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CULTURE BOOKS SPECTRUM

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Winters of change: writers and artists reflect

Nintendo in a filthy share house, an alpine cottage with no door, a family crisis, a life lesson, a forgotten saucepan. Authors and artists capture the season.

By **Rose Hartley, Katherine Firkin, Alex McClintock, Anne Brinsden and Jo Lennan**

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Rose Hartley

In 2005, my third year in Melbourne, I moved out of college and into a sharehouse with four male friends. From the outside, the house was a two-storey Victorian beauty with tessellated tiles and a balcony overlooking Royal Park. On the inside, it was a beloved rotting wreck.

If the men thought I was going to keep the house from falling into its natural state of nearly uninhabitable filth, they were wrong. I don't remember vacuuming the floors or mopping the bathroom even once the entire year. I do remember someone left a raw steak out for two days. No plate, no plastic, just meat seeping into the kitchen bench.



Lucy Culliton's Heater on Rug (2020). LUCY CULLITON

That winter, not long after the annual Gatehouse Street Centurion, where you take a shot of beer every minute for 100 minutes, I came down with the flu twice. I learned the hard way that catching influenza A doesn't give you immunity to the rarer strain B. The second bout seemed to develop into pneumonia, not that I saw a doctor or connected my septic living conditions with my frequent illness. That was the year I figured out how to distinguish the flu from a bad cold: the death wish. If you don't feel so ill you want to die, it's not the flu.

In 2005, the cult of productivity had not yet begun. Life-hackers weren't haranguing us on Twitter about efficiency maximising. I didn't feel obliged to spend my winter of sickness learning to code and reading Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* in the original French. I, a mediocre student with few aspirations beyond getting a low-responsibility job to fund my writing habit, bought a Super Nintendo on eBay and spent three months perfecting my Super Mario Kart technique. When I wasn't coughing up blood I was dedicating approximately six hours per day to improving my fastest lap time on Rainbow Road.

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Rose Hartley

The tracks in Super Mario Kart are always laid out the same, but the power-ups are different each time, and the ways the other characters interact with your

player alter just enough to keep you alert, kind of like when you hear a really good song and get a rush of dopamine waiting for the chords in the chorus to resolve.

Yoshi was my player character, the most difficult to handle but the fastest accelerator. The trick to Rainbow Road is never tap the brake. Hop the corners, use a mushroom before you hit the bump where the road splits in two so you can jump the gap, and otherwise take the inside of the course. The first time you finish without falling off the edge into the abyss, you feel invincible.

I played it obsessively. I had focus, I was dedicated. At university, my creative writing was banal and amateurish, my essays always late, my future uncertain. But at Rainbow Road I excelled. It's a great feeling to be good at something.

After three months, my lungs were almost clear and I could sleep horizontally instead of sitting up. My health coincided with the blooming of the magnolia trees on Gertrude Street. That spring I was thin and weak but full of the euphoria of health that follows sickness. I packed away my game console and joyfully watched the little brown wrens that hopped inside when the kitchen door blew open to peck crumbs off the peeling linoleum floor.

We all moved out that summer. Despite all that time at home I'd become strangely alienated from my housemates, as if we'd been living in parallel worlds, them in the healthy and me in the sick. I held onto my Super Nintendo for another 10 years before selling it on eBay for a surprisingly high price.

Recently, after a bout of grumpily muting writers on Twitter for proclaiming how many thousands of words they'd written in isolation, I saw a tweet that read: *Mario Kart's "the closer to 1st place you are, the less useful power-ups you get" system is an ideal model for how our economy should work*, and was filled with a newly righteous longing for Rainbow Road.

Rose Hartley lives in Adelaide. *Maggie's Going Nowhere* is her first novel. She was shortlisted for the 2019 Judith Wright Poetry Prize.

Katherine Firkin

What does a person look like when they've jumped from a bridge? This is the question that is taunting me as I arrive at the hospital, frantic and utterly dazed. Will I recognise you? Will you be ... (I don't want to finish this thought, but I have to) ... *whole*?

"Are you immediate family?" A woman gently asks from behind Perspex at the intensive care reception.

I fix my gaze on the top rim of her oversized glasses and take a tissue, not bothering to hide the snot that's dribbling over my lips. "I'm his sister," I barely get the words out.

The world stops as I walk down that corridor to your room – this isn't a figure of speech, it has stopped. I'm convinced of it. Everything is silent, and still, and white, and also why are my footsteps so loud? I can't breathe as I round the doorway, at first seeing nothing but the sheet over your lower body. Then I meet your face.

A sound comes out of me that I haven't heard before. I don't know how to describe this – a yelp? I do my best to take it all in: the disfigurement, the bruising, the tube in your mouth and the clamping on your cheeks that seems to be holding your face together ...

I'm broken.

"Why don't you take a seat?" A nurse is there, appearing like magic, and I slump numbly into a chair.

There were things I'd planned to say – I'd practised them in the car on the way over. Optimistic things, hopeful things. Instead I take your right hand, squeezing it just enough so that you might know I'm there, but also terrified of dislodging one of the many, many tubes.

"I'm so sorry." It's all I can get out.

I try again. "I let you down. I should have done more." At this, I feel the slightest tremble from your fingertips, a solitary tear slides down your right cheek. It's enough. I leave that night knowing you can hear me.

I don't think the medication is working. This was how you'd started a phone call to me less than 24 hours before your fall. It's a conversation I will replay in my mind over and over, probably for the rest of time. I tell this to the friendly nurse the next day when I'm back in that room, listening to the beeping of the machines and the failings in my head. "I tried to help," I say in between snotty, gasping breaths. She nods, and hands me more tissues.

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Katherine Firkin

Later that day you open your right eye. "I love you," I tell you, leaning over your bed. The one eye blinks back at me furiously, and now I know you can see me.

That's how we communicate over the next few days, me attempting to produce words without crying, and you blinking. When the nurse eventually suggests getting you to try writing, I excitedly hold the paper under your wrist. It's a crushing disappointment.

"We'll get there," I hear her say, as I squint at the jumble of unintelligible lines.

It's late August when you're transferred to the trauma ward. By now you're talking and sitting up. But it's only when you take your first cautious steps that I begin to consider a future beyond the hospital walls. And strangely, I don't want to leave.

This sterile building has become your home, and also mine. I've sleeplessly roamed the corridors, vomited in the bathrooms, and used your room as a confessional. I've done more crying and thinking and praying here than I intend on doing the rest of my life.

As I watch you shuffle down the corridor, two hands on a walking frame and a nurse at your side, I realise how much you've healed, and how little I have.

This may have been the longest winter, but now that it's almost over I'm not ready for it to pass.

Katherine Firkin is a Melbourne journalist, currently with CBS New York. Her debut novel, *Sticks and Stones*, is inspired by the many criminal trials she has covered.

Alex McClintock

My partner and I moved to Canada two years ago. Canadians often ask us why, a question I find difficult to answer. The real explanation – I had a bit of an identity crisis, she was sick of her job, we wanted to live overseas and a Canadian visa was easier to get than a US green card – is a long story and perhaps a little insulting to citizens of the True North. Instead, I joke that it wasn't for the winter.



Tom Carment's *Through the Garage Windows, Mount Lofty* (2019). SAM ROBERTS

This has the advantage of being both true, because the winter is awful, and engaging, because Canadians love to talk about how awful the winter is. It's an easy habit to pick up, as I'm about to demonstrate by being the guy who moves to Canada and complains about the cold.

People warned us, obviously. We just didn't listen. When our first housemate in Toronto said we would be "praying for zero degrees and blue sky" come January, I laughed. She may as well have tried to convince me that maple syrup is made from the milk of raccoons.

So when the leaves on the trees finally turned the colour of the one on the flag, and the geese and retirees flew south to Florida, I was not prepared. Not for six months of no colours but grey and brown. Not for the cold that rises through your boots and hurts your shins as you stand on the icy concrete waiting for the bus. Not for the darkness that presses down, telling you there's no point getting out of bed.

Lying there, I spent weeks on Instagram, watching friends back home enjoying hot sun, cold beer, salt water and Christmas prawns. All I had was Tim Hortons, a Patagonia jacket and seasonal affective disorder (SAD), the only type of depression with a descriptive acronym.

Then, one day, the leaves came back and the snowbirds flew home. Life started to seem pretty good again. There might not have been prawns, or Christmas, but there was hot sun, cold beer, fresh water, new friends.

Among these were Jesse and Regan, an objectionably good-looking and wildly fun couple who, for reasons unknown, took us under their wing. When the leaves burned red and fell once again, they kept inviting us to things. A home cinema night at their apartment to watch *Midsommar*. Caroling and mulled wine at Regan's parents' house. A New Year's Eve all-nighter ending with an icy morning swim in Lake Erie.

In February, Jesse invited me to go camping with his friends Scott and Cole. They wanted to snowshoe into Bruce Peninsula National Park and explore the aquamarine ice caves formed by wind and waves on Georgian Bay. Jesse assured me that the forecast low of minus 10 was no problem: we'd get a canvas tent with an inbuilt stove and cart it around on a sled

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Alex McClintock

I was sceptical, but the next weekend the four of us drove out of the city and into the wilderness for three days. Jesse supervised the construction of the tent. Scott guided us along the shoreline through twisted ziggurats of ice and snow. Cole cooked cauliflower curry and naan on an open fire. I nearly asphyxiated us all by absent-mindedly leaving a log on top of the stove and falling asleep.

On our last day, I realised how much can change in a year. After hiking miles in the driving wind, we flopped down in the snow to cook lunch. Scott carefully removed the gas burner from his pack, followed by the coffee and the pre-cooked chili. Then, after a long silence, he broke the bad news. He'd forgotten to pack a saucepan.

It was cold and dark and miserable, and we couldn't stop laughing.

Alex McClintock grew up in Sydney and now lives in Toronto, Canada. *On the Chin: A Boxing Education* (Text Publishing) is his first book.

Anne Brinsden

My brain worked better in winter. Probably because it had more space in which to operate – on account of me not having to deplete its finite resources by asking it *why* all the time. Like why would my white skin never get that compulsory tan despite my zealotry of Baby Oil and sunburn? Winter lulled me. Other than the foreboding of the cows going dry and us having to drink powdered milk, winter was the finest. It had seasonal superiority: it cast aside bikini humiliations and instead taught me how to smoke filter-tip cigarettes. And pretend to like beer.



Lucy Culliton's Heater (2020). LUCY CULLITON

Actually, winter didn't teach me. It was my friend Karen who did that. But it was winter when she did it. And it was such a comfort having a friend like Karen. She was splendid. She made a fashion statement out of blue Levi's, a man's navy singlet, someone's old school jumper and moccasins. She had big boobs and slim hips and Karen in her white bikini went brown in summer without even trying. I never knew why she decided to have me for a friend.

"You have to learn to do the drawback," she said. My insides cowered. I knew she was right but I was mighty tired of always having to be responsible for doing something. I had five brothers and sisters to look after and a father who was out down the dairy all the time. Or checking the irrigation in the paddocks to all hours of the night while we rattled around inside the house by ourselves. But I am stubborn. So I persisted until I had burnt off all the cilia in the back of my throat. And to my surprise, and unending comfort, I discovered that I was a drawback doyen. I was a natural. I took to sucking that cigarette smoke down to the bottom of my lungs and back again like an opera singer to an encore.

"I hate the taste," I said though, openly insubordinate when Karen tried to put me up a grade and onto drinking beer. "And beer stinks," I added, like a child.

"Well you can't drink soft drink. You look stupid. Just pretend you like beer. Just keep sculling until you can't taste it." I shook my head. Karen was always right – I would have to do it. Karen should have been getting into politics she had such a knack for knowing what the important people would be thinking. Not settling for a job at the Beehive Cafe.

“Just pretend you like beer. Just keep sculling until you can’t taste it.” I shook my head. Karen was always right.

Anne Brinsden

There was serenity in those winter nights – leaning indifferently against the wall, watching the cool boys play pool. Positioning yourself opposite the wall mirror so you could casually critique your smoking technique – another of Karen’s good ideas. The comfort in smirking at the shifty panic of the choking boys whose cilia was still intact and whose drawback therefore was not. Who were right now being judged and disqualified. A Melbourne Bitter at your feet, a Marlboro Red held tantalisingly between your fingers. Or dead in the middle of your lipsticked mouth for girls. Or between your teeth or at the side of your mouth for the suitable boys. I pretended I liked beer. I didn’t have to pretend about cigarettes.

It turned out Karen knew all things vis-a-vis smoking. She was asthmatic – coughed her guts out every morning. “A ciggie helps,” she said. I watched as she puffed and scorched any recalcitrant, lingering cilia until she killed them all and she stopped coughing. That was when I stopped smoking. It happened the morning I realised Karen’s hacking asthma cough was nearly as good as the killer one of my father’s. But he didn’t have asthma. He just had years of cigarettes.

Anne Brinsden grew up in the Mallee, she moved between chores on the family farm and her local school of 16 students. Her first book, *Wearing Paper Dresses*, was published in 2019 by Pan Macmillan Australia. She is currently working on her second book.

Jo Lennan

When I was seven, we left the coast, heading for the hills.

My parents, outdoor types, lived in fear of suburbia, and they moved every so often to some neglected backwater. This time, we decamped because development had threatened (specifically, the building of a supermarket).

Our destination: a small town in the sub-alpine Monaro region, population 1000.





Clara Adolph's Stillness (2020).

At the red-brick Infants' School, my teacher was Mr Cooper. He peered at us like we were beasts and wouldn't give me my pen licence. He didn't give a reason and I felt it was unjust, being made to go on scratching resentfully in pencil long after the others were allowed to write in ink.

On the upside, that winter – the first we spent in a cottage on Old Cooma Road, behind a dense row of pines – I made my acquaintance with snow and frost. The ice that hardened over creeks, and over the windscreen every morning of the silver Datsun 200B we referred to as the Mutt (its licence plate began with the letters MUT). The blue heeler mix sheep dog, Buster, who came to live with us after biting a sheep, a sackable offence in his line of work. And the snow days when the roads to outlying farms were cut and school was cancelled, bringing an unexpected windfall of freedom.

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Jo Lennan

My father set about making improvements to our house, and for a time we had no front door, only a tarpaulin, and my mother cooked dinner wearing a ski jacket. My bedroom was a closed-in porch: draughty, south-facing, bereft of insulation. I learned to sleep on my front, trapping my body heat.

Off at a distance lay the alps and Mount Kosciuszko. Or *Kossie Osko*, as we called it. Kosciuszko, a famous Pole, had led his people in rising up against both Russia and Prussia, but in true democratic fashion we bastardised his name, giving it four syllables instead of the Polish three.

A farmer later told me, "I know it seems out of the way, but we think of where we live as the centre of the world." Old byways connect the alps to the east coast at Twofold Bay, Eden. For Aboriginal tribes, the Bundian Way, a 360-kilometre route that predates the Silk Road, allowed seasonal gatherings for the Bogong moth harvest on the Snowy River and the spring whale migration.

That winter, we discovered cold-weather pursuits. Like skiing cross-country, spending long, arduous days on trails. Only Dad was exempt: he had a dodgy knee, or was this an excuse? I envied, of course, the friends who were whizzing down slopes at the resorts, practising speed drills.

Once, on a trail, I came across a fox. It had a surprisingly luxuriant red coat: snow life agreed with it. It was bold and curious, and when I offered it a piece of chocolate it seemed to regard it as a fitting tribute.

I didn't forget that fox. Or that winter.

Fast forward to now, and I find I miss the cold. I especially missed the cold this summer, when the flanks of Mt Kosciuszko were aflame, and when the woodchip mill at Eden burned day and night over Twofold Bay.

So, yes, give me the cold. That long-ago winter, I learned how to live with it, to make it a source of solace in its own right, and to be alive to the beauty that comes with it.

As for that pen licence, so long withheld by Mr Cooper? It eventually came through. And with it I was, at last, to be allowed to write.

Born in Wollongong, Jo Lennan studied in Sydney and Oxford. She has worked as a lawyer and writer. Her work has featured in the *Best Australian Stories* and *Best Australian Essays* anthologies.

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