

THE PORTAL

Portarlington Neighbourhood House Writers' Magazine

Issue No 11 April 2020



Cover image by Di Kolomeitz - Photo of artwork created from 'found' wood on a wall in Singapore

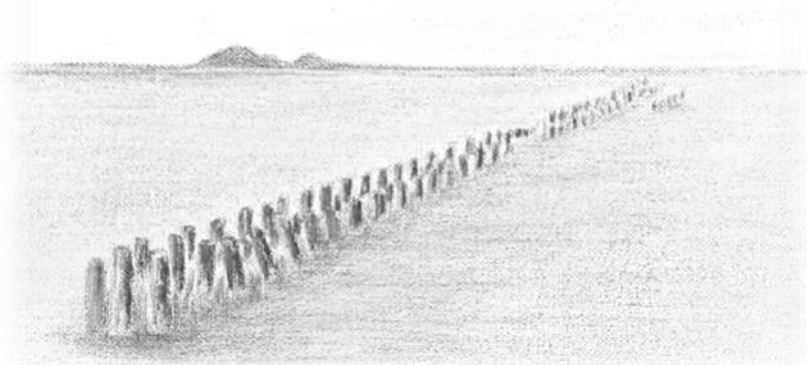
Editor's Notes

Welcome to issue number 11 of *The Portal*. The Portarlington Neighbourhood House Thursday Night Writers Group will be continuing to publish our magazine this year although for the foreseeable future, it will only be an online publication. We will convert these digital only issues to hardcopies for our readers when the Neighbourhood House is open again and the virus, the wretched 'rona, has left us. And what a blight it is! Who would have thought that between our last issue in November 2019 and this one that we'd be house-bound, handwashing and hoping like hell that all our efforts to flatten the curve are successful and that we save lives? We hope that you all are safe and well, and we long for the day when we can congregate in person instead of just virtually.

In this issue we have the very entertaining first instalment of Eileen Jenkins' *Just in Time*, a mixture of gothic, horror, humour and romance. Great fun! We have also published a number of pieces using the writing prompt, *Dangling*. This prompt produced some wonderful work which we were all pretty pleased with and which we are delighted to share with you. Also, apart from the comments above about coronavirus, none of the work in this issue deals with the pandemic. We hope you enjoy this break from the fairly relentless but necessary communication about this huge change in our lives.

Dividing Line

Ruth Wachtel



The bright dividing line of the rotting pier stumps sits in the sea.
From across the bay, the You Yangs look on, parent like, at the remnants
Of some long-gone engineers' carefully placed posts.
Like child's play on the shores, the stumps now
Wither with the tides in the slapping, salty water,
Disintegrating, falling apart, their centres spongy and hollow.
Once so carefully, rhythmically arranged, they are
Now a simple join-the-dots exercise to tell again
How brief the line is between life and its end,
For all but the ancient, pale hills in the distance.

Image: Ruth Wachtel

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www.portnh.org.au Click on Creative Arts.

No Loss



Jenny Macaulay

*Jenny's story is being republished in this issue as the last, important line of her story was omitted in the December publication due to technical difficulties. Apologies to Jenny. Here is the complete version of **No Loss***

The left side of Charlie's head pounded. He tasted blood and as he moved his tongue over his parched lips, he felt the jagged edges of broken teeth. He wrenched and twisted his hands but the rope had no give. It was then he realised that he was also bound around the middle, fastened to some metal pole that lay horizontal on a cold, metal floor, a floor that rose and fell gently as if at sea. Impossible.

Charlie tried to lift his head but his cheek remained hard against the floor. His legs were free but the pole he was tied to weighed heavily on his arm which was twisted behind his back. Unable to move or see in the dim light, he tried to piece together what had happened.

Kittens. He remembered carrying the cage full of kittens from the shed, past the kennels, towards the training yard. He remembered shaking the cage in front of the greyhounds, teasing them, enticing them. But that was it. That was his last memory.

On deck, William looked through binoculars to the right of the setting sun. He turned towards the brig and watched Jillian communicating with the Cessna circling above. She gave him the thumbs-up as she turned the wheel and steered the boat north-west. William lifted the binoculars to his eyes and searched for the tell-tale fin of the white-pointer.

'We're almost ready guys,' he said to the three marine biologists who were leaning on the rails nearby. 'Time to prepare the lure.'



Dangling

Sue Jager

Good God,' thought Eric as he slowly opened his eyes. 'Just for once, I would like to wake up with a clear day, and no appointments.'

Eric had retired and was enrolled in several activities which were new to him. He had taken up bike riding and after the first two years of pedalling along with the beginners on a heavy budget bike described as 'good for trails', Eric was ready to take it up a notch.

He fancied himself on a sporty lightweight racer, beautiful in red and white, with the latest in precision engineering.

While his contemporaries were extolling the virtues of electric bikes, Eric quietly yearned for lycra and fitted jerseys. Sipping cappuccinos at Edina after the morning sprint and where they talked importantly about upcoming events, like the Cadel Evans race.

His wife, Janice, had made it very clear. No more bikes cluttering up the shed. Some would have to go. Eric put his ad on gumtree and over the past two days had engaged in an endless email question and answer session with Fran, Jessica, Steve, Belinda and Ann.

Has the bike got tubeless tyres? Is it a Rove disc one, two or three? Has it been serviced recently? Can the handlebars be adjusted? He had posted photos and information, but still had to politely respond to these inane questions.

Finally, Fran made an appointment to come and view the bike. Eric felt it was sure to sell. This was an \$800 bike two years ago and he was only asking a measly \$250. The only time Fran could come around was a bit inconvenient as he was also dealing with the plumber looking for a water leak, and the window cleaners. He wanted that bike out of his shed. He could multitask.

Fran and her partner showed up. She indicated that they had been to number 99 but he had told them 91. Never mind. Fran looked at the bike and indicated that it was as heavy as her bike. She was here on behalf of a friend. Her partner asked how





the disc brakes worked and Eric gave him the manual to look at. Fran had a test ride and Eric noted that the seat was a bit low for her. Off she went. Back she came. Then Fran and her partner started a dialogue about how they were not sure, and they preferred different tyres, no fenders and a different frame size.

Weariness overcame Eric and he fought down an intense feeling of rising irritation. All the information had been in the advertisement or via the endless emails and now he felt the sale slipping away due these weaslingly incompetent buyers.

'OOH I don't know. What do you think Bart?' whined Fran.

'I don't know either,' responded the non-committed, somewhat pathetic, Bart.

At this point Fran asked innocently, 'Would you accept \$200?'

'No, I would not,' fumed Eric. 'I have already reduced the price.' He snatched back the manual and briskly started wheeling the bike up the drive.

'We may be back with our friend later,' they chimed. Eric did not respond but thought, I will see you in hell first.

The next day dawned and Eric fended off a range of emails from potential buyers who wanted him to accept a lower price. One of the more radical explanations was that the buyer lived two hours away and the cost of petrol meant that the bike price should be lowered. Eric was incandescent with annoyance. Janice was unsympathetic and said, 'You know Eric, you just could never deal with stupidity,' implying that being kind and patient would get results, but it may take a while.

All the while the bike shop sales were on and the lovely bike he had his eye on, was reduced. Talk about dangling the bait. Maybe he could venture a deposit but if Janice found out, his life would not be

worth living. He had to keep up with this relentless sales pitch.

Wearily he agreed to Jessica's third proposal for a time to view the bike. To date she had been unable to come afternoons or evenings or Mondays or any-time that he had been free. He was having to inconvenience himself to fit her in. She was coming at 9am Saturday.

Out of the blue he got an email from a mystery new buyer, Lau. Eric assumed it was an Asian woman. Lau wanted to inspect the bike and was available that very day within two hours. Unheard of. Eric agreed, and at 5pm an impressive van rolled up in his drive and to his surprise, a young man hopped out. He grabbed the bike and inspected it like a bike shop expert. He bounced the suspension, inspected

the gears, identified that annoying wheel wobble and quickly came to the point. He indicated that the wheel wobble would cost \$20 to fix. Eric indicated that the bike rack and drink holders were

extras worth more than twenty dollars. They appraised each other carefully.

'Lau, you and I know what this bike is worth, and you have driven here to get it. Let's split the difference and I will give you a ten-dollar discount.' Lau made some feeble remark about having no change, but Eric was prepared. Janice always had change. The deal was promptly sealed, and money exchanged with a worthy adversary. The bike was loaded in the van and in fifteen minutes, the shed was clear.

Ready and waiting. The lure of that nice new bike was dangling in Eric's mind.

All the while the bike shop sales were on and the lovely bike he had his eye on, was reduced. Talk about dangling the bait.

Illustrations: Sue Jager

Just in Time

Eileen Jenkins

Part one: 'Blackbird' (The Beatles)

This story is a mix of gothic horror, humour, romance, teenage angst, romance and detective work. It does not follow any genre apart from my own.

As the girl opened the crooked, iron gate, the squealing sound it made reminded her of a wounded dog. The grass on the other side had grown so high she couldn't get it fully open. Squeezing through the gap she turned while shaking off the rain dripping from the hood of her waterproof. A fox barked in the distance.

Ahead of her, the house, situated just out of town and silhouetted against the darkening sky, loomed ominously on the hill. Its dark, triple gables, once indicating past wealth and prestige were now dated and shabby. The veranda, approached by a path and three wide steps was covered in cracked tiles, some missing and some out of alignment. The girl hesitantly mounted the steps while trying to block out the thoughts running through her head. *What if no one answered? ... What if the rumours were true? ... What if?*

Above her head, a bell with a chain attached was the replacement for a door knocker. She supposed that to attract attention she ought to tug the chain, but pausing, she tried to see through the stained-

glass window almost hidden by ivy at the side of the faded oak door. The hall disappeared into the nether regions of the house and the doors either side were closed apart from one. A dim flicker shone out across the tiled floor showing up the pictures on the walls. *Portraits of the family. A family tainted by corruption, decadence and possibly murder.* She shuddered.

Something brushed against her leg, something cold and wet. Afraid to look down she froze in horror. Letting out a breath, the girl relaxed as a cat meowed and wound itself around her. She stood until her breathing steadied again, and then taking hold of the bell chain she tugged on it twice. The resulting peal

was deafening as the tune of 'Greensleeves' resounded endlessly throughout the house. She waited ... and waited. *No one in. I'm leaving.* Retreating back down the steps, she heard the door creaking open. Turning into the blinding light of a torch, she tried to make out the figure behind it. A blackbird started singing in a tree nearby.

'What do you want?' It was a woman's voice.

Something brushed against her leg, something cold and wet. Afraid to look down she froze in horror.



‘So sorry! I thought no one was home.’

‘Come closer so I can see you.’

The girl cautiously made her way back up the steps and stood looking at an older woman of somewhat faded elegance. She was holding a torch above her head.

‘Well?’ The woman paused. ‘Why are you here on such a nasty evening if it isn’t to annoy a helpless old woman?’

‘Oh I didn’t mean to annoy you ... I’m sorry to have disturbed you. I’m calling in place of Vicki, a friend who happens to be sick. She’s a volunteer and I thought I would help her out.’

The rain had stopped and the moonlit sky was bright enough to light up the two figures: one, a young girl on the path, looking rather scared, and the other, an old woman on the veranda looking grim and disgruntled. The girl felt cold and shivered as she noticed a figure looking down from an upstairs window.

The woman beckoned her closer again, examining the face of a pretty girl who appeared to be about sixteen.

‘Why don’t you come in and we can dry your clothes by the warm fire while you have a hot drink? Then you can tell me the reason for your visit,’ said the woman in a gin-laden voice as she repeatedly swung the torch back and forth over her head.

The girl stared in fascination at the light from the swinging torch as the beams burned into her eyes, blocking all but the thought of a warm fire and a hot drink. Slowly she crossed the veranda and moved towards the creaking oak door.

‘But I told Vicki I would only be a half an hour delivering these newsletters, and I’ve still got three to deliver,’ said the girl in a breathless voice as the woman stood aside to let her enter. The blackbird kept on singing until the woman closed and bolted the door.

To be continued
Part 2 – ‘Little Darlin’ (The Beatles)
will appear in Issue no 12 of ‘The Portal’

Rusting in Peace

Diane Kolomeitz

Ekphrastic Response -

Artist: Eileen Jenkins, Poet: Diane Kolomeitz



'Rusting in Peace' Artist: Eileen Jenkins

A towering wall of demon tongues from Hell
Has tortured trees that dared to hold their stance,
Writhing in ecstasy, a devil dance.
No-one was nigh to sound a warning bell,
To wake the startled bush life from their trance
And see them safely to a final crypt -
Where, having breathed last scent of eucalypt,
Their bodies, like the bush, the fires fell.

The earth so dry, where once the grassy fields
Of hopeful farmers waved their silky fronds,
Sustains no green, but only brown and bronze
Where cowering life in grim acceptance yields.
Yet here, a strange thing, with no living bonds
To tie it somehow to this wasted place -
This dire, dead, apocalyptic space -
Its rusting body where no structure shields.

Misplaced and alien in a foreign land,
The lurching, ponderous hulk has come to rest -
A fencer's truck, imported from the west,
Its human cargo gone, now left unmanned.
A hot wind blows - the gaping door in protest
Cries a high-pitched squeal, a lonely note
Across the outback plains, its parched throat
And hinges moan an ode, by smoke drifts fanned.

The fencer left this beast to fare alone
Beneath the surging, blackened clouds on high.
The sagging fence wires curl around a sigh
For fallen heroes. Barbed, they mope and groan
While, stark above ... the endless, bloodshot sky.
The mulga posts are charred, but stand in wait
For one who fenced the stock, who shut the gate,
Who mourned for those of skin and bone.

The burning heat has caused this fire to rage,
Or careless act, discarding butt or match,
Igniting undergrowth as dry as thatch.
Leaves crinkled, crackled, like the driest page,
Fanning a blaze too fast for Man to catch.
Old rusting warhorse snorts the sulphurous air
And listing, in defeat it settles there ...
Awaits the fate of Geologic Age.

The Holiday House

Beryl Stott

The cool night air has stopped the prickling of perspiration on my face and arms. I can hear low murmurs from the campers over the other side of the lake. It's amazing how far sound travels at night across the still water. I sit on the end of our little pier wondering how long I will be able to do this. I wonder now, because I have been in denial; denial is a strong defence against decision making. I'd be happy to give up this lakeside property, didn't want it in the first place. Doug convinced me to buy it so he could go fishing and skiing with the kids.

They've all grown up and left and now the reality of a disengaged marriage stretches before me; a highway of loneliness into the years ahead. My mind wanders along to a definitive outcome, divorce, and I can see half my assets melting away and reappearing on his side of the spreadsheet, even though I had it all before he came on the scene.

Conquering my anxiety of what could be hidden in the depths, I dangle my feet in the water, then swish them around, relishing the cold flowing past at even that slightly deeper level. Once again I wish I could swim; how lovely to dive off from the deck and feel the cold water rushing through my long hair and all down my body. I would push out with my arms, and kick my feet. See, I know the principle, just can't conquer my fear enough to put it into action. It hasn't mattered in the past; it's just now with this feeling of unease creeping over me, I once again wish I could swim.

My thoughts wander back to last week, a barbecue at the Walkers' house. I found it a nightmare as although I am used to his patronising putdowns, he went on interminably about how childish I was in not learning to swim. I don't know which is worse, staying home with him and walking on eggshells, or going out and being subjected to ridicule.

It was later in the night I noticed her. How strange that she should be down here in this little lakeside town. She obviously didn't want to acknowledge me, turning away and feigning absolute interest in old Geoff's boring conversation.

Doug knows her. Oh he pretends he doesn't, but I recognise the quick glance of desire, or is it already ... guilt?

Then yesterday he is readying the boat for a fishing trip. Insisting I come.

'You'll enjoy it, get you out of the house,' and finally, 'I need the company.'

Ever hopeful of a softening in our relationship, I go. Even though there is a strangeness to it all. He hasn't wanted my presence for such a long time. I don't like being in the boat, particularly as Geoff had borrowed all the safety vests for his guests. Even when I have one on though, it doesn't allay my anxiety completely. I know he gets cross with me, thinks I should get over it, move on. But I can't. This dread around water is something I've had ever since another child pushed me under. Caught in branches that lurked beneath, nearly out of breath, I managed to free myself and surface, but I've had this lurching fear of deep water ever since.

I did believe it was just an accident in the boat. Just thoughtless that he started the motor and changed the position without warning me. I completely lost my balance and only grabbed the side rail at the last minute. Of course, he was all apologetic, but finally, reality has pushed its way through my usual 'Pollyanna' cloud.

I hear him flip-flopping down the pier behind me. 'Here, you must be cold, I've brought your shawl.'

He wraps it around me, tucking both ends back in under my arms. It feels claustrophobic and I try to loosen it. He has pushed both his hands down my back and is cupping my bottom. Is this a reconciliation gesture?

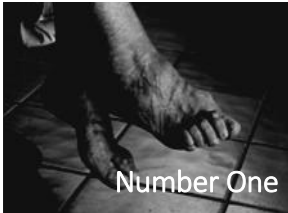
Then I feel the strong push and I am in the water. I go straight down. The cold water rushes through my hair. It is totally dark. The shawl grabs my arms and stops me flailing about. I surface and try gulping air, water chokes me. There is Doug, his hands reaching out to me - just out of reach. I go under a second time, and kick my legs, surfacing and panicking, I can see him reaching down for me again, but his hands don't connect. I can hear him screaming for help. At night I know this will echo all around the lake, everyone will think he tried to help me.

It is then I realise - he has no intention of saving me.

Dangling - Three Feet

Some Vignettes

Ruth Wachtel



The shoe was left dangling exquisitely on her foot. Marlene rummaged through yet another box's rustling tissue paper to find its pair. She was helping her 99-year-old mother find new footwear. A tiny city of teetering shoe boxes surrounded them.

'Mum, do you think we've tried enough pairs yet?' The precariously placed shoe dropped to the floor as Marlene handed her mother its pair.

'No dear. I still haven't found the ones I want,'

'Do you really need more shoes Mum? Can't you stretch out the old ones for this season?' She felt like adding, 'or for the remainder of your life,' but didn't. Instead she cruelly muttered, almost to herself, 'How far do you think you'll be walking anyway?'



Simon couldn't believe what he had just heard. Several months into their baby's new life, his wife, the new mother, had sat him down and told him she seriously 'didn't think she could *do* this.'

'Do what?' he had asked naively.

'Be a parent. It's too hard'. She had begun to cry. He felt like joining her. She was right. New parenthood had been a shock. The baby had been a frightening footling breech presentation, as though she couldn't wait to start walking the Earth. The resulting caesarean delivery had been as traumatic as it was unexpected. From the moment their beautiful newborn arrived she had cried, frequently, noisily, desperately, as though the world was too much for her. Neither parent had had more than three hours sleep in a row since her birth. They were slowly getting better at reading what their baby wanted and working towards making her happy, but so often they just had to walk around the flat holding their wailing infant and feeling as though they'd failed in the fundamental tasks of parenting. Breastfeeding had been abandoned as the infant welfare nurses and a doctor had become concerned about her 'failure to thrive'. She was gaining weight now, but was still unsettled. They were told not to worry. Now, simple worry seemed to be turning into distress.

'What do you mean you can't be a parent?' he said to his wife. He felt like he might be left dangling, abandoned with sole responsibility for their wailing infant. He turned and faced the room's corner, breathed deeply and was silent for a time. His wife was sobbing quietly on the couch. The child, mercifully, was asleep, but he knew from past patterns that she would be awake and demanding of them soon. He knelt before his distraught wife. He was struck by the fragility of this woman in front of him who had undergone such huge physical upheavals to produce new life. He knew he had to be the strong one now.

'Look, I know this is tough. It's harder than I thought it would be. It will get easier though, I'm sure. It can't get any harder can it?' He tried to lighten the mood. The infant began to cry in the next room. They both rose and went to her. Simon gently picked up his tiny girl from her bassinet and said,

'Look! She's smiling.'



Darren made the call to tell them he wasn't going to accept the job offer. This wasn't well received by the man who would have been his new boss.

'What! You're a shoe in for this job. We thought you'd be thrilled. Shit mate. You've really left us dangling here. You were far and away the best applicant.'

'Sorry. It's a step too far,' he said meekly and hung up after wishing the company well. He felt he had been the one left dangling during the few days hiatus between hearing the job was his and making the decision not to accept it. This time had been a dreamlike limbo of weighing and then reweighing pros and cons again and again. Ultimately, he had decided he wanted the solid ground of familiar territory, not the unmapped new ground this job would offer. He wanted an easier life and was sick of stress and ladder climbing. He knew those around him would be disappointed.

'Why have you let this opportunity slip by?' they would question. Darren put the phone down and went barefoot into his garden to deal with a rampant creeper. It would be easier than dealing with corporate entanglements.



Seagull and Chip

Diane Kolomeitz

Seagulls, wheeling, squealing, are suspended over the bay,
Eyes like beads are scanning the water, seeking easy prey.

Seagulls, landing, standing, scarlet twiggy legs look frail,
Belying a stubborn spirit of persistence without fail.

A moveable feast, facing the east, they are heckled into a group,
Assembled before their leader, who loudly commands his troop.

Seagulls, ravenous, cavernous in their greed, make haste,
Awaiting new instructions on the latest form of human waste.

Seagulls, a raucous caucus, staring at The Chosen One,
With heads on the side, they contemplate his shadow in the sun.

They must wonder why we batter fish ... they'd rather dive and dip.
And what is that pale golden thing we call 'the humble chip'?

Seagulls coy, the Hoi polloi, so fickle in their guise,
Will soon ignore their dictator, and cut him down to size,

Will steal the chip before he knows and one of them will gloat
Before it joins the flock bay-bound, anonymous to float.

Once Were Frogs

Jenny Macaulay



This is a short story rejigged as a poem. See 'Paradise Lost', The Portal, Issue no 9, August 2019. Illustration by Jenny Macaulay

The squelch of her boot
the left then the right
the decay of seagrass that lines the shore
like ropes of filthy foam from an outgoing tide.

She steps over those ridges of strangled syringes
of nylon line and bleached fish bones...
the latter a memory of a time
when the sea sustained edible life.

A hovercraft disgorges its passengers
like maggots emerging from the carcass
of roadkill.

They are swept away to their inland hotels

Away from the stench of the coastline
that oozes and globulates
around the debris
of times gone by.

She whistles the dog
coughs... and heads home
before the stink of the sun...
and she thinks of frogs.

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