vignette

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We acknowledge the Awabakal people, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which this journal is created and shared. We pay our respects to Awabakal Elders past and present, and we honour the stories, songs, and knowledge that have been passed down through generations on this Country.
As a literary journal, we recognise that storytelling has always been central to Awabakal culture, connecting people to land, sea, and sky. We are grateful to walk, write, and create on this Country, and we extend that respect to all First Nations peoples across Australia.

from the editors...

The human experience is incredibly complex, painful and beautiful all at once. Take Newton's third law of motion: 'for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction'. At 18 I heard Guru Sighn interpret this into the context of how we live our lives, saying: "live your life in that premise, that for everything that is happening to you, there is a way out, there is a way through." What he was saying is that there is always hope.

Art is a mirror. We write to understand - what we know and what we don't. We write wishing for hope to reflect through the art and bounce out for the consumer to catch. We write so someone will see themselves or their experience in the words or between the lines. Hope is the invisible string woven into all our stories.

These vignettes show that whatever trials have been thrown our way, we can find a way through. They are about not succumbing to apathy, but redirecting to empathy because we need more of that, for ourselves, and the world. We hope you hold space for the words of our students, staff and alumni in this first addition of Vignette. We hope they wander beside you and remind you of one thing: to always have hope.

- Bailee McLeod

Why must we write?
Silence is heavy. It is important, but it is shapeless, and it is our words that give form to our silent moments. Those of awe. Those of terror. Of grief. And of bright joy.
Sometimes a secret must be written so that it can be borne. A memory must be recorded so that it can endure. We shape chaos into rhythmic poetry and draw out maps for those who travel beside us. The world is vast and fractured and we write to make it whole.
We write prayers, and confessions and we hide our truths in metaphor wanting to unseen, and yet seen, by those we share this life with. Reading the work of another is witnessing their existence, noting that they were here, that they lived.
We write to join the chorus of the living: to re-enter moments that once held us so that they can hold us still. We draw lines around the moments that made us. We ask: "Tell me a story". "Remember me".
We write so that somewhere, some stranger can see in our words a mirror, a human kinship. We place our small voices against the roar of the world. We write because without stories, life would pass too swiftly, and we would lose our grasp on it.
Welcome to Vignette, the first Avondale Creative Writing Journal. This little piece of paper contains the words of Avondale students, staff and alumni and we thank you, the reader, for witnessing them, sharing the moments and being our kin in swift journey that is life

- Lynnette Lounsbury



poetry

Jesus loves the little children,
and I watch them starve on the internet
while I eat breakfast.
I let the sun absorb into my skin,
and they get buried under rubble.
I log out of my phone
because I need a break,
and a mother buries her child
and her husband never comes back from
searching for food.

What did mercutio say?
“a plague on both your houses”
I don’t want to wish ill of anyone,
but is now the time?
I guess I wish shame,
on both their houses,
and ours.

I paint make up on my face,
and the prime minister does nothing.
I work eight hours,
to come home and scroll,
ease the pain of the grind,
and watch fascism seep into society.

I eat my organic food,
and someone
somewhere
goes without.
I shower,
slather oil and creams over my body.
I slip into slumber in a safe place,
while someone
somewhere
sleeps rough.

The sun rises,
I breathe the fresh air,
and write my gratitudes
and recite my affirmations.
It’s a twist of fate that it’s me
here
and not them.

Another bomb is dropped,
in a land I’ve never been.
Another house is raided,
parents stolen.
Another child is the collateral.

But Jesus loves the little children,
and God will judge those who’ve starved
them.

— she | a day in the life.

– Bailee McLeod



ink on paper fades,
yet a vignette holds the light
stories breathe and pause

The best is to come

His eyes were chartreuse, saddened and drawn
He grew up, in the town, in which he was born
He tried his very best, but ended in scorn
An ill-gotten life, that had been lived and worn

He packed up and left, in the night, without sound
His messed up heart, shattered on the ground
Nowhere to go, but he'd drive for miles
Cause it isn't easy, tryna find solid ground

No one to blame, he was never the same
Or was it the life he knew, that got stripped away
He's seen a few summers, his heart they'd mistreat
Just gestures of 'good will', whatever that meant

From dirt back roads, to pedestrian strips
He was lawless and stubborn, though he'd never admit
Unspoken words, but words he'd regret
And the life he has made, will be a life they'll forget

The war is won
The best is to come
When all is said and done
You'll get all you deserve

Their eyes were chartreuse, like light at first dawn
They drive, through their hometowns, and pass right along
They are scrubbed from the hurt, the bruises all gone
Their bodies are dust, but their love lives on.

- Nikolai Baumanis

Mask Room

A weathered room
With countless masks
For every person he ever was
One mask, courtly, unhappy
Anxious,
Another, gluey
With stretch marks
From holding his family together
All share an overwhelming feeling of exhaustion,
    They all exude a sigh in unison
But their eyes sparkle with hope
Almost like they believe the next mask
Won't be a mask at all

- Daniel Alderson

Before

My reflection still looks back at me,
the same -
The same as it did before.

My eyes,
eyes a little too wide and wild.
The ocean within,
peaceful but unpredictable,
ripping back part of myself,
The same as they were before.

My smile,
a smile a little too broad with
teeth contained,
through years of strangling from steel,
still slightly imperfect,
the same as they were before.

My skin,
(okay, maybe a little more tired)
But still quick to rose and wrinkle,
the same as it did before.

Only I can see the small changes.
My eyes are fleeting,
fleeing from observance.
- That's different to before.

The squeezing thrum within my chest,
triggered by words,
and street posts.
- that's different to before.

Wanting to press rewind -
But, would I still somehow see the
world through fogged lens,
not the rose ones of before?
Would I feel lighter,
or weighted from the innocence (or
ignorance) of before?

All I know is it doesn't seem fair,
that all I have to show for it,
is the same reflection as I had
Before.

- Jocelyn Foster

WAKING

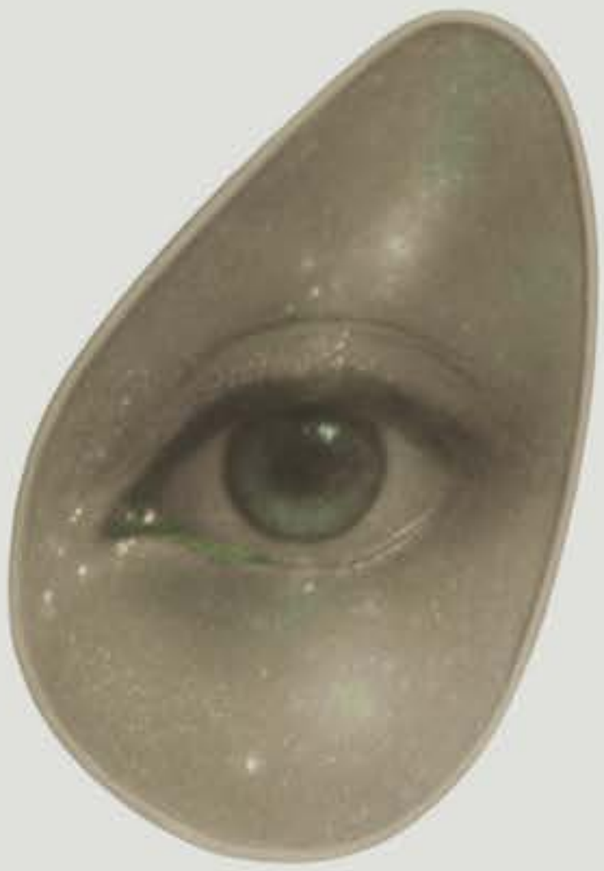
for George, my father

Every Sunday morning—
the tune now belongs to childhood days—
my father's song would chip and
split the morning frost

Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam
Where the deer and the antelope play ...
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word ...

would wrap the weatherboard ice
in a slow combusting hymn
Then his steps—ahead of words—
would come unstuttered down the hall
to sing me to the fire's heart.

- Carolyn Rickett



Patroclus

The glare of a funeral pyre on a crowded beach.
A sickening brightness.
Twisted beauty.

War snuffs the souls of naive spirits,
their protesting passion deafened by missiles
which streak lonely across the sky.

The lifeblood of Patroclus mingles with coarse sand.
Coagulated grit.
Strangled breath.

The iron tang of shattered promises
seeps into every pore,
staining red the hands of poets
who'd only read about war.

The man who launched a thousand ships
observes the flames with a viper's eye.
Sacrifice; the best motivation.

Guernica reimagined for the streets of Lviv.
Men digging through rubble like children
in sandpits, reaching for buried treasures.

The wrath of Achilles hangs over them all.

-Zoe Cochrane

myopia

time
  a string
of knots and
    diversions
has pulled us
    from the sail riggings
of our past
and the frightening bondage
 of our future
   into the frayed
but honest
      tightness
  the familiar short sight'ness
   of now
 that allows us the myopic luxury
of standing close
    so close
  we cannot help
but see the beauty
      in one another

- jp lounsbury

Desert Confessions

I am the sharp horizon under the scorching relentless sun
where banjos are played to rattlesnakes and coyotes,
hiding in their sparse dens.
Silent guards cast long shadows.
They drink my life and defend it with spears,
demanding blood for a sip - a life for a life.

I am Sonoran, Sahara and Gobi.
I eat nomads for breakfast.

I am ravenous vulture thundering my rumbling stomach from above.
Eagle-eyed Anubis I watch the echo of your step.
This giant hourglass turned horizontal.
Stagnant stench of time rotting away untouched.
I lay you down gently to lullabies of no tomorrow and whisper softly.

I am the keeper of secrets.

I am shattered glass, desirous of molten lava.
A melting pot bubbling away to dinner plates and laughter,
gathering around large tables.
Moonbeams dancing Samba and, 'have just one more bite', 'pass the salt dear' and,
'we'll deal with the dishes in the morning'.
Your hair tangled between warm fingers.

I am Delilah of the desert.
I reach for the knives.

I am the drop containing oceans.
Liquid longing for solid ground, the edge of the world, or both.
I am salt on your cheek rolling like jazz on a Sunday morning.
I am scattered bricks, diluted wall,
a hidden well where wishes hum low harmonies
and dance to endless mirages catching their tails.

I am the mother of Oneiroi and Ker.

- Linda Edorsson

Devastation of the Morning

A quiet frost on still, green grass. A slow
shuffle of bags, books, keys and a keep cup.
Blinking at the early sun's faint glow,
I gather my things and make my way up –

Past the rude singing of arrogant birds,
the incessant chorus of proud crickets.
I press on with nary a single word,
Stumbling under the clawing thicket -

to the twinkling Zion of 7
And the call of the caffeinated gates.
Alas, that the lights reveal a crowded heaven
Of fellow pilgrims, seeking percolated fates

I reconsider my holy quest, yawning,
Cursing the devastation of the morning

- Daniel Carrigy

odyssey

my child is sick. I wander through his green veins looking for darkness. I clean out boxes of old things looking for the moment when it found him. He has a wild short doctor who wears red shoes and tells me this is an odyssey not a footrace. He is my Calchus. The hospital smells like people under siege. They hoard dignity and cheap biscuits. I know where all the coffee stalls are, but I can never find an elevator. or enough water – this place is so dry. There is no silence here, only alarm. a constant humming sob that sits in the walls. I watch him from behind glass. Hostage to better minds than mine. My thoughts are amputated, my prayers sarcastic. I watch the war unmedicated, stateless. A short woman drags a wooden horse around the wards stopping when she sees me to ask if I want tea and I say yes, with no intention of drinking it, only of reading the leaves. There is a map on the wall outside his room, an evacuation plan. I follow it one day and end up back where I began, watching him sleep as cold tea drips off the table onto the grey floor.

my child is sleeping. I have one night off from my usual bedside hospital concern tedium, and I go to the beach to sit by the sick moon instead. She is part hidden by shadow. I find myself less alone than I hoped. There are stingers crowding the grey night sand, and a dog chasing the sleeping seagulls. a family of large, loud men are night swimming the bogey holes, their babies and wives on the beach eating chips and sand. There is a seal song playing on the crest of the waves as they hit the rocks and the large backs of the loud men. I wander close to the water and creep away. I want my feet baptised but not my heathen pants. Someone asks if that was rain or sea spray. It is rain. An old man walks passed, his beard pointing the way to the lifeguard tower. This reminds me of my time in the underworld, walking by the black river Lethe - I forget when. I forget a lot of things. I am as lonely here as I was in Hades, more alive than I have any right to be. I dream of the lost promises of an east coast youth: that the beach has all of the answers. I pull a torn page from the book of the moon and see that Odysseus still has miles to go before he makes it home. I take some sand and a few wet strands of the moon back to the hospital with me and return to my vigil.

my child is home. I watch him live but I am something other than alive. I am arrested. An idle king. I wander my own house now, the walls quieter, but no less alarmed. the colour of worry is grey, a monochrome that dissolves the edges of the world. From my window the gate becomes the magnolia tree becomes a cobbled path becomes a bat-filled fig, its roots pushing the streetlight to one side – a pearl of inspiration winking at me in bemusement. The bat on the black branch squeals: do you feel the sea? she is tired tonight. I nod. I know. She has brought me only exhausted memories. There is smoky fox in the street, eating the pigeon that was hit by a car. A feather rises, lifting into the tree and settling on a magnolia bud. The fox whistles: this isn't your time. go to bed. I nod. I know. Endings are an ominous stasis. A residue of hope. I am home and my purpose, it holds, but I am also on that tired sea remembering.

- Lynnette Lounsbury

Terminal

To be caressed by autumn air's fresh tender kiss
To be cocooned in the broad sun-kissed roots of a wild fig tree
To be careened by the ocean's docile rhythmic swell
To be clothed in the sun's January afternoon gaze
To be consoled by the tender company of the moon's luminous glow
To be cloaked in the gentle mist of weeping grey clouds
To be cradled by sleep's Sunday morning allure
- What I hope death feels like

- Taylah Jones



Carrying Fire

We leave immediately. It is still dark, and the light has not yet remembered what to do with itself. The windows of the car are dew-damp and the sea, at our backs, is hissing. There are people who wouldn't leave this early. Who would wait to see. But it isn't us. That isn't our way. Ziggy, our satin-black Kelpie, riddled with anxiety that she might not be invited, is pounding back and forth across the front porch. I direct her to back seat of the car and shove gear in at her feet. Whatever will fit. I watch him close the door casually, as though it is just a Tuesday. As though I am just taking him to school. But I notice he leaves the key in the door. We pull out onto the empty street. Ziggy pogoes across the back seat between open windows like a metronome, her breath on my neck, then on his, sucking in the scent of the morning world, the unemptied trash cans, the bats returning to the fig tree.

"Day One," I say, because that was our joke.

He glances at me, legs pulled high to accommodate a box shoved hastily at his feet. "Day Zero. We're prequeling."

He always does this; tips the world back a half-notch, refusing to let it get ahead of him. He shifts the universe to keep himself a step ahead. I see he has on yesterday's jeans, but he have grabbed a sturdy jacket, a scarf. In the box at his feet, I see the first aid kit, and I feel a flash of warmth at the way I can trust him to remember important things. The way I know that he will be steady. We had planned a road trip weeks ago, but it had never materialised. Life kept pointing us in different directions. It wasn't as easy as when he was a kid. Today we left in forty minutes. Military precision and barked explanations of our packing choices. It was a road trip the way a fire drill is a rave.
We roll past the only café open this early. The one where the barista learned Ziggy's name before mine. Waverley Cemetery is still asleep, the white teeth of the headstones grimacing seawards. I tap the steering wheel. "On the Beach was set in Melbourne," I said, apropos of both nothing, and the thing. "All that grey acceptance. Ava Gardner drinking on verandas."

"The book's better," he returns, because this is how the ritual goes. "But if we're doing nuclear chic, 'Threads' still wins. Or 'When the Wind Blows.'"

"Oh, that broke me."

"It was meant to." He is trying to keep his voice light. But it is complicated. The only one in the car having an uncomplicated time is the dog. Ziggy indulges in a full-body shiver. We take Oxford Street in the pearly pre-traffic quiet, the city still a suggestion of itself, blank and bland. There are runners self-flagellating around Centennial Park and we both stare at them wondering how far they will get. Why they chose to run. And not to run.

"If this were 'Station Eleven,' all these houses would go feral," I say, peering into a yawning terrace. "Grapevines would cover the verandas. People would join symphonies."

"Or become pirates," he says. "We could be pirates."

"I'd be a thespian who occasionally pirated." I know myself. He laughs.

Something has been hissing beneath the news, under the daily brawl about interest rates and sport and that war. He and I have that in common: we hear the undertones more than the melodies. It's not spiritual; it's just years of science-fiction novels and too many zombie films. The last two nights we've stood in the kitchen, him glued to his phone, frowning, while my feed churned with geopolitics and speculation and the usual men in polos insisting the left were hysterical. Exposition. Ziggy has stalked us around the house, nails clicking. There is a storm forming. We are sensitive to the pressure of it. *Rising Action*.

We glide through the city, still undisturbed by traffic, and onto the Anzac Bridge, the concrete curving around us like ribs. Just tradies and personal trainers out this early. We look in the windows of the cars. Nobody seems to be on the same wavelength as us and I see him frown. Does he doubt the choice we've made? "Carry the fire," I whisper, quoting our favourite book, *The Road*. He gets the reference and sighs.

"Carry the fire."

We slide down Parramatta Road in the last ropey minutes before it becomes a carpark. Cars close in behind us, packed with people, with boxes, taped up rooftop luggage. They are in the petrol stations we pass, filling up and gathering bottled water and kindling and cans of Coke. Ziggy switches windows, reading the air like braille, smelling the fomenting panic. Our own jerry can, filled in the darkness this morning at a twenty-four-hour station, sloshes back and forth in the back.

He jerks his head towards it. "That's the next religion, right there."

I smile. "Mad Max. Or hope. Hope could be the new religion."

He looks out the window at the fingers of sunlight tapping the tops of the mountains in front of us. "Children of Men. We have both, what does that make us? Agnostic?"

"Lucky," I say as we cross the quiet brown of the Nepean. The sky has cleared its throat by now, and the black has become a grey blue. Streets lights are blinking out and the air, rushing in the open back windows, has the tinge of daytime warmth to it. The road is filling now and I felt a sense of compression, as though my chest, the car, the mountains, everything is holding its breath. He taps the map. "Maybe we should detour? We don't want to get stuck halfway up here." The map continues its cheery blue optimism even as cars pull in around us and we slow to accommodate them.

"I don't think it has a setting for - 'I have a bad feeling about this'."

"True. And we don't know these roads well enough to guess. Not really the world's greatest preppers are we?"

I laugh. "We had a bugout-bag. You have a gas mask!"

He rolls his eyes. "It's vintage. It's probably filled with asbestos."

"I mean, better than mustard gas, right?" I try to keep the mood light, but both of us are starting to feel heavy as we crawl up the mountain. To mediate the silence, I turn the radio back up. It is a mistake. Two washed up comedians are riffing on how stupid you would have to be to pack up and leave. He sighs and changes the channel. It is a serious, clipped news reader telling us that everything is fine, there is no official notifications and that rumours cause unnecessary panic.

He looks at me. "Are we the idiots?"

I say nothing, but I do wonder. Are we? I have long thought us the, “pragmatists with a good imagination,” but have we let a lifetime of fiction rewire our ability to decipher actuality? The bush moves closer to the road and the morning heat, crisp at this time of year, warms the eucalypts until the scent wafts into the car. It feels strangely comforting and I feel certain again that the mountains re the only choice we have. We slither between the carved rock walls, ancient and layered. The lanes were still moving but it is slow enough now that we can see into the other cars. Faces are strained. Backseat children, always a barometer, are anxious and crying. We climb the mountain steadily and are passing Glenbrook when Ziggy’s perpetual joy thins rapidly, becoming first a small whistle in her throat, then a soft keen and final a rattling whine that sends tremors through her entire body. He reaches around to place a hand on her back. She starts at the touch but remains at the windowsill, ears back, claws gripping the leather of the seat.

“Maybe we need to stop for her?” He looks at me in concern. I don’t want to stop. We are already snails. It will be difficult to get back into the flow. I sigh. I don’t have a choice. There is a turnout ahead labelled with the usual Australian Government pragmatism: “Hawkesbury Lookout”. We pull off and rumble across the gravel into a car space. Ziggy’s whine is constant. He lets her out of the car, and she immediately presses herself against our legs, sitting low the ground and refusing to move.

“I thought she needed…” He turned from her to the horizon, and so do I. The air is clear and has the hard scent of sandstone in the heat. A hint of bitumen. Below, the Nepean braids its way through the long chain of soft hills. Beyond that: the city. A miniature against the broad blue of the sky. Tiny spires and squares with the sliver of ocean behind, bluer still. Ziggy’s whine ceases. There is a universal intake of breath, and the trees pull towards the ocean. And then a light over the city, bright and sharp. A bloom and a fist and second sun rising.

And then the cracking of a whip and the exhale. We see it rolling towards us, grey and foaming. The powdered darkness stretches further and further, and I begin to think we have not made it far enough. It will reach us. But it withers and becomes only wind and heat. I find his hand and grab it as the wave rushes over us. He holds the old wooden fence, and we stand against it until it passes. Shock wave. I think we are high enough. We are far enough. The cloud hangs in the air, holding its shape. I know I must move, but it feels impossible. Ziggy, uncharacteristically, nips at my ankle, and it brings me back. I lift her into the backseat, and we clumsily fold ourselves into the car. There is another sound now, deep, long and tearing. More heat. I close the windows, and we put on our seatbelts because rituals persist. We say nothing. As I pull back towards the highway, I note that the other side of the road is empty and so I pull out. There are no rules after that sound. My apology is the hazard lights which blink and tick like a heartbeat. There is the heavy sound of cicadas outside the windows. I keep my breathing measured; I don’t want him to feel my panic. I hadn’t really wanted to be right.

We drive. The names of the towns toll like church bells: Blaxland, Springwood, Lawson, Hazelbrook. We turned off near Wentworth Falls to a lookout we had stopped at a dozen times when life had been more of a picnic and less of a syllabus. The car park is half-filled with people standing beside their cars, all of them looking expectant, as if instructions are coming. The horizon east is a wound that has already scabbed over with a dull cloud of grey, rigid smog. The world has not ended the way the movies promise, with a clear path forward. It keeps going in its usual way – a scattered, fragmented, relentless normal. A black galah sweeps low over us, screaming abuse.

I hand him a protein bar and take one myself. It is something to do. We chew slowly, struggling with the momentum. Ziggy refuses to leave the car and ignores the treats I place in front of her. We realise that no one is yet able to talk. There is just silence, fidgeting, and false starts. We move back to the car and close the doors. I watch him rub a hand hard against his sternum, something I recognise as a nervous gesture he uses to calm himself, to slow his breath. I count quietly to ten. I take my time, allowing myself to decide nothing for ten moments. The counting builds a narrow bridge over a deep place.

“We trained for this,” he says.

My mouth recalibrates into a part of a smile. “We did?”

“All those books, those movies. The Tough Mudder races. The jokes. It was all training for this. For continuing.”

I lean towards him, and our shoulders push hard against each other.
“We did,” I say. “Let’s do it. Back roads to Amy’s place, and then we go find Grandma and Grandpa and see how they fared. Yeah?”

“Yep.” He waves his hand in a grand ‘onwards’ gesture, and I pull the car back on the mountain road. Somewhere ash is falling on water we swam in last weekend. A home full of stories is a fine white dust. There are names wafting in the air over a dog park, a football field, and a mall. There is a low hissing static from the radio, and I turn it down, but not off. It is a connection I don’t want to break. I watch his hand rest on his thigh, tapping a rhythm of controlled concern. The tendons on the back of his hand are a map I’d know in the dark. Ziggy stretches and moves towards the window, yawning widely, her way of resetting the universe. We drive towards the atmosphere we can still breathe. There is no revelation. We do what we have always done: we carry the fire.

- Lynnette Lounsbury



January 5

The January sun’s warmth beckons with a seductive glow, tickling the back of the neck and the bridge of your nose with the thought of its kiss. One might expect movement on a day like today, an escape from the cocoon of blankets. Or at least, the warmth filling up the room would become too much, forcing you out, similar to how smoke forces a rodent to leave its hiding spot. But no, Margot remained sprawled, lazily lapping the sunlight that filled her room, eyes fixed on the ceiling, the only spot not crusted with the filth of her avoidance, ignoring my very existence. Just as she always does. Instead, she twisted like a rotisserie, beads of sweat trickling down her back, collecting at the waistband of her shorts, leaving salty trails on her once colourful bedspread, now faded from her frequent use. Her hands hang weightlessly off the bed, light glinting off her rings. In that soft light her body seems almost translucent, the skin wrapping tightly around each bony crevice. It's vexing because, at her best, Margot possesses a captivating allure that I simply lack.

And yet, for reasons unbeknownst to me she intentionally disregards the potential she has. But then again, it seems that potential is all she ever is. I don't want to be her. But, if I could wear that tight skin for one day, I would show off those scattered freckles. I’d pierce the ears protruding through the sparse chocolate strands, and I’d promptly address the jagged and uneven mop of hair. I'd let the sun darken my skin and warm my heart, infusing me with energy and a zest for living. But even the sun and its warmth couldn't convince her to leave the comfort of her room or our home. At least not today. Or any yesterday, I can recall. Her days are often uneventful, flowing from room to room with a feline grace. Her scent of despair and self-pity has lingered so long that it has wallpapered walls and carpeted the floor. And in her wake, she fosters an atmosphere of animosity, planting seeds of self-loathing and resentment that extend to others, including me. But to her credit, she does manage to make her way down the stairs like a modern-day prom queen, her heavy breathing and grunts echoing through the empty rooms, with no photographers or adoring parents in sight, only closed curtains. The whole house has actually now been tailored to her liking. The sun doesn’t filter through windows without her approval, and the loungeroom has now been relocated to offset the stairs and reside closer to the kitchen, not that she cooks. If Margot asks, she receives. Meals, washing, love, affection, she is never without and is continuously attended to. And if I’m lucky, she will express her gratitude with a crooked half-grin. Those tightly pressed lips almost seemed to retreat into her face and ironically mock the kindness of my actions. Then again, my actions never warrant a flash at her yellowed smile. Though, I think that's for the best.

So now it’s ten steps from the bottom stair to the cushioned surface of her choosing. Sluggishly she loiters in her spot on our fraying lounge and makes sure the TV remote has found its home in her hand, transfixed by the lives of modern-day reality stars. We both obsess over how gratifying and carefree those reality stars' lives are. Though, Margot's lust for their freedom is unjust, considering she is the firstborn and favoured of us two girls. Unlike her, I live in a world of muted colours, existing in the quiet corners of my family's story. She has willingly stayed within her self-imposed sanctuary for months, drawn to the safety of the familiar like a moth to a dimly glowing lamp. In fact, she has rewritten her narrative so many times, and every version leaves no space for secondary characters. I am shadowed by her presence. And at least if my life mirrored the lives of those reality stars or hers and were as entertainingly awful and ridiculously trivial, it would be something. It would be mine. I envy their passion for things like shoes, boys, or money. Their plastic pink hearts beat with passion, more than my own can manage. And more than any passion Margot can muster, even within her privileged life, she always manages to complain.



So, really, it is just another day. Margot’s body tattoos the lounge, and she resentfully envies people with lip filler-induced lisps, perhaps wondering if one can even recognise hitting rock bottom. And I sit beside her, holding the bucket she gags in for the fourth time, not commenting on the absurdity of her despair. Because surely there is an acceptable limit to how much time she can indulge in self-pity. Any day now, she will have to face what life has dealt her. Look at me. I've endured Margot's illness as long as she has, and I'm going to deal with the consequences of her death long after she's gone. Yet, she has me and our parents, and maybe when she realises there are people other than herself sharing her life sentence alongside her, she will be happier. I mean, everyone has regrets, so I get it. Maybe she is sad because she didn’t realise life's shortness before her twenties, and if she could do it over again, she would embrace life's vibrant colours while they were still within reach. Perhaps she would enjoy receiving more sloppy kisses, eating more food, and rebelling against what others expect of her. Perhaps, if I could be in her shoes, I’d demand our parents' attention as a child does when they throw a tantrum. But regrets—yes, I have regrets that will haunt me. Everyone does. But how long does it take for someone to think of others? Think of me? I sit next to her, watching her do this same routine, lying in bed, to the lounge, getting her meds, throwing up, crying, napping, crying, more meds, napping, the same routine for months, and I've never been thanked. Not even as I hang up my family's hand-drawn art to decorate the beige walls or clutter the corner cupboard with purple floral arrangements, origami flowers, and well-wish cards.

Even now that we are back in the hospital, my presence is overshadowed by a pile of tasks and responsibilities. No, now I just sit in one of the three chairs spread around the three open corners of the bed reserved for visitors, scanning the room for a distraction. I’m careful not to suck any oxygen out of the room, for Margot reserves it all. Not now as I melt into the pale-yellow curtain blinds securing the entrance, protecting the door that loves hallway whispers, allowing every voice to seep through. It takes two clicks to ensure its closure. Not now, as I try to watch the TV, hardly used and poorly programmed, just out of eyeline as if deliberately mounted right there to taunt me. It doesn't matter; I can't focus on it anyway. Not with all the machines filling the room with their boisterous chatter, scattered about like unruly guests at a party. They belong here more than I do. I am as out of place as the sterile, stacked glove boxes hung like wall art, or the lonely lamp Mum brought from home that pushes against the space where bandages, flushes, and cords live. I am a still-life portrait that stares over the washed white linen, pretty but unnecessary. But I mean, that is fine; I get to leave this place eventually. I only have to make eye contact with the ceiling’s fluorescent lights and smoke detectors to avoid staring at needles, mangled hands, drips, and pain for hopefully an hour more. It all depends on how long my parents decide to keep me stuck in this room, making me endure this endless suffering. It depends on everyone but me. My happiness is up to them, and they choose Margot’s at every opportunity. But don’t worry, there's a silver lining in this cloud of lacklustre parenting: they've promised to take me out for dinner as compensation. And if I can play my cards right, I think I can sweet-talk them into getting ice cream afterwards as well.

- Taylah Jones



non-fiction

Dad,
Yesterday was the one year anniversary of you leaving us, and I haven't known what to do.

So I took parts of your spirit and put it in a bottle and I dusted off your favorite fleece, the Patagonia one you had long before I was born (and continued to wear for over 30 years, even if it was just on a walk with the dogs in the later days and not up the volcano summits of your youth) and took these elements of you to one of your favorite places.

We went high into the mountains together, perched amongst the cascades, and when the air turned brisk and snow threatened to reveal itself and remind me that it is, in fact, fall now, I enveloped myself. If I took a deep breath, I even thought I could still catch a whiff of your scent embedded in the fibers.

I thought about how you held on to everything, sometimes for far too long. You would get upset that "things weren't made like they used to be" and that the things that held memories and connection were tired now, would need to be replaced.

But you were proud of this fleece; you would tell everyone about the commitment to quality and the time you sent it in to get the zipper fixed and that's all that's ever needed to be done. Still functional, still perfect—just in need of a little tlc.

Sometimes I wonder if that lifetime guarantee was one of the only constants in your world. In a life that was rocky and uncertain and had too many downs to balance the ups, I imagine there was a bit of relief knowing that something that had been with you for over half your life would continue, just as it always had.

I wonder if when you would reach for it in your closet if you would remember your time here. If you would think of roadtrips down Chuckanut Drive and out to Leavenworth with mom before you got married. If you would remember holding my brother tight as you sledded too fast down a snowy hill, or barely surviving a fall descending Mt Baker (saved by the metal frame of your pack), or excitedly dragging us to the nearest field as soon as the leaves turned, filling up wheelbarrows with pumpkins for the porch.

I wish you had reached for it one last time and thought of all the adventures it still had left. It will never be a flash of red in the side of my eye as you round the corner of my future home, covered in dust from home improvement projects, or something soft and loved to cradle your grandchildren.

Your fleece is old and worn now, but with lots of life left, just like you had. It has a bit of paint on the front from tackling your never-ending to-do list and it's much too big for me and red isn't quite my color (unless I'm tanned like you from the summer sun), but I promise to continue the adventure as long as I can. Your fleece and I left parts of you in the mountains, so you can finally feel free. So I can visit you again. I love you dad.

- Ashley Cotter





In the sultry darkness before dawn, my mother had woken up thinking about snakes and bushrangers.

Her recent assault on the roly poly grass that had engulfed the cottage was still fresh in her mind. In spite of assurances from Uncle Charlie and my father that they would get to it when they had a chance, she had waited until they had set off to muster cattle at 'Anderleigh' before she had squared up to the job and spent hours hacking and sweating and pulling and piling in order to make clear ground. Aunty Lizzie had been aghast that a woman with a new baby should take on this formidable task, but such was my mother's primal fear of snakes that she endured the burning sun and the red welting on her hands and arms, as well as the certainty of my father's rebuke that she had gone and half killed herself in the heat.

Now, as light strengthened in the east, she took some comfort in the fact that with the grass gone, she would have more chance of seeing a reptile as it slithered out from under the house. She was also grateful that she could secure the netting around my bassinet, and that well-tucked mosquito nets provided fair protection for John and Amy during the night. However, in this untamed, isolated place where roads became impassable in heavy rain, and medical assistance was almost thirty miles away, nothing that she did in the night or in the day would ever be enough.

My mother's reflections on bushrangers had been prompted by a story that had been doing the rounds in the district in the last couple of days. Fred Bassinger had passed it on to my father, and my father had relayed it to my mother the previous evening as he sat at the table cutting bits out of 'The Sunday Mail' in the light of the kerosene lamp. Apparently, Gladys Wyborg's thick-built son, Gregory, had taken a fancy to tales about Ned Kelly, and thought that it would be a bit of a lark to stage a hold-up himself. His mother was peeling chunks of pumpkin in the kitchen when he hauled himself into some old clothes that had been mouldering in a suitcase under the house, and smeared his face with boot polish. With a squashed felt hat pulled over his eyebrows, he thumped up the long stairs, banged on the door, took on a voice and demanded money. Gladys greeted him with a gun, straight in the chest. Fred Bassinger had told my father that if young Wyborg had not yanked off his hat and yelled that he was Greg – he was Greg – Gladys would have put a shot into him, no questions asked. According to Fred, she was fairly dangerous, even without a gun. My mother was thinking about a woman with a gun when my father woke up and declared that it looked as if the rain had cleared. By the time that my father had laced up his sandshoes and gone with Uncle Charlie to the cowshed, my mother was out carting water from the tank beside the house and filling Aunty Lizzie's big outside boiler that sat next to a concrete wash tub under a pepperina tree. Peewees were already squabbling in the branches as she lit a fire in the grate.

Later, when the nappies had been swirled in Rinso and boiled, she would hook them into cold water with a broomstick, thrash them, wring them by hand, and hang them on a length of wire strung between two trees. If she was fortunate during this exercise, or any other household endeavour, the children would not have been carried off by flies, bitten into red blotches by mosquitoes, or have splinters in their feet. The floorboards in the dwelling place were uneven and rough, and the splinters were sometimes large and deep.



Somewhere in the afternoon, my mother would receive instruction on how to operate a firearm.

My father kept his Boer War rifle behind the kitchen door. The barrel had been rebored to take 12-gauge cartridges that were long and round and red. My mother watched carefully as he showed her how to load a cartridge into the breech, and how to aim at a target. It was important that she tuck the butt of the gun into her shoulder. She practised a couple of times, loading, keeping the gun against her shoulder, taking aim with one eye shut, and unloading. Something was said about setting up a tin on a post so that she could practise, but that idea was extinguished by a baby's cry and the need to bring the nappies in from the line. The cartridge was returned to the box that was kept on a high shelf, and the gun put back in place behind the kitchen door.

That evening, my mother had gone early to bed. As the crickets made a racket in the dry grass and the mosquitoes whirred in through the window that was propped open with a piece of four-by-two ironbark, her thoughts returned to guns and Gladys Wyborg and young Greg. She was astonished that a woman could ram anyone in the chest with a firearm, but at the same time there was a degree of fascination-cum-admiration for the confidence that Gladys exuded in handling a gun. Bushrangers, dingoes, snakes – she would finish them all off in a flash. With images returning of those few small moments that she had spent with my father and the red cartridge and the gun, my mother fell into an uneasy sleep. Somewhere in her nightmares, there would be the python that Uncle Charlie said lived in the haybarn, and the death adder that had been found in a new post hole by the loading ramp.

The snake that made its visitation to the dwelling place by the cowshed in my very first summer was brown. It was most probably an Eastern brown, a species also known as the common brown snake that lives right across eastern and central Australia. It is considered to be the second-most venomous snake in the world. An adult with an untreated bite may die within half an hour.
I was safely in my bassinet and Amy and John were playing in the room that opened onto the verandah when my mother glimpsed its long, lithe form at the bottom of the stairs. She turned cold. In a frenzied moment, she seized John and cast him into the cot, shouting that he must not get out. He must not move, and he must not get out. Amy was practically thrown in beside him as she raced to grab the cartridges and the gun. With red explosives rolling across the kitchen table, she snatched one into the breech and slammed it shut.

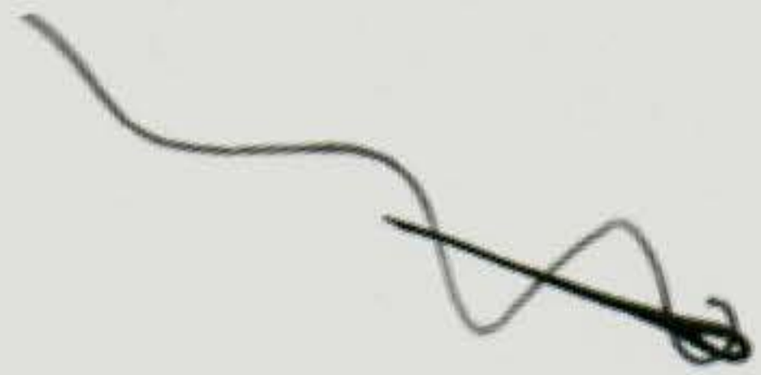
The viper was edging onto the verandah when my mother put the shotgun against her shoulder and took aim.
With her eyes shut, she cried, 'God help me!' and pulled the trigger.
She shot it dead.
My mother was a devout woman who made frequent supplications to the Almighty. She was also swift in her gratitude to God for what she regarded as divine intervention. She knew that she could never explain, 'Why this and not that?' because such questions were well beyond her; but when she looked at the snake lying dead in the dirt, she knew that what had happened was miraculous.

From the other side of the bull paddock, my father and Uncle Charlie had heard the gun shot and come thudding across the hot earth. They found Aunty Lizzie holding onto my mother and all three children crying. My father took my mother in his arms, and she sobbed against his chest. She was as white as chalk and shaking. Aunty Lizzie said that she would put some extra potatoes in the pot and that everybody could have dinner at her place.

My mother could not know then that another snake would be sighted the next day, and another on the day after that – three snakes in three days – and that the shock of her fear and frenzy would diminish her supply of breast milk. She kept on until she recognised her infant's significant weight loss, and in cutting sadness, sought a breast milk substitute, Glaxo. It was a No 1 tin for 'young and delicate babies.'

I still have a No 2 Glaxo tin. It is tall and round, and the print on the metal remains clear: 'Progressive milk food for older infants.' With its straight sides and its tight lid, it sits in my garden cupboard storing bloom booster.

- Althea Halliday



This is an excerpt from the forthcoming memoir, ***A Stitching of Yarns,*** *by Althea Halliday that will be available to hold or to scroll as of November 2025- find it in paperback and eBook on Amazon.*

Festive Cheesemonger

“You have to make a choice – do you want the shoes or do you want the cheese?”
My new housemate Ellie was a food writer with her own line of tote bags embroidered with FULL OF CHEESE in cheddar yellow. I’d landed in Edinburgh a week earlier, in late November, skipping the infernal Brisbane summer for the ever-black skies of Scottish winter. Needing a Christmas job, I’d applied to a perfume shop, Dr Marten’s and a cheesemonger, IJ Mellis.
Each job paid between £9.40 and £10.14 an hour, enough that I’d still need about 200 Australian Dollars of my savings every week to cover rent. The perfume job meant standing on a stone floor in two-degree cold for seven hours a day with the door open to the wind. Dr Marten’s gave a free pair of boots of any style to wear on-shift – worth £99-220! The role of Festive Cheesemonger offered just one thing - unlimited cheese samples in perpetuity.
I thought about it for a millisecond.
“I’ll take the cheese”, I told Ellie.
My first day, I penguin-stepped to work over the frozen path, trying not to slip and twist an ankle. I passed the Water of Leith to a glowing maroon shop front with IJ Mellis painted in gold, its window bountiful with legs of prosciutto and pyramids of camembert.
Marceau, the goateed French manager, greeted me.
“Claudia! Good to have you back. Laura - can you train Claudia today, please?”
A strawberry blonde girl walked over, with woollen thermals under her apron and thick-soled chef’s shoes. From the shop’s counter, piled with thick wedges of many-coloured cheeses, Laura chose a heavy maroon wheel and placed it on a chopping board.
“I think training starts with knowing the products”, she said.
She straightened it against a ruler and, straining her arm, used a wire to cut through the thick wax rind.
“Prima Donna Maturo, one of our most popular”, she handed me a thumb-sized piece.
“Bite, then let it melt on your tongue.”
It began as smooth butter, sweet and nutty, then my tongue felt grains like popping candy.
“What are the little bits at the end?” I asked.
“Crystallisation,” Laura answered, “the salt in the cheese forms little crystals, similar to parmesan.”
The crystals were sweet and minutely crunchy like table sugar, but umami and salty like Parmigiano Reggiano.
“You’ll notice that people are already coming in to stockpile their Christmas cheeses, this one’s good to recommend, it’s so tasty that people can’t stop.”
The notion of Christmas cheese was new to me. Christmas prawns or Christmas cherries, maybe, but no-one I knew in Australia thought festive means cheese.

Next, we tried two best-sellers, Isle of Mull Cheddar and Brie de Meaux. Mull cheddar was kept at the back of the shop, building the display, because the uncut rounds were tall, the size of a milk pail. Its flavour was a bitey, classic cheddar that mellowed to seasalt.
“I think you can taste the island in that one, that Hebridean grass the cows eat”, Laura looked at the cheese lovingly.
She handed me a finger of brie, beginning to ooze out of its rind.
“Brie de Meaux, a classic, it’s not the only brie but it’s the best-known.”
It tasted of delicate, creamy almond at the start with perhaps, for Australians, a flash of Vegemite, but quickly became a funky bouquet of Spring mushrooms. I learned that Brie de Meaux is the grandmother and grandfather of bries, the brie from which all other bries flow. Brie de Meaux is fit for queens but believes in egalite; she’s equally at home on Brigitte Macron’s cheeseboard or a gardener’s hunk of baguette at lunch.

“We have about ninety cheeses in rotation during the year, depending on the season,” Laura explained
“How do they source them all?”
“The European ones are mostly flown to us as-is. For all the local cheeses, Scottish, Irish and English, we buy the young cheeses directly from the cheesemakers, then we have our own maturing rooms.”
“Forgive my ignorance, how long do they mature for?”
“Some are two weeks but it can be six or eight months. We buy the young cheeses, keep them as needed then serve them at their peak. The key is the cheese shouldn’t be refrigerated at all, until maybe the end when it’s ready and you’re trying to stop it ripening. The enzymes can’t survive in fridges so cheese that’s been refrigerated in the early stages tastes flat.”
I wondered whether it was possible to mature dairy products for months without a fridge in Queensland.
“Does the cheese go off, if we don’t sell it?”
“It doesn’t go off but the flavour changes, it gets stronger. If it grows mould, we scrape it away, it’s still safe to sell.”
“And customers don’t mind seeing the mould?” I was amazed, thinking of all the blocks of Tasty Cheese I’d seen people throw away because they’d seen a speck of blue.
“Usually not, the local customers know not to worry.”
Two girls entered, wearing the uniform of University of Edinburgh students that winter – Frazzled Englishwoman a la Kate Winslet in The Holiday - long skinny knitted scarves, looped once round the neck, chocolate suede coats with shag-pile fringes and flared jeans. This was the very outfit I’d wanted to wear when I was eleven, circling shaggy purple coats in the Target catalogue.
“Yes, hello! Do you have charcoal cheddar in stock?” asked the girl with the skinniest scarf.
“No,” Marceau crooked his head to the side apologetically, “sorry!”
“Oh, that’s a shame!”
The girls left. Once they were safely out of the shop, Marceau turned to me and said-
“Eugh, charcoal chedder – disgusting!”
I saw a couple inspecting the Comté closely, looking bewildered
“Comté! We make Comté in Kansas! We have really good cheesemakers,” the husband gushed.
Comté was the one proper cheese I remembered from my last visit to my French family’s house, a few years ago. Had a cheese from Kansas escaped the all-seeing eye of France’s Protected Origin agents, scouring the globe for upstart curds that would sully their good name?
“Would you like to try some?” I sliced two pieces.
As they chewed the cheese, their eyes widened.
“Wow, wow, wow, this is really, really good”, the man looked dazed.
“Does it taste similar to the Kansas Comté?” I asked.
“No, not really, this has so much flavour, it’s just, wow,” the lady looked around the shop in awe.
A tall man with wispy, grey hair and impeccable velvet loafers bounded to the counter like a labrador with a stick.
“Hello! In a bit of a hurry, need a cheese for a little gallery opening in an hour, can you give me something interesting?”
“This’ll do the trick”, Laura said, lifting a heavy piece that looked like half a rockmelon, bright orange inside with a dry, holey crust.
“This is Mimoulette, it’s French, the style is four hundred years old. They can’t export it to America because it’s made with cheese mites, they burrow into the surface which makes those little holes.”

It tasted mellow but tangy, with deep caramel. The man chewed it once and nodded.
“That’ll do, can you cut me a good chunk, enough for twenty people? They won’t all be eating, mostly lookers, not eaters.”
I set to work cutting the Mimoulette. The wire refused to dig into the round, slippery rind which felt hard as marble, so I passed it to Marceau.
Laura and I washed our hands in the corner and she whispered, “That’s Dugald Drummond, he’s an Advocate, like a barrister, comes in twice a week.”
“I see him having coffee next door with his two spaniels on like, Wednesdays at 11am, not sure how much time he actually spends lawyering,” she shook her head and smiled.
Dugald collected his little Mimoulette parcel from Marceau and, on his way out, recognised another tweed-coated man. He thumped him on the shoulder.
“Fred, my good man, keeping out of the news these days, I hope?” they locked eyes and guffawed.
Laura rolled her eyes and laughed tiredly, “That’s New Town for you, they all know each other, most of these old boys spend their whole lives in the same two blocks.”
From the counter, she chose small logs of frosted charcoal and stonewashed white, all goat’s cheeses. The first, St Tola Ash, soothed my tongue with sweet lemon then blasted it with yoghurt and funky grass, fermented like summer silage in the Riverina. The two commercially available goat’s cheeses in Queensland did not taste like this. One was dry and went in salads with beetroot and walnuts. The other came in herby oil and was good in smashed avocado. The point of goat’s cheese in Australia was, essentially, to be savoury cream and melt into other things.
“I didn’t know goat’s cheese could taste like this,” I said to Laura
“What do you mean?”
“I thought goat’s cheese was meant to be mild, I’ve just never had anything like this”
“No, goat’s cheese is strong!”
The next sample, Elrick Log, was stronger and lip-pinchingly tart, but soft and melty like gelato.
“How do they make the cheese this strong – just leave it sitting there?”
“Yep, the flavour just develops naturally. Three weeks they’re okay, but by four weeks they’re too strong for most customers”
I pictured little goat’s cheese logs strapped into an Airbus seat, jetting to Sydney to be eaten within two weeks of their birth.
Selles Sur Cher from France was next. It started floral, like lavender, but finished as parsley and chives. Golden Cross, Ragstone, Dorstone were like siblings, the bounty of Somerset and Hereford, each a different mix of lemons, buttermilk and poppyseed.
Laura sliced a quart of a small, black pyramid with scalpel precision.
“This is Blackmount, it’s a local one, from Lanark, one of my favourite goat’s”
It melted onto my tongue and I heard a faint choir of angels. A whisper of smoke became a luscious hug of cream with a faint note of sweet citrus. It was heavenly.
I glanced at the price card.
“Twelve pounds for one? No wonder!”
Twelve pounds was half my grocery budget, achievable with the cheaper UK groceries and a good minestrone recipe. Two women walked in, wearing matching navy raincoats with firmly-wrapped white cashmere scarves and hiking boots.
“Bobo – paws off!”, one yanked a small blonde cavoodle away from the counter.
Laura nudged me forward to the sale.
“Hi, how can I help?”
“I need two cheeses, just for our girls’ night, one hard, one soft.”
“And what will you be having with it, to drink?”
“We’ve a nice light red, a Sangiovese, so not baby food but not a blue, either.”
I gave her a sliver of Mull cheddar and she hummed.

“For the soft cheese, how about a goat’s?”
“Oh yes, lovely, I hadn’t thought of a goat’s! What would you suggest?”
“Try this, it’s my favourite goat’s cheese, I think it tastes like angels.”
I handed her the slice. She savoured it and her eyes widened.
“Oh my, that’s special, isn’t it?”
“It is, it’s Blackmount, a local one, it deserves to be better-known, I think it’s heavenly”, I smiled.
“Well, I’ll feel clever telling people about this one, what a find!” She shuffled to the till with her friend, pulling Bobo back from a display of Scotch eggs.
Laura picked an off-cut of capocollo from under the meat-slicer, ripped a thick corner off with her molars and asked “Would you like to come to the Christmas market tonight? The one on Princes Street? I’m going. I don’t care if it’s touristy, it’s my first Christmas here!”
“That’d be lovely! I’ve wandered past a few times. What time should I meet you there?”
“At six-thirty, just after we close at six, we can walk up together”
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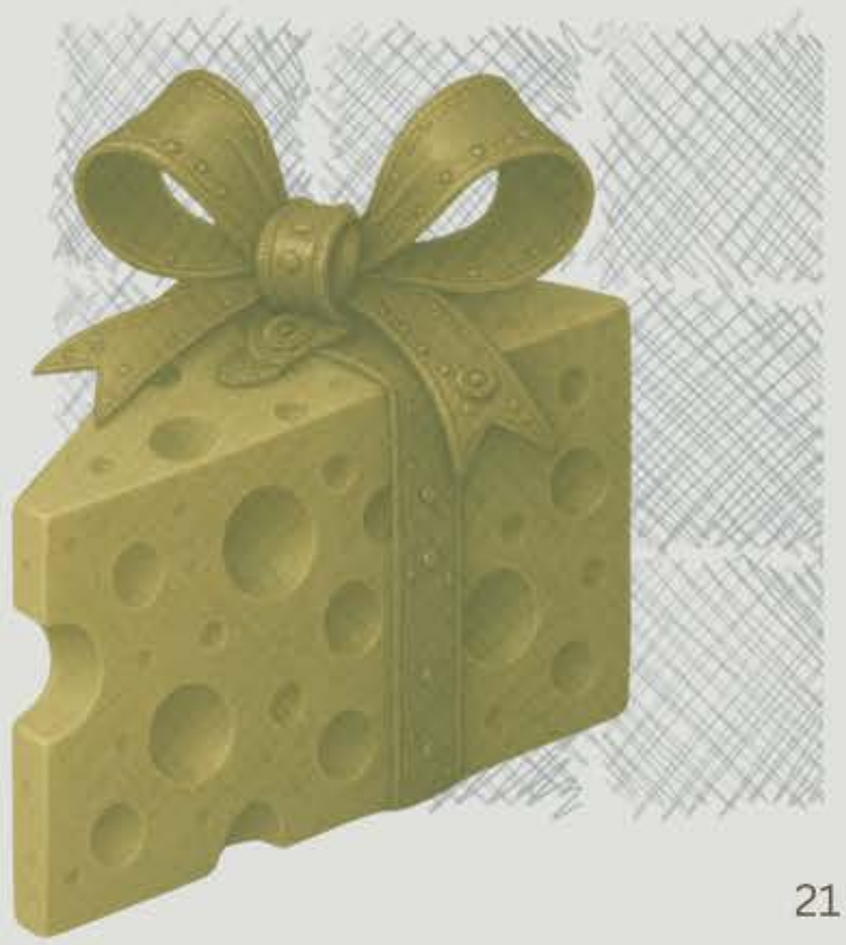
My newly-bought black Dr Marten’s boots felt heavy as we trudged up Raeburn Place, past the empty Starbuck’s, bustling Floatarium, The Baillie pub and Farrow & Ball paint shop.
A voice drifted out of Farrow and Ball; I glanced in and saw two glossy white scarves and a small cavoodle.
“I don’t want the fact it’s Christmas swaying me towards greens for the sitting room, everyone has sage now, you know?”
The shop assistant nodded gravely and waved some butter-yellow paint cards, “How about something like this, always warm, a complete classic?”
We continued past two boutiques with long Harris tweed coats and heavy pleated skirts in grey Scandinavian linen. The flats along Raeburn Place were gorgeous. Big, Georgian windows opened to show Victorian chandeliers, walls in burgundy and mustard, harps and well-stuffed sofas and bookshelves stacked to the ceiling. Some had put Christmas lights in their windows, stars and hearts; their cats stared at passers-by.
The gates on Princes Street funnelled a hoard of us into the Christmas market. A German market hütten had salmon crackling over logs, Bratwurst turning unctuously over a spit and nuts candying on a barbeque. The lights of a ferris wheel drew a hexagon in the sky, pointing to the National Gallery, which soared over the market with its classical columns. The Mound was behind, with layers of medieval spindles and gables, chocolate-stoned church spires and teetering Old Town houses by Victorian coal smoke. The Balmoral tower was the cornerstone, with its gold-lined clock, lit with twinkling spotlights for the season.
Laura and I decided to order a Yorkie Pud Wrap, a full Christmas dinner wrapped in a giant Yorkshire pudding. It was drowning in gravy.
“So, what brought you to Edinburgh?”
I’d been asked this a few times already.



“Curiosity, mostly, my dad’s English and I’ve always wanted to use the passport. Lots of Aussies live in London for a couple of years, but I’m from a smaller town so fancied a smaller city.”
We strolled around the wooden market huts, taking turns attacking the Pud Wrap.
“Why on earth do you all leave Australia? Everyone here’s trying to go there, I have two friends who’ve already moved!”
“You guys do have good things too, the pub culture’s legendary, there’s heaps of history, music, sport, whatever you’re into. Your cities have more of a buzz on the street, unless you’re from good parts of Sydney or Melbourne. And travelling to Europe is so much easier here.”
“That’s true, Ryanair and EasyJet make it cheap, but you guys have Bali and Fiji!”
“Sort of, but they’re quite far, two hours on a plane from Brisbane gets you to more places that are like Brisbane, two hours from here you’re in Norway or Seville.” We stopped at a glühwein stall and filled a mug each.
“Those aren’t that exciting to me, sure I’d like to go one day but Bali’s the dream”, Laura looked wistfully at the dark evening sky.
“Guess the other side is always more tempting, Europe trips are a big luxury for my parent’s generation in Australia, they count themselves lucky if they go once in their lives.”
We passed a Santa balloon hut blasting Miracle by Cascada.
“I guess it’s that classic thing, you’re mid-late twenties, you’ve done the same job for a while, you’re comfortable but don’t feel like you’ve lived enough to settle down, Brits do a six-month trip to Thailand,” Laura swallowed the last of her glühwein.
“Exactly, we’re just curious about the rest of the world because we grow up so far from anywhere else. I guess I never quite felt like I fit in Australia, either, like I was always a bit too serious, and didn’t know how to talk about the footy, the pop culture is very macho and almost the only way you’re part of it as a woman is being a blonde surfer girl, which I wasn’t.”
“Ha! Edinburgh’s full of goths, will you turn into one of those?”
“Probs not, their makeup is cool, but I’d be too lazy to put it on every day.”
Laura looked at my black Dr Marten’s and laughed.
A seagull circled above, looking for abandoned bratwurst.
***
The next day, I woke to snow falling in the back garden, frosting the stone walls that split the Victorian lawn square into wedges. It was minus-four degrees, but I felt brave. It was time to venture into the blues.
The blue cheese section occupied a good third of the selection. Colston Basset Stilton had a brilliant marketing department that popularised the name ‘King of Cheeses.’ It came in little blue-and-white ceramic pots and was, apparently, A Christmas Cheese. Its flavour was equally sweet and acidic, with blue tang, but quite salty.

I sliced some Hebridean Blue, made on the Isle of Mull. It was tangy with a hint of dulse at the end, its blue marble like drifts of seaweed waving in the tide. Cashel Blue from County Tipperary was gentle and custardy on the tongue, a blue to convert the friend who doesn’t like blues.
A round of Gorgonzola Dolce sat above the display on its own stand, like a wedding cake, oozing white curds, gently blue like the first sip of pinot noir on an autumn Friday.
Queso Cabrales from Pico de Europa in Spain had the most exotic birth of any cheese. Like most cheeses, it started as peasant food, made by mountain-dwelling Spaniards wringing every last calorie from the milk of their sure-footed livestock, the only things that could live on the barren land. They took the milk into caves deep in the mountain ridges and washed the young cheeses with water that dripped from stalactites on the cave ceilings. These minerals became crystals which simmered in my mouth like volcanic sherbert, cooled by the blue veins.
I wondered whether Australia had any caves cold enough that you could leave a cheese to sit for eight months, being watered by a stalactite. Maybe in Tasmania.

Dugald Drummond broke my reverie, tumbling through the door. He was accompanied by a tall teenage boy with chocolate-brown curls and the high-chiselled face of a young Hadrian.
“Hi! Bloody freezing, isn’t it? I’m having a few people for a Christmas thing, we need a centrepiece for the table, I’m thinking Stilton! Can I try a bit? Must check it’s up to scratch!” He chortled and snaffled a generous sample.
“Tommy, what do you think?” he handed half the wedge to his son.
“It’s fine, Dad, it’s normal Stilton.”
“How much does that piece weigh?”
I placed the fist-sized chunk on the scale.
“Four hundred grams”
“How much does half that round weigh?”
I placed half a round, a quarter of a whole Stilton wheel, on the scale.
“Two kilos”
“That won’t do, it’ll barely fill the plate! I’ll take twice that. How much would four kilos be?”
I calculated – “Well, thirty-five pounds per kilo means seventy, a hundred and forty pounds total.”
“Dad! That’s four kilos of cheese! We’re having three people!” Tommy exclaimed, looking at his father’s tote bag, brimming with wine, bags of nuts and a baguette.
Dugald looked at Tommy.
“Nothing makes the statement of a Stilton, but fine, two kilos, please.”
“Are you sure, two kilos?” I checked
“Yes, two kilos for five people, no one should complain at that, really– but I could eat the whole thing myself!” his face quivered with stifled laughter
Needing a perfect crescent for Dugald’s Christmas dining table centrepiece, I lifted the heavy disc, half a Stilton, to the cutting board and pulled the wire. The rind yielded and the wire rippled through the soft blue cream. I carefully wrapped three sheets of the waxed paper around the crescent.
“Anything else?”
“Do you have any chutneys?”
“On the back wall.”
Dugald busied himself with jars of Red Onion and Port, Fig, Real Ale and Traditional Piccalilli. Tommy held the bag.
I handed the Stilton package to the till and saw that people were queuing into the street, which had chilled to minus-six degrees.
“Everyone wants their Christmas cheese,” Laura said, nodding to the line.
***
As the weeks rolled past, winter cheeses appeared. I learned that cheese is as seasonal and regional as Riesling grapes and mangoes. Are the cows eating the soft, mild grass of early Spring or the tough, fibrous grass of late Summer? Are they in arid La Mancha or lush Tipperary? The Montbéliard cows whose milk is Comté in the summer make heavenly Vacherin Mont D’Or in the winter, when the farmers move them down the mountains of the Western Alps to eat the hardy lowland grasses. Like wine, no two cheeses are exactly alike, even in the same vintage.
The day before Christmas Eve, we had seven staff taking orders at the counter. Some customers had a list, well-balanced with cheddar, a brie, a blue, a soft goat’s and a novelty cheese. Some wanted something quick for a home date. Others were catering an entire Christmas weekend and were, invariably, in a flap.
“I’m having eight people! I don’t know anything about cheese, just cheddar! What would you recommend?” A lady asked, wide-eyed.
At the first taste of a St Andrew’s cheddar, she relaxed. I gave her Brie de Meaux, Cashel Blue, Elrick log and Moliterno al Tartufo. The last one was a truffled pecorino, too truffley for most of the staff’s taste, but it was an exceedingly Christmassy cheese.

A grandmotherly lady walked in, petite with an impeccable pixie cut and long tweed coat.
“Gruyere! Do you have gruyere? I adore gruyere”, she asked plummily, stretching the name like a melted string of raclette.
“We absolutely do”, I gave her a sample. Her eyes sparkled like a child diving into the Quality Street tin.
The line lasted until we closed at 10pm. The customers asked for cheeses made from sheep’s milk, or vegetarian rennet, from Austria, or Italy, or Scotland, stronger and weaker with flavours of smoke or truffle and I surprised myself by knowing the answers. Seventy cheeses rested in my head, catalogued by origin, texture, ingredients, flavour. Customers looked at us with respect as we talked and tasted with them, fitting cheeses to their needs like tailors.

At closing time, I chose some favourites to share with Veronique and Eric, my aunt and uncle in Brittany, Veronique and Eric, to whom I’d fly for five days on Christmas Eve. They always stocked their kitchen with Comté and brie for the Australians, so I wanted Scottish cheeses. First in my pile were Bonnet, a hard local goat’s cheese, sweet and nutty, and Shepherd’s Store, a hard Irish sheep’s cheese. In went Mull cheddar, Hebridean blue, Clava brie, Blackmount, Gubbeen and a petite Wigmore. The parcel was heavy. I wasn’t sure if I’d manage to slip it onto the plane, food imports being banned into the European Union.
***
In Vero and Eric’s kitchen table in Questembert, they tried Bonnet first.
“Mmmm, this is so good!” Vero inhaled, “and from Scotland!”
They ate their cheese in chunks, sometimes with bread, never crushed onto a cracker with chutney or meats that would cover its flavour. We appraised three years of family news over Shepherd’s Store and a bottle of Beaujolais, weddings, career changes, lapsed veganism and their quiet son Luc’s surprising emigration to Brisbane.
We video called my uncle Rob, their cousin, in Newcastle that night, his Christmas morning. He’d last been in Brittany that summer.
“Claudia brought us some good cheeses, we were very surprised, the food from Scotland is usually not so good, but these were very nice!” Eric enthused.
“We have two types of cheese in Australia,” Rob told us, “Cheese in a block and shredded.”
“I know,” Vero laughed, “you see it now! When our Australians come to France, all you want is bread, cheese and butter!”
It was true. All I wanted that winter was good bread, cheese and butter, eaten with family, and another snow day in Edinburgh.

- Claudia Houston



What to sing when a bear wants to kill you.

I am sitting in a wood panelled ranger station in Glacier National Park, watching a video on bear safety with two friends from different continents. Ben is a building contractor from Seattle. Josh is an actor from Sydney, and we stare, wide eyed as the video presents in graphic detail all the colourful ways a bear can stalk, maim and kill hikers in the backcountry of Montana. That's where we are planning to go. Into the backcountry, but as the warnings in the video get more and more graphic, I'm beginning to have second thoughts.

"Bears kill tourists every year in Glacier National Park..." the video chirps, and we look at one another, "and if you see a bear... yell, clap your hands or sing a song... but don't run. Bears have been clocked at over 35 miles per hour." Geez. That's 56 kilometres per hour. Nearly as fast as a corolla. A large, grizzly haired corolla with teeth.

When the video is finished, we don't say a word. We just sign a legal document that absolves Glacier National Park from all liability if we are slain on the trail. When the paperwork is done, and we have tagged our backpacks with identification numbers, we are ready to hit the trail.

"Great. Now that that's over... shall we?" Ben says with a wry smile. He is the only one who has hiked in Glacier National Park before, and he must have seen the video before. Not that he warned us about it.

"Let's go," I hear myself saying, even though a knot is forming in my throat, "It's now or never."

We load our backpacks into the courtesy shuttle that will deliver us to the trailhead, and as the shuttle winds its way up The Going To The Sun Road, on switchbacks that sit like shelves on the stone face of the Rockies, we take in the spectacle. Mount Reynolds rises from a deep river valley in the distance, a glacier weighing heavy on her shoulder. Off in the distance, a waterfall plummets a hundred metres or more down a sheer rock wall. The scenery is nothing short of spectacular, and I have soon forgotten about the bear safety video as I rummage through my backpack, making sure that all my camera batteries are charged. This is why I travel, I remind myself, to feel these endorphins pumping through my veins. It's like a drug, and I relax into the euphoria, noticing all the little details that I plan to take with me when I leave America. The smell of pine. The gentle updraft of warm wind rising from the valley below. The cloudless, blue sky. Neon blue. The kind of blue that connects memories across the ages. Forever blue. This is paradise.

The trail is narrow and rocky, and leads us across streams and wide-open fields full of purple bloom. Every now and then we stop to marvel, but Ben has the stamina of a mountain goat, and pushes on as soon as we have the breath to speak. It is hard work, and we sweat in silence to the sound of squeaking boot leather. One mile. Then Two. Then Four point three. Before we know it, we have crested a small rise, and a small lake comes into view. Nestled into a valley between Fusillade Mountain to the North and Gunsight Mountain to the West, Gunsight lake sits at 5,351 feet and has the cobalt blue sheen of glacier water. I fumble for my camera and take a shaky photo before we kneel, exhausted on the bank of the lake and numb our faces with the water.

After setting camp and dining on two-minute noodles, we follow the instructions in the video, we throw a small length of rope over a low-hanging branch so we can hoist all our aromatic food twenty feet up. Out of the reach of bears.

I drift in and out of sleep that first night, waking with a start each time I can hear the sound of something tramping in the brush outside. It could be any number of animals we saw on our trek up: elk, moose, or rock marmots. But no matter how big the sound, I imagine a dark silhouette with muscled haunches, circling our tents, raising a wet nose to the breeze as he forages for human flesh.

In the morning, the air is a good twenty degrees colder, and the sun sits on the top of the eastern ridge like a dab of butter, melting into the valley in golden streams. We light a fire and thaw our hands with large cups of steaming coffee, breathing it all in. This is day two of our trek, and we pull out a topographical map of the area and a compass, tracing our way up the trail to Gunsight pass, where we plan to cross the Rockies that evening. It is only a mile and a half to the pass, but with an elevation gain of over two thousand feet, it will be rough going with sore muscles from the day before.

The trail away from the lake is a narrow cut of brown dirt among a field of yellow wildflowers, and at first, it feels like a walk in the park. But soon the ground turns to granite, and Ben is out in front, searching for stone waymarkers that will lead us to the next patch of trail.

Little clumps of huckleberry cling to the rock face, and I stop to pick a few bright red berries, savouring the tart flavour. It's the kind of sour that makes your face pucker involuntarily, and I wince through it, happy for a distraction from the arduous switchbacks that seem to go on forever. A slow burn sets into my upper legs, and I begin to find a rhythm for my breathing to distract myself from the pain. Two steps in... Two steps out... Two steps in... Two steps out...

"Whoa there!" I hear Ben yell out, but it takes a few seconds for me to see what he's talking about, "Whoah!" Ben has his hands up and he looks over his shoulder, his face white. He points to the path ahead and I can see her standing there, staring us down, brown hair bristling on her haunches as she sizes us up. This is a grizzly bear. A big one. And she rears up on her hind legs and lets out a sort of... hiss. That's the only way to describe it. It sounds more like a sound you would expect a wildcat to make, but here it is coming from a bear that stands six or seven feet tall in front of us.

It takes every ounce of my resolve not to turn tail and run. Instead, I raise my camera and pull the grizzly bear into focus. I watch her shake her head at us, and it feels like I'm watching a documentary on National Geographic or the Discovery Channel. There is a grizzly bear *filling the frame*. Click, I take a photo. Click. I take another.



In the corner of the frame, I can see Ben waving his arms and yelling out, “Whoa Bear! Whoa!” and I can see the bear take another step towards us. I can feel my limbs go numb. The air whistles around me. Everything slows down, and I can feel my pupils dilate to a pinprick. Every sense is heightened now, and I’m trying to remember what I’m supposed to do from the bloody video, and then all of a sudden I can hear Josh find his composure behind me, and begin to sing at a volume that only the truly tone deaf have the confidence to bellow, “We built this city… We built this city on ROCK AND ROLL!”

All of a sudden, the bear shuddered, and moved a few steps back.

Ben continued to yell, I continued to take photos, and Josh continued to sing off key… and slowly, miraculously, the bear turned and shuffled off down the trail, leaving us in a vacuum of silent awe at what we had just encountered.

As the reality of the moment settled in, Ben and I looked at Josh with question marks for eyebrows. “Really?” we laughed out loud, “We Built This City?” This is a song by Starship that, according to a Rolling Stone Magazine poll in 2011, won in a landslide victory as the worst song of the 1980s. In 2004, Blender also named this song the Most Awesomely Bad Song of All Time, and it seems that humans are not the only species that feel this way.

In our own independent poll of the great outdoors, Ben, Josh and I discovered that “We Built This City” is also a detestable song to wildlife, though, for what it’s worth, I have a newfound appreciation for Starship. After all, they saved my life.

- JP Lounsbury



musings

when words fail, the dance remains: Siva Samoa and the Diaspora

Many Samoans living outside of Samoa find it difficult to keep their culture alive. We might have been born somewhere very far from the islands. We don't speak perfect Gagana Samoa, but we try lots of times. We may only hear our mother tongue at church or at family gatherings, and we have to try to make sense of what people say. Even when language seems difficult to grasp, Siva Samoa shouts clearly to each of us.

Siva is not only a kind of dance. In many ways, it allows us to get closer to our background, historical past and who we are. Wherever your home is, including Auckland, Sydney, Los Angeles, you probably participated in or saw Siva Samoa at a family wedding, a night celebrating culture or a church gathering. A lot of us are first taught about this tradition during our childhood. It turns into a memory, a skill and also helps us reach something much greater than ourselves. You do not have to know each Samoan word to appreciate the feeling of Siva Samoa. Your hands can express things without you saying a word. The eyes reveal feelings. The movement shows the narrative. Sometimes, the story is pulled from mythology; other times, it is given for the sake of the family, and sometimes it is an expression of thanks. When you try to dance salsa or simply see someone else do it, you feel like you belong, and it feels like home.
It may take a very long time to learn the language. Some people learn to read easily, but others might always find it hard. This is normal. If you weren't raised speaking the language, it can be quite frightening and intimidating. Still, it's possible to include and embrace parts of culture outside the dominant one. Keeping just one link to it, such as Siva Samoa, can help the fire never go out. It can be a way of saying: I might not know every detail, but I know who I am inside.

Siva also links generations with one another. Aunties explain and instruct their nieces in how to dance. Grandparents will usually smile as kids rehearse in the living room. On social media, young people from Samoa often show off their siva dances and express their culture to everyone. Film goes beyond borders and time periods to be understood by people everywhere. Influence does not only come from their performances. There is a special magic in watching someone dance that words alone cannot always describe. It shows you that you have roots in something beautifully important. Something inside you that you keep carrying. I was 8 years old the first time I performed a Siva, and it was at my older cousin's 21st birthday celebration. It was this first dance that opened my heart towards my love towards Siva Samoa, and I remember finally feeling a genuine and true connection to my culture and heritage. Throughout the practices that took place and the performance itself, I felt a fulfilment from deeper within me; I felt every action with my soul in a way I could never express before. I remember seeing my grandparents afterwards, and they expressed how proud they felt watching me perform culturally. This is the special gift of Siva. Perfection is not needed. It only asks that your heart is in the room.
For people living far from Samoa, Siva Samoa gives us comfort, pride and shows us that culture can stay alive even as our language is forgotten. It is with us in our bodies, in our music, in everything we share without talking.

When words fail, Siva speaks. And it speaks to all of us.

- Paige Lafaele

The Literary Lamppost: From Inspiration to Production

On November 6, 2024, I decided I had some things I wanted to say. 2024 was a tumultuous year for the world, and particularly that day, I felt helpless. I imagine I was not alone. As so many of my generation do, I tried to make sense of what I was feeling by plunging into reddit threads, searching for kindred spirits among the slew of half-baked hot takes and we're-all-going-to-die doomsayers. Some 3 blocks of chocolate and 50 pages in, I stumbled across the suggestion of a Tolkien book club. The idea was a breath of fresh air, and it sparked an idea of how I could potentially make a difference through discussions of literature.

I had become an avid podcast listener over the past 6 months or so, and I had searched for a literary analysis podcast, but hadn't found what I was after. So I decided to make it. I searched high and low for a person who might want to do it with me, asking friends all across the world. Those friends I originally thought of were unable to commit to a project like this. I don't blame them; between PhDs, lawyer stuff, and international time zones, it would be difficult. Then the facepalm moment, when I realized the perfect literary podcast co-host was right in front of my nose. My brilliant, English major, assistant editor and author sister Ashley had been floating the idea of a book club, so when I suggested a literary podcast, she was in.

We went up to The Press Bookhouse in Newcastle, and put our heads together over a notebook and coffee, and at the end of the 4 hours, the idea had taken shape. We would do a literature themed podcast, examining issues in the world through the lens of literature. We would tackle historical, social, and political ideas by examining how they played out in literature, and in so doing, try to take on some of the ideology driving the awful things going on in the world. By the time we finished our coffee, we had a line-up of 26 books we planned to dig into. ChatGPT was less than helpful in coming up with a name, but between our love of C.S. Lewis and our appreciation of alliterations, we managed to come up with something we both loved, The Literary Lamppost.

That night, driving back to Sydney, I listened to a podcast from the platform Buzzsprout called "How to Start a Podcast". I highly recommend this resource to anyone who wants to start a podcast but feels overwhelmed by how to do it. It was immensely helpful, and providing guidance for content and ideas as well as the technical side of equipment, software and distribution. We purchased Samson Q2U mics from amazon, and the audio interface from a music store in Sydney. Our living room transformed into our recording studio, with the help of an editing program called Descript. My brilliant husband, Josh, a music graduate from Avondale in 2022, composed our theme music. Along with Josh's XLR audio cables, that's all we needed.

Using Canva, I created the graphic design that would become our cover page. A snowy lamppost in a library, glowing brightly among the books and the snowflakes. Though our style has changed since we began, that graphic has remained our icon, and a symbol of our what we were trying to achieve: providing light through literature.

Ashley and I set up an Instagram account, filmed a trailer, and we set our release date for January 7, 2025. Then, we got to work on our first episode script. We chose Anne of Green Gables as our first book. We had known and loved it from childhood, and there were some interesting issues that we could discuss. Our first episode sounded incredibly scripted...because it was. It took some time for us to figure out exactly what we wanted our style to be. We muddled through our first few episodes, improving in tone and message.

Then, Ashley went to the Digital Discipleship conference hosted by the South Pacific Division in Brisbane. She came back buzzing with a single word, Authenticity. From that point on, I stopped editing out our goofs, and she made sure to have a hook and a thesis at the beginning of each episode. Our tone lightened and became less academic. Our friends told us this shift made the podcast significantly better and more engaging, and it was more fun to make.

At the time of writing, we've made 13 episodes. Some are harder than others and some of our listener numbers are depressing, but the idea that we're making a difference in the world, and the feedback from some of our listeners has kept us going.

This podcast has been the perfect way to keep engaging in literature in a meaningful way, and it has been incredibly rewarding to create something which we feel has allowed us to use our voices and say the things we think are important. It has allowed us to have conversations with people about topics we otherwise wouldn't be able to have, and ground our thoughts and ideas in history, philosophy, and sociology. Sometimes, when Ashley and I are with friends, we will hear each other switch into our "podcast voice" when sharing a thought, or even directly quote things we have said. We have learned so much through our reading and research, and it has taught us to think an analyse in new ways. There's so much going on in the world that feels overwhelming, but it feels good to be doing something.

Those of you who have something to say, we encourage you to find a way to say it. That may not be a podcast; it might be an Instagram account, or magazine articles, or a YouTube channel. There are so many ways to use your voice to try to make the world a better place; don't wait. Do something today.

- Caitlin Jankiewicz

windmills

There are some peculiar structures that are at once grand and humble, icons of neither the slave nor the king. They are towering and lowly, massive but scalable, dangerous yet lifegiving. Some are still used today, but most are more scarecrow than structure. Inhabited if not by vine, then ivy, and if not ivy, then long grass, and if not long grass, then rodent, and if not one of these, then all of them. In this abandoned state, they are a shadow of what once was, and an omen of things to come; though others of its kind still breathe the wind, their own fate is close at hand. Those others that continue to exist are well-oiled, the spinning flower of the field, which scarcely sees its dying brother, already sagging, brown and rusted.

Of course, these agricultural monoliths are windmills.
They rushed past during the slow parts of the road trips, simply blurring into the hazy horizon of the yellow scorched country. They were a feature of the landscape, and that was all. They spun, and that was all. They were as one with those drive-by houses as the chimneys or the mailboxes were, and that was all. As the chimney smoked and the mailbox accepted letters, the windpumps revolved, and the windmills siloed. These were residents, no more unnatural than the beings in those homes.

Then, on those road trips, you left the comfort of the backseat. You put your own unlearned hands on the wheel, and because you had to, you noticed everything. Suddenly, you saw the parts from the whole, the eaves from the roofs, the lintels from the doors. All that was one was now many. All that was together was now apart. All that was alike was now distinct. But this iconoclastic revelation wasn't destructive, rather constructive or instructive. You learnt that all things had their place, and all places had their parts. You knew that one couldn't exist without the other, and that existence was itself but a part of a whole. At that time, you understood the windmill. You saw the breath of the earth welcomed by the windpump that drew its water and thanked the breeze with a whistle. Back around the world she goes, whistled the windpipe. You heard this, for you understood this.

Until you passed that collection of familiar structures, no longer peculiarly alone, but strangely grouped together. It was a windmill museum. The parts were whole once more, but it was altogether new. This was a family reunion of sorts, and you were now the peculiar. Now you knew time as they had known it. It was their own plane which they scaled, their own tower which they climbed. You shared with them your own dimension: space. You climbed them; they toiled on in the wind. You scaled them; they continued to creak and sway. As they were the horizon, you were a distant memory. To these century old beings, you were now the blur. They had known time as you had known the landscape. So, you became the ivy attached itself to the steel legs of the giant.
You were a part of a whole, and that was all.

- Gideon Ryan



Woman of the Year

For as long as I can remember, for better or worse, I've defined myself by my femininity, by my girlhood. I grew up with a sister and always surrounded myself with close female friends. I was the pink sister, adoring Barbie, swooning over Justin Bieber, One Direction and Taylor Swift. I loved wearing flouncy skirts, playing dress-ups, baking, everything "girly." This is who I was, defining my identity until around the age of 14 when I became hyper aware of the social cost of enjoying those things.

So, I changed. I learnt what was considered cool and uncool, then I adapted and altered myself until I eventually fit into the cookie cutter shape of what it meant to be "chill." I became palatable to my male peers by enjoying the things they did. I swapped pop for hip hop and R&B, skirts for jeans, started covering my young face with heavy makeup, and stopped talking about the issues that bothered me.I drank, went to festivals, and prided myself on my "logical brain" and my refusal to cry. But it wasn't just interests and clothing, I had to change my personality as well. As I learnt that being loud made me aggressive, having strong opinions made me argumentative. And was often described as "mouthy."

In all of this, in trying to fit in, I lost myself. The facade was so strong that by the time I was 16 I barely knew who I was or what I stood for.

And I know I'm not alone in this. So many girls have followed the same path, I saw it then and I see it now. In adolescence, anything associated with girlhood is automatically deemed uncool. I watched my peers change themselves to be desirable, to shrink themselves for the male gaze. Boys held the social power, and we either fell in line or fell out of the group. I wish I'd had the confidence to resist, but at the time, being in the in-group felt like safety. And I didn't know how to be outside the group. So I, we, did whatever was needed to be considered low maintenance, cool, one of the boys.

I was 19 when I finally began to reclaim my femininity. By that point, I had moved across the country, lost a friend, fallen in love, and survived a trauma that one in four women know too well.

Over the next two years, I found my way back to the things that made me feel like the truest version of myself. I began to peel back years of internalised misogyny and recentred my understanding of womanhood. I challenged the quiet voice that told me pink was frivolous, that softness was weakness, that being assertive was being bossy, that being loud was being aggressive. I started to rewrite what being a woman meant on my own terms.

I stopped forcing myself into clothes I despised and started choosing what felt beautiful to me. I filled my world with pink, because it sparked joy, and felt like defiance. I rewatched Barbie movies for comfort. I let myself enjoy Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift without irony, remembering how this music made me feel before pressures of adolescence. I allowed myself to feel again. I let my heart soften. I came to see that vulnerability is not a weakness at all, but a form of strength

But most importantly, I learnt to take up space, to be loud and mouthy, to talk about what I care about and stick up for what I believe in. Each small choice an act of unlearning, a refusal to keep carrying shame that was never mine to begin with.

With higher, tertiary education, and learning about history, philosophy, religion and sociology, I relearnt what it means to be a woman in a male centred society. I reclaimed my social value, and decided that my worth would not come from conformity, would not come from beauty, from fitting in, my relationship status or my ability to bear children. I learnt to take up space and be who I am. To be the woman I want to be, not the woman I was told I should be.

Now, as a teacher, I see the same pattern play out every year. Around Year 8 or 9, girls change. Their style, their hair, their music, their sports, to fit in. To be palatable to their male counterparts. And I don't see this from the boys. This isn't changing in a normal "growing up" way, this is a complete overhaul because things that are well liked by young women are immediately deemed cringe and uncool.

But then came 2023. The year of the girls.

Femininity was finally being celebrated. *Little Women* resurfaced in popularity. The Barbie movie, like a tidal wave, took over cinema. The Matildas captured the world's attention. Taylor Swift's Eras Tour dominated headlines. Online, "girl culture" flourished. It felt like a feminist reawakening, through a Gen Z lens. By the girls, for the girls.

Young girls saw women selling out stadiums, and sport arenas, commanding millions of viewers, becoming billionaires by creating original art. They saw Barbie critique the patriarchy while breaking box office records. For once, girlhood and femininity was leading Western culture. And it wasn't just women joining in. Men screamed for the Matildas, they laughed with Barbie, and loving fathers, partners and friends dressed up for the Eras Tour.

I decided to ride that wave as far, and for as long, as I could. I plastered my classroom walls with Matildas posters. I designed a Year 9 song analysis looking at Taylor Swift's The Man. I wrote Barbie quotes on my whiteboard. I did everything I could to keep that spark alive for my students, and I truly believe it made a difference.

But this joy was short lived.

As Donald Trump's second presidential campaign gathered momentum in 2024, the tide shifted. Suddenly, women's reproductive rights, workplace equality, and trans rights, rights of POC, things we thought were settled, were thrust back into public debate. What once felt like basic human rights were reframed as negotiable. Online, conservative voices grew louder, emboldened, and misogyny once again found a comfortable home in the comment sections.

Even from Australia, we felt it. What happens in the US inevitably ripples outward. Trump became more than just a candidate; he became a symbol of outdated values, an attempt to drag women, and minorities, back into silence.

What startled me most was the way adolescent boys embraced him. To them, his extremity was entertaining, his vulgarity a joke. But beneath the laughter, his confidence, wealth, and bravado made them take him seriously. They began believing him. I felt whiplash. Hadn't we all already agreed that Trump was dangerous?

"It's just a joke."
"He's a great businessman."
"He has a wife and daughter."

These were the lines I heard repeated in his defence, over and over again. Red Pill media has desensitised boys, and many men, to Trump's condescending, vulgar comments about women. Commentators, and podcasters, like Andrew Tate, Charlie Kirk, Ben Shapiro, and Joe Rogan have somehow gained credibility, packaging right-wing extremism in a way that feels palatable, even aspirational, to young men.

The saving grace was Kamala Harris. She embodied the kind of leadership we needed to see from a world superpower. Intelligent, empathetic, and trustworthy. She represented the possibility of something better: a world where women's voices are not only heard but valued. A world where leadership is grounded in empathy and inclusion, rather than hostility and division.

A Harris victory would have been more than a political win. It would have been a proclamation that women's voices matter, that the highest office in the world could finally belong to someone who reflected both strength and compassion. For women, it would have shattered yet another glass ceiling. For girls, it would have been proof that their futures were not limited by their gender. And for everyone, it would have signaled a step toward a fairer, more inclusive society.
On November 4, 2025, I woke with hope. Hope for a Kamala Harris victory. But as the day wore on and Trump collected state after state, that hope slowly crumbled.

That night, I cried in the shower. Not just for myself, but for the young girls I would face the next morning. Because this election wasn't just about politics. It was a declaration, a declaration that a man can be a criminal, a rapist, a misogynist, and still be seen as more fit to lead than a woman like Kamala Harris.

A woman who has served as Attorney General of California, a woman who broke barriers as one of the first Black, female Senators, a woman who served as Vice President of the United States, a woman who has been instrumental in immigration and foreign policy, has been a voice for reproductive rights, LGTBQIA+ rights, and women in general.

This woman was outdone, outvoted, by a man like Donald Trump. It was a slap in the face for all woman. A reminder that no matter how qualified, we will be judged by our gender first, and accomplishments second. It was a message that Trump's values were acceptable, and that boys could model themselves on him without consequence.

For a brief moment, girlhood had been celebrated. Girls learnt to rise, to take up space, to speak with confidence in classrooms, on sports fields, and online. It felt like a cultural shift, like we had finally reached a point where young women were beginning to believe that their voices mattered.

But with Trump's victory, I watched so many shrink themselves again. They retreated into old habits of silence, of laughing along with the boys to fit in, of mocking female celebrities because it was easier than defending them, of becoming small in a world still built for men. Suddenly, self doubt crept back in. Girls who had once proudly claimed their space started crossing their legs a little tighter, lowering their voices, brushing off casual sexism with a smile.

Ten months on, here we are again. Defending rights we thought were secure. Dodging the same tired "jokes." Confronting the same old arguments about whether women are too sensitive, too ambitious, too loud. Watching, with exhaustion, as reproductive rights and gender equality are dragged back into the political battlefield as if they are bargaining chips rather than fundamental human rights.

And yet, despite the fatigue, despite the frustration, I still feel a glimmer of hope. Because the fire lit in 2023 hasn't gone out. The Year of the Girls changed something permanently. We learnt what it feels like to stand together, to see ourselves reflected in movements that celebrated girlhood and femininity instead of diminishing it. That power cannot be undone, no matter how hard the other side tries.

Because no matter what Trump does in the next three years, we will fight back. We will defend ourselves. We will uplift one another. We will uplift all women, because for feminism to be true it must be intersectional. Women and girls are no longer willing to be passive recipients of the world's cruelty, we are organisers, we are leaders, we will rewrite the rules.

We are reclaiming femininity, choosing to live beyond the male gaze, and learning to define our worth within ourselves, not by beauty, not by motherhood, not by marriage, but by authenticity and truth. We are teaching one another that softness is not weakness, that strength does not require hardness, and that ambition is not shameful.

And I believe, deeply, that fewer and fewer girls will feel the need to erase themselves as I once did. They will dream of being athletes, politicians, doctors, tradies, artists, scientists, CEOs, doing it all in whatever clothes they want, with whatever music they love, as loudly, and as boldly as they desire.

Every time a girl speaks up in class when it would have been easier to stay silent, every time a woman demands fair treatment in the work place, every time someone refuses to laugh along at a sexist "joke," the tide shifts. Every protest, every article, every conversation at the dinner table chips away at the old world that tells us we are too much or not enough.

And I know that in years to come, I will see less and less girls follow the trend that I did. I know that with time and with grit, we will build a world where women decide who they are, what they want and how they want to fit into this place. I can't wait for that future.

- Caitlin Carey



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Growing up: in faith

Growing up. It defies definition. For me, it was never one thing. I wouldn't know how to answer you if you asked me, How did you grow up?". There was a time in my early adulthood when I would shy away from answering a question like this. In fear of trauma dumping or having to relive the negative experiences. I wouldn't want you to think of me differently. It was embarrassing, almost, aspects of my childhood. Aspects. Key word. Because if I'm keeping it real, there was a struggle. And there were battles. A lot of them. But in so many more ways, there was Jesus. And that made my 'growing up' something I now love to speak about.

Growing up in a low-income household means learning to live with less. Less food on the table, fewer new clothes, and fewer opportunities to experience the childhood luxuries others took for granted. It meant watching classmates go on school camps or excursions that exceeded the already expensive school fees my parents couldn't afford, or not experiencing the family holidays my friends would rave about after returning to school. It meant dealing with the embarrassment of the card declining on $15 grocery run. Growing up without money was hard. We moved houses a lot. The walls changed, the neighbours came and went. Sometimes, it was because the rent went up. At other times, it was because the house we lived in was no longer suitable for us. Divorce is never easy for kids to process, and it wasn't any different for me. I was old enough to understand that their love had changed, but young enough to feel that my world was split in two. It wasn't just the absence of my dad in the house; it was the absence of stability. Mum, already battling chronic fatigue syndrome, had to shoulder even more responsibility. Sickness wasn't foreign in our family, though. An invisible sickness lingered in our house.

Mum's chronic fatigue syndrome meant she was often too tired to play an active role in our lives. It was paired with depression. She did her best, of course, but there were times when her absence was felt deeply. Then there was my older sister. She battled severe mental health issues from as early as I can remember. It caused a strain in our relationship as she took most of her mental pain out on me. The focus on her needs was constant, and as the middle child, I felt invisible. It wasn't anyone's fault—it was just the way things were. I learned to take care of myself. Still, it left a mark. I carried those feelings of invisibility into my teenage years. It was only later, when I started grappling with my own mental health struggles, that I began to understand how deeply the roots of my childhood ran.

My dad immigrated from Tonga in his twenties, bringing with him a rich culture that often felt at odds with the world I was growing up in. He worked hard to provide for us. Growing up with an immigrant parent meant navigating two worlds—the one outside the house, filled with Australian customs and expectations, and the one inside, steeped in Tongan values. We were the only brown people in my church. Slowly, I began to realise that Australia, 'land of the free', doesn't operate in favour of immigrants.

I left home at 17. Not because I wanted to, but because I needed to. The weight of these struggles felt heavy. I needed space to breathe, to heal, to figure out who I was outside of financial burden, invisible disabilities, and trauma. But leaving wasn't easy. I had no money, no support, and a misguided sense of self with a side of depression to guide me. I worked part-time jobs to scrape by while trying to keep up with university. Every day felt like a battle, but I had no choice but to keep going. My little brother joined me a year later, and suddenly, at 18, I found myself in the role of caretaker. We grew up together in those years, leaning on each other and figuring out life one day at a time.

As what some would call a ‘grown-up’, I am still trying to break the financially unstable cycle I’ve experienced since I was young. At times, it feels harder, but dealing with it is easier, because I can draw from my experience of growing up financially unstable. I watched my parents struggle. But through that struggle, I watched them pray. I watched them faithfully serve God and others. I watched the card decline, but I also watched the cashier give us those same groceries for free. I watched my friends go on a school camp without me, but I also watched my parents’ faces light up when the school rang us to tell us someone had paid our school fees. I watched us move houses constantly, but I also watched my parents pray over every new room, thanking God for giving us a roof over our heads. My mum still doesn’t have a house, but she reminds us that God will provide – just as He always has. I grew up in Australia with divorced parents. But I grew up with parents. One was an immigrant, and one was sick, but I had parents. Parents who showed us a love like Jesus. Parents who, despite separation, showed each other grace like Jesus. Growing up in Australia, experiencing mental health disorders around me and in me doesn’t define my childhood. Because even though my mum was battling her depression, she never fell victim, reminding us that any battle we face does not belong to us – it belongs to Him.

Growing up with an immigrant parent played its part. But in the best way possible. Our culture is foreign to Australia, but I carry it on my sleeve every day. The Tongan traditions, like keeping the Sabbath holy and honouring God in everything you do, brought an unshakeable faith to a young Pacific islander immigrant who showed me that God has a plan for you, even in a country that is built on white privilege.

I may not have moved away and begun adulthood with the ‘perfect’ circumstances, but I had God's guidance. I started my life knowing I grew up in gratefulness, in Grace, in a God-fearing home. Through all of it faith was the one thing that never wavered. My parents didn’t give us the perfect childhood, but they gave us a perfect example of what it means to trust in God. They showed me what faith, like a mustard seed, looked like. It was the reason we experienced happiness in adversity. We had less, but we struggled to feel that way. My parents reminded us every day that we have all that we need because we have Jesus.

So when people ask me how I grew up, I struggle to give a simple answer. But above all, I grew up in faith. I grew up faithfully, and I continue to do so every day.

- Lesila Taufa

Waste and Regret

I know a lot of people's worst nightmare is being asked one of those pointless icebreaker questions in front of a group. I have always thrived on random questions, both answering and asking, as my friends can attest to. 'If you could have any superpower, what would it be?' Oh yes, I've thought about this at length, let me tell you... 'What is your favourite colour?' Well, what sort of day have I had?... 'What is your biggest fear?' Okay, this one is often asked in jest, but I think I have found one that takes up more space in my mind than it should. 'Spiders?' You ask? No, I'm fine with those. 'Heights?' No, not that either. My biggest fear? I am afraid of wasting my life. Ooooo things just got deep.

According to various surveys including those done by Daniel Pink, author of *The Power Of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward*, omission or inaction based regret makes up more than double the amount of action based regret that the participants from 134 countries reported (Pink, n.d.). In other words people are doubly as likely to regret NOT doing something than they are to regret something they actually did. For example, people regret not trying their big idea, not leaving an unhappy job, not travelling the world, etc., more than actions they did take.

The idea of wasting my life has been a recurring theme in most deep conversations I have had over the last five or six years. I was always a thoughtful kid. So when I heard, as I'm sure you have as well, older people in my life reminisce on things they wish they had done and insist that I 'enjoy it while it lasts' or remind me that 'these are the best times of your life', I listened. I put the pressure on. I would say I have tried quite hard to have an 'interesting' or 'successful' life. To please or impress others? Sure. To make use of my finite youth? Definitely. But also, because I'm scared of regret.

This fear really came to the forefront for me when plans to travel long term with my friend fell through and I was left to decide if I was going to go ahead on my own. I was trying to work through this dilemma while on the phone to my sister and she asked me, 'well, what do you want to get out of it? What's your motivation behind going?' And I found I didn't know. The usual answers of adventure, excitement, or curiosity didn't feel right. What did? "because I don't want to regret NOT doing it", and "because I am able to, so shouldn't I while I can?"

Now most people have heard of FOMO, the fear of missing out, but this is different to having a fear of regret, although there are similarities. FOMO is looking forward and thinking 'I don't want to miss out on that.' It is based more around social interaction compared with the fear of regret which is a fear of looking backward and not liking what you see. It is more of an individual experience, in my opinion.

Upon reflection, I think this fear of regret and guilt around inaction is a key motivator for decisions in my life. This is not necessarily a bad thing as it has led me to some great experiences. But when I'm not enjoying myself as much as I think I should, when I'm not achieving that 'main character energy', I'm riddled with guilt at the waste. I agonise over which decision will have the least waste, which decision will end with the least regret.

I did decide to travel. I moved to England by myself and have spent almost half this year on the road, hostel hopping and seeing the world. Do I regret it? No!

Have I missed out on other opportunities? Have I delayed setting up my future? Have I had way more low moments than I thought I would on this ‘idealised’ journey? Yes, yes, and yes! While I've learned that I would prefer to have these experiences with someone, it hasn't stopped me from doing them. In fact, this time exploring will inevitably inform my decisions for the future. The real question is: when do I come back? When do I cut this opportunity short?

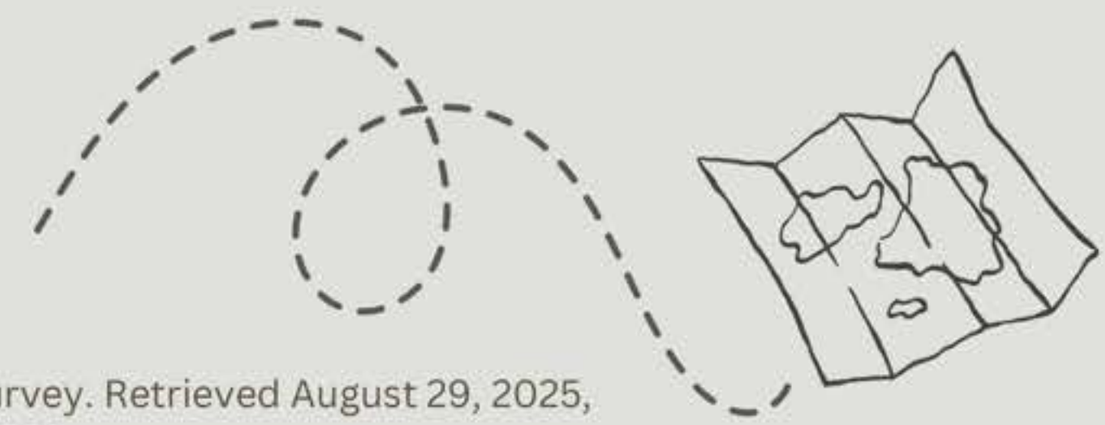
This year people have often spoken to me about ‘living my best life’ and I regularly get the feeling that that is not what I’m doing. I think it is a mix of this fear and a disconnect from the reality of travel and perhaps what a ‘good life’ looks and feels like. Social media has become a bench mark for the happiness of our lives and the lives of others. And even though we know it is not an accurate representation, we still compare our choices and experiences to those of others. Wanting what you don’t have is a universal human experience, especially in developed countries where the majority of people are not fighting for survival. Social media idealises what others have and takes up the space in your mind where pride and joy in your own life should be. Young people nowadays have a lot more options presented to us compared with generations preceding us and those choices can sometimes be overwhelming.

I don’t have a formula, and I now know that no one does! Everyone is doing this life thing for the first time and is stumbling blindfolded just like me, wondering if the decision they made is the right one. Career, partner, home, travel, whatever. Whether that decision is instigated by guilt, the fear of regret, curiosity, faith, FOMO, ambition, peer-pressure, passion, inspiration, or love, use your heart and your mind together, discuss it with the safe people in your life, and JUST PICK. I need to learn, and maybe you do too, to stop stressing over making the right decision, and instead, make the decision right.

Our brains are powerful things. So, when you need to make a decision, put things in place to help it succeed. If you feel or notice that you’re self-sabotaging then actively work on self-improvement. If something you chose is going poorly, put things in place to move forward positively and change your perspective. If it is going well, put things in place to invest in your future joy. If you already have regret, reflect on it and put things in place to proactively improve in the future. Make the decision right for you.

When I started writing this article, I didn’t know where I was going to go with it. I knew this regret was a significant pressure for me and I wanted to talk about it, but I didn’t know the answer. I still don’t, but through discussions and reflections and research, I have realised that regret is not something I should fear. Every version of life, at every stage is important. If I stay in England until my VISA runs out in a year's time, that is a good decision. Alternatively, moving back to Australia, getting another full time job, starting a garden, and settling down, is a good decision! Because I have the power to make my decisions right for me, moving through regret and satisfaction alike. Rather than “when do I cut this opportunity short?” I need to rephrase, “when do I start my next chapter?”

We have opportunities and decisions to make until the day we die, what a blessing it is to have the freedom to regret.



-Jenaya Lewis

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‘The Giver’

Musings on our obsession with communism

In a world of short-form content, reading is becoming less common, and people are engaging less with books that confront worldviews and challenge readers to think critically. Writers write what they see the world to be. All the lived experience an author pours into their writing comes, in varying degrees, from their own life story and society at large. Lois Lowry’s The Giver is no exception. Books like The Giver play an important role in teaching people about systems of governments and some of the consequences that can result from them being in power.

Perhaps you’ve been forced to read this book in school. In my conversations with others, it’s not the most popular book—it has uncomfortable themes and no solid answers or endings. It’s also been banned several times due to dark topics like euthanasia, violence, and the degrading of motherhood.

The setting of The Giver is a futuristic dystopian society that has eliminated pain, fear, war, and choice to ensure stability. People lived highly regulated lives, with assigned families and emotions suppressed by medication. People cannot see colour and have no historical context or memories of a time before. The only one who does—who holds the role of Receiver of Memory—is known as The Giver. The main character, 12-year-old Jonas, is assigned to The Giver as his life occupation. It’s a rare and honoured role, and through his time spent with The Giver, Jonas starts to realise that the society he lives in may not be all it’s cracked up to be.

Overall, The Giver is a very interesting read, especially when you realise it’s critiquing a specific form of government—in this case, communism. In the novel, communism is represented in a few ways. First of all, there's the concept of “sameness”. Everybody is treated the same. Framed as equality, they all wear the same kind of clothing, live in the same kind of house, and have the same kind of family unit. However, if anyone tries to leave this system, they die. There is a severe lack of freedom and choice, despite potentially good ideas. Now, extremism in any form should be condemned. However, several values from The Giver are worth noting.

For example, there is no homelessness nor forced gender roles. There are male characters who are in charge of taking care of young children and female characters who work in the justice system, and it’s considered very normal. But these values being good is meaningless, because of the lack of personal agency, something taken away by both the extreme right and extreme left. However, just because a value is bad when it’s forced doesn't mean it's an inherently bad value and something that we shouldn't strive for as a society.

Equality is good. Personal agency is good. But personal agency is meaningless without equality, because if you don't have equal power, you don't have the same ability to make choices about your life. If you're considered less than for your skin colour, your gender, or your religious beliefs, your ability to make decisions about your life is significantly limited. But equality without personal agency is equally meaningless. Everyone is equally limited in their ability to make decisions about their lives. Like the characters in the The Giver, all equal, but without the ability to have a rich and meaningful life.

Literature loves to critique systems of power. However, most critiques of totalitarian regimes within literature, media, and pop culture are based on communism—not fascism. Why?

Everyone is aware of communism and the harm it does, and there's a relatively well-defined body of literature around communism (Animal Farm and Brave New World to name a couple) in which The Giver is a part of. The fear of communism and media push-back against began in the wake of World War II.

During the War, the US was a staunch enemy of fascism. They joined the War when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941, but even before that, there was concern about the Nazis and the other fascist Axis Powers. The US allied with the Soviet Union, which was communist at that time, out of necessity. A lot of anti-fascist propaganda promoted freedom, democracy, and anti-totalitarianism, and fascism was seen as the worst enemy. After the fascist powers were defeated, however, the US' gaze turned to the Soviet Union as it began to take over Eastern Europe. The Cold War began, and being anti-communist became a defining feature of US identity, as society quickly began to fear the threat of nuclear war and Soviet spies infiltrating their society. Those previously on "the left" were seen as suspicious. Many people were blacklisted despite their innocence. So this anti-communist body of literature we now have is actually part of a long-term reaction to communism that is embedded in Western culture.

But it's important to remember that communism is not the only form extremist governments take. On the opposite side of communism, we find fascism.

Imagine the conversation of "right" versus "left" as a sliding scale. At one end you have fascism, often associate with Hitler or Mussolini. On the opposite end we have communism, championed by Stalin and Kim Jong Un. There's another scale on top of the original one, however, a scale that on each end results in totalitarianism—a lack of freedom within society, while in the middle we have the more democratic, or freedom-oriented government systems. And what's interesting to note is that whenever communism has been attempted by society, it leads to a dictator similar to one in a fascist society.

Lowry is an American author, so The Giver reflects a lot of American attitudes, where the anti-fascist sentiment faded and the anti-communist sentiment became centre. As a result, there are many who are unaware of fascism and the dangers it poses, fearing even the term socialism, which Australia leans towards more than the US with its subsidised health care and education. Could it not then follow that people afraid of one extreme could back easily into the other extreme without even realising it? Just because fascism was defeated in WWII does not mean that fascist tendencies do not remain.

That's why it's so important to understand the history and the forces which drive politics and political movements, because otherwise we can end up in situations that maybe we were trying to escape all along. It's especially important in a world like ours where there's a fair amount of geopolitical instability.

It's important to remember that any system of government can easily become corrupt no matter how good the values it was founded on. CS Lewis has an interesting take on this. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, he says, “That is the key to history. Terrific energy is expended—civilizations are built up—excellent institutions devised; but each time something goes wrong. Some fatal flaw always brings the selfish and the cruel people to the top and it all slides back into misery and ruin.” It's a part of the human condition, but that doesn't mean that we should just give up on those good values. We need to live them, to promote personal agency, equality of all human beings, and kindness. Because at the end of the day, why would we not treat others the way we wish they would treat us?

-Ashley Jankiewicz

Adapted from an episode of The Literary Lamppost, a literary podcast hosted by Ashley and Caitlin Jankiewicz.

10 Podcasts for lovers of literature

The Literary Lamppost: Along with Caitlin’s analysis and Ashley’s imagination, wander through the world of stories and their meaning in our world.
The History of Literature: exploring literary traditions from ancient to modern.
New Books in Literature: author interviews focused on new books and scholarship.
Literature and History: connecting literary works with historical and cultural contexts.
CraftLit: serialised readings of classic literature, annotated and discussed.
The Book Review (NYT): critics and authors talk about current books and literary trends.
Storybound: authors read from their work, often with musical/production accompaniment.
Writing Excuses: short episodes about writing craft, especially in speculative/genre fiction.
Sentimental Garbage: hosts revisit and discuss books people often dismiss, with literary humour.
Borrowed: a library-themed podcast exploring stories, reading, and cultural life.
The Maris Review: in-depth conversations with authors about their work and inspirations.



Versions

Musings inspired by Celine Song's Past Lives (2023)

Moving, captivating and beautiful.
These are the words I wrote down after my favourite recent watch, Past Lives (2023), written and directed by Celine Song. When I shared with my film connoisseur brother that I enjoyed Materialists (2025) in cinemas, he informed me that Celine Song has written and directed another gem of a film. While Materialists was wholesome and refreshingly reminiscent of a 90s rom com, Past Lives left me contemplative for quite some time. But probably not in the way it was intended to.
I love stories and I make a living out of hearing people's stories, however when I am taking in stories in leisure time, I want balance between a real-life emotional roller coaster and an inspiring escape. This film is both heart-warming and heart breaking. It prompted reflection about the various potential versions of our lives.
Past Lives follows childhood friends, Nora (played by Greta Lee) and Hae-Sung (Teo Yoo), as their lives intersect over time and eventually meet again 20 years after Nora emigrated from South Korea to Canada with her family. This is a love story spanning across decades, Eastern and Western cultures, and continents, inspired by themes from Celine's own life.
We see contrasts of Hae-Sung's life in Korea and the life Nora is making in Canada and then New York. Her interactions with Hae-Sung serve to reconnect her to a language, culture and almost another version of herself that is dormant at times whilst in America. We see Nora wrestle with holding onto her roots and pushing forward to build her dreams and make the most of the opportunities her parents worked hard to create for her. We see Nora introduce Hae-Sung to her husband and navigate Hae-Sung's love of a past or even potential version of her.
As someone married to their teenage boyfriend, I resonated with the value Nora placed on her young friendship with Hae-Sung and the pull of a familiar friend. There are an ease and comfort to a friendship like this. Someone who knows a past version of you and can remind you of any of the youthful and innocent qualities about yourself you might have neglected. A person who knew you when you were bright-eyed and only dreaming of the things you have now.
In a world where teenage relationships are romanticised in literature but can be frowned upon in real life, it has taken a while for me to feel permission to celebrate how the beginning of our relationship adds value to what it is now. Past Lives celebrated the loveliness and tensions of nostalgic relationships. While my marriage is different to that of Nora and Hae-Sung's friendship, I felt seen by the acknowledgement of how significant people can be even from our young lives.



My husband and I are not the same now at 30 as we were when we were 15. There are some things the same, but there are changes. We have witnessed the various versions of each other over time. We know the trials and triumphs that prompted them. We know what it took for each of us to get here. Nora in talking to Hae-Sung about what it is like to be married, describes fighting as “It’s like planting two trees in one pot. Our roots need to find their place.” We keep getting to know and making room for the person changing alongside us.

Joining your life to someone else’s, you cannot help but influence the other person. You choose to make those life directing decisions together and that might not be exactly what you imagined for better or possibly worse. I resonated with Arthur’s, Nora’s husband, pondering, “You make my world so much bigger and I’m wondering if I do the same for you?” A helpful guide to consider if we are adding to the lives of those around us, especially our significant person.

There is beauty in having someone who knew and loved you then, come along with you as you build new things together and separately. They can serve as a reminder of how far you have come and how reality is similar or different to what you imagined. But just when you’re getting a bit too big for your boots, it can also be grounding that this person was also there for the awkward moments, missteps and decisions lacking maturity along the way.

Reflecting on the beginnings of our relationship, those teenagers did not know they would break up, get married, become a physiotherapist and a psychologist, support each other through unexpected losses, buy a house, travel a little but love staying home, how their worldview would grow or that they would still be living in Cooranbong. Even choosing to do life together, there are still many directions that could be taken and decisions to make together.

While Nora and Hae-Sung, ponder on “in-yun”, the karmic bringing together of people who were lovers in past lives, I wonder about what God has planned for us and how He can work with a variety of decisions we make rather than Him waiting for us to choose a correct one.

So, if you are pondering “what ifs” through nostalgic reflection down memory lane or because you desire a change of direction in your life, consider this. Nora’s mother says about them leaving South Korea, “It’s true that if you leave you lose things, but you also gain things too.” Wherever there is change, there is loss. There are all kinds of different ways life could go, each bringing different opportunity rather than there being wrong turns.

I was soothed by both Celine’s films’ subversion of expectation rather than plot twists, and her contemplative story writing. May we take comfort in the words of Nora, “If this is where I ended up… this is where I’m supposed to be.”

- Mikaela Matthes

reviews

The Reclamation of Voice in Percival Everett's *James*

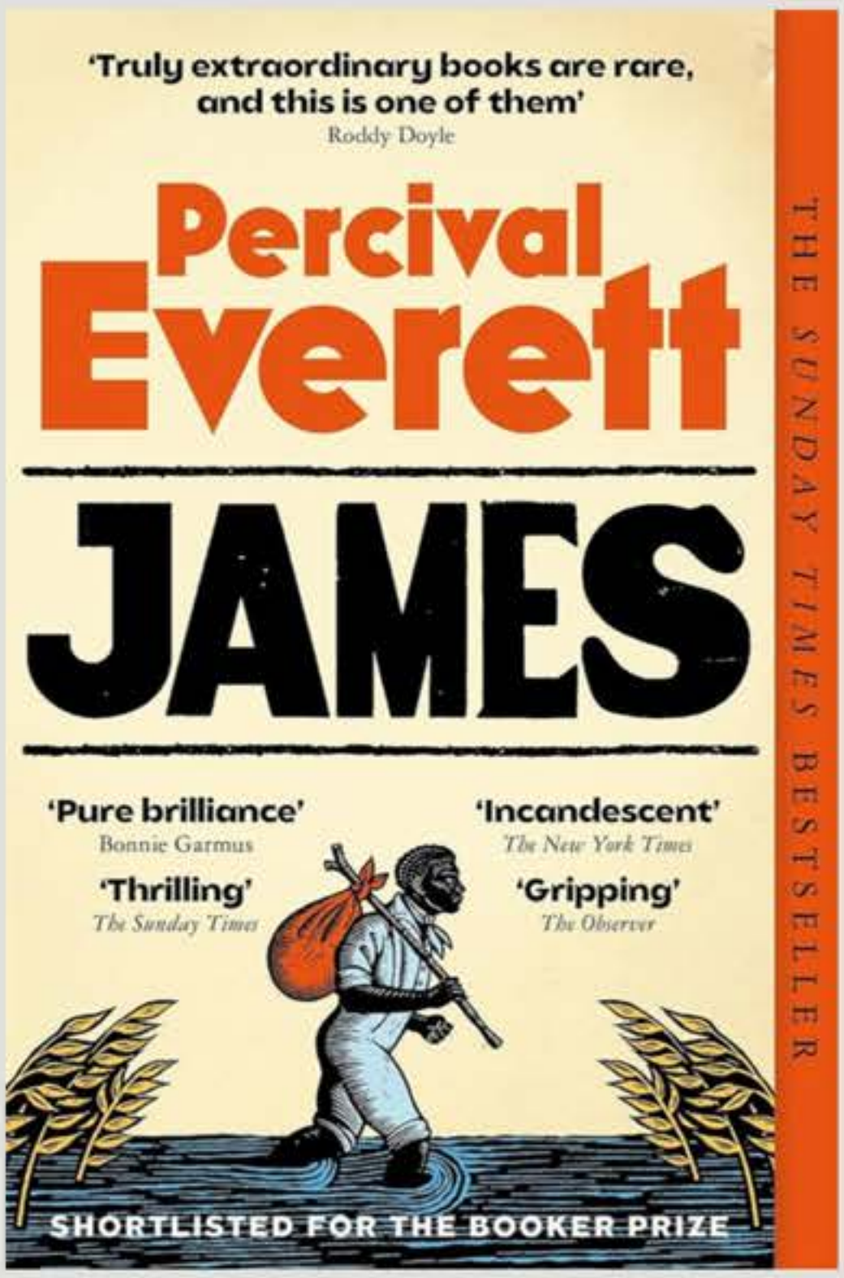
In *James*, Percival Everett performs one of the most audacious acts in recent American literature: he steals back a story that was stolen to begin with. Taking Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, a canonical pillar of American letters built on the silencing of Black voices. Everett gives us the man behind the caricature of "Jim", the thinker behind the dialect, the human behind the racial mask.

Everett's James is a novel of doubling and undoing. It speaks fluently in the languages of mimicry and resistance, pastiche and precision. The book opens with the familiar setting of the Mississippi River but quickly reveals itself to be a work of literary jujitsu, using Twain's narrative structure as leverage to throw the entire edifice of American mythmaking off balance. Here, James is no longer the comic foil to Huck's awakening; he is the consciousness we have been denied for over a century. His supposed "simple speech" is a performance, a camouflage designed to survive under the white supremacist gaze. Beneath that mask, Everett's James reads philosophy, thinks in multiple registers, and engages in a private, interior eloquence that shames the narrow imaginations of those who would call him slave.

Everett's prose is as sharp as it is sinuous. It hums with irony but never loses compassion. His sentences hold a tensile balance between rage and restraint, between laughter and lament. The novel's formal intelligence lies in how it layers voices: the public voice of subservience, the private voice of reason, and the literary voice of a Black writer rewriting a white man's myth. Every line feels like a restoration of dignity, of narrative control, of breath.

To read James is to feel the weight of history shifting. Everett doesn't merely reimagine Huckleberry Finn; he reclaims the American novel from its own blindness. In doing so, he reminds us that satire alone cannot undo oppression; it must be rewritten from the inside out. The result is a text that vibrates with intellectual rigour and moral clarity, a river that finally runs in the right direction.

- Lynnette Lounsbury





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writers

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