

STORIES OUT WEST

17
writers
17
stories

Andrew Lac
Bohdi Byles
Daniel Nour
Gary Paramanathan
Gatsby Lim
George Haddad
Gum Guo
Jenny Nguyen
Jinny-Jane Smith
Keith Quayle

Lei Tan
Marel Parono
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Nadia Demas
Sarah Carroll
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Winnie Dunn
Jazz Money

Foreword by
Steven Ross

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Acknowledgement of country

This book was gathered, developed, and published on the lands of the Gadigal and Dharug people. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which this book was developed and pay our respects to elders past and present.

We recognise the importance of storytelling within Indigenous culture and embrace the principle of ‘First Nations First’: re-centering Australian history with Indigenous histories.

We recognise that Australia’s migration history began, and continues, on stolen land that has not been ceded; and that it is untenable to talk about race in Australia without situating it in the histories of dispossession and colonisation of Australia’s First People.

STORIES OUT WEST

**Stories from Western Sydney
LGBTQ+ First Nations and
culturally and linguistically
diverse communities**



Arts &
Cultural
Exchange

First published in 2023

by ACON

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Printed and bound by Hurstman
Printing Group

ISBN 978-0-646-87215-5

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The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of any entities involved in this publication. Please note that some of the stories contained within this publication contain potentially triggering content. All the stories in this anthology are geared towards an adult audience, and some stories contain sexual themes.

Design and typesetting by
Montgomery Marshall 2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This anthology is an initiative of ACON, as part of our work across Greater Western Sydney, funded by South Eastern Sydney Local Health District. This anthology was developed in partnership with Sweatshop: Literacy Movement Incorporated.

We would also like to acknowledge ACE (Arts & Cultural Exchange) for allowing us to host our workshops in their space in order to support and develop the emerging writers that are featured within this anthology.

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Foreword

Steven Ross

I am a complete Greater Western Sydney convert. I grew up in the inner-west from the late 80s and like most people from the east of the city I occasionally travelled west to see Elizabeth Farm, for a sporting event or on my way to the Blue Mountains. I didn't appreciate the vast geographical and cultural landscape on offer in the West.

In 2012 after a decade in rural NSW, I left Sydney utterly burnt out and over city life, especially Sydney queer life. I scored a job at a Western Sydney local council. I discovered the true joy and freedom of living in the West, away from the homogenised gentrification that enveloped the places I had left behind. Away from the white colonial gaze of the White colonial gays.

Parramatta, at the heart of so-called Sydney, is the central point of Western Sydney. It has always been a meeting place of different clans, underpinned by an ecological amalgamation of salt and fresh water, of plains and mountains and the Dharug and other clans of the Sydney basin.

It is now home to the largest First Nations population anywhere in Australia. Almost 50,000 of us are embedded in Greater Western Sydney from Campbelltown, Bankstown, across to Penrith, up to Blacktown, Cumberland and Parramatta.

It has been the biggest privilege of my professional and personal life to work with the Dharug peoples. To experience their cultural leadership and their deep connection to Country that is their sovereign birthright. The fact that the Dharug and other Nations such as the Tharawal and Gandangarra are thriving in this urban streetscape is solid evidence of First Nations' power and that our knowledge will generate solutions to the big critical issues of our time. We can all learn from the Traditional Owners of Greater Western Sydney.

To also hear their storying of land and waters and their connection to history through ritual is incredibly healing. I have seen and experienced those traditional practices shift the energy in places that have dark and painful histories.

Ritual and storytelling have sustained us since the first sunrise by connecting us to Country, to place and to each other.

Other cultures from around the world also know and emphasise the importance of storytelling for connection and understanding, in order to move us forward onto a greater version of ourselves.

Greater Western Sydney is where many people from those cultures of the world now call home. We understand out here that diversity is more than just great food. It is also a driver of culture and art, of innovation, ideas, research and of true human connection; it gives us a better sense of the world, the universe and our place in it. Diversity is who we are and who we have always been.

And like the Traditional Owners, we understand that this place is a dynamic cultural domain. This is misunderstood by many in broader Sydney, evidenced by decades of neglect by government,

service providers and community groups, many of whom champion equality and equity but stop when confronted with the West.

That is why supporting and developing projects that elevate the existing voices within the West, like ACON's *Stories Out West*, are so important. It is through these projects we can begin to draw focus back onto the West and the thriving and diverse communities that live within it.

Western Sydney is still underinvested in cultural, economic and social funding and is often cast as culturally barren or as problematic and violent. This was made even more apparent during the COVID-19 Delta outbreak where people living within the suburbs of Western Sydney were targeted and racially discriminated against; and police were targeting Aboriginal young people with fines at a far greater rate than the general population.

The thing is, for all the perceptions cast upon Western Sydney-siders, we just don't give a shit. We just get on with our work, our lives and everyone else can catch up. The queers I know out here feel the same. The eastern suburbs can ignore us but we lean in, we mould our own identities, we tell our own stories and we navigate this city the way it has been navigated for thousands of years. Greater Western Sydney is the beating heart of this Country and it is our future.

In this anthology of LGBTQ+ storytellers, we get to learn about another part of our city, seldom heard or given space to be seen. Our LGBTQ+ community in Western Sydney is unique and powerful. We understand the true nature of Sydney and our place in the world.

You will begin to understand this true nature when you read these stories of humanity; the diversity as strength. The vibration of the streets with its cacophonous noise. The intersection and oppression of technology and the State. The raw trauma of the colonial processes of homophobia, transphobia and racism. The healing gift of Country and family and the power of the family you make in the face of adversity or just for the love of human connection.

These queer stories of Western Sydney are the stories of this Country. The ones we don't even know exist yet and the ones that come into being one hundred years from now. We live it now in the West.

REFLECTIONS FOR READERS

HOW DO YOU WANT TO ENGAGE WITH THESE STORIES?

I WANT TO FEEL SAFE



I WANT TO FEEL CONNECTED



REFLECTION PROMPTS:

- IS THIS A GOOD TIME AND PLACE FOR ME TO READ ABOUT LGBTQ+ LIVED EXPERIENCE IN WESTERN SYDNEY?
- DO I HAVE A FAVOURITE GROUNDING EXERCISE THAT I CAN USE OR SUGGEST TO OTHERS IF FEELINGS COME UP WHILE READING?
- DO I HAVE STORIES OF MY OWN THAT I MIGHT WANT TO SHARE ONE DAY?

MORE RESOURCES AVAILABLE AT THE END OF THIS BOOK

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INTRODUCTION

Adrian Mouhajer and Loc Nguyen

Western Sydney has always been an integral part of our lives. We both moved out of the area when we came out, but it drew us back in. We have always felt most at home here in the suburban streets where trollies litter the backyards of our neighbours and our local parks. In Lakemba, where Arab uncles and jeddos congregate in front of cafes on Holden Street. In Cabramatta, where aunties would wheel their groceries down John Street. Where everywhere we walked, we could see the faces of people who looked like us. However, just like the family homes we left behind when we were both eighteen, Western Sydney has also at times been a hard place to grow up and live within. We exist on the boundaries of our queer identities and cultural heritage, we can find connection but also face barriers within both of our communities as we try to maintain our sense of self.

We have struggled to bring our families along with us to fully accept our queer identities. Throughout many conversations with our parents, we've found that the tools we initially used to discuss gender and sexuality have been crafted from White ways of talking. These conversations have often left our parents feeling further alienated. Our parents believed that we had become 'Westernised' and that we wanted to detach ourselves from our culture. This couldn't have been further from the truth.

This rejection led us to search for chosen families within queer spaces. But we then started to face racism and a lack of understanding as to how our cultures form our relationship to our queerness. Through the discovery of alternative ways of being queer people of colour, we drew strength and discovered ourselves through the stories passed down by our ancestors and told within our cultures, customs and faiths. For myself (Loc), I am a queer non-binary Vietnamese person from Cabramatta, a suburb many refugee families like my own now call home. I've learnt how to reconnect with my culture and have begun to find representations of my queerness within Buddhism, such as that of Quan Am (also known as Guanyin), the Bodhisattva of Compassion, who is able to take the form of any gender or living creature. I have used these stories within my own culture and faith to also reconnect with my Buddhist mother, who can finally begin to understand and engage with my queerness. For myself (Adrian), it is through getting to know other queer Arabs and sharing stories with them that I can finally see how open our language and our customs are to being interpreted through a queer lens. The Arabic language is gendered and pronouns are not utilised within it. Yet when I converse with my Arabic-speaking friends, we can easily interchange between the female and male versions of words in the same sentences to create a cacophony of gender androgyny. In our spaces, we invite each other in, share food and breathe hospitality just like our families but leave their prejudice at the door.

These are the stories we shared with one another as we began the development of *Stories Out West* through our roles at ACON. Bringing together our personal experiences with our

work at ACON through this anthology has been an exciting opportunity to connect further with, and provide a platform for, our communities. This work is part of ACON's commitment to achieving greater health equity for LGBTQ+ people from culturally, linguistically and ethnically diverse, migrant and refugee backgrounds. ACON's investment in the creation of *Stories Out West* is a reflection of our values: Community, Collaboration, Equity and Inclusion, and the work we set out to undertake in ACON's Multicultural Engagement Plan. More than that, it's a powerful expression of our collective strength in our varied but connected communities.

In 2022, ACON partnered with Sweatshop, a literacy movement based in Western Sydney devoted to empowering culturally and linguistically diverse communities through reading, writing and critical thinking. Sweatshop supports marginalised communities and individuals to identify issues that affect them, take control of how they are portrayed and perceived, and to build alternatives through artistic endeavors. This partnership was crucial to ensure that the writers involved were given the skills needed to be able to tell their stories and take control of how they are portrayed.

Sweatshop and ACON ran weekly workshops to assist emerging writers in developing their pieces for this anthology. There was a focus on moving away from writing for a White audience, and not shying away from lived experience. It was also an opportunity for LGBTQ+ First Nations and culturally diverse people with a connection to Western Sydney to connect with one another and share their experiences. In these workshops, the comment 'I love that I don't have to explain this part of my story to you all because you just get it' was heard multiple times. Regardless

of cultural background, we had similar experiences; especially when it came to navigating our complex family ties and the way we felt about Western Sydney. Through *Stories Out West*, we hope to continue to encourage and facilitate storytelling among many other queer and trans people of colour from Western Sydney.

The writers seek to assert their existence and agency as a community and celebrate the uniqueness of their lives living, working and growing up in Western Sydney as their authentic selves. Daniel and Marel unpack being Middle Eastern men growing up in the confining steeples of churches. Winnie and Sarah share their journeys of discovery within their Islander communities. Gatsby writes a love letter to his brother and reflects on the moves between Vietnam, Cambodia and Australia as a refugee. Jenny navigates identity and sexuality in Vietnamese culture through their relationship with their partner's mother. Mark dismantles stereotypes and uses humour to draw attention to what love can look like behind closed doors. Jinny-Jane jumps the fence and bridges gaps within her tight-knit family narrative. Gum uses poetry to paint scenes of Chinese culture through their family life. Gary and George focus on the dualities of being gay men of colour who in their privacy and discreetness, search for intimacy and sex in public spaces. Andrew and Lei explore the motivations of betrayal and how to come to places of healing. Nadia gives new meaning to play and uses this as a catalyst for her own trans reflections. Bohdi articulates the violence that queer folk can encounter in the West through their lived experience and Keith reflects on how the biggest barriers to our growth can sometimes be ourselves. Tooba imagines an alternative reality where culture and queerness intersect and thrive in clouds of

shisha smoke. Jazz provides a beautiful and hopeful conclusion, celebrating the diversity, fluidity and colour of Western Sydney.

As a reader, you are invited to partake in these stories and develop your understanding of our cultures and communities. Communities gain power as a collective when they recognise their multiplicity. We encourage readers to start to unravel the false boundaries between queerness and culture as you indulge in these works. With the many voices that are shared in *Stories Out West*, we hope that this collection serves as a reminder and testament to the fact that LGBTQ+ First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse communities exist, resist and thrive within Greater Western Sydney. Our voices, our stories and our lives matter.

NOTE TO READERS

Please note that the following pieces may contain potentially triggering content, particularly in the areas of racism, transphobia, homophobia, prejudice and discrimination. Additionally, some of these stories also contain sexual themes and are geared towards an adult audience.

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FISHY SAUCE

Jenny Nguyen

Far sooner than we intended, I met your mother. We were at the traffic lights across your red-brick apartment block in Marrickville. I leaned my head on your delicate shoulder in the quiet hum of the evening. We were still at the early stages of getting to know each other then, hearts fluttering in that pre-dating stage rose-hue.

‘That’s my mum,’ you said with a strained voice.

I shot upright. Your mother was not wearing glasses. My voice cracked, ‘Do you think she saw?’

Muttering shakily, you explained, ‘My mum has better eyesight than me. She got laser eye surgery recently.’

We crossed the road to greet her whilst I giggled nervously. *Of course she got laser!* At your mother’s hip was a red trolley bag brimming with groceries in blue plastic bags – scallions peeking out the corner. It was a familiar sight. She’d blend in perfectly in Cabramatta.

‘Con chào co,’ I whispered sheepishly as I bowed.

Your mum nodded and proceeded to speak to you about plans for dinner that night. I was only half listening, partly because I was not yet accustomed to your Northern Vietnamese accent. As we walked towards your home, I took the trolley handle you had instinctively retrieved from your mother’s hands.

Running nimble and withered fingers through her dark brown dyed perm, your mother invited me for dinner. We took off our shoes at your door and you offered me bright pink plastic house slippers. Your place was cosy, especially with all the mother-daughter photos that hung on the walls. You told me your mother really liked wood, evident by the cedar shelves, cabinets, coffee table, TV stand and floorboards that filled the living room. Against the wall, in the centre of the room, was a deep mahogany floor-to-ceiling Buddhist altar. Plates of mangoes, vases of fresh yellow chrysanthemums and fluorescent red lights backgrounding the statues. A photo of your grandmother was at the centre of the altar – the late strong-willed matriarch that continues to watch over you and your mother. You explained that the altar was your mother’s pride and joy – she loved that it could be seen through your balcony from the street. I told your mother that I had the exact same altar at home. The tear-away Lunar calendar hanging near the kitchen marked today as an auspicious “lucky” day. By my side, you were shifting from foot-to-foot in our matching pink house slippers. I gathered you were thinking what I was thinking – that despite our pre-dating status, I was already meeting your mother. Lucky then, how we turned out.

I sat on your living room rocking chair, trying not to creak. Hands on knees, feet flat, back straight. This space felt familiar but also different. It had been a while since I had to try to impress a Vietnamese auntie. I felt your mother’s pencil-sharp eyes linger on my hair. I automatically scratched the back of my head; the tapered sides pricked my ears.

When you and your mother began cooking in the kitchen, I heard how she routinely tutted and talked over you about how

“things are supposed to be done.” My contribution to dinner was carrying the steaming bowls of *bánh canh cua* to the table. I slurped up the sticky and thick crab broth topped with soft yet chewy tapioca noodles. The crunch of the fresh scallions punctuated each soupy spoonful. I knew the noodles were good the moment I took my glasses off. Your mother was pleased when I asked for seconds. I could tell from her slight smirk and nod and the way your eyes softened. Your mother was very proud to tell us that her hometown, Hạ Long Bay, was known for the abundance of fresh seafood and fish sauce.

‘Nếu không có nước mắm là không được.’ *If there is no fish sauce, it will simply not do.*

She asked me all the typical questions you’d expect in the first meeting with a Vietnamese mother – age, suburb, work, family, my parents’ hometown and their work. I responded with polite and palatable answers. She pulled up both our grammar and pronunciations. She even corrected that I should refer to her as *bác* since she was older than my parents. I could feel my own mouth twitching in attempts to hold back laughter. Her feisty tone reminded me so much of your own. I stopped smiling when, alone together, she asked for the exact figure of my income. You had gone to the bathroom. I stuttered and stumbled whilst she remained perfectly still. Of course, my social worker salary made no impression on the mother of a corporate lawyer.

You later told me in a hushed tone, ‘That’s the first time my mum was able to ask questions to my ... friend ... directly herself. As opposed to interrogating me after they’ve left. But she’s never asked for anyone else’s salary before.’

A year later, I suggested we travel with your mother. We were well and truly in a relationship at this point. Lucky us. I was such a regular at your place that I could comfortably wash the dishes after a meal without being shooed away by your mother. She stopped insisting that I was a guest.

Your mother was thrilled by the suggestion. In the weeks leading up to the trip, she must have watched every single YouTube video of Darwin ever uploaded. All she ever spoke of was barra fishing, mud crabbing and the raging waterfalls of the Top End during wet season with its tropical monsoons so like her hometown. She made known her dismay that the Northern Territory had the world's largest crocodile population and that we must never be near any water's edge.

‘Cá sấu chấm nước mắm chắc trở thành cá ngon.’ *Crocodiles [literal translation: fish ugly] dipped in fish sauce surely becomes fish delicious.*

We laughed.



When we got to our 4-star Hilton hotel room, your mother discovered that her fish sauce container had exploded in her luggage. Shuffling in her new hotel slippers on the plush red carpet, she hurriedly ripped her luggage open and scattered its contents on the bed. Old-school curlers, matching tracksuits and floral silk scarves were sprawled on the top end of the bed to be aired out overnight – expensive hotel dry cleaning was absolutely not an option.

That night, your mother slept on half of her bed. Her face covered in a rose-coloured eye mask. We fell asleep holding hands under the covers. We were on the second queen bed, which was left unburdened by fish sauce-soaked fabric. We intentionally laid further apart from each other to seem inconspicuous.

In the middle of the night, your mother frantically shook my shoulders. ‘Jen-nee! Jen-nee!’ With wide eyes, she stared at me. Sweat beaded on her lip. With a groggy head and racing heart I blurted out, ‘It’s not what it looks like, Auntie!’ Even in my surprised state, I knew the lights were on and I knew that she knew that I was hugging you. My arms had been draped across your chest. Our cheeks were pressed against one another, lips almost touching. My gut twisted as I became more awake.

Your mother demanded in a harsh whisper, ‘Out, out, out!’ I dragged myself away from your delicate shoulders, wordlessly obliging. I knew you well enough to know that you were only pretending to sleep through the entire ordeal – discerning a plausible explanation to dismiss our closeness.

As I carefully settled into the fishy bed, your mother launched rapidly into the extent of her nightmare. A shadowy female figure had been pushing down on her chest and jumping on her neck. She had a premonition that the figure was involved in the 1983 Pine Gap Protests of Alice Springs and had died in this hotel. Your mother had seen the unwavering figure come out of the closet. Eventually, she yawned and remarked that the con ma qui was less likely to affect me because I was “strong and healthy”.

Later that night, you slid into my embrace in the fish sauce-free half of the bed. You whispered that this was the safest you had felt and perhaps you didn't need to come out to your mother anymore. Rather than the hurt of her purposely forgetting your confessions again and again, perhaps she cares for you, for us, in the only way she knows how. Perhaps your grandmother was watching over us and keeping the bad spirits away. Here, we held hands, the ghost of the closet at rest for now.

DEAR BROTHER

Gatsby Lim

Soursdey Bong,

You'd love Vietnam. We share the same abusive exes of countries that fucked up our lives. Plants reclaim French and American-style buildings alongside Chinese siheyuan temples indiscriminately. Burning meats on coals waft through the streets. Outside shops on dirty plastic stools sit folks that look like our family. A metallic taste of rain is threatening to pour. Reminds me of Cambodia.

Brother, I'm sorry it's been so long since I last wrote. Yesterday, I boarded a ship called the "Orchid" to Halong Bay. I'm on holiday with my sweetheart, Matthew. He's a Blue Mountains man. In Khmer our nephews call him 'Uncle with Eyes the Colour of the Sea'. I double-clicked on Matthew ten years ago. We're still pressing each other's buttons. In the evening, we sit on a narrow balcony that pushes Matthew and I shoulder-to-shoulder. Limestone pillars jut out of jade waters and the skies are postcard blue. Looks Photoshopped.

The guide explains that the people here prayed to the gods for protection from pirate raids and were gifted the islands. A dragon and her baby made their home here forming the archipelago that would protect future prosperity. At least for a while.

Cát Bà has rare endemic orchids and the government have recently “relocated” the Cửa Vạn people here. Fisherfolk who lived clustering like barnacles to these seas for generations are now forced ashore. Orchids don’t need soil to live. If dragons can become flowers, maybe they can grow roots long enough to find their way back to the waters. Two families remain, given permission to live in their sea. The ancestors of the ocean dragons now furiously paddle lazy tourists out to the grottos for a few US dollars a round trip. Where villages once floated, luxury cruise lines set anchor now. Brim-full ferries takes tourists forwards and backwards. They will take home Insta-perfect selfies with light-green seas invisible of the Vietnamese whose lives are tethered to this place. We head past the last floating structure. A faded red plastic chair like the ones we used to sit on, feet nailed down. On the rusty tin a faded pink shirt flaps hello in the wind.

Do you remember the Red Cross refugee camp in Phanat Nikhom? Hot pink polo shirt, no pants. Chasing screaming kids and blushing aid workers around the encampment. They nickname me “The Crab” because I run sideways. Baa said I’d never keep my pants on. Late one night we leave home to visit sick relatives and never return. We didn’t let anyone know our real plans. No one could be trusted. Uncle Pol Pot made sure of that. Only enough food for a short trip. Rubies hidden in snotty tissues. Gold folded into soiled nappies. A full bag of rock sugar. Our parents carried us through jungles. I held my breath as people were shot dead. I closed my eyes as a woman threw herself down the mountainside with her baby. A mouthful of sugar to stop from crying. Cold muddy water as we sunk ourselves into the

landscape. Gates opened, no papers were asked for. Our bleeding feet didn't stop 'til Thailand. If any part of our story had changed we might have become sea, dragon or orchid folks.

You were still and quiet like a good baby. Mum snatched you from Dad. Howling, she pressed your tiny, hot wet body into herself. You weren't breathing. Looking into Baa's dark, gaunt face she sobbed even louder. Can you hate your own malnourished body? Starvation, guns and the silence stood outside. A teenage woman and man in a concentration camp in Battambang held tight onto their dead baby. I like to think as their screams escaped the small wooden room they were allowed to give birth in, the soldiers outside put down their guns. I like to think that their grief made a small village motionless for a few seconds. But a stillbirth stops nothing. Something was moving inside her. Confused, the midwife checked her limp stomach. A kick. A tiny thing insisting on life amongst all the death. *It's me*. Like a good big brother, you gave me your portion to eat. Did you give your breath? Baa told me about our birth only a few years ago. He made me promise to never ask Mum about you.

From one stolen land to another, Migrant Services Australia gave us a home in Campsie. We were thrown together like a united nations of the homeless into a run-down orange brick flat. Cambodian, Lao, Vietnamese and Lebanese families brought with them Buddhas, Kinh Dương Vương and the Prophet Muhammad – all beat into fibro walls. Remember when I spilt that cup of hot soy milk? The white liquid ran slowly off the pages of the newspaper we covered the table with, blurring words none of us could read onto the floor. I sobbed. Something sharp stabbed into my dry stomach. Dad said nothing. His eyes glazed.

Mum cleaned up. We ate in silence. For a moment we remembered an old hunger.

Liverpool in the 90's "Chink", "poofter" and "faggot" became my second names. Inside our fibro house I'm the model child. Becoming Ozzie is footy matches, BBQs and Ramsay Street. I get a centre-parted bowl haircut and bleach it blond. I want to look like Zac from *Saved by The Bell*.

Brother, in my face they see you. In their disappointment of me, do they wonder how you would have turned out? Sometimes I've wished we could have traded places. It took time but I can now meet your eyes. Our family is safe and thriving. Mum and Dad own their house outright. I'm loved by a handful of handsome men, not all of them blue-eyed but brown-eyed like me. A Schnauzer follows us around my plant-filled city apartment. On weekends I take blood and chosen family to stay at my small cottage in the Blue Mountains. How do I live a life worthy of that breath you gave me?

I don't know. I'm trying to live enough for two.

I love you brother. I love me.

Always,

Gatsby

RIGHT NEAR PRIDE ROCK

Winnie Dunn

It was in the house of fe'ofa'aki, the house of love one another, the house of my grandmother, that I first saw lesbians. It was all my aunty Lahi's fault. Honest! Lahi and me, we are called Meadow Meade. We were named after each other. That's why I called her 'Lahi', which meant senior. And that's why sometimes I got called, 'Si'i', which meant junior. We were always in reference to each other. My full name is Meadow Kakala Lotu Fe'ofa'aki Meade. Tongans go on and on about how the more names a person has, the more important they are. Lahi explained that she gave me the fullest name because we were chief as. This is due to the fact we were both the first-born girls out of our siblings, which meant we were the leaders of our family. I didn't live in the house of fe'ofa'aki, but I was over every weekend and every school holiday, so I might as well have.

On this particular Saturday, we were upstairs, laying side-by-side on a mattress on the floor. Lahi's large frame rolled like plastic bags filled with warm water. The balcony doors were full open. Summer swayed in by the fronds of the two palm trees that stood outside like soldiers. My grandmother's two-storey brick house with wrought-iron gates was a regular Buckingham Palace, right in the middle of Mt Druitt, 2770. It was early as in the morning, when the lights of the slowly rising sun were

navy blue and stars twinkled still. Lahi was snoring next to me, competing with the cicadas. Spit bubbles dribbled from the sides of her mouth and onto the freckles of her heavy and pale cheeks. Her boyishly cropped hair, with the tips dyed blonde, stood at all ends. I was always awake in these late hours watching re-runs of *The Lion King*. That Saturday was no different.

Humming to “Hakuna Matata”, I thought about how Lahi had her own room but still chose to lie down with me on the floor just so I could watch TV all day and night. To get to Lahi’s room, I would step from our mattress towards the old IBM computer that was covered in frayed wires, boxes of Lahi’s DJ equipment and sticky syrup patches that were congealed with ants. The ants would come because Lahi and I left our Macca’s cups half-filled with Fanta lying around. We were too lazy to put them in the bin.

Then, pivoting to the front of Lahi’s bedroom door, I would see near the door handle the white marks of a wonky heart. I had tagged it with her Rexona Ocean Breeze deodorant can. I did it because I always wanted Lahi to know that I loved her, even when I was away from her on weekdays. I think my aunty knew this, which is why she never wiped my graffiti clean. Aunty Lahi’s room had a four-poster bed with sheer fabric laid over the top like the ones in Disney princess movies and a wall-to-wall window overlooking Avery Street, Mounty County. She also had a large ornate mirror with a marble benchtop, which was covered in half-used bottles of Calvin Klein – For Men. Lahi also had a walk-in closet where she kept all the suits and ties she wore for work, even though she was a girl.

Eventually, I came to suspect Lahi's style had something to do with the video I saw on her work laptop that night. The laptop I picked up whenever I was bored of Simba sooking about not wanting to be king. That night, as soon as I opened the bulky HP, a Firefox browser automatically loaded to a website called "Wetlesbians.com". For some reason, maybe just because I grew up in the hood, I had known the word 'lesbian' from a very young age but I never knew the actual definition. That was until my best friend at Whalan Public School had explained it.

'I'm Lebanese,' Sarah Chamoun reminded me one late afternoon as we waited in the empty school car park to get picked up. We were always the last ones to get collected by our over-worked parents, which was how we came to know each other.

I squinted at Sarah as she played with a golden cross around her neck. Locks of her full black curls kept getting tangled in the shiny chain. Something had been on my mind ever since we'd met: her kind was a sin in The Bible. Did she know? Should I tell her? I cleared my throat and whispered, 'Wait... what do you mean you're a lesbian?' Sarah blinked and blinked and blinked at me as if I'd thrown sand in her eyes. Then she slapped my forearm so hard a sharp sound snapped off the sandstone that made up our school buildings.

I yelped as Sarah flared her nostrils at me. 'No, you idiot! Leeebbbb-ahhhnnn-neeceezzz, as in from Leb-ah-non.' It was my turn to blink as I rubbed the patch of sensitive skin where she had struck me. What the heck was Lebanon? It sounded like somewhere in Africa, right near Pride Rock.

Sarah sighed and put her chubby arm around my bony shoulders. She smelt of salty yoghurt and Impulse Romantic Spark mist. Our lips were close enough to touch. A knot grew in my stomach, which I tried to ignore. Maybe Sarah was used to dumb Fobs and felt sorry for me. Her breath was warm like cinnamon when she said, ‘Remember it like this: *Lebanese* are hard cunts. *Lesbians* just lick cunts.’

I watched the video wide-eyed. A compiled recording of numerous nipples, fair folds and furry flaps pressed against each other in wet whimpers. I saw curly long hair between thighs. Tongue-filled kisses. Elongated backs bent low. I heard screams, low pillow-faced moans and short-breathed cries. My face was hot enough to melt itself. That knot in my lower stomach, similar to the pain of a muscle cramp, made the space between my legs quiver. I quickly shut the laptop before the knot could grow. I took a few moments to catch my breath. *Islanders don't like women who fall into other women – it was and always will be a sin.*

Even though Lahi and I shared everything together, I kept the lesbians a secret to myself. Not only because I was ashamed of her sexuality but also because I was scared of my own. *But maybe ... maybe ... it would be alright if Lahi and I went to hell ... because at least we'd still have each other.* In Tongan ways, there is no word for ‘aunt’, there are only mothers. And what daughter wouldn’t follow their mum, even if it meant we’d be pillars of salt?

Snuggling into Lahi’s water-filled plastic bag sides, I hummed “Hakuna Matata” again until I fell asleep under the yellow hues of a suburban sunrise. The light touched everything, including us.

WICKED WINGED LINER

Bohdi Byles

Public housing. Smashed windows. Cars lit on fire. Slumped. Exhausted bodies colliding with trains racing past. Local drunks with their brown paper bags in the early morning. Falling asleep to a lullaby of sirens and screaming. This is Western Sydney.

Bullied even when closeted. My first experience with a guy. Fingers sliding down abs, lips against bare skin. Confiding in friends who spread it. Like I'm a disease. Yelled at in quiet classrooms by the bully if I'll suck his dick too. I'm a queer cunt who should be burnt alive. Kill myself. Sting of a razor.

Proudly out. Working in makeup. Metallic blue eyeshadow. Wicked winged liner. *I wish I could do my makeup like you.* Leaving work. Confidence.

Faggot. Shouted. I'm alone on a shitty Penrith train. Heart thumps. Break through my fucking chest. *Will I get hit?* Moving carriages. I don't belong. Still just a queer cunt. Power walking home. Clean my face that much faster.

Return to work. Bare-faced. Dark circles. No makeup. Surviving in spite.

JUMPING THE FENCE IN MOUNTY COUNTY

Jinny-Jane

Waliwaani.

Waliwaani is from my Dhurga language of my father's people. Located on the far South Coast. Greeting word of safe travel, not hello nor goodbye. This true yarn I wanna share with you mob. Not so much a coming out story as it's more of a "jumping the fence" story.

Back in the late 80s early 90s, NRL just became a regular Friday night thing! I was a little daddy's girl and loved spending any and every chance I could with him. Friday night would roll around and we would all get ready as a family to sit up and watch the footy together. Dad's first cousin, my uncle, is Andrew Walker. For those that don't know who he is, he is one of very few, if not the only, Aboriginal dual sport Australian representative. Basically means he played two different sports for Australia! He is a big deal. Played rugby union and rugby league for Australia.

I remember it clearly, our little old house. 28 Livingstone Avenue, Dhurrak in Mounty County. Big fibro. Houso. Creamy white with brown trimming. Big four bedroom. Floorboards throughout. Long hallway, loungeroom and dining room together. Yeah, deadily big family home! Straight across the road from Dawson Public School, where I spent more time after school hours than

I did during school hours. Bless. Those were the good old days, playing rounders with the mob. Family versus family.

Yeah so, the whole family: Mum, Dad, my two brothers and one sister. We would sit up on the lounge waiting to watch our uncle play. Well here he came, running out of the sheds with his red, white and blue jersey. Played for Roosters. Bless. It was the years when footy was a real tough sport. Bring back the biff!

We were all cheering him on. This game was fucking awesome and I loved it and I am not ashamed to admit it. I was young. I was a little Rooster, cause y'know, my uncle Andrew plays for them. He was deadly. My passion for this game grew and grew season after season. Even through the phase of the Super League. *What were they thinking?* That's them confused ones. Bless 'em.

Anywho, back to the yarn. It's now the late 90s early 2000s. The era of the Mounty County anthem that was produced by Montell Jordan. Shalalah lah. This is how we do it in the Druitt. I had done all the stupid teenage things: running amuck, running around, taking on the world, thinking I was the queen of Mounty. Know that shirt or meme where it says, 'I climbed Mt Druitt and Survived'? Well Jinny-Jane created that saying. Nah true yarn. I learnt some real good life lessons. Best was when I became a teen mum. Still so close to youth, realising all things that actually matter.

So being a mum made me treasure my childhood memories and just how special footy was when it came to family bonding! I started to take my daughter to regular live games. The match between Roosters and Souths was always the game that me and daughter would have to be at. That game made the best banter

when screaming out, ‘All day sir!’ or ‘C’mon ref!’ My younger brother is still very much a die-hard rooster supporter. We got older and more mob was added to the family. My brother/cousin in-law is also a die-hard Rooster supporter! Me, him and my brother would talk strategy. Post-game matches, recruits, stupid new rules – all things footy!

2008. I realised who I really was deep down inside. I think I always knew and it came time to tell the brothers. My younger brother was always going to be the hardest to tell so I thought I would test the brother/cousin in-law first. It was at cuzzy’s house in Bateman’s Bay in his mancave while we were having a few beers.

Talking footy. I looked at him.

Me: ‘Brother, I have to let you know something. I– I– I have jumped the fence!’

Him: ‘Yeah I know, sis.’

Me: ‘No brother, I haven’t said it before. I have to tell you something?’

Him: ‘What is it, fuck ya?’

Me: ‘Bra, I jumped the fence. I now go for Souths!’

Him: ‘Aww, what the actual fuck! Well, I’ll be fucked ay. I never saw that one coming! You really have shocked me ay. Well, I’m happy for you, sis. I will always love ya. We’ll see you on the field!’

One of the hardest things I had to do, ay. Anywho, nothing has changed. He still rings me up after a Souths loss to dig into

my wounds. That grudge match between Souths and Roosters. We give it to each other on social media or we just won't answer the phone if it rings. And you know how I was worried about the younger brother? Well, he didn't even bat an eyelid. He now has two kids: a boy and a girl. My nephew, bless him, has been brainwashed by his dad I say. Cause he goes for Roosters too. My sister-in-law and her mob are all die-hard Parra supporters so I always thought my niece had no chance but to go for either of those teams, bless. I was shocked when my sister-in-law told me that my niece takes after me and goes for Souths! So now I start getting them the footy gear. You know the Indigenous round jerseys? Auntie Jin goes all out on that stuff.

I am always big on creating those family time memories. For Christmas last year I bought them both their footy season memberships. I actually had to go into Roosters headquarters to get them. Their website was stuffed but that's a whole 'nother yarn, bless. My niece got the Junior Souths membership with a whole heap of deadly stuff. Now we can go to the footy together and make some of our own deadly memories. Hopefully they don't jump the fence later down the track! Even if they do I hope it isn't as stressful for them as it was for me when I had to let the family know, 'Up Da Bunnies!'

FILIPINO-GAY-BESTIE

Mark Mariano

A green bubble dinged at the top of my phone. “am i a bad bf??? 😬”. I paused the episode of *Glee* I was illegally streaming and tapped a reply, shifting my body to the edge of my bed. “nooooo, don’t even think like that!!! 😬👊”. Tyler never texted me, not even in emergencies. I’d had a crush on him since Year 8 but it seemingly fizzled out by the time he started dating my best friend, Eunice. My heart fluttered a little, getting that text. I pictured Tyler, face pink and perplexed, on his own bed in his well-fitted footy shorts. His straightened blond side fringe and gel-slicked back-tips quivering as he tried to call Eunice for the thirty-something-eth time. Tyler gave me a hug once after I helped him with a Maths assignment. He’s the tallest guy in our year, so I was level with his armpit. I smelled like Lynx Africa for the rest of the day. I didn’t wash that shirt for two weeks. With Rachel Berry cry-belting Lea Salonga’s ‘On My Own’ mid shotty website buffer, I noticed that Tyler’s last message to me was from two years ago. He had threatened to block me on MSN after I spammed his account with, “Heyyyyyyyyyy x!”’s back in Year 9.

All this drama because we were at the Thai noodle place on the roof of Blacktown Westpoint having dinner earlier. It was all three of us. Eunice and Tyler and then me – the perpetual third wheel.

‘She doesn’t mean anything,’ Tyler mumbled. He picked at the Penrith Panthers logo on his bag, avoiding eye contact with his girlfriend. Eunice fumed, arms crossed and steaming more than the three heaped plates of Pad Thai in front of us. Her clean-cut bangs flew with every, ‘Hmph!’. Despite her petite Filipino frame, the table shook with every alternate, ‘Humfp!’. I was slurping, mid nood, when their fight started. Tyler’s ex-girlfriend had liked my Facebook check-in and Eunice had gotten the notification too. I stroked her back to calm her down in a way only a Filipino-Gay-Bestie could. She elbowed my arm off. I finished my noodles and carefully put down my fork. I held my breath in my shoulders, glancing back-and-forth between the two. Our phones pinged as more status likes rolled in. I grabbed my phone, typed in my password and deleted the check-in. I sighed in relief as I watched Tyler’s ex’s name disappear. It wasn’t that bad of a fight. There weren’t any Corelle plates being hurled at each other, nor any ‘Tarantado talaga!’s or ‘Gago ka!’s leaving Mama and Papa’s mouths like daggers. Those fights would last for hours and usually ended with the sound of slammed doors or Mama’s hatchbacked Toyota Echo screeching off. Eunice wasn’t baring her teeth like Mama does, heaving in-and-out like she had just finished a marathon. However, Tyler shrunk like Papa did, deflating. But, I didn’t have to cover my younger brother’s ears so that he wouldn’t hear the yells. There also wasn’t any crockery shards to sweep up in the aftermath.

A plump slice of chicken vibrated on the lip of my bowl as Tyler’s shaking knees tapped the bottom of the table. They had only been dating a few weeks and this was their first big fight. Tyler was the height of the back quad’s netball hoop but I had never seen

him so small. As they bickered, I tore a bit of the paper takeaway menu off and folded it into a star, puffing it up at the points. I saw it in a K-Drama somewhere that if you make a thousand of these a wish would come true. I wished Tyler was my boyfriend and I wished it was me that was seething. A red-faced Eunice who had been holding her breath for at least three minutes stormed out of the restaurant without a word. Her navy school skirt whipped her seat as she left. Tyler grabbed his bag and followed, also without a word, leaving me alone with the Pad Thai.

“She’ll get over it, I promise!! ☺”, I texted as a follow-up, along with a gif of Cristiano Ronaldo putting his thumbs up. Tyler loved anything sports related.

I squeezed through the entrance of my room – which was just my house’s dining area sanctioned off with two closets, which I had to come out of every time. Family could also peek in at any moment. But ever since my sister caught me Googling, “naked muscle guys”, it rarely happened anymore. At least my “room” was only a few steps from the kitchen. I tiptoed past Mama in the lounge. She sat on the largest of our hodge-podge second-hand couches, video chatting with her sister in the Philippines on her laptop. She kept the light off so I could only make out her face. Her head floated in the unlit sala. Mama’s crescent moon brown eyes were a sunken Skype-blue hue.

‘I don’t know what to do about him, Ate. It’s getting out of hand,’ she whispered. My heaped takeaway container hummed in the microwave as I stared at the wedding photo that hung above the sink. Mama was triumphant in all-white and the vintage grain of the photo blurred her sun spots. Papa was clean-shaven in Tito

Jun's fancy hand-me-downs, baring his yellow teeth in a smile he reserves for parent-teacher interviews. Were they so very much in love back then? What happened? Their photo sat over a new set of Corelle plates drying on the rack. I've heard Mama have this conversation about Papa a million times. But like her yelling matches, I drowned out her whispers too.

'Beeeeeeep, beeeep, beeeep!' the microwave yelled. I slid back into my room and continued my *Glee* marathon, reheated Pad Thai in tow. My heart pumped as a masculine Blaine Anderson ran in slowmo, hand-in-hand with a porcelain Kurt Hummel. Blaine's palms fit perfectly over Kurt's nimble fingers. A shiver ran throughout my chunky body. I chewed on a forkful of sweetened noodles as I envisioned a sweaty Tyler dragging my fat ass through D Block. My curly brown hair bounced in the musty hallway as flecks of Tyler's post P.E. sheen slapped my face. Tyler's blond Justin Bieberesque swoop clung to his forehead as my bosom jumped with joy. We stopped running and he leaned in, our lips pouting. 'Ping!' my phone screeched, interrupting the melodic la la la's playing in the background.

Thai-inspired grease squirmed in my stomach as I searched for my phone. My belly as wide and as slappable as a sack of rice slumped in the corner of the Filo store down Main Street. *Why would Tyler be interested in a McChunk like me?* Flashing on my phone was Eunice's single response – “☹️i hate him!! ☹️”. She had ignored my previous barrage of texts asking if she was okay. *Had to fulfil my GBF duties though, right?*

Breath heavy through my wide nostrils, I imagined telling Eunice what I actually thought. That Facebook fights were stupid and

that Tyler didn't do anything wrong. That Tyler looked better with me, even if his Panthers hoodie didn't fit over my moobs. My thumbs turned white as I slammed down on the screen's keyboard, texting the only thing a Gay-Bestie could. "i hate him 2! 🤢".

THE SUM OF US

Gum Guo

chicken feet

In the portrait of my father, his eyes are downturned.
His heart has been hurting. The hospital found nothing unusual.
He talks and eats, I listen and draw.
The dark values are most pronounced in the shadows
under his neck and in the frame of his glasses. 广州人,*
our faces tend to be more angular.

I show him what I've drawn:
of the chicken feet, he admires the likeness.
Of his face, he says I've captured the essence.
However, he didn't recognise the pickles at first.

A few weeks later, my brother complains about our father.
Why does he think I should know his heart has been hurting?
Eighteen years of distance waver between them,
a world where the word 'father' is a threat.
A dent in the wall.

We recall the value of violin lessons taught
like the snapping of an overtuned string, swift and stinging.
Wiry arms holding in the air
a shrieking note.

Walking back home now, we laugh.

* Guangzhou people

a fish shop

grandfather tells me:

‘come over, I am preparing fish.’

scritch-scratch-scratch

he scrapes the scales off, thumping it hard on the head

the scales look like sequins overturning

scritch-scratch-scratch

his arms are thick, they scale the fish,

water and scales flick off and onto the floor

sister throws another flapping white bag to him

grandfather hits fish with knife, shakes away the plastic

scritch-scratch-scratch

this one fish is more alive – it jerks

– he thumps it again

returns to scrape the scales

fish twitches, grandfather bashes the head one last time,

slices open from the neck and removes the gills,

bright red, flapping –

ah, but it's dead, dead

HARAMi MUBARAK

Tooba Anwar

Assalamu'alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh

السَّلَامُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَرَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ وَبَرَكَاتُهُ

Eid al-fitr.

Eid Mubarak lipstick stains my right cheek.

Eid Mubarak lipstick stains my left cheek.

Eid Mubarak lipstick stains my right cheek.

Three times on Eid, we embrace someone to celebrate the good day. I opened my arms. Layla stood at the door, her big smiling orange cake face welcomed me. I was sixteen when Layla got me banned from going to shisha with the cuties from the mosque. *That bitch.* 'Smoking's not for girls!' my mumma assured me. Only Abu, who worked relentless night shifts at Nation Wide Oil Pty. Ltd. was allowed to inhale carcinogens. It was the same night when Layla said to me, as we caught the T1 into the city, that being bisexual was like parking in a disabled parking spot even though I didn't have to. *Ugh, Layla! My mum knows we kissed. Don't you get tired of pretending to like boys?*

We continued to embrace with her lips printed on my face. She smelt of smokey perfume. Layla once snitched to my mum

that I had multiple boyfriends. Obviously, I didn't have any *real* bfs, but I didn't want anyone to know I liked girls. Why I kept trusting Layla, the lip-injected two-face, I had no idea. Maybe it was because we did make-out that one time...

At the soor, I reminded Layla of this bfs story, pretending to laugh. She just snapped her acrylics at me even after I had explained that because of her big gossiping, my mum had asked me if I knew all the boys at school. Not thinking twice, I had listed them all. *Ugh, Layla! Don't you get tired of pretending to like boys?* Eventually, I walked through Layla to the rest of the gatho, taking my Nikes off. Held the fabric in my hands. Carried the rubber bubbled soles with me.



I sat on yellow and orange hexagons, which made up the woven chitai. Speckles of coloured flakes clung to the backs of my feet. I placed my floppy plastic plate, piled with mountains of Biryani and Chana Dhaal, onto the ground. Shovelled the spicy rice. Regretted my lack of raita. Washed all of it down with Coke. I drank the soft drink so fast I could feel the hot bubbles climbing up my orifices and escaping. 'Ouch!' I checked the time and winced. So long until I could leave the gatho and return to my life outside. My lock screen lit up to reveal a Salman Toor painting. Toor's oil on canvas brushstrokes illuminated. Two men embraced, the tips of their fingers knotted together. I knew intimately of the longing between their hands, which was stretching out across decades of repression.

'You okay?' Taha, who I went to Questacon with when we were nine, looked at me.

‘Alhumdullilah.’ I raised my eyebrows and sighed.

Taha stared at the painting, brown eyes blazing. ‘Did you do namaaz this morning?’

With furrowed brows, I nodded.

‘Allhumdullilah. Actually, I think everyone at namaz this morning really liked my undercut.’ Taha cleared his throat, his tone etched an octave or two. ‘Mashallah! Wouldn’t shut up about it.’

‘Mashallah,’ I mumbled back. Taha’s hair *did* look slick and so much better than all the other boys in the community.

Mumma had said some funny things about Taha. That he was a bit different and couldn’t drive. It was during that conversation that Mumma also told me she used to sleep with her new shoes next to her pillow every night before Eid. She wiggled her withered brown feet at me, held in house slippers, a big grin on her warm terracotta face.

I smiled at my new Nikes resting in the corner. I loved the air bubble in the sole because it was so bouncy. If I wore them now, I could fly across the gathos seagulling sweet treats. My cheeks would be filled with Jalebi and Gulab Jamin. My lips would seal together from the sticky syrup. No more secret kisses and no more ammo for snitches. *Ugh, Layla!*

Taha asked for the time. My lock screen lit up again. Taha’s heated eyes darted around the room. ‘You like Salman Toor?’ His words pitter pattered through the white noise of the aunts and uncles.

As we discussed Toor, we stepped into the digitised painting. The dampened colours faded away and we arrived in technicolour Jannah. Warm hues of summer wind carried the scent of Hashish. We saw men entangled – embracing, rolling, swaying, yearning. Ghazals of Mughal E-Azam. ‘Jab Pyar Kiya toh darna Kya? If you’ve already loved, then what is there left to be afraid of?’ We saw women yearned – swaying, rolling, embracing, entangled. Lipstick stained on their necks. ‘Eid Mubarak Meri jaan.’

We moved past the table of dancers. Taha and I. Wandering deeper and deeper, we followed the scent of Hashish until we found towering shisha stands. We turned our heads up to see cool beams of moonlight, which pierced the clouds of smoke billowing over us. The bubbles of the hose settled. The mist in the base cleared to reveal a face.

We squinted, Taha and I. We said, ‘Salman Toor?’

Like the caterpillar from *Alice in Wonderland*, Toor huffed. ‘You know why I brought you here.’

Taha and I looked at each other. I opened my arms.

Eid Mubarak.

Eid Mubarak.

Eid Mubarak.

Toor’s wispy tendrils smiled. ‘Do you know your way back from here?’

We ran back through our collective dreamscape. Taha and I. Not before I picked a cigarette from the back of one of the table

dancer's ears and swiftly placed it in my pocket. We climbed back out through the brush strokes. I extended because Taha was in front of me. I felt his knobby fingertips close to my own. Our grip bridged and Taha pulled me through to reality.

Gifted from Toor was a new tradition. Post gatho shisha with all us weird and povos and queer kids from the mosque with bad mental health. 'Aijib O Gharib!' Finally, we had something worth celebrating.



The following Eid, we transported ourselves to Auburn. Neon lights of the sheesh and manoushe indulged. We stole stray chairs from other tables. We dragged the rusted metal legs across the concrete to make ourselves comfortable. Scruffy men sat across us. We shared a hearty laugh in unison. Hot coals swung around and were placed atop our argileh stem. Taha pulled from the pipe, so that a sickly-sweet aroma of double apple and pineapple filled our lungs. I lit the cigarette I took from the painting and dragged the smoke down my lungs. We exhaled. Allhamdullilah.

Wa alaikum assalam.

وَعَلَيْكُمُ السَّلَامُ

ELLIS, KANT, DADDY FREUD, CUNT, BESTIE

Marel Parono

Inside the little townhouse, tapping my feet.
Rolling my eyes back into the rush.
Wooden doors swing open.
Whipping myself.

Snaggle-toothed Uncle John barges,
pulling me into the bathroom and
yanking off my clothes.
He wants what is best for me;
bathes and pats me dry.

Moustached-lipped Aunty Mariam drags
me out, slapping away bitten nails that bleed at fingertips,
buttoning up my shirt.
She wants what is best for me;
zips up my pants and ties my shoelaces.

Balloon-bellied Nana pushes
me back into the bathroom and
vigorously brushes my long hair despite trickling tears.
She wants what is best for me;
places a graduation hat softly onto my head.

Bro. Albert Ellis. Remember that.

Dig my heels into the ground to nail my feet down.
I do not budge until bare-breasted Mama appears,
kissing my forehead.

Out of the townhouse, towards the big white church.
Crosses on the tip of the steeples shine blue,
yet windows stay black.
My toes itch and twitch as soon as I step inside.

Your mate Kant said emotions were pathological.

Press my palms into the arched wooden doors
of the big white church like a knot.
Uncle John, Aunty Mariam, Nana and Mama,
shove me down the aisle towards the velvet steps
of the marble altar.

All alone on the top. Back turned to
the black crucifix casting a shadow over me.
Arms itching and twitching with each passing second.

It is quiet inside the big white church.
No gossiping aunty upstairs in the choir room.
No grandpa snoring softly into his chest.

Taptaptaptaptap.
Taptaptaptaptap.
Feet echoing off the walls.
Taptaptaptaptap.

Nana thrusts the graduation hat from my head.
Aunty Mariam rips at my hair.
Uncle John tatters my sleeves.

Only then comes bald-headed Baba,
who shreds my jeans with bloody knuckles.

Mama, chest covered with my torn fabric,
watches from the arched wooden doors.
Wipes her smooth pale face with her hands,
and turns her back.

Fuck. Was Daddy Freud's Oedipus Complex a case study on me?

The first fist, sent flying by Uncle John, baptises my bones as
Baba's swollen knuckles imprint into my raised forearms as
Aunty Mariam's bejewelled acrylics claw down my shins as
Nana flays at my skin with a crown of thorns.

Burning as more flesh is pulled off,
making me a lump of El Jannah for their unholy feast.

The hell did I drink a protein shake a day for?

Fellow Wogs walk down the aisle of the big white church,
flaunting Gucci bags with their camp talons,
in heels taller than Gaga's.
Flexing Rolexes that glisten off their wrists, with the freshest of fades.
They do not come to receive the Holy Eucharist.

In his navy chinos from yd. and glossy loafers from Politix,
Joseph strides onto the velvet steps of the big white church.
His sharp-toothed chainsaw grinding through muscle fibres.
Limbs drop onto the marble altar.
I am dokhwa stew feasted upon by the 5,000.

*Aren't those the shoes I bought you, you dick-whipped
hypocritical cunt?*

With dark hair extensions down to her BBL,
Nina weaves her white coated nails past the spinous
processes of my neck.

Her fingers curl around the vertebrae as
spinal cord snaps off at the cervical region.
Nerves dangling from the sacrum.

You called me your ride or die once, bestie.

Disembowelled on the velvet steps of the big white church,
facing the altar, the black crucifix casting a shadow over me,
blood
trickling
down.

On the third day, Mama,
shrouding me in white fabric,
pulls me up from the velvet steps.
Kisses my forehead.

I drop the bloodied tunic,
onto the ground next to Mama's perfumed feet.
Naked, I limp away from her,
out of the big white church.

Back to the little townhouse. Showering.
Inside my head a little boy, all bandaged,
cloaks me in black. 'Are we gonna be enough?'

We already are but.

Ready myself for next Sunday.

CAGED

Keith Quayle

You see I know you because I see you, I am you.
So for that I do apologise.
You are my reflection and I am yours.
See the sky transforming our
existence with the slow passing of time.

And thank God, you still have a few remaining teeth.
I don't want you to bother other people
but I have bothered you
to the point of sending you to jail.

The opportunity to fulfill Dream with you so many times.
Sometimes too much, you harshly.
I'm going straight to your heart...
your soul is in such a distorted way.

Beats marked out amongst the shadows and trees.
The fall of a sunset from a tall building –
I'll allow and I'll promote.
I'll remember and I'll forget.
When we were children maybe?

Teenagers in fact. Tangled up like old cables.
In the supplied poverty to which nothing lacks.
Trudging through a sweeping swamp,
born to be a Free Man.

I'm fine mute koala. I'm fine big pensive buddy. I'm fine
child Keith.

Head up, go gently now.

SNAPSHOTS OUT WEST



Loc Nguyen (left) and Adrian Mouhajer (right)



From **Wicked Winged Liner**

RETURN TO WORK. BARE-FACED.



Seven Hills

DARK CIRCLES. NO MAKEUP. SURVIVING IN SPITE.

by **Bohdi Byles**



Cabramatta

From **Fishy Sauce**

IT HAD BEEN A WHILE SINCE I HAD TO TRY
TO IMPRESS A VIETNAMESE AUNTIE.

I FELT YOUR MOTHER'S PENCIL-SHARP EYES
LINGER ON MY HAIR.

I AUTOMATICALLY SCRATCHED THE BACK
OF MY HEAD, THE TAPERED SIDES
PRICKED MY EARS.

by **Jenny Nguyen**

From **The Transification of Goku**

MY VOICE STILL AN EASY HIGH FEMME,
BUT IT CRACKS
AND I START TO CRACK WITH IT

by **Nadia Demas**



Rhodes



Panamatta Square

HELLO. GOODBYE. TAKE CARE.

SMOKO AND KETO.

BODY ODOUR. MUSKY.

IRIS. HAZEL.

CONCRETE PAVEMENT COLOUR.

Sign: 'NO SMOKING' SIGN.

CAMPUS SECURITY

BIG AND BOISTEROUS, 'HEYyyy, MAN!'

WE ARE CLOSE FRIENDS.

I KNOW YOU DON'T THINK SO.

MINGLING. BROTHERS. 'HELLO JIMMY-'.
 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 11. 12. 13. 14. 15. 16. 17. 18. 19. 20. 21. 22. 23. 24. 25. 26. 27. 28. 29. 30. 31. 32. 33. 34. 35. 36. 37. 38. 39. 40. 41. 42. 43. 44. 45. 46. 47. 48. 49. 50. 51. 52. 53. 54. 55. 56. 57. 58. 59. 60. 61. 62. 63. 64. 65. 66. 67. 68. 69. 70. 71. 72. 73. 74. 75. 76. 77. 78. 79. 80. 81. 82. 83. 84. 85. 86. 87. 88. 89. 90. 91. 92. 93. 94. 95. 96. 97. 98. 99. 100.

From **Ellis, Kant, Daddy Freud, Cunt, Bestie**

OUT OF THE TOWNHOUSE,
TOWARDS THE BIG WHITE CHURCH.

CROSSES ON THE TIP
OF THE STEEPLES SHINE BLUE,
YET WINDOWS STAY BLACK.

by **Marel Parono**



Greenfield Park



Panhamatta Park

From **Cherry Chapstick**

PUTTING ON MY NEWLY PURCHASED CHERRY
CHAPSTICK AND RECREATING MY HAIR INTO
A LITTLE POOF LIKE I SAW KATY DO IN
GIRLFRIEND'S NOVEMBER 2008 ISSUE.

HOT OR NOT SECTION.

DEFS HOT.

by **Sarah Carroll**

From **Harami Mubarak**

WE STEPPED INTO THE DIGITISED PAINTING.
THE DAMPENED COLOURS FADED AWAY
AND WE ARRIVED IN TECHNICOLOUR JANNAH.

by **Tooba Anwar**





Cabramatta

From **Dear Brother**

A FULL BAG OF ROCK SUGAR.
OUR PARENTS CARRIED US THROUGH JUNGLES.

by **Gatsby Lim**

'SHALL WE GO FOR A WALK
IN THE PARK?' SAID VISHNU
HESITANTLY, GIVING THE IMPRESSION
THIS WAS HIS FIRST ATTEMPT
AT SUCH A THING.



PanMatta Park



Ermington

66

From **A Gaymer's Prayer**

UNDER THE TiNG TiNG TiNG OF THE MANTRA
I WHISPERED, 'O MERCIFUL KUAN Yin!
THANK YOU FOR ALL THE LIFE EXPERIENCES
YOU HAVE TAKEN ME THROUGH SO FAR.'

by **Lei Tan**

From **Right Near Pride Rock**

IN TONGAN WAYS, THERE IS NO WORD FOR
'AUNT', THERE ARE ONLY MOTHERS. AND WHAT
DAUGHTER WOULDN'T FOLLOW THEIR MUM,
EVEN IF IT MEANT WE'D BE PILLARS OF SALT?

by **Winnie Dunn**



From **12 learnings of queer western sydney**

WE CREATURES OF THE BORDERLANDS
WE QUEER THE BOUNDARY LINES
SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OF SHARED
EVERYWHERE HERE IN THIS PLACE
OF SPRAWLING EDGE
LOVING COMMUNITY SINGING UP
PLACE WHERE CARE HAS ALWAYS BEEN
PLACE WHERE QUEER HAS ALWAYS BEEN

by **Jazz Money**

DEEP WATER PARFUM

George Haddad

A man in a cardigan is pushing a fox terrier in a pram along the track at that cruising spot in Milperra. At first, I think he mustn't have realised where he has ventured but as he passes, I see a fluoro orange jockstrap peeping out from underneath the cardigan, his shorts hanging lazily on the pram. The dog strains its neck to snarl at me. My AirPods are in and Azealia is about to hit a crescendo. I look up through the leaves at the messy sky and beg for some good dick to appear. Then I practice voguing down the dirt path towards the creek where someone has built a makeshift bed from a pallet and a tarp. It has been caked in mud since the floods. I decide not to death drop onto it. It's quiet because of school holidays and so the dads have to entertain their kids instead of themselves.

I spot the little Chinese grandfather who is always here. I like to think of him as the Western Sydney cruising nymph even though I have seen him at La Perouse too, trekking through the brush after the twinks in tacky swim trunks. I pack my AirPods and walk over to him because I haven't spoken to anyone all day.

‘Quiet today.’

‘Yes, yes, school holiday,’ he says through a laugh. He reaches over and rubs my chest; the yellow mesh singlet guiding clumps of my hair in and out of its holes.

‘I see you in university in Parramatta.’

It’s not funny but he’s laughing again.

‘Yeah? What were you doing there?’

‘Gardener.’

The mention of uni reminds me of an assignment due tomorrow for my statistics class which I’ve failed once before. I take his hand off me and walk to the other section further from the river. The place you go if you’re in a hurry, where you can’t be fussy about privacy.

I smell his cologne before I see him standing next to the tree that if you sit in it, puts your face at waist height. Tall, black skinny jeans, grey linen shirt, brown loafers. The hair has highlights. I would usually go there for the sake of it, but I have a rule with cologne. Basically, it repulses me, and you can never get it off your skin and so it makes it harder to forget about the mediocre hook-up afterwards. I imagine him at Myer in the city, trying on the scents with one of his clone friends in tow, going to brunch, catching the lift up to his desk on level twenty-three. I angle my torso away from his as I pass by on the track. He grabs my arm.

‘What’s the rush?’ His voice is smoother than I expected.

‘Just trying not to suffocate.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘Don’t worry about it.’

‘Where you from?’

‘Next question.’

‘Where do you live?’

I feel compelled to lie. ‘Newtown.’

‘Oh so you’re one of those gays.’

‘What do you mean by one of those gays?’

‘Like you’re alternative, you go to The Imperial.’

‘The Imperial? That’s pretty much a straight pub now. Where do you live?’

‘Potts Point.’

‘And you can survive this far out of your habitat?’

‘Very funny, mister. I grew up in Milperra actually.’

‘Yeah, I’m not a *mister*.’

‘So what are you into?’

I check my phone. The screen is brighter in the fading day. There are no notifications. ‘I’ve gotta go.’

On the track towards the car park, I see doggy pram man again and he’s put his shorts back on thankfully. A couple of years ago the park made the news because a mum from the nearby playground had seen a bunch of used condoms and a bottle of lube in the bushes which meant cops started patrolling and the beat became real slow. Luckily it picked back up again during lockdown and has kept a steady tempo since. The thing with the mum is what was she even doing in the bushes? The playground is way off.

In the car park, there is a convertible silver Audi with the top down parked next to my Yaris. I start the engine without getting in. There's no one around. I lean over into the Audi and pop open the glovebox. The half-full bottle of cologne winks at me. The label says "Sauvage by Dior". Clearly it inspired the guy to go wild, just not enough to lose the linen shirt and loafers. Sitting beside the bottle is a cola flavoured vape. I take both and click the glovebox shut. I vape as I walk away from the cars, holding the cologne in the palm of my hand ceremonially. It clunks hard against the bottom of the empty bin outside the toilet block.

A GAYMER'S PRAYER

Lei Tan

*“My wish is not for karma to find you.
My wish is that you find yourself before
you begin to reap what you sowed.”*

– Pierre Alex Jeanty

Chinese New Year. For as long as I have known him, my last boyfriend's family observed prayers on both the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month. He lit the red candles on the sacrificial altar. It was originally a cabinet that his father modified at a Lebanese-run carpentry factory he worked for in Bankstown. The dim lights flickered in this tired old public housing home he shared with his family near Birrong station. Just a few inches away, facing the ancestors' memorial tablets and a Kuan Yin statue (The Chinese translation of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion who saves unhappy beings on earth), he lit a few dark green incense sticks with one of the candles. The strong scent of sandalwood made him sneeze loudly as it diffused. His mother often said the perfumed smoke reminded her of her old family home in Hanoi. Her son never set foot in Vietnam. But he told me he wanted to visit. On a cushion in front of the altar, he knelt and closed his eyes. I watched as he put his strong palms together in front of his muscular chest. The prayers my ex had memorised for the last thirty something years slipped out of his

cracked thick lips without any effort: ‘All ancestors! O Merciful Kuan Yin! Bless my family with health and safety. Let wealth roll into our home and let everything go wel–’.

His mother chimed in from the kitchen suddenly. ‘Ask your middle brother again if he can bring the wife here tonight. And remind your baby brother to get the groceries after work!’ She spoke in Cantonese. I rarely heard her speak in Vietnamese. They were proud that their ancestors were actually from the Canton area anyway.

‘And let everything go well!’ Having finished the first prayer, my last boyfriend grunted back loudly, enough to let his mother know he heard her. ‘O Merciful and Compassionate Kuan Yin! Thank you for your blessing of a precious baby boy on the way to my brother and sister-in-law. More to come for the family if possible.’

My stomach churned. Maybe I was the reason that he could not fulfill his family responsibility as the oldest son? My own family never prayed to Kuan Yin or even had an altar at home. Those kinds of traditions all have been abandoned after Chairman Mao’s cultural revolution. Watching my last boyfriend praying always made me feel he was a better person than me. That was the last time I saw him praying in person.



‘A simple person with simple joys in life.’ My last boyfriend said that to me on our first date ten years ago. Wearing a belt with a big Gucci buckle, he insisted on being dropped off at the station instead of his public housing home. For so many years,

everyone I knew had been telling me not to be picky on small things with a real-life Ned Flanders like him. I would try my best to follow their advice against my Virgo instincts. Gradually, I found myself becoming a simple person too.

After those ten years, one day my brain went blank. His smart watch somehow unlocked his phone, which was always on silent mode and never left his sight. It was vibrating endlessly on the table while he was having a shower. “I really love seeing you. “I like you very much.” Hundreds of messages a day for years between him and a guy with a Korean name. When the numbness wore off, packs of horses took over my skull and kept running around aimlessly inside of my head. Their hooves hit my nerves in time with some hysterical music from those gaming machines when a big win was hit... ching ching ching!

‘It is like catch-me-if-you-can kind of excitement. A breakthrough to the next level of a chasing game.’ I could tell it was a big relief for him to confess while I suffered. One big admission and his guilt was cleared. *Cheating? All because of video games that I grew out of after high school?* For a while, I blamed myself. I had made my game way too easy for him to reach the final level. I hadn’t validated him enough by giving him golden coins with some happy jingle playing in the background to keep him interested... bling bling bling!

‘My therapist says that the pussy is the direct connection to the soul for girls. I don’t want my arse to be the only way for men to connect to my spirit.’ *At least he was trying to change?* And for that I was still hanging there wishing for a miracle. But then he continued: ‘I don’t just cut people off from my life. You should

demonstrate that you can still trust me by letting me keep the Korean guy as a friend.’ Womp womp womp! Thinking about how my ex always kept piles and piles of video games in his cluttered bedroom, I realised I was just another in a stack of used toys.

I started chatting with other Asian guys on dating apps after the breakup. “I have to be honest with you, I had sex with your ex about seven or eight years ago,” and “Your ex had sex with me about six years ago,” and “Your ex said he’s single and just looking for fun after we had sex.” From Parramatta, Fairfield, Auburn. Catch. Collect. Catch. Collect. He’d been playing *Pokémon Go* in Western Sydney all the time I had been with him! Eventually, I started to believe there was a Kuan Yin. She’s trying to save me by revealing the truth, even without my praying.



A few weeks ago, I bumped into my ex on a busy street at Lidcombe. He was going out for dinner with the last fling I found out on the phone. A young and K-Pop Asian guy. He could have been me, only ten years younger. I glared at my ex’s pimpled face. Cheeks. Thin and dull. Shrunken in half. His black hair was dry, thinning and greyish. His eye sockets were hollow behind thick glasses. ‘Trying to move on from the past by exploring myself these days,’ he murmured upon seeing me, shifting slightly behind his fling.

I couldn’t help but sneer through my nose as I said, ‘Ever got any answers for your prayers?’ Later that night, I saw him online on Grindr. I guess his dinner reunion with that fling didn’t go as well as he hoped.



Chinese New Year again. At Nan Tian temple down in Wollongong by myself. I found it was not as busy as I expected due to the Covid requirement, which explained that I had to make an appointment online before visiting. There was no smoke in this spacious prayer hall, only a light serene Buddhist mantra playing on a loop. I knelt on the long red cushion bench alone, facing the big Kuan Yin statues in front of me. Placed my tiring palms from the long drive together in front of my thin chest. As soon as I closed my eyes, I couldn't help but think about the way my last boyfriend used to pray.

In this temple, I imagined his prayers to Kuan Yin being interrupted by his phone vibrating in his pocket. A text from this new fling. I imagined that the text would say something like, "Hi babe I kinda short for the stuff this week. Can U help pls? I'll fuck you so high for the whole night tonight until U beg me to stop, ya?"

I imagined my ex's pimply thin face turning a little red. He'd be short of breath, thinking about the high and the sex. He'd text back quickly with his shivering fingers, "will bring some \$\$ over tonight. Can't wait...xx".

Would his mother still ask him in Cantonese, 'That was a long pray. Must be a nice one?' Would he still grab some tissue to wipe clean his running nose from the incense smoke like before?

Perhaps I could imagine all this because I was the only few lovers that ever visited his public housing home in Birrong. Under the ting ting ting of the mantra I whispered, 'O Merciful Kuan Yin! Thank you for all the life experiences you have taken me through so far. Please give my ex enough strength to face his own path and find his way home.'

THE PRODIGAL'S BUM

Daniel Nour

‘Lust of the eyes! Lust of the flesh! Pride of life!’ The dire words are emblazoned in comic sans for tonight’s church meeting PowerPoint presentation. Mark, the withered pastor, slams his palms against each other so hard that the weedy strands of his comb-over tremble across his egg-shaped head. Behind him in the decrepit Bayside Gospel Chapel, a projector screen spells out the title: “Devil in the Media”. In the draughty room, with its white walls and yellow stackable chairs, I sit alongside thirty Egyptians. We watch with dead eyes as Mark decries in a gruff tone, ‘When we live lives of sin and profligacy, God punishes us so that we may know his mercy better and return with more gratitude!’

Then Mark plays us a mashup of iniquity. Janet Jackson pumping her breasts in “Rhythm Nation”. Freddy Kreuger slashing a schoolgirl in *Nightmare on Elm Street*. A Lacoste commercial where two White men kiss on the lips after their “morning after” rush out of the house. Mark’s eyebrows are spread as high and wide as a parted Red Sea. ‘Do you see how dirty it is out there? See how sinful this worldly culture is?’ I shudder. Between Mark’s risen brows I am set adrift. The sea is dark and cold. Perhaps a whale will swallow me up.

This is when Rebecca (my second cousin), who rejected me when I asked her out at the Easter camp, raises her hand.

Her acrylics clack against each other as she asks in a smooth voice, ‘Pastor Mark, where do sexual diseases come from?’ I roll my eyes. *This bitch thinks she can seduce King David.*

With bulging pupils, Mark answers abruptly. ‘The punishment for gay sex is AIDS!’ He is so certain he states it as fact. Other facts include: Freddy Kreuger does not harm Christian children. Janet Jackson is a sinner. HIV infects every sodomised butthole.

When the meeting ends, I linger for a bit at the tea table. It is covered with complimentary Original Glazed Krispy Kreme doughnuts and small red Gideon pocket bibles. I talk to Alex, the only Greek at our church. As we discuss the nature of sin, I stare at his full beard with specks of brown. If only I had asked Alex out at the Easter camp instead.

Such lust reminds me of the time my sister saw my Google search history when I was ten. Ashamed, I blurted out, ‘Would Satan look like two men in a hammock?’

Alex just pats me on the shoulder, ‘You need some help, bro.’



When I get home, there’s a familiar quiver in my jeans. I go to the downstairs bathroom cabinet to get the bottle of Palmolive shea butter hand cream and tear open a new box of Aldi-brand tissues. I grab the small hand towel I keep in my room for occasions like these. After use, I will tuck it at the bottom of the washing basket in the hope that Mum will not scrutinise it too closely. I shut my blinds to make sure Rex, our overweight ten-year-old Boxer, doesn’t see my iniquities. I cover the lounge in a large beach towel and slowly lift my bulky HP laptop. I Google my

usual go-to: *The Farmer's Son*. To see it, I must generate several fake email accounts and watch the film in fifteen-minute trial segments through a website called "Falcon Entertainment". I reach for the hand cream and tissues, which releases the scent of vanilla. A reel of endorsements opens the porno. My favourite is "The legendary topman, Jason Adonis, bottoms for the first time in his career!" Jason. Adonis. A true god. He lowers to his knees to take Erik Rhodes's magnificent dick up to the hilt.

This is the scene I love most: It's a sunny day on a random Kentucky farmhouse. Erik and Jason are shirtless, showing off their shredded physiques. They survey the engine of a broken-down truck. Erik, a replica of Narcissus, says, 'You need some help cleaning that shaft, bro? Looks like you could use a hand... or maybe something else.'

The sun dapples through the fine branches of the poplars, illuminating Jason's broad shoulders. He is glistening in chemically enhanced bronzed skin. Protruding from Adonis' Levi's is a burgeoning bubble butt. In a deep voice, Adonis replies, 'Sure bro. I've never looked in this engine before.'

Erik rubs the crotch of his own Levi jeans as he states, 'I wasn't talking about the truck.'

As they stare into each other's eyes for a prolonged period, I recognise that if Aphrodite couldn't resist Adonis, neither can I. In a flash, Erik turns his cap backwards and unzips Jason's jeans. Conveniently, he is wearing no underwear. I gasp when Erik grabs the base of Jason's uncut penis, which, like his nuts, is completely hairless. Erik puts the flaccid shaft in his pink mouth. Jason's irises roll back as his dick hardens. The broken

truck sits neglected by the roadside while I furiously pump my own stick shift.



At next week's meeting, Pastor Mark pulls me aside. His balding head and gawky posture make me feel bloated. The secret feeling of needing to chuck a shit seizes my bowels as Mark mumbles, 'Danny, I sense you are struggling.'

Shifting from foot-to-foot, a pleading tone escapes me. 'Not at all, my brother in Christ. I am as resolute in the Lord as ever.'

Mark picks the lint from the elbow patches of his cardigan before continuing. His breath smells like ham. 'I am told Rebecca cannot see a potential union with you because ... because ... she does not think you capable. In fact, she believes you would be unable to wife any woman.'

With big eyes and mouth agape, I say, 'Brother, that's simply not true!' I wonder if marrying my second cousin would be less sinful than taking it up the arse.

I leave Bayside Gospel Chapel thinking of the fifteenth chapter of Luke in the Bible. It tells the story of a son who leaves his father's farm so that he can live a life of lasciviousness and waste – burning up his dad's money on sex.



Several Addictions Anonymous meetings in Granville. A tirade of conversion therapy sessions in Surry Hills. All over Sydney, for most of my life, I was forced to live in gay panic. Now, in my early thirties, it is no wonder I have to see Steve, my

psychologist, twice a week. Steve is a burly and large man with the friendly warmth of a cartoon bear. He has been scratching at his blond moustache for the last two years. In that time, Steve has desperately tried to counsel me through religious trauma, sexual shame and internalised homophobia.

Steve's tone is soft. His therapy room is dotted about with phallic objects. At first, I thought his side table was lined with a row of Easter Island stone heads but then I realised they were just penises. The room next door to his office is called "Sensual Touch Therapy". All of it just reminds me of the conservative protest phrase: "It's Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve". At the end of our session, Steve twirls his moustache and recommends the following, 'Go back to simple steps. Light a candle and make it nice. Most importantly, enjoy yourself!'

Determined to make it work, I return to my two-bedroom apartment in Bankstown with a plan. I take out my MacBook and chuck it onto my bed. I change into boxer shorts, ignite a jasmine scented wick, turn on my saltrock lamp, turn off safe search. I type "cute gay sex scene" into Google. A second passes. The Chrome wheel turns. Then a filthy torrent like the cascade of brimstone that destroys Sodom. A stream of every conceivable sex category: Old & Young. Daddy. Crossdresser. Big Cock. Bareback. Twink. Asian. Massage. Vintage. Blowjob. Anal. BDSM. Blowjob. Bukkake. Creampie. Cum Tribute. Cumshot. Fetish. Fisting. Arab. African. European. Interracial. Jewish. Chubby. Big Cock. Small Cock. Muscular. And for some reason, Straight. I shut my MacBook abruptly and recite Psalms 23 twenty-three times. But Steve said I needed to get past my immediate trauma response, which manifests itself into Bible verses. After a while, I huff,

knowing what I must do. Google blinks before me again, this time an open invitation. My fingers begin tapping at the keyboard like the tablets of stone miraculously drawn by the hand of God upon Mount Sinai. A summery Kentucky blinks before me as I press “Enter” on the phrase: “Erik Rhodes fucks Jason Adonis.”

THE TRANSIFICATION OF GOKU

Nadia Demas

**If I like *Pokémon* more,
can I still be Goku when I'm older?**

Three of us. All under ten. Dressed to our mothers' tastes. Clashing colours and Kmart canvas shoes. Prayers drone through the loudspeaker in Arabic and Coptic. We weaved through plastic folding chairs, past floodlights and a shepherd's watchful eye. We went down between the demountable bathrooms.

'Do you watch *Dragon Ball Z*?' Youssef took charge. All that practice as soccer captain made it so easy for him.

'Yeah. It was so cool how Goku beat up Ginyu, right?'

'Yeah! Or when Ginyu turned into that frog?' Bishoy mumbled, wiping his broken nose on his sleeve.

Roles got dealt out. Sticks chosen and christened. We've found our game. Bishoy calls dibs on Ginyu because he's obsessed with the poses. *It's all idol worship, or maybe idolatry?* Our Sunday school teacher told us that. Hardly heavier than a bag of rice, I was condemned to being Bulma, but bragged my way back up to Gohan. Another ill-fitting hand-me-down.

'I could totally be Goku though. I'm just letting you because.'

I hadn't noticed my own body back then. Too busy with a Gameboy. Ran through the dark cackling Kamehameha louder than the Ameen's. When the sticks hit together it felt like *Ultra Instinct*. The force made my arms shudder. When we left they were bruised all over.

'And I hit him so hard then I did the thing just like Goku where he moves like super-fast and gets behind the bad guys.'

Dad just listened as we drove home. At every red light, he patted sweat from his brow, the top of his head, behind his glasses. He wanted to make sure I won. Or at least showed them how tough I was.

**If we both wanna be Goku,
will we still be friends after high school?**

Mac Fields High wouldn't let me bring a DS. We were too old to play wrestle, so we settled for word games. We sat three to a bench meant for two but my tiny waistline made it work. I'm pinned between arms thicker than my legs. They were so much bigger than I was. They could probably feel me blushing across the table. My voice was an easy high femme. But it cracked and I started to crack with it.

'You guys remember when we played *Dragon Ball* in the morning?'

'I loved that shit.' Tawney's voice was deep enough to be his dad's. *He would hate me for saying it.*

'Bro, imagine you could actually go Super Saiyan though. Who would you fight?'

The question went down easy with a diet of 4Chan and testosterone. The edgier we got the better. Middle Eastern wit was genetic.

‘Nah bro, if I could do that shit, I’d fight anyone, I’d fuck anyone, wallahi you couldn’t stop me.’

‘Ah yeah? Can’t even look Sara in the eye but you’re gonna fuck everyone?’

I slapped him and watched as his face changed. He grabbed me by the collar and pulled me halfway over the table, close enough that I could see where his beard had started growing. Desires itched under my white polo. I grabbed his wrist to pull it off, but it wouldn’t budge. It was thick and firm in my hand. He yanked me even closer, close enough that I could see the blood vessels in his eyes. We held eye contact. For a moment the whole playground was quiet. Then the laughter started.

‘Bro relax. You slap like a bitch.’

‘I didn’t go Super Saiyan tho, aye? Nah but for real, you know that I’d fuck anyone if I was.’

I risked the question I kept coming to in the dark. ‘What do you think it feels like for the girl though?’

**If we spent all week sexting,
will you ask me out before my lecture ends?**

Tinder was PictoChat for grownups, but the marks lasted longer. There were bruises on my neck, along the bone of my hip, on the softest parts of my thigh. Wherever the flesh was soft enough to bite. Somewhere through the night I had lost a piercing to

Robin's teeth. I had scratches where no one I've brought here had thought to leave them. Turned out there was more to a body than just dick. They sat me down, made sure I caught my breath, gave me some water. There was no need for *Dragon Balls* to bring me back this time. I didn't mind losing when it felt like that.

'It's fucking freezing out here.'

The oval was close enough to both of us for regular visits, and it was always deserted. They watched me get dressed. There was no rush to get warm.

'You look gorgeous though.'

'Don't think anyone's made me cum like that before.'

'You didn't really strike me as a top, so.'

'I could top if you wanted. I just let you because--' They kissed me and smiled. There was no need to pretend.

Wandered out onto the oval to look at the stars together. All those newly marked places made up a body I recognised. My bruises felt like they were cracking where Robin's teeth had sunk in. I could pull them open and come out immaterial. They laid me on their chest, I fit so easily into the crook of their shoulder. Traced the line of their jaw and thought about how our bodies only made sense here. The wet grass mixed with the day's sweat, acrid and sweet and familiar. They ran a hand through my hair, gently this time, and we traded stories of how we got here.

CHERRY CHAPSTICK

Sarah Carroll

Magazine cut-outs are splattered all over the floor. I'm rearranging my poster wall. Katy's the largest and centre stage – an A3 fold out from *Dolly Magazine* I proudly purchased with my pocket money. She's surrounded by smaller glossy pages of herself, blue hair, booty shorts, sparkly heels. In the one image, Katy is lying down on a beach chair dressed in pin-up attire. A shirt with red kisses and cherries paired with bright blue high waisted shorts. She is holding a giant heart shaped lollipop and has a cheeky smile on her face. Whenever I see it, I smile big, with all my crooked incisors. In another image, Katy is winking and sitting in a larger-than-life banana. Whenever I see this, I also wink.

Next to Katy are some smaller cut-outs of Zac Efron from *High School Musical 2*. In the middle of my poster wall is my trophy shelf; netball, singing, a snow globe but the Fijian version. When I shake it, the dolphins inside come alive, diving in-and-out of each other through the bright blue water. I try to land them on the sunny plastic island. There's also a stack of magazines with Katy Perry on the cover. *Total Girl*, *Girlfriend*, *Teen Vogue*. Next to that a pile of books, *The Twilight Saga*. I'm Team Bella. I'll learn later in life what that means.

Peeking into the computer room, I can hear my palangi dad shouting at the footy as my mum cooks tuna curry and cassava.

The salty scent wafts through the house. I think about putting tomato sauce all over it. Yum as. Starting up the computer. Sitting. Waiting. Thinking about the dread of school on Monday, where the salt of tuna cassava is long gone. I log in. Password: midnight101. User: carroll. Connecting to the dial-up modem, which we still have because we live in St Marys, 2760. There's a diagram of two computers connecting via a mini globe of the world. The screen saver is just a bright blue. There's lots of folders of my mum's research for her thesis. She's becoming a Doctor of Theology. I don't know what that is but it sounds really smart. There's another folder: Family Fotos. Another folder: Sarahz Stuff. I log into YouTube. My email address is: wakingupinvegasx@hotmail.com. My password is: KProcks101#.

Katy Perry has just released a new music video for "I Kissed a Girl". It's already in the number one spot. I hum the lyrics as the video loads. Hmm-hmm-hm-hm-hm-hm-mmmhh. Putting on my newly purchased Cherry ChapStick and recreating my hair into a little poof like I saw Katy do in *Girlfriend's* November 2008 issue. Hot or Not section. Defs hot.

Katy Perry's real name is Katheryn Elizabeth Hudson. She was born on the 25th of October, 1984 in Santa Barbara, California. Her cat's name is Kitty Purry – that's actually where the term Katycats came from. She has created two perfumes, Meow and Purr, inspired by her cats. I have both 100ml and travel size. She is one of three siblings. The youngest. Her parents are Pentecostal ministers. She wasn't allowed to eat devilled eggs. She has dyed her hair so many colours. Blue, pink, black, blonde and even purple. She was once suspended from school for humping a tree.

Someone on the internet posted a photo of her school report on Twitter. And it said, “Katy and other students were in an off-limits area practising a skit. Katy pretended that a tree was Tom Cruise and began making sexual motions.”

The more I watch, the more I begin to feel a sensation downstairs and butterflies in my stomach. I can’t stop looking at her dress, the way the video pans up her legs from her white heels with two diamonds on the toe. Her Bella-like porcelain skin. The Jesus tattoo on her left wrist. The way she moves her arms. Her blue irises and how her left eye is a wonk eye. The way her boobs sit perfectly in that tight fitting top, one being slightly more prominent than the other. The light colour of blush. Her hairless upper lip. Her lips. Her bottom teeth that are slightly crooked because she ate too much candy when she was younger and couldn’t afford the dentist. The way her nose crinkles. The lines I can trace when she smiles. Longing to know what the taste of her Cherry ChapStick is...

The door slams open. ‘Bubsy, Lemle ā tē.’

Mum. Shit. Fuck. Dinner. Close YouTube.

CHILLIN' MHiNiLLiN'

Andrew Lac

Good times

Western. Sydney. University. Level 6. Downstairs Latte. Chilling. *The Iliad*. Buddhism. Nietzsche. Hermaphrodite. Wie geht es dir? Reading. Class. Chess. Hello. Goodbye. Take care. Smoko and keto. Body odour. Musky. Iris. Hazel. Concrete pavement colour. Sign: 'No smoking' sign. Campus security big and boisterous, 'Heyyyy, man!' We are close friends. I know you don't think so. Mingling. Brothers. 'Hello Jimmy—'.

Panic at the Disco

Birthday. Pad Thai. Tom Yum. Gaysian friends. Uni friends. Smoking again. Vodka. Mother Russia. You're good at telling stories. Better than me. Oxford Street. Traffic light. Vomit in gutter. Disco glitter. Palms. We're downstairs. *Woah!* Cher. More friends. Strangers. Ass grab. 'What'ya?' Dismissed. Black out.

What's + up?

WSU. Reception. Your thick brows knitted. Transgender toilets. Table. Tennis. Swimming. You spoke about these things. Were you uncomfortable? Silence between. Thali. Viet. Banh Mi. Börek. Serbian. Ćevapi. Crusts stuck on the roof of my tongue. Sober. Bruh.

Air-conditioned tutorial. Level three + three. Your thick brows high-risen. No sneezing. OK. 1.5 metres away. Why? You said I had germs, with your thick brows jumbled. Reasons? Family. Brother. Baba. Covid? Germaphobia? Coughing. Homophobia? Laughing. Yes + no. Fuming. Slander. Downstairs lobby. Boisterous big security, 'Break it off you two!'

420 bro

Four. Hours. On call. Two weeks. At home. Zero fucks. 4:10:56. Wet socks. Rain. Home. Drama. Korean. Plastic on the TV remote. Start to kitchen. Mum. Voice squeaky. 'Con oi con oi con oi – going to wash the dishes? Con oi con oi con oi – what about lawn mowing?' You said you'll hang up phone. Good-bye. My thin brows contorted. Corner of my eye. I notice Mum noticing. Bowl of sliced oranges. Well-ripened. Well-earned. Mum. Voice softly. 'Con có nghe không, ha? My kids don't thương me. You're always out. You're always late.' Disconnected. Rooftop. Rain droplets. Mum. Voice droning. 'Có nghe không, ha?' Sulking. Whatever. Good gone. iPhone in hand. Trembling.

Pathei-mathos (Learning through suffering)

D&M. Tâm sự. Thali says. Toxic. Better off. Think positive. Test positive. Get over it. Move on. Who gives me advice? Mum. Friends. Tinder match. Scripts. Our bedfellows. Hector. Hecuba. Philosophia. Hurt. Strength. Reincarnation. I miss you. *Talk to me, Tony*. Return to Level 6 again. A philosophy seminar. You are there too, with thick brows still. Hide. No naming. No soy latte. No good-bye.

Again. Mum. Squawky voice rushed. Calling home. ‘Hold on a sec, I need to talk to my Australian son ... con oi con, how come you don’t answer the phone? Your sister isn’t answering. You call her?’ Not a request. But she cooks me food all the time. Even when I don’t ask for it. Leftover noodle soup from last week. Bún riêu on the reheated stove top. Plastic on the fridge handle. Papaya seeds in the used Woollies bag. In season. Mum. Again. Slow voice reaching for me. ‘Con oi. Help me stack the fruit at temple on Saturday, can you?’ Bonding. A duty of children.

A kind gesture is–

Revisiting. Level 6. Reading. Buddhism. Messaged. Received. Soy latte again. Seen. A balancing of mandarins.

MUNDA

Gary Paramanathan

Between Instagram and Grindr, Vishnu was oscillating. Sometimes the two social apps blurred into one. He would double tap a square photo, only to realise he was on the wrong platform. There were no two-dimensional red hearts to give away on Grindr, only eggplants and peaches. Vishnu's nineteen-year-old legs were hanging off the edge of the single bed. Sunday afternoon drifted to evening as lawns and gardens received the weekly drenching. BBQs fired up and LG flat screens flickered on. In this suburban hum, Vishnu was organising a hook-up for the night.

The self-description Vishnu provided on the apps did not match his reality. Vishnu's heels flicked at the bedsheets. The wooden frame of his bed, similar to the colour of his skin, was too small. Vishnu's overused pillow, once blemished with Lynx, was now laced with layers of YSL cologne. The shoebox of a room gave the impression of a giant in a solitary cell. The vast distance between his preferred places of frequenting and his place of residence was ever more acute in this moment, as he trolled through the grid of faceless abs, thighs, stretched skin and tattoos.

“Brown boy grew up in Sydney, like good aesthetics and conversation. Looking for dates, mates and yeah, a bit of fun, read Vishnu's Grindr profile. “Come at me with good conversations and nudes, please.”

His Insta bio read, “Western Sydney Royalty. BLM. #brownboybrilliance.”

Just like his Grindr grid, Insta’s grid was full of half-naked men. In this alternate screen-universe, no matter how hard Vishnu tried to cultivate a complex identity, the feed correctly labelled him as a horny teenager. Always too shy to message people first, Vishnu would instead click on the flame button on Grindr, a common way of letting someone know you find them attractive and getting them to do the work of messaging you in return. Rarely did the flames he sent out come back, most died out in the virtual wilderness of anonymous bodies. He pulled his legs in so they would be under the quilt. It was a cool night.

Ding!

“Indian guy. Pure top. Looking for fun. Can’t host. NPNC, read the profile.

No Pic No Chat? Vishnu thought this was an audacious demand for someone who didn’t have photos listed themselves. *Beggars can’t be choosers*, thought Vishnu, studying his limited options. Vishnu and IndTop exchanged brief messages, trying to ascertain what they both wanted.

IndTop: “I’m discreet, bro, and horny.”

Fuck I hate the word, bro, thought Vishnu.

Vishnu: “Yeah me too.”

As Vishnu got dressed for his hookup, he mulled over how many of these casual exchanges were with Indian men. There was a new wave of brown men who had recently settled in Parramatta.

Their discreet booty calls always came with conditions. None of the fresh off the boat, aka fob men, had a home of their own. They were shackled up with their family or stacked up in a student household. Privacy and space for intimacy was unheard of. Vishnu had no antidote to this either. He lived with his parents. Tonight Vishnu and IndTop were meeting at Westmead station.

Vishnu caught the T2 from the newly renovated Pendle Hill station and checked his phone once again.

IndTop: “Where are you from?”

IndTop identified himself as Punjabi. Vishnu did not speak a word of Punjabi or Hindi, nor Marathi or Gujarati for that matter. He could speak Tamil and mumble a few words in Sinhalese but his domain was English. He knew one word.

Vishnu: “Munda.” It was Punjabi for “boy”.

IndTop: “K.”

Getting off at Westmead station, a burgeoning transport hub, Vishnu was grateful it was conveniently located near Parramatta Park – which was famous for one recent murder. A young Indian woman walking home from work late at night was found stabbed to death. Her personal belongings intact and no sexual assault. An unexplained murder that pointed to her husband. Tonight, Parra Park belonged to the bats feasting on fig trees.

IndTop turned up five minutes earlier than planned. He was lingering around the entrance when Vishnu spotted him. IndTop was surprisingly tall and slender for a brown man. He had little facial hair and a big silver bangle on his right forearm. He was

wearing straight chinos, chequered shirt and a plain black jacket – a sure-fire sign he was newly arrived to Sydney. IndTop finally gave Vishnu a name in a thick accent. ‘I’m Gautam.’

Feeling brave, Vishnu got closer for a hug. Rigid, Gautam hugged back, a wooden toy creaking to life.

A well-used Indian kitchen. A complex layer of spice, oil frying and a faint incense. That’s what Gautam’s shirt smelt like. Vishnu was instantly turned on. This scent was so resented by his family that they had insisted on turning a kitchen into a panic room. Closed off from the rest of the house, Vishnu was shooed by his mum whenever he walked in with a nice shirt while she was cooking. ‘Spice is for stomach, not fabric!’ Vishnu’s mother would lament, her sun avoidant brown skin remaining firm as she pushed Vishnu away from the stove. Enough time spent in Australia had taught Vishnu’s family no one should ever smell like their food. Vishnu had manifested this as his kink. To find complexly curried Indian men was a thrill.

‘Shall we go for a walk in the park?’ said Vishnu hesitantly, giving the impression this was his first attempt at such a thing.

The sidewalk, which eventually led to the Burramatta River, was scantily lit by moonlight. The screeching bats had settled slightly. As their conversation began to dry out, Vishnu stopped and turned around to face Gautam. They bumped into each other’s shoulders.

Smiling, Vishnu grabbed Gautam’s hand and gently stroked his fingers. Vishnu moved his nimble fingers past Gautam’s rough palm. Up the forearm. Over the shoulder. Centre of torso.

Fingertips still on the shirt, Vishnu rubbed Gautam's chest gently. *This guy is almost skeletal! Does he eat?* Vishnu moved his hands down Gautam's flat stomach. Vishnu slipped his finger under the shirt. There was plenty of hair on Gautam's body. Vishnu smiled as he twirled the belly hair between his knuckles. Gautam's mouth was so close. Peppermint gum close. Kissing. Vishnu searched for something more than peppermint, maybe remnants of a well-made chai, but it was Wrigley's after all. Hands around each other. Crotches heavy and warm.

As they feasted on each other, Vishnu imagined they could be two werewolves in the night. Gautam had enough hair for it. Complex curry. Peppermint. Animal – ticking all the boxes. Eventually, Vishnu lowered his knees and felt the cold pavement penetrate through his jeans and onto his skin. Button after button, straight-cut chinos were lowered. Blue Jockey underpants, the logo barely visible. Lavender washing powder residue. *A woman may have washed his clothes.* Not that Vishnu could judge, his mother washed his too.

It was too dark to make out a face, but Vishnu could hear Gautam's slow and heavy breathing. Bzzzt! Bzzt! Bzzt! Gautam's phone came. Groaning, Gautam pulled out the latest iPhone, paused as he looked at the screen, and rejected it. Vishnu attempted to slide Gautam's trousers. Bzzt! Bzzt! Bzzt!

'Sorry,' Gautam muttered. A faint silhouette of an erect penis pulsating behind the cotton, Vishnu sighted the prize but fumbled to get a hold of it.

As Gautam looked at his phone once more, a faint silhouette began to appear, lit by the distant light of suburban streetlights fading

into the open grasslands of the park. Gautam went limp as the footsteps grew louder and the silhouette materialised. Both men in the height of adrenalin tuned in their senses. They could make out the shape of a woman approaching.

‘Gautam,’ she whispered. ‘What are you doing?’

Vishnu leaped up onto his feet as Gautam rushed to zip up his pants. The face of a young Indian woman stared at Gautam. She began to speak in languages that Vishnu could not comprehend. She raised a finger towards Vishnu and laid her dark brown eyes on him. Like a possum spotting a fox, Vishnu sensed peril. He bolted into the darkness of the park; sprinting as fast as he could.

CONCLUSION

Jazz Money

12 learnings of queer western sydney

1.

there is water story snaking through this fertile plain lands
it's for these fluid bodies

2.

have you ever been so lucky
to see western sydney glow with the kiss of evening
as the colour rushes up like bird song
when sun sets beyond the mountain line
after the city gives out
to scrub suburbia heat sink
and the tarmac choreography
turns you homewards
in that place of ever longing

3.

in some streams of queer theology
dawn and dusk are seen as proof
that god saves their greatest beauty
for the place between binary

4.

if you have been so lucky
to exist in the glow of the gender queer
you know this to be true

5.

yes beloved
your radiant self

6.

what happens when we constantly define
that which is
by absence
of what it is not

7.

western sydney

not quite centre

but not so far as where the bushland other sings

a place beyond fantasy of neat line divide

where everything comes more bright for it's blurring

8.

queer bodies

not quite centre

but so much closer to song of ascending divine

a place beyond fantasy of neat line divide

where everything comes more bright for it's blurring

9.

the way I've been taught it

borders aren't a place of divide

but of sharing

of gathering and redistributing

a place to walk gentle

to know responsibility

and to know where to yield

a meeting of communities

with shared value

and value shared

10.

every side of the river suffers where you disrespect the water

11.

we creatures of the borderlands
we queer the boundary lines
speak the language of shared
everywhere here in this place of sprawling edge
loving community singing up
place where care has always been
place where queer has always been

12.

the queer body borderless in sydney between binary
glory song glowing strong
rest here in west
where your gentle soft body makes home
let waterways teach fluid
these systems of care
stretch into that golden glow of always

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

SPEAK TO SOMEONE:

QLIFE (QLIFE.ORG.AU) 1800 184 527 CHAT OR CALL TO SPEAK TO SOMEONE 3PM-MIDNIGHT, EVERY DAY

REACH OUT ([HTTP://AU.REACHOUT.COM](http://au.reachout.com))

LIFELINE (13 11 14) FREE 24-HOUR TELEPHONE COUNSELLING

13YARN (13YARN.ORG.AU) IS AN ABORIGINAL AND CRISIS SUPPORT LINE AVAILABLE 24/7 - CALL 13YARN (13 92 76)

SUICIDE CALL BACK SERVICE (1300 659 467)

BEYOND BLUE ([HTTPS://WWW.BEYONDBLUE.ORG.AU](https://www.beyondblue.org.au))
WEBCHAT AND PHONE SUPPORT AVAILABLE.

ACON ([HTTPS://WWW.ACON.ORG.AU/SUPPORT-SERVICES](https://www.acon.org.au/support-services))
FOR INFORMATION ABOUT ACON'S SUPPORT SERVICES,
COMPLETE THE INTAKE FORM OR CALL (02) 9206 2000.

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

CONNECT WITH COMMUNITY

GREATER WESTERN SYDNEY INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

([HTTPS://WWW.INCLUSIVECOMMUNITIES.COM.AU](https://www.inclusivecommunities.com.au))

RAINBOW CULTURES - ([HTTPS://WWW.RAINBOWCULTURE.ORG.AU](https://www.rainbowculture.org.au))

A DIRECTORY OF LGBTQ+ MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY GROUPS AND SERVICES IN NSW

ACON HERE FOR WESTERN SYDNEY PAGE

([ACON.ORG.AU/WHO-WE-ARE-HERE-FOR/WESTERN-SYDNEY](https://www.acon.org.au/who-we-are-here-for/western-sydney))

ACON - TRANSHUB

[HTTPS://WWW.TRANSHUB.ORG.AU](https://www.transhub.org.au)

ACON'S PLATFORM FOR ALL TRANS AND GENDER DIVERSE PEOPLE IN NSW, THEIR LOVED ONES, ALLIES AND HEALTH PROVIDERS

TELL YOUR STORY

SWEATSHOP LITERACY MOVEMENT

([WWW.SWEATSHOP.WS](http://www.sweatshop.ws))

SWEATSHOP IS A LITERACY MOVEMENT BASED IN WESTERN SYDNEY.



ACON is Australia's largest health organisation specialising in community health, inclusion and HIV responses for people of diverse sexualities and genders. Established in 1985, ACON works to create opportunities for people in our communities to live their healthiest lives. ACON was founded by community, for community, and it is in that spirit that we continue our work as a fiercely proud community organisation.

ACON's work in Greater Western Sydney (GWS) started in a time when safety was paramount to our communities. The legacy of this work has continued through our existing relationships and partnerships with diverse communities and organisations and our commitment to forming new ones. ACON is committed to supporting initiatives, such as this anthology, that are led by and for LGBTQ+ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse, migrant and refugee backgrounds, and LGBTQ+ people of colour.



Stories Out West, an initiative of ACON, celebrates the voices of First Nations and culturally diverse LGBTQ+ storytellers from Western Sydney. Where boundary lines on a map are queered and where culture is shared across generations. These stories navigate the complexity of family, explore those parts of us often hidden and stumble upon the pure simpleness of attraction. The diverse queer and trans communities of Western Sydney claim their agency through this challenging collection, sharing their powerful stories with the world.

