

## INTRODUCTION: *THE WAY WE LIVE NOW*

In *Cruel Optimism* (2011) Lauren Berlant identifies the “impasse” as a “genre for tracking the sense of the present,” one that marks “the unfolding activity of the contemporary moment”:

a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one’s sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event. (Berlant 4)

The Pandemic Era has demanded that awareness and hypervigilance in the context of ordinary and extraordinary crisis: climate catastrophe, the ongoing vicissitudes associated with settler cultures and the seemingly everyday irruption of crises whose contours and extent, implications and associations, are imprecise and mobile. The “wandering absorptive awareness” that Berlant promotes alongside “hypervigilance” sets the tone for this issue of *Southerly*. Assembled through the negotiation of impasses both distinctive and generic, now, in Australian literary, publishing, and personal cultures, we hope these essays, stories, memoirs, poems and reviews contribute to the ballast and orientation required to find and maintain our “sea legs.” Like the pandemic itself, with its waves of too much and nothing much, this collection of pandemic-inspired and pandemic-adjacent writing has been long in the making, exposing everyday precarity and privilege, fomenting action and inaction. The only part that is over is the fantasy that it might be over by the time we were done with our work on this issue. Instead, the way we live now feels permanently recalibrated. Less and more.

We were overwhelmed and delighted by the influx of submissions in response to our call for this special issue; inevitably, sorry that we could not include more, and glad that digital publication gave us greater latitude in some respects. Made possible by the local support of Create NSW, at a particularly disastrous time for arts funding, we are grateful to all our contributors (a number of whom are appearing in *Southerly* for the first time) for trusting us with their work; to our distinguished reviewers, Vanessa Berry, Pam Brown, Matthew Clarke and John Kinsella; to Angela Rockel, Brigitta Olubas, Daniela Brozek and Elizabeth McMahan for their assistance with producing the issue; and to our readers in advance, wherever, whenever. Writing this in the first flush of a new Labor government, we hope for better times. Our cover features one of Catherine Vidler’s dazzling “Lost Matchstick Sonnets” (more appear within). Images of poised uncertainty, these experiments in set form are genres unto themselves. Evoking the familiar constraints of the sonnet in material patterns and play, they remind us that timing is everything: genres, materials, and arrangements are volatile and metamorphic, chance intrudes on the everyday, the everyday

brings material for formal elucidation. The diverse work offered here, in *Southerly's* first online-only issue, gathers "Australian" writing produced in many different places and circumstances. Heterogenous and singular in its contents, the layered contiguity of digital publication optimistically promotes the lateral and multitemporal formation of the commons, true to the big ambitions and longevity of this venerable "little magazine." In Corey Wakeling's words, "disperse, *carte blanche*" ("The Gavel Foundation").

Our contributors dwell in and on the permeability of extreme and ordinary states, temporal confusion and disturbance, bringing genre to bear on forms of technological, linguistic, and psychical mediation, reinscribing Berlantian "impasse" in myriad ways. Chris Andrews's compelling sequence, "Shufflemancy," begins its "phantom enfilade": "This is where I couldn't be sure / of which way to go. No time to wait" and ends with the authority of grammatical fiat: "that you have come to find and join here." As Michael Farrell writes, "we go through the stacks like a character / Like a character from another national literature altogether" ("In The Library")—from the secret relief of Beth Spencer's "chronic kitty covid city" ("I like this new zoom world") to the precarious safety of Lucy Dougan's "Down to the Corner" and Rebecca Jessen's deadpan repetition: "It isn't summer until Stosur chokes / on the smoke of homespun soil" ("The New Year"). Stuart Barnes's interlaced "Triolet on Receiving Email from C" positions the iMac as its pistil, rhyming "medium," "tedium" and "*Selenipedium*." Liam Ferney "dial[s] back my podcast diet for the pandemic / but keep[s] nexting on skate vids on YouTube" ("A Love Supreme").

A sheaf of descriptive-phenomenological lyrics exemplify Berlant's "wandering absorptive awareness" as they meditate on sensorial intensification or overload: Angela Gardner's "Each Bending" ("I climb out of the world / and look back in"), Jake Goetz's "Satellite Hearts" ("her laptop humming as train doors // close at the feet of a myna bird"); Jill Jones's "I can look—can't I—" ("nothing is minor"); the "coded murmurings" of Julie Maclean's "Piffing Yonnies into the Post-Industrial"; Julie McElhone's "Nigh Times," a sequence produced as "an observer in isolation" of an online collaborative writing event. No less in thrall to the sublime, Sam Morley's "The algorithm says get tested" revels in the horror of "the world of phlegm." Pascalle Burton's "each one asks in fear, 'will it be me?'" tests the limits of irony, remixing a debauched mediascape as "catastrophic storm" while Julie Chevalier's "rainy stay at home five visitors, max" satirically riffs on Ginsberg's "Howl." The "new normal" of Dan Hogan's "How to leave work on time when working from home" promises "synergetic grieving with a smile": "Sad face emoji." Emily Stewart's absorptive "track and field" poem, "On pause / windswept," catalogues "pencil behind the ear / goings and comings," "negotiating the sliplane," "a breeze in a door." TT.O.'s exuberant algorithmic essay-poem "On Us" crunches numbers and letters into a "moving clock" prognostication of "another 'mass extinction'" and "argument for staying alive." Michael Stratford Hutch calls out Western Sydney's proposed "Aerotropolis" as neofuturist "colonist fantasy": "Here at the edge of the double-thought / sprawl, a dissonant wedge of wing."

It seems especially appropriate that so much of the work collected here in *Southerly's* first entirely online and free issue, concerns the complexity of place, orientation and mediation. Claire Aman's "If There are Zebra Finches" (joint winner of the Harold Tribe Award for Fiction in 2019) treats seriously the sense of contingency the title's "if" implies. A narrative of unintended consequences and the impossibility of maintaining a predictable passage through Country, it nonetheless sides with generosity and serendipity against history's dead hand. Ella Jeffery's "Nachträglichkeit" and Anne Casey's "The federal government has extended the international border ban until June" poeticise bilocation

exacerbated by pandemic border control. Eileen Chong's "Reason" crystallises the terror of filiation as primal scene: "You say: *I thought I'd give you / something to cry about. // I remember. And you did.*" In Blake Falcongryn's "Arcadia" "familial ties / weigh heavy and autumnal." Sophia Small's "To Autumn Again" pursues daughter/father entanglement indirectly by tracking the poet, John Keats, from a Sydney classroom where she teaches Champion's *Bright Star*, to a memorial plaque quoting *Hyperion* outside Guy's Hospital in London where her father is receiving chemotherapy, to "Keats themed" Hampstead and the Keats Collection in the British Library.

The push and pull of contraction and expansion, the one and the many, is figured as elemental reckoning in John Kinsella's "Condenser":

When I am dead and buried I will rot down  
past the crust into the mantle all the way to the core  
where I will be remade molten and compressed.  
I will be part of the whole *terra* thing whether  
I want to shed angst and guilt or just forget. This crisis  
of infinitesimally small particles and realities  
of pressure and cohesion and dispersal  
analysed by the gross reading tool of gravity

Shastra Deo's neoromantic "Przewalski's Horses Are Back in Belarus," constellates a series of living things—"the last wild stallions," "couch grass," "bumble bees," "birches," "birds' nests / in cottages rotting against / the clouds"—to reveal "that people / were never needed here at all." The affective and political implications of this heightened awareness of contingency are manifold. Various kinds of dialogue spring up, juggling "selves" and "shelves" (Farrell), versioning and seriality, software and hardware. In A. Francis Johnson and Anthony Lynch's collaborative poem, "Zoom," "Our astronaut selves are cornered / on screen." Lucy Sussex's short essay, "Pandemics Past and Present," parsing the uncanny mix of alien and familiar in "writing a past pandemic" whilst "living in a pandemic, in the present" is coupled with an extract from her fiction based on a murder in the 1650s, *The Tell-Tale Skull*. The shade of John Forbes seems to hover over Toby Fitch's "New Chronic Logics":

Will we remember the weather  
and whether our bodies passed through each other  
in the lockdown dark? It gets away from me

like a sprig in stew, like something nicked.

Individual contributions, and the issue itself which is the sum of them, constitute a provisional library, a theatre, a kind of "Pandemic Bathing" (Wakeling) fit for contemplation of such questions as "What made you laugh during that world-watching called pandemic doom-scrolling self-surveilling epidemiologising of your statistically-quantified data bios called the Covid-self?" (Corey Wakeling, "Pandemic Bathing"). Wakeling's own long "spree"-poem, "The Gavel Foundation," "after" Pam Brown's "Only A Fool Buys Real Estate," exemplifies his parsing of "wit" in its anatomisation of "what you are going to inherit / when you try to insinuate yourself / into canton Australia." So too, in compressed form, Elena

Gomez's sonnet, "Zoe's Catalytic Converter," set in the complex infrastructure of a suburban shopping centre car park where cars "forget" how to find their way, and catalytic converters are catnip for thieves: "They contain / precious metals."

The pandemic scene foregrounds embodiment and intimacy, worrying the boundaries of self and other. Josie/Jocelyn Deane's "Black Star" catapults us into the emergency ward and the speculative self as "alien intelligence," "a kind of language," asking, "What if the body you are, in lockdown, is easier to hack?" Trisha Pender's "Live from the Chemo Lounge," in dialogue with Sedgwick, Sontag, Smith (Stevie), Lorde and Diski, claims the paradoxical "satisfaction" of the negative, the black comedy of the desire to be "already dead": "I confess that after the first shock had worn off I was strangely relieved to be diagnosed with cancer. It meant an end to striving." June Perkins's "Two Livestreamed Funerals, A Cancelled Wedding and the Saving Grace of Poetry" captures the enmeshment of the live and remote in the uneven, "dislocating" effects of attending funerals and weddings via Zoom: the paradoxically enhanced "closeness" that streaming sometimes makes possible and the thrill of rediscovering "in-person vibrations of the human voice." Mark Peart's companion poems pair court records from sodomy prosecutions in Sydney in 1930 with the exigencies and affordances of contemporary cruising, "criminal elision on serial repeat, / the rhythm / of a procedural, *en tele* / wired up to cyber." In "Suspended Loop," Johanna Ellersdorfer walks the night streets of Canberra, her pandemic home, feeling "achingly and suddenly removed from the person I had been only a month before." Vanessa Berry's subtle "Gentle Strength," written "with Anne Dufourmantelle's *Power of Gentleness*," meditates on charged surfaces, associative inflection, the prolonged moment of the suspended "slow blink." Honni van Rijswijk's "Knowing True Crime" orients "living" in relation to the sometimes revelatory, sometimes melancholic mirror the genre of "true crime" provides in thinking through the status of "knowing" itself. Aligning moments of insight with an autobiographical narrative of a life inevitably shaped by the popular dissemination of narratives of crime and justice, "Knowing True Crime" situates a genre whose current popularity largely outstrips efforts to understand its fascination. As such, it deftly marries genres that are insufficient in themselves to encompass this still-burgeoning field of interest and find those points of generic "impasse" (after Berlant) intrinsic to true crime as such.

For any attempt to write "the way we live now"—pandemic body, nation, earth, genre, event, text—matters of truth, justice and activism are paramount. Sandy O'Sullivan's essay "Challenging the Colonialities of Symbolic Annihilation" offers a profound examination and explanation of the deep importance of thinking through relationality, and the consequences of such thinking for both aesthetic and infrastructural interventions. Connecting "deep history" and Vizenor's theorisation of "survivance" they assert "people matter more than the art made, including those future generations, including our deep histories, and including the ways in which this connectedness makes our lives worthwhile." Those inclusions are critical to the analysis of infrastructure O'Sullivan offers, a model and enlivening resituation of the importance of good thinking into the administrative space that we work with, and generously demonstrates the way Indigenous and First Nations thinkers have already offered transformative possibilities for this work. Chris Arnold's poem, "offline," "a trope, or one in the making," considers the ethics of care and the politics of privilege:

is that sauce on your sleeve? why do you keep  
choosing *that* path—the one with the thorns,  
as if there were another. as if this town,  
this Derbal, were left to Wadjuk care and anyone  
could step off-grid whenever they please.

“Precarity and Possibility,” a collaborative essay by the Illawarra Climate Justice Alliance, explores the local potential for “an anti-capitalist decolonial approach to a just transition” in the context of “intensification of existing pressures,” by “[l]istening to and learning from the knowledges embedded within the Aboriginal custodianship of Country.” That process requires hypervigilant attention and self-scrutiny. As Harold Legaspi writes in “Cool Kids”: “I am on my way home, and I am in my house, a partial imagining of some memory. / Literally, I am tangled. In fact, this material is a yarn of internalised violence.” In “Burning Cook,” Katrina Schlunke puts a match to the edifice of Captain Cook:

Be careful where you stand Mr Policeman Australia  
You are always standing on life.  
Touching that life is a gift we sometimes get  
But we Johnny-come-lately Australians are never going to get it from atop a statue  
So I am burning Cook.  
Trying to burn away that bit of myself that forgets  
Trying to transform that mixed up shit

Alison Whittaker’s exhilarating, excoriating “the poets are about to lie to you” enjoins us to wake up and take responsibility: “recall some worlds getting smaller. remember others exploding into deathly view.” Only then can we hope to discover, in Berlant’s terms, “those processes that have not yet found their genre of event.”

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#### WORK CITED

Lauren Berlant. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2011.