

## **Twenties**

Adam Aitken, Luke Beesley, Joanne Burns,  
Zarah Butcher-McGunnigle, Tom Carment,  
Chris Fleming, Mary Hoban, Emily Kiddell,  
Kim Mahood, Dani Netherclift, Nicola Redhouse,  
Advait Thakur, Ruby Todd and Katy Warner

the  
slow  
canoe  
press



## Contents

First published 2022 by The Slow Canoe Press  
www.slowcanoe.com

Copyright © 2022 by the authors

Edited by Oliver Driscoll & Anna Thwaites

Designed and typeset by Oliver Driscoll  
in Baskerville 11/13

Printed on 250 gsm and 100 gsm Envirocare

Kim Mahood  
Luke Beesley  
Ruby Todd  
Mary Hoban  
Chris Fleming  
Adam Aitken  
Katy Warner  
Nicola Redhouse  
Advait Thakur  
Joanne Burns  
Tom Carment  
Zarah Butcher-McGunnigle  
Emily Kiddell  
Dani Netherclift  
About the Contributors

# Chris Fleming



### **Eight Times a Day**

I am working out at gym in Castlereagh Street in Sydney's CBD. I am strutting and doing lat spreads of would-be muscles, trying not to get caught looking at myself in the mirror.

A guy about my height – but significantly broader – approaches me and asks, 'Do you do martial arts?'

'Yeah – did you see me kicking the bag?' I say.

'No – it says *KARATE* on your tracksuit pants,' Dave says.

Dave and I become friends and start doing karate together. We attend a dojo in Hunter Street, where an English instructor, L., in his early fifties, takes lunchtime classes. L. is always trying to launch his acting career and to that end has written a bunch of scripts he's trying to sell, all starring him, all based on the same premise: he's been hard-done-by (in love, by luck, by the law), and after suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous scripting, is afforded the opportunity to exact justice, usually by means of a rapid series of punches, throws, and kicks.

He is not an especially talkative guy, but as I get to know him, he grows more forthcoming about his personal life, until I find I know too much about his masturbation habits – which seem extraordinarily fecund for a man of his (or any) years – as well as that he typically has four bowel movements and three litres of water a day, and a big steak once per week (on Fridays). L. starts going out with a karate student in our class half his age, but things soon turn sour. She leaves him and stops coming to karate. One day after class, in a moment of vulnerability, L. turns to me and says, 'I miss her so much, Chris. I'm wanking six, seven, eight times a day.' He has tears in his eyes.

### **Abrasions *dans* Nirvana**

I am at Selina's at Coogee Beach, watching Nirvana play. I am exhausted by their sheer volume and paint-by-numbers nihilistic schtick – their playing out of every watch-us-not-care rock move like they are soldiers under command. I know this is history being made and I resent them for it. I stand right at the front, at the mercy of the punishing fluid dynamics of a 90s grunge crowd.

I notice an extraordinarily attractive woman next to me doing a punk pogo (a 'dance' Sid Vicious claims to have invented in 1976). She is wearing a spangly gold top that is brushing against my bare arm as she jumps. I decide I am prepared to endure the set for the payoff of abrasive contact with an attractive woman. I speculate that she might also like touching me, given that it keeps up without pause and that she leans in if I move away slightly.

My private pleasure is interrupted only when a drunk guy in a wet Misfits t-shirt crawls on stage and begins running its length. Never really getting himself fully upright, he galumphs at an acute angle – tipping towards the crowd – for a few meters before bouncers gets close to him. He evades them by leaping (Cf. 'falling') awkwardly back into the crowd, just clearing the barrier up the front, where I stand, and landing directly on the arm of a skinny guy near me who has been leaning on the front railing.

The skinny guy winces, turns to me and says flatly, with disbelief: 'That guy just broke my arm.' Given the way it now hangs, his upper arm has indeed been snapped in half.

I can now see he is the boyfriend of the spangly topped girl.

I work my way to the back of the crowd and then out the front doors to have a cigarette. My arm feels wet and only now do I realise it is bleeding, grated for too long by sequins.

## Casting Calls

I go for a job in a security firm and the guy running the interviews asks me to stay back. At just after 3pm we are led back into the interview room for what he calls ‘the tie break’. He hands around a two-page excerpt from David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross* and asks us to read it out as best we can. I land the role of Shelley Levene. I find the situation incredibly funny, *impossibly* funny, so I’m obliged to roll the laughter I can’t swallow into my character.

As absurd as I find the situation, I am stunned and offended to later learn that I didn’t get the job. I was clearly the best actor among the potential guards. Two weeks later I land a job as a guard at Fantos Duty Free in George Street, Sydney, near Circular Quay. During my second shift, the guy who’d run the interviews turns up with several boxes of perfume. He is now working as a courier driver.

I am employed at the Duty Free store by John M., whose business card announces that he is the ‘Managging Director’. Within the next six months I get two of my friends, G. and D., jobs at Fantos. We all angle for the cushier nightshifts, when the shop is closed and we patrol the empty building. Sometimes when we are bored, we turn up to each others’ shifts and just hang out. Our only obligatory tasks are to watch four surveillance monitors and then, once an hour, to travel up three floors and turn a key on another floor, which registers when we do so to prove that we’ve done our patrol. Aside from this, our time is our own.

One evening G. and D. let themselves into the building during my shift. They check the control room, see I’m not there, and wait outside an elevator for me to return to the floor, planning to scare me. As the doors open, G. charges into the lift, screaming. Instead of finding me in there, he nearly flattens an elderly German couple, both of whom are lucky not to have died from fear. As the German man collects himself, he demands: ‘What is your name, young man? I’ll be reporting you!’

‘Chris Fleming,’ G. shoots back without hesitation.

There is a sombre mood in the control room. I am angry that I might get sacked. (I’m not.) G. and D. go home to let me finish my shift alone.

## Good or Shit?

I’m living in a share house at 23 Botany Street, Bondi Junction. One of the members of the house, M., is unemployed and supported by his girlfriend. He spends most of his days in a dressing gown and ugg boots (winter), socks (spring or autumn), or thongs (summer), wearing headphones with an impossibly long extension cord – headphones that allow him to access anywhere in the house – and maybe even a couple of houses down, if he wanted that. He very rarely decides to do the washing up, and when he does, he spends most of the day shuffling between the kitchen and the lounge room, headphones on, working at the rate of around two-plates-per-hour. It can take him between four and ten hours to finish a load. As much of a drug-addled mess as I am at the time, I still resent the notion of people slacking off from their responsibilities, their housework. I am almost always irritated with him.

He sometimes gets on the phone to his best friend, and they adjudicate whole genres of music, designating artists – sometimes just albums – as either ‘good’ or ‘shit’. Thanks to their concision, they can do dozens of albums in a single session. They agree on almost everything, but I take note of some of their landmark disagreements:

Jeff Buckley

M.: ‘Shit.’

B.: ‘Good.’

Fishbone’s *Give a Monkey a Brain and He’ll Think He’s the Centre of the Universe*

M.: 'Shit.'

B.: 'Good.' (They agree that the band's earlier *The Reality of My Surroundings* was 'Good'.)

The Smiths

M.: 'Shit.'

B.: 'Good.'

Stravinsky

M.: 'Shit.'

B.: 'Good.'

(On reflection, B. had broader musical tastes.)

This is in the time before mobile phones, when a phone can be engaged, and I always hate the length of time they spend on the phone doing their pointless adjudications. I don't know why anyone would spend so much time on something so stupid.

One night I come in late, drunk, and realise that nobody has taken the bins out. M. is on the phone with B., adjudicating popular music. They were doing this when I left; I wonder whether they are still covering new artists or just revisiting earlier judgements.

I take the bins out, and return to the front door to see M. standing in the door frame with a single finger up to his lips. 'Shhhhh!', he says. I realise he is admonishing me for being too noisy in my bin work. I become enraged. We both go inside in silence. M. sits down in the lounge room, headphones on, listening to Frank Zappa and playing along with an unamplified bass. Fuming, I get myself a glass of water and sit opposite him, staring, trying to catch his eye. He won't look up. I hate him. I want a fight, but he is either locked down inside himself or pretending as much.

I take a large gulp of water into my mouth. Then I spray it all over him.

M. looks down at himself, soaked, and then at me.

Without a word, he stands up, grabs a towel from the back of the chair he was sitting on, wipes himself off and goes to bed. We never speak of this.

### **Fresh Corn**

One Friday evening I get drunk by myself and catch a train into town. I get off at Town Hall and sit on the steps and pretend I am waiting for someone, but am just watching others wait for someones. Behind me on the stairs is a girl who is batting her folded full-size umbrella between her hands with what I interpret as frustration. She loses control of it and the handle hits me in the back of the head. She apologises and tells me that her friend is late and probably not going to turn up. We talk briefly. She's German, from Bremen, on holiday. We catch a train back to my house. We talk and drink Stone's Ginger Wine and listen to music. In the early morning we go to my bedroom. We hold hands – and that is all. Neither of us even attempts a kiss. Very soon we are not even talking – we just lie in the darkness, staring at the ceiling, holding hands. We fall asleep.

In the morning she tells me I snore and suggests a picnic, and we go to the supermarket to buy ingredients. She buys corn, and I tell her that I don't want to return to the house to cook it; she replies that *corn can be eaten raw*. We walk to a local park, again holding hands, and eat our salad and bread. I am surprised by the corn. It feels like a very adult, sophisticated form of knowledge, to know this about a common vegetable.

In the early afternoon I walk her to the station, and we never see each other again.

## About the Contributors

**Adam Aitken** was born in London and spent his childhood moving between Thailand and Malaysia and Perth, before his family settled in Sydney. His last book is *Revenants* (Giramondo). He received the Patrick White Award in 2022.

**Luke Beesley's** most recent poetry collection, *Aqua Spinach* (Giramondo), was shortlisted for the ALS Gold Medal. His writing has been published widely in Australia and internationally and has been translated into several languages. He lives and works in Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung country.

**joanne burns** is a Sydney writer of poetry / prose poems, short fictions, and monologues. Her most recent book is *apparently* (Giramondo, 2019). She is currently assembling a new poetry collection *rummage*.

**Zarah Butcher-McGunnigle** is a writer from Auckland, New Zealand. She is the author of *Nostalgia Has Ruined My Life* (Giramondo, 2021) and *Autobiography of a Marguerite* (Hue & Cry Press, 2014).

**Tom Carment** is a *plein air* artist and a writer. His pictures have been shown in numerous exhibitions, and selected twelve times for the Archibald Prize. He is the author of *Days and Nights in Africa* (1985), *Seven Walks: Cape Leeuwin to Bundeena* (2014), and *Womerah Lane: Lives and Landscapes* (2019), which was shortlisted in the 2021 NSW Premier's Literary Awards.

**Chris Fleming** is a writer and translator whose work has appeared in both scholarly and popular media. He is the author of numerous books – including, most recently, *On Drugs* (Giramondo, 2019). He is currently Associate Professor in Humanities and a Member of the Writing and Society Research Centre at Western Sydney University.

In between living, **Mary Hoban** worked as a researcher, editor and occasional writer, in the latter capacity winning the inaugural Hazel Rowley Fellowship to write *An Unconventional Wife: the life of Julia Sorell Arnold*, which garnered several awards in history and non-fiction. She still writes, in between living.

**Emily Kiddell** is a writer based in Naarm/Melbourne.

**Kim Mahood** is the author of *Craft for a Dry Lake*, (Random House, 2000), *Position Doubtful*, (Scribe, 2016), and *Wandering With Intent: eEssays*, (Scribe, 2022). Her artwork is held in state, territory and regional collections. She coordinates cross-cultural mapping projects with Indigenous groups in remote, regional and urban locations.

**Dani Netherclift** turned twenty in 1994 and wrote bad poems all through that decade. More recently, she has had lyric essays published in *Meanjin*, *Island* and *Westerly*, and poetry and other writings in *Cordite*, *Rabbit*, *Stilts*, *Mascara*, *Plumwood Mountain* and others. She is a creative writing PhD candidate at Deakin University.

**Nicola Redhouse** is the author of *Unlike the Heart: a memoir of brain and mind* (UQP). Her essays and journalism appear in places including *The Monthly*, *The Age*, *The Australian*, *The Guardian* and *Meanjin*. Her fiction has been in *Best Australian Stories* 2014 and 2015 and *The Big Issue Fiction Edition*, and her poetry in *Cordite*, among other places.

**Advait Thakur** (b. October 28, 1990)

**Ruby Todd** is a Melbourne-based writer and teacher with a PhD in Literature from Deakin University. Her fiction has won the inaugural 2020 Furphy Literary Award, the 2019 Ploughshares Emerging Writer's Contest, and the 2016 AAWP Chapter One Prize. Her work has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Crazyhorse*, and elsewhere.

**Katy Warner** is a playwright and author, currently living in lutruwita (Tasmania) and hoping to see a platypus in the wild one day. Her plays include *Grace*, *A Prudent Man*, and *Spencer*. Her second young adult novel, *Triple Threat*, was published by Hardie Grant in September 2022.