

THE PORTAL

Portarlinton Neighbourhood House Writers' Magazine

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Photo: Beryl Stott

Editor's Notes

Our cover for this 13th edition of *The Portal* was taken by Beryl Stott, a member of our Thursday Night Writing Group. It is an image of her kitchen unravelled during renovations. The door shown leads the eye to what might be beyond the mess and disruption of refurbishment – a portal to something better.

Renovating and renewing our dwellings has been a common activity for many during the pandemic lockdown. It's a messy business home renovating, and requires peeling back layers, exposing the various skins of a room or house and being prepared to be flexible when it comes to fixing what's found beneath a normally intact wall or façade. Below is a photo of the Lincoln Room at the White House being renovated in 1951. It could possibly do with another clean sweep.

Earlier in the pandemic lockdown, many commentators talked of a sense of renewal and improvement that might rise from the ashes of the intense disruption experienced by the whole world grappling with a virulent enemy. Seeing lockdown as a turning point, they suggested that the world could improve social justice, inequality of wealth and opportunity, housing, and treatment of the environment. Light has been shone on the long list of possible silver linings which might emerge from such a dreadful pandemic. It seems this light will have to shine for many months to come unfortunately.

We have a mixed and stimulating selection of writing from our group in this issue, with only the occasional reference to the pandemic. We hope our writing offers some light relief and also some insights into life during these extraordinary times.



wikimedia.org/View from the Lincoln Room during the White House Renovation-01-23-1951.



Inside

Sue Jager

She feels her heart thumping and every breath is laboured. She is running a marathon and is trying to race, to complete the last few kilometres. All her body parts hurt, and she cannot think of anything, except the finishing line. Sweat runs down her back and soaks her clothes.

Overheating now, it feels as if her head will combust. Then the terror begins. A panicky feeling of falling off a building with no end in sight. There is no comfort anywhere, just sheer terror. Screaming and tugging at her top, she sits up. Her eyes are wide open, and she sees herself reflected by streetlight, in a mirror. What a shocking sight. Sweaty, terrified, and alone at four am. Suddenly she is very cold.

It's inside her head.

Shivering, she gets up and shuts the bedroom window.



Out of Reach

Sue Jager

Deb had tried so hard to make the ideal yo yo biscuit. She had researched traditional cookbooks and interviewed champion bakers and cooks, hoping to winkle their secrets out of them. She had three prize winning recipes in her possession and had practiced all the methods outlined in them.

She drove fifty kilometres to the nearest independent supermarket to buy the legendary brand of dry ingredients which were rumoured to oven bake with no visible pink speckles. She spent ages thoroughly sifting the flour in preparation.

Outside the home, she feigned absolutely no interest in baking. This is how she managed to insinuate her way into these baking conversations and gather intelligence. Silently, she carefully listened in as variations of the recipe and tactics of show baking were discussed at the Mosaics table.

She overheard Audrey speculating on whether passionfruit icing may be a winning feature and saw the quickly concealed look of glee pass over Mary's face, as she nodded sagely. Clearly, best to stick to plain icing. She kept her own counsel and practiced for weeks, alone in her kitchen.

The yo yo baking contest at the local show was a hotbed of gossip and rivalry because there was a trophy involved, also bragging rights for twelve months. Surely if there was any justice, it would be hers this year. On the day, Deb was at the show pavilion door by opening time with her freshly baked yo yos. She was issued the coveted ticket, No1. Now all she had to do was watch and wait.

By lunch time, it was all over. Eight contestants and a fabulous array of biscuits tested by the judges. Not a winner. Hers were deemed to be too dainty and small. Who knew that size really does count? Damn and Blast. Deb was mentally deflated, but physically bigger. Unfortunately, she had increased a dress size, as someone had to eat all those practice yo yos. She ruminated on her next steps after this crushing defeat.

It's Carrot Cake next year. There was only one entry in that section.

Just in Time

Eileen Jenkins

Part three : 'Help' (The Beatles)

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

It had been five days since little Tina Brown was last seen by the neighbours waving to Vicki Watson as she left Vicki's house with a bag of newsletters. Vicki had been interviewed by the police and interrogated numerous times by her family and friends. The town was agog. Rumours flew around like pizzas on a Saturday night.

It was said by some, that as she liked to swim in the prohibited area around the ferry, she'd probably been chewed up by the propellers and crabs. Her mother thought Archie Halliwell, (*Nasty piece of work that*) had abducted her, which was rather far-fetched as Archie was on a fishing trip with his Dad at the time. Archie had been keen on Tina since she fell off her skateboard and into his arms at the skateboard park. Tina's mother disliked him because of his leather jacket. There hadn't been much contact since.

A group of women suffering from malnutrition and kale overdosing caused by the latest trend, thought they could, possibly, perhaps, have seen her getting into a white van with doughnuts painted on the side. No one had a clue about anything

apart from the fact that Vicki Watson had been the last person to see her. Five days later and at Tina's mother's insistence the police thought it a good idea to speak to Vicki again.

'You said you'd asked her to take over the delivery of your newsletters as you were feeling unwell?' said Officer Alright to his notebook while licking his biro.

'Yes' said Vicki gazing at his numerous badges, epaulettes, truncheon, taser, pistol, and pots and pans dangling from his belt. She admired his biro'd moustache.

'Do you know where she would have gone to deliver them?'

'Yes,' said Vicki. There was a pause.

'Where would she have gone to deliver them?' said Officer Alright in a long sigh.

'I wondered when you were going to ask me that,' said Vicki smirking, as teens do when they think they have the better of their elders. 'I gave her a list to follow, so all you have to do is follow the list until you find an answer ... or not,' she said twisting her hair around her fingers. 'I'd thought of



doing it myself but didn't want to tread on your feet.'

'Toes.'

'Whatever.'

'Alright,' said Officer Alright. 'I'll let you know what develops. I'll be back.' He rattled his way to his all singing, all dancing super car and drove off as he imagined he would if he'd had a car to match Batman's.

Later, Vicki walked along the high street to see if any of her friends had news. She'd donned her denim jacket, placed her mobile in the pocket and set off. She was a little upset about her friend disappearing, but like all youngsters was quite resilient and was soon humming the latest tunes trending on her Apps. With her ear-muffs on, she didn't hear the sound until she was almost on top of it. Music was drifting from the little church with the modern, stained-glassed windows, the one opposite the fire station. She didn't recognise the notes being played on the organ ... it was Bach's Fugue in F minor, a fierce cacophony of sound. Approaching the open door, she peeped around it.

Mrs. Sugden and her son were standing before the altar with the minister. As the music died away the minister began to speak in the hushed tones of a woman giving private counselling to a parishioner. Vicki tried to hear what was being said but it was all gobbledygook. She did catch bits.

'So You must!Tina ... next Wednesday; we can't have the service without her. We need the body of the person ... it can't be done by proxy, nor by Express Post as you've requested'.

The Sugdons seemed to shrink in disappointment at this and although they had their backs to Vicki, she knew their expressions would be ugly. She'd seen them displeased before when she'd done a late delivery and when she tried at first to miss them out of her delivery round altogether.

'OMG,' thought Vicki. 'They're planning a funeral. They've only gone and murdered Tina. I must let Officer Alright know straight away!' She reached for her mobile.

To be continued
Part 4- 'With a Little Help from my Friends'
(The Beatles)
will appear in Issue no 14 of 'The Portal'

Sense and Sensibility

Janet Campbell



They had come together in their quiet seaside town because one of them had asked around, as women do. They were eight women of a certain age: certain of who they were, how they wanted to live their lives and that they had little tolerance for those who were inclined to unduly interfere with that living.

Initially, their club focussed on the book they'd chosen to read that month. They met in a café, (as women do) and discussions were accompanied by coffees, teas, wines and snacks of a savoury or sweet nature in accordance with the preferences of each member. With literary perspectives shared and remarkably similar certainties discovered, they soon decided to take turns to host the group over dinner in their homes. Partners, housemates, fur and boomerang children were banished for the occasion.

Soon it was apparent to all that the monthly books were merely appetisers for the main course of exchanges about families, friends, pivotal life moments, thoughts, feelings, hardships and passions. Familiarity nurtured revelations, highlighted commonalities and bred the fondness that provided the group's real sustenance.

It didn't matter that they were divided about whether Tim Winton was an attention-seeking tosser or a great author, or whether it was ever worth buying pinot noir without tasting it first. It did matter that only one woman had a food allergy – and it was easy to accommodate. The menu for both food and books was virtually unlimited.

The club's tenth anniversary dinner was an outdoor occasion on Jude's deck overlooking the town's beach. In the balmy air of a late December evening, crowds of holiday visitors were gradually moving from shore and sea back to their night lairs. As a wisp of serenity managed to permeate their surroundings, Kathy spoke up.

'We could actually do it this year, you know. We've got enough evidence on each one. We could do it like a firing squad. Only some shooters have live bullets so when they all fire no-one actually knows who fired the deadly shots. It's for their peace of mind; no-one can be individually blamed and no-one can blame themselves.'

'Someone could work out where the fatal shots came from by studying the trajectory of how the bullets entered the person, though,' offered true-crime fan, Jude.

'Well yes, CSI-Girl, but since the people who'd investigate in the case of firing squads are the ones who've set up the system in the first place, they'd be unlikely to bother, wouldn't you say? Anyway, we're not aiming at targets via gunsights, are we?'

'Let's not get distracted by the gun issue,' Prisha interjected with her usual practicality, honed through years of work as a metal sculptor. 'We'll make spectacles of ourselves lining up or even bunching up to do it regardless of how many carry the fatal load. I thought this was supposed to be a stealth operation with a super-low chance of anyone ending up in prison. A group of women of our maturity and sensibility near the targets will be hard to miss. Even one of Jane or Orla will be hard to miss!'

Kathy was irrepensible when she got close to any action that reminded her of her 'Women for Peace' Pine Gap camp-outs in the 1980s.

'True enough,' she conceded. 'So super stealthy is the name of the game. Maybe we need a plausible distraction or diversion going on so no-one registers us being there. And we could be in less conspicuous groups of four with just one in each group having the real stuff; we'd cover more targets within the time frame.'



'Better still, we shouldn't be in groups at all,' Jude pointed out, eager to further distance the action from anything resembling a firing squad. 'Everyone individually just meanders about the targets looking like the harmless, invisible seniors they are. Jane and Orla, of course, will have to take extra measures with their attire, but I'm sure they can do it for the cause.'

Kathy was now on track.

'Know what? Everyone in ordinary-looking beachwear, looking like they've been swimming. We carry towels and a beach bag of sorts with the stuff in ready-to-go containers. We spread out through the target area, after arriving at different times and from different directions. Then we just mill about, mixing individually with the happy campers as they head to showers, drinks and barbecues around 6 o'clock. When the opportunities present, each woman strikes her targets and saunters off.'

Seven nods, yays, here-heres and general signs of assent preceded Prisha's summary of the mission they were about to undertake.

'Here's the plan then,' she said. 'It has to be Sunday so the empty bottles can be rinsed and put into everyone's recycling for collection Monday morning. The weather forecast's looking perfect. I'll get

the bottles ready and get them to everyone on Saturday or before noon Sunday. Two each, in brown paper bottle-shop bags. We want maximum impact, so twelve bottles will be loaded and four will have water. We don't want to know who has which bottles, so no sniffing or snooping. Plausible deniability and all that, plus you really shouldn't sniff this stuff.

Don't look to see what's happened once you've attacked. Just meander away. Keep going until there's nothing left in the bottles or you're not able to inconspicuously continue. If you end up with any liquid left over, I'll pick the bottle up Sunday night. You don't want to tip more than an absolute dreg of that stuff down your kitchen sink when you're rinsing. Just text me. Ask if I'm interested in sharing take away. We rendezvous in sub-groups as usual on Monday and see whether any gossip emerges around town or the media reports anything.'

Kathy was now beside herself with excitement.

'Or we get immense satisfaction by meandering through the area on Monday, watching men of a certain persuasion crying over their poor corroded jet-skis. Please can we?'

And It Came To Pass

Jenny Macaulay



'Hey Dad?'

'Yes mate, what's up?'

'How come Granddad was only seventy-three when he died and Adam was 930?'

'Adam who, mate?'

'Adam, who begat Seth when he was 130?'

'What the hell are you talking about? Begat? For heaven's sake, where did all this come from?'

Nine-year-old Simon looked up from the cartoon playing on his iPad. 'Mr O'Sullivan told me. He said our flesh is corrupt just like when all the begetting was happening, and a virus has been sent to punish us, just like the floods when Noah built the ark.'

'Stay away from Mr O'Sullivan, Simon.'

'Why?'

'Because he talks a load of shite.'

'But Dad, if I get the virus I can kill a bird and wipe its blood on another bird then sprinkle the blood on myself and I'll be cured, just like how Moses cured the lepers.'

'Bloody hell, boy, you are to stay away from Mr O'Sullivan, do you hear?'

'But Dad, the Lord spake unto him.'

'To Mr O'Sullivan?'

'No, to Moses. He was sad because some people were committing whoredom. What's whoredom, Dad?'

'Aren't you supposed to be doing some maths or something? Where's your mother? It's time the bloody schools reopened.'

'It's Saturday. Mum said I don't have to do school work on Saturday. She's hanging out the washing.'

Dad folded the paper and rose from the table.

'Think I'll go and give her a hand. Now, you are to stay away from next-door. Leave Mr O'Sullivan in peace. Got that?' He picked up one of Simon's exercise books from the table and frowned at the school crest on the front. *Children of the Holy Mother of God.*

Mary's bare legs and pale-blue-slipped feet were all he could see below the half-filled clothesline.

'Honey, what do you think about enrolling the child we begat in the state school when this lockdown is over?'



'What?' She peered around a purple bath towel.

'Our boy is being radicalised.'

'What on earth are you talking about?' She pulled a Geelong football jumper from the basket, shook it and pegged it on the line.

'He's going on about a whole lot of bible crap. I'm picturing that lunatic holding a bible in front of the church in the States and all those white, evangelistic morons who voted for him. It's frightening.'

Mary picked up a pair of blue and white socks and hung them next to the jumper. 'Why did you throw this stuff into the wash?' she asked, holding up a beanie.

'Just getting ready. Won't be long before the boys are back into it. Bar fridge is ready to burst.' He smiled and went to kiss her on the cheek, but stopped. 'How long have you been wearing that cross around your neck?'

'Since your Mum died. Five years now. It was hers. She always wore it.'

'If I bought you a different necklace, would you wear it?'

'Of course I would, dear, but when is that likely to happen?'

'Sooner than you might think, and I'm serious about the state school. I hadn't noticed religion getting its clutches into Simon, obviously encouraged by the old codger next door.'

'Don't forget, you're the one who chose the Catholic school for him, but I'm sure he'll be happy to change. His best friend, Jeremy, goes to the state school.'

'Good. How about getting on to that next week, eh? And while you're home schooling him, see if you

can knock some of that bullshit out of his head.

There's to be no religion in this house. The boy needs a clear head so he can make up his own mind when he's old enough. I want him to grow up just like me without any of this brainwashing shit.' He watched while Mary picked up a smaller Geelong football jumper from the basket.

'And what are your plans for the rest of the day?' she asked.

Gary looked at his watch. 'Races are on shortly. At least a man can still have a bet in these morbid times.' He stood with his hands in his pockets while Mary struggled with a queen-sized sheet against a strengthening breeze.

'What's Simon doing at the moment?' she asked.

'He's watching some old episodes of, um, "Bluey", or something on his iPad, at least he was when I came out here.'

'Perhaps you could watch with him. It's a good show, good for dads as well as kids. But first, could you give me a hand with these sheets?'

Gary absent-mindedly pegged the sheets to the line, picked up the empty wash-basket and walked with Mary back into the house. Simon was sitting at the table with his coloured pencils.

'Look what I've drawn. It's a rainbow serpent.'

'Good one mate.' Gary patted him on the back as the phone rang. 'Christ, I hope that's work calling me in,' he said as he reached for his mobile.

'So do I,' said Mary.

Illustration: Jenny Macaulay

The Album

Ruth Wachtel

A flimsy net of soft, grey cobwebs and fine silt dust enmeshed the book. Debra had just exhumed it from its coffin, a trunk in the attic. She blew on it and then wiped away some of the gossamer threads and grime from the book's once golden title, 'Photograph Album'. She hadn't wanted to be here sorting her parents' lifetimes' belongings into boxes or refuse piles. Grief's disorder was still palpable.

The dust she had blown from the book made her sneeze and an even more violent cloud of powder puffed from its cover to shower the small, fusty room in a miasma of dust. The choking suspension of dirt particles in the air reminded her of Mallee dust storms she's lived through which ravaged and obscured everything. She stood and reached for the window lever to release the gagging dust and smell of airless decay and age. Then she sat on a small stool to consider her quarry from the trunk.

Debra felt as if she were handling religious relics rather than the album which she had pored over so many times as a child, wondering how it was that her parents could have looked so impossibly young and dark haired as they did in photos from their youth. She opened the album's cover to investigate further and allow herself the luxury, the indulgence of a few minutes' nostalgic relief from the awfulness of the mop up after death. She wanted that short trip down memory lane for which the photos would be a guide.

She didn't imagine the creaking sound which declared itself from the stiff spine of the book as she prised open its first page. It was sufficiently loud to make her worry that the cover was breaking and that the whole book would fall apart spilling its contents in bedlam on the floor. Suddenly, she stood, and in a furious lurch forward, flung the book and its delicate pages dramatically across the other side of the room. She screamed and clutched her hands in fear to her chest as she watched hundreds of silverfish leech themselves from the album and scuttle in shivering streams towards the safety of other objects and the attics' skirting boards. The book was alive. It moved and fluttered with the insects eating her family's album, consuming its pages and pictures and, sadly, some of the memories they might rouse.

Debra ran from the attic to the kitchen. She grabbed a can of insect spray and hurtled back up the stairs to destroy the destroyers. Later, when the haze of the room's chemical infusion had settled, she went back up to inspect the damage. The album's pages were lace, the photos half-assembled jigsaws of memory scattered in unruly chaos. She had a good cry and then hurled the album in the bin.

Later she retrieved it to see if she might cut the damaged parts of the photos away to make a montage so that even bits of the snapshots, those scraps of moments in time, might serve as fragile prompts to her wistful recollections.



My life as a train

Beryl Stott



I am a train chugging around my track. It goes in a circle. My engine is painted lime green and I have three open carriages. There is always sunshine and rainbows hovering over me. I am very happy.

I only started out as an engine, then I added number one carriage. A giraffe sits in this one. Her name is Sophie and she has an apple green feather boa around her neck. This sets off her orange and brown crazy pattern beautifully. She is an artist and has an easel set up, choosing whatever colour she wants and painting whatever she decides. She loves to paint. Carriage number two was added many years later and has a black and white striped zebra standing in it. Her name is Cassie. Her mane is braided with lovely fluorescent pink hair ribbons. Her tail is braided with these ribbons too. She works in clay and has a little table set up so she can sculpt as she glides along in the train watching the scenery. The third carriage carries a hippopotamus. She is quite a serious gal and has huge black framed glasses propped on her forehead. She likes to write stories. The side of her carriage is covered in shelves filled with books. She sits back in a very large deckchair and writes on her laptop.

We all love to ride our train. The rails are iridescent turquoise blue and we whizz around our circuit very fast and have such fun.

One day our train slows down and without warning, an enormous khaki green human-shape stands over the tracks. Massive dark blue clouds hover behind this shape and go right up into the sky. A big hand zooms out of the cloud and forces us to stop immediately.

Once we stop, all the fun oozes out and we become flat and stiff, like cardboard cut-outs. Our whole train falls sideways off the rails and we lie on the ground, unable to move. It is very quiet. The whole world has stopped turning. We lie in the quiet for many weeks.

Slowly the cloud disperses, moves off to other far-flung lands and we start to fill up again. We puff up slowly because it is hard work coming up from a flat position. Finally we sit up, and look around. We all push and pull and with much effort, we climb back on the track again. The rails have changed to a cerulean blue, but up ahead I can see they are still turquoise. It is a point to focus on and with effort I think we will make it past the cerulean, and onto the turquoise where it all looks like it used to.

Illustration: Beryl Stott

Out of Reach/Inside

Diane Kolomeitz

Inside our bodies,
A chamber of secret thoughts
Waits for exposure.

Sheltering within,
Those things unseen by others
Anticipate touch.

Discovery lurks,
Yet, hoping for asylum,
Shapes hide in the dark.

Silent emotions,
Strangled by expectation,
Remaining repressed.

Out of reach they lie,
With no known identity,
Dormant in this life.

One day they'll break out,
Find another existence
Beyond the inside.

Then, widely roaming,
Expressing thought without dread,
Our minds will be free.



Images: Public domain pictures https://storage.needpix.com/rsynced_images/psychology-2422439_1280.jpg

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