on the

couch, except him. It's soaked with a stale beer and urine smell. No matter how hard it gets scrubbed you can't remove the stench.

There's a soft knock at the door.

"Come in," I whisper.

Mum squeezes through the space. "It's time, sweetheart."

"Really? Tonight?"

She nods. "Wait 20 mins. He'll be snoring by then."

She pushes the suitcase into my room and shuts the door.

I take a deep breath. *Here we go again.*

I clean out my drawers and wardrobe. It doesn't take long. We don't indulge in lots of clothes, just the essentials. I retrieve the box tucked behind the wardrobe. Six months of hoarding and helping myself to his wallet is in this box. He never knows how much money he has left after drinking.

I scoop out the cash along with a couple of faded photographs. I run my finger over the faces. Mum's holding me high when I was a baby. She looks so young. Her face is smiling upwards as mine laughs down at her. From a young age I've known we're a team. It's only ever been the two of us. The cash cows along the way don't count. The blokes Mum hooks up with have only ever been a way to support us. Steady income with no family nearby and definitely no kids. Alcohol allowed, but no drugs. She picks them well, most of the time.

I throw the last of the things I want to keep in the suitcase. Over the years, packing has gotten easier. I don't get attached to material things, like trinkets and keepsakes. I sling my backpack over my shoulder, heave the suitcase and walk out the room. It's just like the other dozen I've lived in over the years and won't be missed.

# Time To Write

I sneak down the back stairs, careful not to let the suitcase bang. I wait in the shadows for Mum. The heat, mixed with the night air, makes me sweat. Or is that nerves?

“Abby, catch!” Mum drops the car keys to me from above.

I unlock the car, making sure the interior light is switched off. I throw my stuff in the boot and race back upstairs to grab my doona and pillow. We’ll probably spend a few nights in the car until we find a place. The longest we’ve spent living in the car is two weeks. It’s easier to sleep when it’s cold. It’s stifling in summer.

I wait in the passenger seat. The car heaves as Mum loads in her bags. Bang! The car door slams shut.

“He’s passed out,” she says, starting the engine.

I nod, put my seatbelt on and tuck my legs up onto the seat. I wrap my arms around them tight.

“We’re moving on, sweetheart.”

She holds her hand mid-air, waiting for mine to join up. I grip her hand and she shakes it about.

“To bigger and better things,” I say.

She reverses out the driveway and we don’t look back.

HONOURABLE MENTION

*AMON*

SUE GUNNINGHAM

Amon lent his forehead against the train window and watched the commuters on the platform. A shaft of sunlight outlined the honeyed sheen of the teenager's face. Leaning back, Amon stretched his right arm along the top of the double seat that he was occupying, a pose he knew would show off his muscular frame. He inhaled deeply and felt his broad shoulders rise and lift the firm spread of his chest. The tautness of his stomach in the white singlet top and the muscular knots of his upper arms were testament to the hours he spent in the gymnasium.

"Like a rock," Amon told himself with pride.

He had bleached his hair a few days ago. He wore it short and tousled with a long fringe that he could flick aside with panache. The hairstyle, the hair-flick and the torn jeans that Amon was wearing all mimicked the style of his favourite singer.

Too hot to handle. He nodded to his reflection in the window.

Glancing at his arm, the teenager thought yet again how much better he would look if he had a tattoo – something awesome, something that would be envied by others.

*They say it hurts a bit – a needle scratching ink into your skin. His biceps involuntarily clenched at the thought. Still, lots of sheilas get 'em done. Can't be too bad.*

Amon considered this for a moment. *They get little tats, though. Roses or hearts. Probably little ones aren't so painful. What about*

# Time To Write

*those guys with 'em on their neck or head? That must kill. Anyway, doesn't matter. They won't let me get one 'til I'm eighteen. Bloody rules. F'n government!*

Amon grinned. He hardly ever swore out loud. Not like some kids he overheard on the train.

*Some put 'f'n' in front of every thing they describe. Hard to know if they mean something's good or bad when everything's labelled f'n this or f'n that.*

Amon said the word softly.

“Fucken.”

*Most kids his age could only dream about what fucking was like. Supposed to be great. Hard to know where to begin with a girl, though. What d'ya say when you both know what the bloke really wants? What words can convince a delicate, pretty, sweet-smelling girl to let a lumpy, stupid boy touch her secret bits and eventually pierce her inner sanctum with his ridiculously ugly, oozing 'sword'?*

“Fucked if I know,” Amon muttered to his reflection.

He ran his hand through his hair and re-adjusted the designer sunglasses that rested across his head. Once when he had taken a train to the beach, Amon had seen a surfer wearing sunglasses like these. He remembered the surfer coming out of the water with his board under his arm. Striding up the sand, the surfer had given one gigantic toss of his head and flicked his wet, tangled hair into a thick rope that trailed rivulets of water down his back.

*Like a god,* Amon mused to himself.

Amon had watched, mesmerised, as the surfer dropped his board and flopped down onto a towel. A girl was stretched out face-down on an adjacent towel, her bikini top discarded beside her. As she lifted her head to murmur to the surfer, her small, round, pomegranate breasts were partially exposed. Rising up slightly, she rummaged around in a



large bag. The whole side of her breast was clearly visible to Amon as she stretched to pass the surfer his sunglasses. Amon remembered the heated surge in his groin as he glimpsed the pale, delicate curve of her under-breast.

Later, he had bought a pair of sunglasses like those worn by the surfer. That was an image worth copying. Amon nodded to himself. That surfer undoubtedly knew the words to begin a conversation with a girl.

*Imagine leaving her alone on the sand and going surfing. No way that surfer just stole glances of those sweet pomegranates. If he could leave her, he must have already tasted the fruit and is no longer consumed with the aching hunger. Fucken lucky bastard!* Amon scowled at the window.

He was distracted from the memory by some schoolgirls seated further along the carriage. They were stealing glances at him and talking in that loud, hysterical manner that girls adopt when they want to be noticed. He wondered if they considered him 'god-like'. His eyes skimmed across the girls, but avoided direct eye contact with any one of them.

He swung his gaze back out through the window to give them the freedom to study him discreetly. He could hear them whispering about his physique and good looks. Amon was well-pleased with himself.

Soon the train pulled into his station. As it slowed, Amon gave a grunt and threw himself upwards with the force needed to ensure he balanced safely on the metal calliper secured along the length of his stunted left leg. Adopting his usual awkward swing-and-jerk gait, he moved towards the carriage doors. His entire body released and contorted in the effort required to throw his left leg forward.

He hated to delay other passengers in his struggle to alight safely, but his fear of stumbling was enormous as he stepped across the gap between the train and the platform. Years ago, a toddler had slipped down into that gap and been dragged away by the train.

# Time To Write

Concentrating hard to make the large step, Amon took all of his weight onto his good leg before swinging the callipered leg down. Once safely on the platform, he stood for a moment to catch his breath. He silently congratulated himself. *Yes! You're a fucken marvel!*

Behind him, the train pulled out. Through the window, the schoolgirls watched the platform slip away. One girl turned to her friend beside her.

“Didja see that?” she whispered, raising her eyebrows. She gave the uncertain giggle of a child pulled back from the edge of a dangerous precipice.

HONOURABLE MENTION

*HALF A YEAR*

**FRANK INCE**

Ruth Lawrence walked out of the clinic in a daze. Half a year, the doctor said; yet she felt so well. She visited the clinic only to get the results of her latest tests. Indigestion, she thought, but the results said differently. The blood tests came back positive. The MRI supported the doctor's diagnosis. Every test she underwent resulted in a negative outcome. Too big to operate. He gave her half a year.

How dare he pass sentence on her like that. He wasn't God. Only God can say how long she had left, and if God was using the doctor as his messenger, then surely he could express time in everyday language. Why couldn't he have said it the way it was: six months.

The rain was falling gently as she made her way to her car. She didn't care if she got wet. What was the most terrible thing that could come of it? Catch a cold. Perhaps even get pneumonia. The worst outcome would be a minor issue.

Ruth entered her car and reached for the wiper switch, but did not activate the control. Better to leave the windows wet. That way no one would witness her distress.

Half a year, he said. Just six months. It didn't really matter what words were used to couch the message; in the end it was all the same. 182 days. Given that no one can be precise when it comes to life expectancy, it might be a little more, or a little less.

Half a year, and already she was well into the first day, or as the motivational gurus might say, 'The first day of the rest of your life'. For Ruth, it was the worst day of her life.

## Time to Write

Doctor Murphet had held her hand as he gave her the bad news. Through her tears, she was aware of the sadness in his eyes and realised it was a bad day for him too. What was worse, to learn that you are dying or to have to tell someone else they don't have long to live? She didn't have an answer. She thought she would rather receive a death sentence than be charged with the responsibility of affecting such an assignment on another.

With trembling fingers, she managed to insert the keys in the ignition. When the motor fired into life, she wondered if she should drive. Wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, she stared unseeingly through a wet windscreen. The rain turned everything into ghostly, misshapen images.

Fumbling for a handkerchief, she dabbed her eyes. As she turned the key in the ignition, she wondered again if it was wise for her to drive. For some moments, she sat listening to the motor running and remembered the car was overdue for a service.

What a crazy thought to have at a time like this. Fresh tears stung her eyes as she realised that, service or no service, the car would survive her. The rear window was fogged up, and she had to turn the demister on before she could back out of the parking bay.

Her concern with safety troubled her. Doctor Murphet hadn't told her not to drive, but then he hadn't told her much at all. Half a year was what he said. No, she was not being fair; he had said much more, but they were the only words she could remember.

With the windows cleared, she backed the car out of the bay and headed toward home. Her hands seemed to lack strength as she turned the wheel, but she was untroubled by the condition. Losing control of the car was the least of her worries. If today turned out to be her last day then she would have the last laugh on the doctor.

Laugh? It would be no laughing matter if she were to be responsible for the death of someone else. That sobering thought caused her to

pull into the kerb. The fact that she had the power to take another person's life scared the wits out of her.

She experienced an epiphany watching the wiper blades glide in metronomic fashion across the glass. Having lived her biblical allocation of three score years and ten, all of which had been rich and fulfilling, she still had half a year more.

Sitting in her car when she had 182 days still to enjoy, while there were others whose time would come this very day, was no way to appreciate what she had left.

Putting her car into gear, she recommenced her journey. If she was to enjoy what she had left, she had better get a move on.

Time <sup>TO</sup> Write

HONOURABLE MENTION  
*THE AMAZING, THE MAGNIFICENT  
AND THE MUNDANE*  
**JENNI CURRY**

The hay covering the showground was damp from the night before, but still smelt like poo. I trudged across it, carrying my step stool and box of tricks. The purple cape that Mum made was already tied around my neck and billowing out in the morning breeze. Today, I would show everyone what I was made of. Today, I would amaze them with my magnificence!

Mr Corky from across the road had said I could have a spot at the town fair today, and he wasn't going to charge me any of my pocket money. I was amazed at that. Maybe my magic really was powerful.

I put my step stool down between the fairy floss stand and the one where you could win toys by knocking stuff over. My box sat on a good pile of hay as I pulled it open. I had spent all last night cutting out silver stars and now I had to stick each one onto my stool with sticky tape.

"Come oooooonnn," I mumbled, as another piece of tape wrapped around my fingers. I waved my hand about but it wouldn't come off. I sighed and knew I would have to wait for Mum to come by later to take that piece off for me.

My box had everything I needed and I had practiced and practiced all of yesterday, so I knew exactly how to do every amazing trick. The only other thing I needed to pull out was the bowl I stole from the kitchen. I put the bowl on the ground in front of my stool and sticky-taped a sign to it, which read 'MoNEy'. Standing back, I liked the look of it.

# Time to Write

I threw the sticky tape into the box and closed it up tight. No one was allowed to see in, and I wanted to buy fairy floss before the show opened.

“Come one, come all, to see the Amazing, the Magnificent, Toby Wizard! Watch as I make this card disappear.”

I went through the practised movements, careful not to go too slow at the important parts. The card was safely tucked up my sleeve, but I don't think anyone noticed me put it there. In fact, I'm not sure anyone saw the trick at all! The crowd wandered by, some glancing my way, but they didn't even slow down! But I knew what to do: my most amazing trick ever.

I dug down to the bottom of my box and pulled out my prop. I screwed up my face when I saw it had been squished and spent a bit of time returning the paper towel roll to its normal shape. It had to be round.

“Come one, come all to see the Magic Tube! OOOOooooooooo! I will pull objects from this empty tube. Come and test it for yourself. Make sure there is nothing inside.”

The people kept walking past. The only person looking at me was a little kid holding her mum's hand.

“Do you want to make sure the tube is empty?” I asked, looking right at her. She just hid behind her mum's skirt.

“As you are all satisfied that the tube is empty, I will now perform my magic. ABRA KAZOOODALY!”

And poof! Out came a purple scarf. I waved it around and the little girl screamed and stepped away from her Mum's skirt. Now, I had an audience.

“Do you think I can pull anything else from the Magic Tube?”

The little kid shook her head, holding her pigtails.



“ABRA KAZOODALY!” I yelled, and pulled another scarf from the tube. The girl giggled loud enough this time to make her mum turn around. Some other kids looked at me.

“Now for the most amazing thing ever! I will need your help with this one. I’m going to make a ribbon come out of the tube, but I will need you to grab the ribbon and walk away with it to make it all come out. Can you do that?”

The little girl nodded and came closer.

“ABRA KAZOODALOODALY!”

And the end of a red ribbon came out. The girl squealed again and looked at her mum before coming closer to grab the ribbon. I had to bend down ‘cause, on my stool, I was so much taller than her. She held the ribbon between one tiny finger and a thumb and started walking backwards. The ribbon was long enough to go all the way across to the stalls on the other side of the walkway. I made sure it was, ‘cause then everyone had to stop walking and watch my magic trick.

“Behold, the Amazing, the Magnificent, Toby Wizard and his Magic Tube!” I yelled to the crowd, before doing several bows in different directions.

Lots of people clapped so I gestured to my money bowl. A few came up to give me money, including the little girl. When she came up, I pulled my hat off and bowed deeply.

“Thank you for your help, little one.”

She giggled and dropped the money before running off to hold her mum’s hand.

The show started to slow down in the afternoon. That was okay; I was tired. I had worked hard all day and there was \$8.35 in my money bowl. Amazing. I picked up my box and packed it, and the stool, up to walk home. It seemed so far away and I wish I knew the spell to make boxes lighter.

## Time to Write

When I arrived home, I went straight to my room to put down my magic tricks and hide my new money. Then Mum called me for dinner.

Sausages, mash potato and peas. Yuk. I wished I knew the spell to make dinner a pile of magnificent food. Guess I was back to the mundane. But I still smiled because I knew that whenever I wanted to, I could be the Amazing, the Magnificent, Toby Wizard!

HONOURABLE MENTION

*MY UNCLE*

**GREG BOGAERTS**

My uncle, Ken Musson, worked at the Wire Rope Works in Newcastle for almost 60 years. Back then it was a job for life; once a bloke got hold of a position in one of the industries, he didn't let go of it. The memories of the Great Depression and the suffering it brought were still raw, and Newcastle had suffered a small depression in the 1920s when BHP was closed for updating. Bad times and unemployment had become a way of life amongst many Novocastrians.

Possibly, as a result, my uncle was a careful and conservative man. His world was narrowly defined by shift work, home, meals and sleep, broken only once a year by holidays. When his son left his job at one of the power stations at Lake Macquarie, my uncle nearly had a pink fit; he saw his son's leaving of a secure job for other employment as reckless and irresponsible.

Ken's conservative nature affected all of his family. The three sons and one daughter were kept under strict control and, inevitably, some of the children in adulthood couldn't wait to be free of their father and free of Newcastle.

My Aunt Joyce, Ken's wife, wasn't allowed to spend more than she was allocated every week out of the take-home pay, despite the fact that they were well off – everything paid for. When my uncle died, his wife lashed out, going on holidays around Australia, spending money on her children, doing up the family home in Mayfield. The immediate family of sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law were horrified, dismissing my aunt as irresponsible, but the truth was they were similar to Ken: conservative, worried about surviving, not

# Time To Write

inclined to splash money about when they'd lived through the hard times my uncle had.

Ken lived in a short street, and when he retired he became a custodian of sorts for all the families that lived there. He spent his remaining years going from house to house, looking after the elderly and infirm, making sure they had meals to eat, making sure their bills were paid by walking up to the post office himself and paying them, making sure he had time to sit down and chat with the men and women he'd known all of his life.

He invited Jill and me for tea when we first married. My family was made up of a wife and two stepdaughters, but that didn't seem to bother Ken like it did some of my other relatives. My uncle seemed genuinely happy that I'd found someone to love and marry. It didn't bother him that Jill and I had made the decision not to have any more children; two daughters were enough, and my wife was too old to bare babies safely.

This attitude was in contrast to my father's attitude; my father never got over Jill and I not having our own children, and I suspect he always considered my two stepdaughters inconsequential – of no importance because they weren't blood relations. None of this had a part in my uncle's outlook; the supposedly narrow man seemed open-minded to me when I compared his attitude to my family with that of my father's, which demanded that he have grandchildren as if by royal command and entitlement.

Ken died of a benign brain tumour; it was so deeply embedded in his brain it couldn't be surgically removed. His eldest son gave the funeral eulogy and, during it, Darrel made the point that his father had always had an inferiority complex that had prevented him from reaching his full potential in life.

It may have been a short journey from the Wire Rope Works to his house in Mayfield, but I thought my uncle, in his small way, created a life full of caring and compassion. An existence of understanding that many, including his family, didn't see in him.

HONOURABLE MENTION

*ROSA*

**MICHAEL HORVATH**

Last year, when the Republic became at last a finer nation – and her arsenal was robed in the scarlet of her conquered neighbours – there sat Sir Wingate, a certain consort of coruscating heights, though not to yours truly; one of the heroes of romance scaled by a most peculiar fate indeed. The first rung of the climb, for such it – initially, at least – was, begins with splendid summer dusk near the Gothic opulence of the Doge's Palace.

Just the Persian-apple tint of the wispy fading sky that mirrors de Machaut's songs about steamy Venus would suffice to aviate me in reveries of the heart; but I am far too enfolded in the nigh to dream of that, or, in fact, to think of anything else at all.

At the Piazza – that brick-paved square where travellers from three continents meet – you see me for the first time ever, sitting by myself, my iron falchion resting mightily at my impotently quivering hip. I am, impossibly in that bustling open-air common, quite alone – barring, naturally, Avis, my picketed thoroughbred albino steed on her all fours, stilted faithfully as ever under me.

Around me, the vibrant, cultured-looking horde of mariners from craftsmen, of nobility from mariners, world-famous, and in their most beautiful of cities, granted. But who are they to lance me both with their stares and their acid tongues all for the solitary benefit, it seems to me, of the senseless besiegement of my foreign silence? Do I, this obscure foot soldier from Armenia, this tiny newcomer, appear to have been born between the leonine hindquarters of the Griffin?

# Time to Write

Well I guess you yourself, for one, took me for as much, Winnie! At first! Today, I concede you had every right to immediately trust your person to beyond the Alps – even the very edge of the world – to get yourself from my alien sight. Thank you for, in the event, voyaging only so far as the cellars of Melamocco. But, back then, I think your aversion to me – your nose up, your symbolic golden spurs dazzling no matter the mere twilight – is fouler even than the carious pigs from the monastery of San Antonio Abbate. Swine, which, even then I knew, rootled at liberty about the city.

Speaking of which, it is momentarily later that I catch on to the blindness of my chronic nervousness, so that my onlookers' odd keenness, I understand suddenly, is not odd. They see how I am, not what I am, and that my state is in fact ensconced on the back of one of the Abbate's profanities, not, as I had thought, on that of my dear Avis!

The massive sow is going into labour, to be sure, for its belly, evidently, proportions girt equine as that; and the pig is also so motionless and so quiet, as if having all the confessions of its appetite to hide. My indecorous rose cheeks harbour no such inhibition. Not more than my attention, drawn and rigid, composes me briskly alight off the offensive animal and to manually wipe down my Milanese armour, which I've polished for a very good reason. The onlookers disperse. I reface the Basilica.

You eventually arrive in Melamocco. I, at the Piazza, am yet further steeling my distinguished guest status mettle, confronted with the garish doors of the Basilica, whose loggia towers over me at closer quarters. The likes of my official invitation I have never before attained, nor any events any of grandeur. But there is considerably more to things than soiled that.

My shakes, my mindless breathlessness prevails – especially as I recall my encounter with the porcine one – but I am, at least, on foot now (though unsteady of gait) and my soiled loins are being chased by flies. Whereas Avis, apparently, fled in horror after the genuine case of mistaken identity of my animal ride, and is nowhere to be

located. I have never predicted a mere horse could be so beloved but indignant. I am having a bad turn with the quadrupeds. I pray my affairs with the two-footed of the world will be much more profitable.

My nine-minute ballad, 'The Prance', is about to be performed *compositor presenti* at the Basilica loggia – and at the Doge's formally handwritten lead-sealed request at that! For the Doge's kind, I hold private rancour admittedly; I am, by profession, a pawn who kills; whose soul has bolted. But it was with the utmost expedition that I accepted the Doge's surprise official invitation in the field, although I had never met him. Why such haste of mine? Vaguely, I wondered whether I ever would meet him – it seems likely now. And would I ever, after that, perhaps enjoy leisure of the flesh among the nubile at, say, his castle Greensward.

At twenty-five, I am a veteran of the killing fields; to all tradition, one would think, unexpectedly and luckily alive. Maybe that is why I was invited to the loggia, and if so, how generous of the septuagenarian Doge! But I digress. That fact is, at my age, I need a spousal woman, preferably a rich noble one of ducal blood.

Gingerly, I walk up the stairs and, soon, into the crowded loggia itself.

'The Prance' passes me off well. Standing applause. And meet the Doge, I do; but thereafter, he introduces me, with much purposeful ceremony and pomp, to Rosa: his prodigally-dimensioned hand-raised pig, a favourite I later discover, of all the local Venetians.

That sow and I have met already...

Your father was insane, Winnie. He plucked me, at random, from my homeland just for his popular, but sorely-unwed, pig. All the luck that had dogged my life to date – for instance, my father's long since having dragged a foot from the surf to find his half-drowned son attached it – came flooding back to me like the plague. Where was Avis?

Gone yet, but looked like still the only woman for me.

Time <sup>TO</sup> Write



CATEGORY  
NMIT STAFF AND STUDENTS



# Time TO Write

WINNER  
*GOODBYE OLD FRIEND*  
TAYLA CHERIE

The smell of smoke left my throat dry, like sandpaper, intensifying as I stepped closer toward the blaze. A member of the *Deutsch Madel* ushered me forward. She was quieter than the others, but stern. She could say all that needed to be said with her eyes: the boys of the Hitler Youth relied on shouts and barked orders.

I looked down sadly at my tattered copy of *A Farewell to Arms*. “It’s just a lump of paper and ink,” I told myself. But I wasn’t convinced. Too many memories had leeches themselves into that book. I ran my finger over the tear where my mother had snagged her ring the first time she’d ever read it to me. On the titlepage was a blue scribble where my brother had shown me how to solve the newspaper anagram.

The line had stopped moving and the flames reached nearly as high as the church steeple. I looked behind me. The queue of people now stretched outside the gates and a crowd had gathered to watch. Babies clung to mothers, crying as the ash flecks stung their eyes. Old people were huddled over trolleys filled to the brim with enough paper and words to cover the history of the world: maybe they did conceal the history of the world. But not for much longer: it wasn’t history anymore. It was lies.

The heat engulfed us. The cheeks of those around me were crimson; sweat ran in steady streams down all of our faces. Even the impeccably groomed teenagers in their crisp, ironed uniforms were wet, struggling to hold onto their batons and clubs that had become slippery with sweat.

# Time To Write

The line was still stuck. I sighed impatiently and looked to the front. A little girl of five was screaming. She clutched a picture book her mother was trying to wrench from her hands. The *Deutsch Madel* was hunched over, her eyes level with the girl's, repeating a rhyme like a broken gramophone: "The book is by a Jew. Jews tell lies. We'll knock them flat. Jews are rats, and rats tell lies."

The mother won the battle. She threw the book into the fire and propped her screaming daughter over her shoulder. The girl stretched out her arms. It was as though she thought if she reached just hard enough, she might be able to pluck the book from its fiery death and savour it. She reminded me of something. A scene I had witnessed just weeks before. When they were moving those declared not German out of the city.

Someone grabbed my arm from behind. Their grip was vice-like.

"The book, *Frau*?" the *Madel* was trite. The little girl had almost worn her patience through.

"I'll throw it in myself," I told her. She marched upward along the line.

As I drew closer, I could see the books already in the flames curl and shrink.

I shuffled forward as each person slumped away; their faces down, shoulders forward.

When it was my turn, I stepped as close to the flames as my eyes and skin would allow. I looked down at the book, the typed words, the tear, and my brother's anagram. I rubbed my fingers over the pages and sighed. "Goodbye, old friend."

RUNNER UP  
*CLAIR de LUNE*  
MARIAN PENMAN

My parents were musicians. Dad played electric guitar in a rock band: a group of old men still stuck in the summer of sixty-nine. They played cover versions of rock songs from the 70s and 80s – Clapton and Springsteen, AC/DC and Pink Floyd. Where most people had bookcases, Dad's study walls were lined with CDs. I preferred songs from the 80s and 90s: Madonna, when she was still young enough to be sexy, UB40 and Whitney Houston. I used to listen to their music over and over, especially after I found a songbook titled *20 Songs from the 90s* among the sheet music scattered over the floor.

My mother was a concert pianist whose choice of music always seemed somehow appropriate. Which was why after a particularly disastrous recital, when the first violinist had lost his place in the score and the conductor had broken his baton in frustration, my mother indicated to the orchestra to stop while she turned to the audience, smiled graciously and launched into Debussy's *Clair de Lune*. At the end there was loud applause and the orchestra was ready to return to their symphony.

I started off learning the violin. I loved the smell of polish and mustiness as I took the instrument out of its case, pine-forest memories dancing through my head as I rosined up the bow. I saw myself as another Vanessa Mae, wading into the sea, strains of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* filling the air. Somehow though, the screeches that I managed to produce bore more resemblance to the backing sound in a horror film. One day after my lesson, I heard my teacher telling my mother, in his rather scary Austrian accent, that the violin has many enemies. I concluded that I was one and put my violin away.

# Time to Write

My mother, determined I would play an instrument, started me with a piano teacher: an elderly lady, a Miss, who would frequently pick up the ruler she kept behind the black keys and flicked it across my knuckles or my wrist if I wasn't holding my hands at exactly the correct angle. She chose horrible music for me to play, which my mother said was trite and so I was moved on.

My next teacher kept cats: many cats. You could smell them as soon as you opened the door to her house. There were usually at least two in the music room at any time and I learnt all their names. My teacher's obsession with cats made her very easy to distract when I hadn't practised my scales, which was most of the time. I would simply enquire about the welfare of each of her kitties, and half the lesson would be wasted with not a thought to the amount of money my parents were paying for these diversions.

Thus my progress was too slow for my mother's exacting standards, so a third teacher was found: a teacher with a reputation for getting results. She did not keep cats, or if she did, they kept well out of the way. Her pupils passed their exams with merit, they were entered into Eisteddfods, and starred in the concerts she put on.

It was at one such concert that I was accompanying a younger girl singing *Ave Maria* – it was too awful. She didn't come in on time. She was flat, and then she burst into tears, which was a shame because she actually had a stunning voice. *Ave Maria* just wasn't the right music for her.

She stopped singing altogether and there was a moment of silence. Then without thinking, I broke into the first six bars of *Clair de Lune*. Suddenly panic hit me. I couldn't play past bar 14; my fingers weren't long enough to stretch the octaves required for the chords. Nor could my left hand move fast enough to bring the moonbeams to life.

Feeling sick, I glanced at my stony-faced teacher. My parents were sitting right behind her, looking awkward. As I caught my Dad's eye a wicked idea hit me. This could be my moment. This could be the

greatest opportunity for the kid sniffing into a tissue. I winked and gave her the nod. She grinned back, knowing what we were going to do. It was what we had done at home when no one was there, when we should have been practising *Ave Maria*. It was a song that was made for her voice. After all, this girl had dark brown skin and a voice to match.

As I played the intro I could see her standing tall, filling her lungs and transforming herself. She sang the first line and raw emotion filling the hall. The song built to its climax and goose bumps of excitement prickled up my arms and down my back.

*"So, goodbye. Please, don't cry.  
We both know I'm not what you, you need.  
And I will always love you.  
I will always love you."*

She bowed, looked at me and we both smiled at the loud applause. Then I caught my mother's eye.

After that I took up playing the flute.

# Time TO Write



HONOURABLE MENTION

*SURFING JOE*

**TERRY CHAPMAN**

I am ten years old and I have never caught a wave. Yet here I am, about to plant my feet on a moving board and ride it til it stops. The wind whistles around my ears; it blurs the growl of the power around me. I am in heavy traffic, but it does not faze me like it should. In rollicking motion my feet drop, right foot ahead of left, and this mighty force carries me. I feel the energy rumble through my feet and up my skinny legs; the beast is at my back. I feel no fear.

I can sense the ride coming to its end. My balance holds while the power peters beneath me. I have done this enough to know just the moment when I will be flung from the board, and just before this happens, I sing a weird little song. I have no idea where the song came from. It goes, “I’m a surfie-Joe, and my name is Mo and here comes a tidal waaaaave...”

And right on the ...aaaaave bit, the tram stops. In the middle of Kew Junction, the green rattling slug screeches to a stinking halt and hurls me forward. My feet hit the grimy tarmac of High Street and work at roadrunner speed to stop me from splatting flat on my face. I battle to contain the momentum, to avoid flying into the crossroad, or smacking into the tram in front, or collecting any passenger waiting to board; and then I veer across the face of the evening peak-hour and go home. I do this every time I catch the tram; having finished my after-school paper job, I surf the tram home.

I am not sure from where the inclination to do this came. For an inner-suburban kid from Melbourne, surfing was about as alien as walking on the moon. I had seen it on TV, I guess. And I had heard

# Time to Write

Candy go on about it. Candy rented a room in our place above the menswear store, and her freeloading boyfriend would rave about the waves they would go off in search of every weekend in his Kombi. I remember Mum arguing with her about the stupidity of such, giving she couldn't swim.

“Oh, I just grab the board,” Candy would laugh.

The topic of board, unpaid I am figuring, led to further arguments between she and Mum until Candy and her free-spirits were evicted from our shop-top flat, with a little help from the cop next door.

And then there were the Coke ads that I saw, which played on this beachy free-spiritedness, showed people surfing and partying, living some wow of a life. Maybe at ten I decide I would like some of that.

Dean Clifton, a kid in my class, certainly seemed to live it. He had surfie-chick sisters, a mum who was cool, and a surfboard of his own. The Cliftons were from Queensland, and Dean, with his long bleached hair and sloppy-joe tops, looked every bit the beach bum. Kew Primary School, for him, must have felt like a detention centre. He was as laid-back as a ten-year-old could be, and he just lived for the weekends when his mum would throw them all in their Kombi and hit the coast. There was certainly something going on with Kombis, I was noting; the best I could do was jump on a tram.

The number 42 tram would bring me home from my street-corner workplace and save me the half-hour walk in Melbourne's chilly dusk. I sold Heralds up Cotham Road and would earn half-a-cent for every paper sold, and I often scored the tip that a five-cent piece would yield from the four-cent transaction.

I would do the famous cry of the *Herald* boy at passing motorists, at workers alighting from the city, and at shoppers on the intersection of Glenferrie Road.

The gold mines were Bib Stillwell's Ford and the Kew RSL where I did not need to yell: I just walked in expected and plied everybody with

the day's news. Business there was easy, and the RSL barman would always pour me a cherry lemonade for my troubles.

At the end of each shift I would hand back the unsold papers and count my coins with ink-stained fingers to work out if my earnings justified a two-cent tram fare home. However, often times, the conductor would not bother me for the ticket.

Nor did they seem to bother with the health and safety issues surrounding a child swinging out the open door of the W-class while it was still in motion.

Infused with this strange yen for the free-spirited ways of the surfer, (thanks to Candy, or Dean, or those Coke ads on telly), I would hang by the handrail as the tram descended toward the junction, watching the cars travelling alongside, and then down at the rushing roadway. At a speed deemed not-too-crazy, I would swing out and drop, land on the running board, let go of the rail and surf the beast back-hand. I'm not sure why, but I always faced outward. I never thought to turn around and ride with my back to the cars. It obviously didn't feel right (I wonder if it was this that determined my fate as a goofy-footer?). Either way, I never wiped out.

The ride became a highlight of my day. Way more exhilarating than grade-four maths, and far more rewarding than the few bob pocketed from flogging papers. For there I was, mixing it good, on the edge and out in the traffic; flying through the fumes, feeling adrenalin flush me full. I was alive and I was stoked, and if I was to one day look back after a long and happy lifetime of big wave riding and surfing success, perhaps I could pinpoint this period as a significant and formative time.

For it was the time when I sang my surfie-Joe song, loud and into the cold rush of the commuter air, with no concern for safety, nor for lyrical sense. With a blissful, free-spirited naiveté about what the whole surfing gig was about, could it be I was taking my first steps toward cool abandon, along the path to surfer glory?

No. I was just a suburban paperboy, catching a tram.

# Time TO Write

HONOURABLE MENTION

*THE ROAD*

**J. M. MOORE**

Dora lived in a pretty little house in a pretty little suburb of Melbourne. She lived alone with her little dog Bruno, in a house that had belonged to her parents. Dora didn't care that it need updating, it was her girlhood home and she loved it. Whenever she was out, she couldn't wait to return home.

Life was a pleasure for Dora. She loved pottering in her garden, walking Bruno and just pleasing herself. That was, until the new bypass was built.

At first it made no difference to her life, but gradually as the traffic increased, the noise increased. Cars started using her street as a short cut: whipping past her house, braking at the last minute, and making terrible noises.

Dora had been born into gentler times. The need for all this speed and rushing about eluded her; all she wanted was her peace and quiet back.

She closed all her windows, no more gentle breezes blew through her house, but the noise still managed to force its way in. She shut all the doors and drew all the curtains, the sunlight was stopped, but the noise still kept her company – constant and unrelenting. It echoed and vibrated all around her. She had no escape.

Dora decided to write to the town council and complain, surely they would take action, but after a month of waiting there was no reply. Dora thought it very rude. *Perhaps a phone call*, she thought, but the council was unsympathetic and muttered platitudes: perhaps

# Time to Write

she could invest in double-glazing or shutters? How about earplugs? *Earplugs indeed!* She thought, as she angrily hung up.

Dora became more agitated with each passing day. She ceased pottering in her garden and she no longer walked Bruno. She hardly slept. She went to see her doctor, but sleeping tablets were all he could offer. The more she tried to ignore the noises of all the cars, trucks, B-doubles, the sirens and horns, the louder the sounds became. Her mind became consumed with noise. Sometimes she felt incapable of rational thought. Her behaviour became more erratic. She rarely ventured out from her home now, trapped inside by the cars speeding down her road, and the cacophony of noise erupting from the bypass.

One day, the road was closed for repairs. Oh, the peace, the quiet! *This is how it used to be, she thought, everything peaceful and still. It's beautiful. Why can't it always be like this? Why won't anyone listen to me? I must do something. I know! I will rouse the neighbours and we'll have a demonstration. We will take back the road and regain our serenity!*

She raised a petition and visited all her neighbours. They were very polite, and listened attentively while Dora explained about her protest. They all signed her petition. They all nodded in agreement. And when Dora left, they all shut their doors in relief. No one was going to tell Dora it wouldn't work, you can't turn back the clock: this was progress!

Satisfied with the support of her neighbours, Dora phoned to notify the local radio and television stations. They too listened politely, made notes, thanked her and hung up.

The night before the protest, Dora dropped leaflets into her neighbours' letterboxes reminding them of the following day's action. She stayed up half the night making signs. All was in readiness.

The following day she was up early. She dressed with great care. There were bound to be cameras and she had even prepared a small speech, just in case. When she arrived at the specified rendezvous, however, there was just Bruno and her. Nobody else turned up, no cameras, no reporters, and certainly no neighbours.

*What had happened? Had she got the wrong day?* She struggled to think, to remember the exact details of the protest. Never before had she been so close to the road. The sounds from the traffic were extreme; the noises made her dizzy. They ricochet inside her head. She couldn't think coherently. It was unbearable.

Angrily, she raised a protest sign. She would do it on her own. But the noises kept pounding in her head and she became confused. Bruno became alarmed, broke free from his lead and ran onto the road. Dora screamed, and thinking only of her dog, she charged onto the bypass. Unfortunately, as she stood on the road calling his name, a huge B-double appeared. Her last thoughts were of her mother, underwear and something about accidents. Bruno made it to the other side; Dora didn't.

Dora's death made the headlines, but only because it was a slow-news day. She also made the radio news. Her neighbours felt some guilt, but they had never intended in joining in her protest anyway. Her death was reported, but no one seemed interested in the reason for it. It was just an old woman protecting her dog: just another road statistic.

Dora's relatives sold her pretty little house. It sat on a huge block of land, and it brought them a pretty price. The house was demolished and six townhouses were built. The new owners were delighted with their new lifestyles courtesy of Dora. They enjoyed coming home every night to their beautiful new homes. The sound of the traffic was a comfort to them. To them it meant the vibe of the city.

The locals never forgot about Dora though. And every year on the anniversary of her death, they would get together and have a party in her honour.

"To Dora..." they would say as they raised their glasses. "An old woman who stood up for what she believed in, and literally died standing her ground."

Bruno was put up for adoption, but his fate remains unknown.

# Time TO Write



HONOURABLE MENTION

*LAYERS*

CATHERINE SLOMAN

Each morning, just before the sun rises, a horn blows. This signals a new day in this morbid existence to which I have become accustomed. Sometimes though, I lie awake wishing the horn never sounded, but it does, it *a/ways* does.

Since as far back as I can remember, we go through the same routine every day: we wash, we dress, we eat, and then we step outside into the dark – into the streets that are painted grey. It is there we wait for the soldiers to come.

Sometimes we have to wait another hour for them, but they *a/ways* come. And all the while, we wait in the freezing cold, dressed only in thin cotton. Clothing is scarce in these parts; if we are lucky, we might come across some poor soul lying dead in the street, and we rid him of his clothes to fuel our own warmth. No one ever likes doing it, but it's important to survive and not give in to our harsh reality.

They come – the soldiers do – finally; with their lists and their guns, and once our names are checked off, we make our way in our assigned groups over to the next village to begin our work. *They* think, that *we* think, that we walk unsupervised, and that if we wanted we could escape: make a run for it, but that would be a fool's errand. We know they watch us even if we don't see them and their long-barrelled guns. We watch the watchers, if only in our minds.

About a month ago this boy, who must have been around my age, tried dragging his mother away from the group. Her bare feet ground along the gravel as he begged her to run with him. She wouldn't budge.

# Time TO Write

“Stay here,” she begged him. “Stay here.”

But the boy did not listen and let go of her. Some of us helped catch her as she lost her balance, and we all stood there and watched him run. The watchers were watching him too, because although we saw them not, their guns could be heard. Although the bullets were unseen, we saw the boy move as if in some erratic dance. And then he was still; mound in a cloud of dust that rose up high into the morning sky. We immediately began walking and so did the boy’s mother.

She made not a noise, nor shed a single tear until late that night when we were all back in our homes. I heard her from across the street. I’m sure we all heard that deep bellowing noise that comes from a place familiar to us all. I don’t know why I did what I did, maybe it was because I too lived in a house unprotected – alone. Or maybe it was because I just wanted her to get a grip and be silent. But once I knew the guards were back at their stations, I crept over to her house. I put my face up to the slightly-cracked window pane to see her sitting on a couch, and I tapped as lightly as I could, so as not to startle her, until finally she noticed me.

She let me in and I felt the full weight of her body as she piled it onto to me. She hugged me so tight, so *tight*, and I felt the wetness of her tears on my face. She hugged me like I was the son she had just lost; the son she would never get back. We stayed like that for a while until I felt the weight of her release from me, as she pulled back and held me back at arm’s length, a sombre look on her dry face.

“You’re Jonathan.” she said.

I nodded.

“From over there.” she said, pointing to my house. “You should go; I think it would be best if you go,” she said.

Without thinking I latched back onto her, I wasn’t ready to be parted from this rare human interaction. The tears threatened to pierce the

walls I had spent my life building. “Be my mother.” I blurted out. “Be my mother. Be my mother.”

I felt a sting on the side of my face where she slapped me hard, and I knew she hadn’t meant it because of the look of horror that marked her face. I turned to leave.

“Wait,” she said.

I turned around and saw the back of her disappear into the adjoining room. When she returned, in her hands she held a pile of fabric.

“Take these,” she said. “These belonged to David. You will make better use of them. Now, go home, Jonathan. Go home.”

I looked down at the clothing she had placed so gently in my grasp, as if she were handing me a child. I had no words, so I nodded my appreciation and left.

The next morning when the guards raided her house, the walls around my heart rose up. I didn’t need to see the body they so carelessly dragged out into the dirty street to know that she had killed herself. And I looked away as passers-by ravaged her body for her clothing.

This sort of thing happens regularly so I try not to get close to anyone. I do what I’m supposed to do: I get up at the sound of the horn; change into my ragged clothes; eat my grub-infested porridge; wait outside to be checked off; and then I head to the next village slowly, eyes fixated on the ground. I just keep walking, watching my blistered feet hitting the hard ground, one after the other.

# Time TO Write

HONOURABLE MENTION  
*THE WRITER'S TRIAL*  
**ROBERT BENNETT**

I am in writing mode; seated before my trusty keyboard and bright, white monitor. I am waiting for inspiration like a late-night roisterer waiting for a cab. I love writing, but sometimes I think that writing does not like me. This usually happens when I am pressured by a deadline. I do not think that it's writer's block, because my head is crammed full of ideas. The problem is more one of choosing.

As always, I want what I write to be very good and, if possible, brilliant. But deciding what to write is difficult. I am afraid that if I make the wrong choice, I may as well try to climb Everest naked without a Sherpa. In both instances, the fear of failure looms large.

I have had a couple of goes at looking out my study window. It provides a very nice view of the garden and I like watching the birds as they visit the flowers. It's peaceful and it usually helps me to make key decisions, but not today. So, I activated Plan B and flicked through some of my favourite books. The fatal flaw with Plan B is that I end up reading more than I should.

Plan C is also fraught with danger, but I have given it a go as well. Another dead-end because there is nothing worthwhile on the telly, and what little good there is, I have already seen several times. Maybe a coffee break will help?

As the kettle works itself up to boiling point, I gaze out the kitchen window. The couple next-door has just had a row. It was a real ding-dong. Both the f-word and the c-word got a workout with plenty of

# Time To Write

shits, bastards, bitches and get stuffeds thrown in for good measure. Why are other people's fights so amusing?

Now she is storming about in a bare-midriff top, micro-shorts and ugg boots; I guess it could be called fetching, in a way. He, on the other hand, has a bigger hump than Quasimodo; he decides to take his vintage Mustang out for a bit of a burn. Just as I am making my cuppa, he takes off with a prolonged screeching of tyres. You can hear him slamming through the gears as he races away down the backstreets to who knows where?

I grab a couple of bikkies and sit down at the kitchen table. After a little while I turn on the radio. Why did I do that? I really hate those programs where people call in to express their general dissatisfaction with everything – every day. Worst of all, I have a sneaking suspicion that many of them are professionals, employed by the major political parties: *a cynic? Moi?*

I decide to walk back upstairs to the salt mine. As far as salt mines go, it's okay. There is carpet on the floor and a galaxy of distractions on the book shelves – and not just books. I have several scale model cars including the famous Aston Martin DB5 from *Goldfinger*. In addition, I have a number of ceramic cats; numerous dragons; some carved statues; a water feature; a model sailing ship that doubles as a desk-lamp; my father's silver sporting cups; my teddy bear; and my crystal collection. If that were not enough, I also have my degrees and other framed documents festooning the walls along with two large prints. One of the prints is of a cricket match at Lords in 1886, while the other is a photograph of H.M.S. Rose. She is a beautiful sailing ship that has acted in several movies including *Master and Commander on the Other Side of the World*. It is fair to say that I have lots of toys.

I am starting to get just a teensy bit angry with myself. No one should be stuck for an idea with so much stimuli around him, and yet?

Suddenly, I catch sight of my notebook. This is where I jot down ideas and observations that might turn into stories. It has been some time

since I was last here. Hmm, some of these ideas could do the trick! There is one about a lawn bowling club that is dominated, as such clubs tend to be, by three old men. At the time, I had made a note that I could use the events of the Russian Revolution as a structure for a story about how the old *troika* is overthrown by a peoples' revolt by other members. Oh, well, it sounded promising at the time.

Next, a hard-hitting piece on the evils of telemarketing in which a law-abiding citizen becomes a killer bent on eradicating the people who make all those annoying phone calls. But wait, there is more. How about 'The White Shoe Club', an expose of big developers and crooked councillors? I could even throw in some stuff about sex for favours granted.

Oh, here's one that makes me laugh - the trials and tribulations of a thesis writer. Then there is a single word: mortiferous. It means deadly, and it could be useful. Here's another, a real 'ghost' writer. This happens when a living author is possessed by the spirit of a famous deceased writer, and becomes even more famous by churning out masterpieces in the style of the dead maestro. Lastly, there is a single line that reads 'Melbourne hath charms to soothe the savage beast'. What was I thinking?

Oh, my god! I have just looked at my clock. Two hours have passed and my coffee has gone cold. The screen in front of me is empty: the proverbial polar bear in a snowstorm. All these thoughts and conjectures, and I've still got nothing to show for it. Desperate times call for desperate measures. *Shuffle, shuffle*. You'll have to imagine this bit. I am looking for something among my papers. *Shuffle, shuffle*.

Eureka! Thank goodness for good old scraps of paper. 'Space travel at high speed is rather like conventional air travel only much faster...'

# Time TO Write



HONOURABLE MENTION  
*THE HEDGE*  
MARY STEPHENSON

Claire peered through the slats of the blind and watched the street. The neighbourhood was stirring: workers and schoolchildren were going about their daily business conducting their lives as if nothing had happened, as if everything was still all right with the world. She pushed back from the kitchen sink and turned to her husband.

“I hate venetians. They give such a half-view of life.”

James didn’t respond. He was still absorbed in the task of freeing his newspaper from the clinging plastic that wound itself more tightly with each attempt to remove it. He struggled for a few more seconds before Claire reached into the drawer and handed him a pair of scissors.

“It shouldn’t be this hard,” he muttered.

Claire brought her cup to her lips. The coffee was cold. Cold like...

“You should do something about the side hedge.”

“Claire, not now.” He was focused on flattening the newspaper, pressing it down with his palms before smoothing out the undulations, pushing his hands from its centre to the outer edges. The newspaper sprang back into a roll, not as tight, but a roll nevertheless.

“It’s been a year,” she continued.

He looked up at her then, his eyes pained. She reached for his hand but he pulled it away and began patting his pockets.

# Time to Write

“Have you seen my wallet?”

“James?”

“I’ll get around to it.”

“Your wallet’s in your briefcase. When?”

He shut his case and tucked the newspaper under his arm.

“When I can. When I’m able.”

“In the meantime?”

“In the meantime, Claire, just do what you always do.” He took up his briefcase and made for the front door.

“Wait,” she called after him. “You forgot your keys.”

His shoulders slumped, just for a second. But a second was enough. A second was all it took when...

“I don’t need them.”

“What if I’m not here, when you get back?”

“You’ll be here,” he said, his voice hoarse and then he was gone.

Claire watched him through the window. He would join the other commuters, and find a seat on the train where he would unfold his newspaper and distract himself for the hour journey into town. He would continue to distract himself at work and on the return journey. Once home, he would distract himself with more work until exhausted. Then he would crawl off to bed to where he would try to sleep and forget. ‘Busy’, he called it. He said it was unavoidable in his line of work, but Claire knew the truth. He kept busy to stop himself from thinking.

Claire had also tried to keep busy, but her housework was usually finished by mid-morning, leaving her lots of time to think.

She switched on the television, and then switched it off again. She walked back to the kitchen and caught a glimpse of the grey clouds and the first drops of rain. The washing would have to come in. She tiptoed past his bedroom; he could be sleeping. She opened the back door; he could be playing. He loved being outside in the sun, loved to ride his tricycle up and down the drive.

Claire's legs buckled. She fought the urge to run back inside. She forced herself to slow her breathing, urging herself to quell the rising panic that churned her stomach and made her heart race. Once steadied, she took the step down into the garden and began unpegging the washing.

The sun had disappeared behind the clouds leaving the yard in gloom. He didn't like the dark. He had pointed to the shadows under the trees and had asked her where the flowers were?

She had knelt down next to him to explain, "flowers don't like the dark".

"Me too, mummy. I a flower too, mummy?"

She struggled with the clothes; struggled with herself and hurried to get the task done so she could return to the house, back to the darkened kitchen. She chastised herself. He would have hated her living in the half-light. Nothing grows in the dark.

"I a flower too, mummy?"

Nothing can live in the dark.

She was yanking at the cords before she realised. Raising the venetian blind to the very top and then, for the first time in a year, she had a complete and clear view of the driveway.

The displaced gravel and the ruts were still there. So too was the gap in the hedge, but the grass had returned and the hedge had continued to grow. Of course it had. Life went on, it was meant to go on. It had survived despite the gap. Despite the yawning chasm in her heart, she too had survived and now it was time to

# Time to Write

heal. If James didn't have the strength, then she would show him the way.

This time she didn't hesitate at the back step. She made straight for the garage and pulled the larger of the two pot plants from its stand and dragged it up the driveway. It took more effort than she realised, and all of her strength, but eventually she reached the gap. With some twisting and turning, she managed to roll it into place. It didn't quite fill the void, but it was a start, the hedge gap no longer gapped.

She was standing by the window when James returned. He raised his eyebrows in surprise when he saw the opened blind, but then his expression changed to something she couldn't recognise.

He lowered his briefcase to the floor and put one hand against his chest.

"You've filled the gap," he said.

Claire wandered if she had done the right thing.

"Not quite. I need help to do it properly." He continued to stare at the hedge. She edged to his side. "We can do this, you know," she said.

The morning light bathed the kitchen in a golden hue. James snipped the last of the plastic wrap from the newspaper and left it to unfurl itself on the table. He pulled on his jacket and picked up his briefcase.

"Claire, have you seen my..."

Claire lowered her coffee cup.

"Your wallet's in your briefcase where you always leave it."

He tucked the newspaper under his arm and left through the front door. Seconds later the doorbell rang. When Claire opened the door, James handed her the newspaper. "I won't be needing this."

Claire took it from him. It wasn't much, but it was a start. She smiled and his face softened. For the first time in just over a year she felt they might have a chance.

Time <sup>TO</sup> Write



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# Time To Write

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Phone: **03 9269 1833**





NMIT's Bachelor of Writing and Publishing's Yarra Bend Press operates as a live work studio providing students with an indepth understanding of the workings of a publishing house through the delivery of real production-based experiences. The studio engages students in authentic projects with commercially defined outcomes while facilitating industry and peer-to-peer consultation including workshops, functions and seminars.

By allowing students the opportunity to be involved in producing commercial quality publications aimed at enhancing their future academic and employment possibilities, Yarra Bend Press addresses the problem of diminishing work experience opportunities within the publishing sector.

Yarra Bend Press student-based activities include work flow management and the coordination of all aspects of production related activities; acquisition and maintenance of commercial publishing opportunities from the tertiary, public and private sectors; selection and liaison with suppliers in a professional capacity; maintenance

# Time To Write

of financial and business records associated with studio activities; liaison with clients, suppliers and industry representatives; development of an online presence as a vital tool in the promotion of live work folios for potential employment; the planning, development and production of a range of print and digitally-based publishing projects; estimation, print production, process and control; researching, cataloguing, ordering and recording ISBN, CiP; and copyright issues.

Yarra Bend Press also instructs students on day-to-day publishing issues including dealing with authors; editing practices; design principles; typesetting; digital versus traditional printing; book structure; numbering; imprints; rights and responsibilities; legal deposits; barcode and DW Thorpe; press releases; advertising; promotion; selling; online stores; search engine optimization; RSS; blogging; networking; distribution; terms; freight; sos; returns; discounts; GST; faults and returns; and so on.

For more information about NMIT's Bachelor of Writing and Publishing's Yarra Bend Press contact:

Web: **[www.nmit.edu.au/ybp](http://www.nmit.edu.au/ybp)**

Email: **[ybp@nmit.edu.au](mailto:ybp@nmit.edu.au)**

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The *Time To Write* 2014 short story prize is a chance for Australian writers to showcase their talents. Now in its third year, the *Time To Write* anthology presents thirty stories by some of Australia's talented aspiring writers. Inside are stories about tram surfing, magical pockets and the trials of being a writer. There are stories of sadness and of inspiration: of love and of loss. Take a dive into tales of remarkable imaginings and revel in the talents of these short-story wizards.