

Meniscus is published by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs
www.aawp.org.au



© 2021 AAWP. All Rights Reserved. (First Published December 2021)

ISSN: 2202-8862

Meniscus, an online literary journal featuring poetry and creative prose, is published twice a year.

The editors read submissions twice a year; for details, please see

www.meniscus.org.au.

Meniscus claims only first publication rights. Copyright in published work remains with the author, and no work may be reproduced for any purpose without permission.

Editor:	Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton
Consulting editors:	Jen Webb and Deb Wain
Designer:	Shane Strange
Image:	Yee I-Lann, 2021, <i>Pangkis</i> , a single channel video of performers from the Tagaps Dance Theatre wearing the woven sculpture, '7 Headed Lalandau Hat'. All images courtesy of John Curtin Gallery. Photography by Hunttwo Studio.

About Meniscus

Meniscus is a literary journal, published and supported by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) with editors from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

The title of the journal was the result of a visit made by two of the editors to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, where James Turrell's extraordinary installation, 'Within without' (2010), led them to think about how surfaces, curves, tension and openness interact. In particular, they were struck by the way in which the surface of the water features, and the uncertainty of the water's containment, seems to analogise the excitement and anxiety inherent in creative practice, and the delicate balance between possibility and impossibility that is found in much good writing.

MENISCUS IS PUBLISHED AS AN INTERACTIVE PDF. Clicking on title or page number in the Contents will take you directly to the selected work. To return to the Contents, click on the page number of the relevant page.

SEVEN-PART STRING

Thor Kerr

Rhythmic prayer encircled a narrow apartment tower in Jakarta, waving in through grey windows to the folks within. In a small, drab apartment on the fourteenth floor, this prayer found a young man; sweaty, shirtless and propped up in bed. The prayer toyed with him as he fumbled to copy alphanumeric code within the screen of a mobile phone. The prayer swept into a lower pitch, sending slow vibrations through the inflamed membrane of his skull, squeezing his brain, blurring his vision, and messing his desperate attempt to join a conference call.

Novi sat up, drank from a glass on the bedside table then adjusted the pillowed prop to better see the phone he clutched landscape on his belly. He touched open the videoconference link then pulled on headphones, finding relief in momentary silence.

Agus came on screen, holding a baby, ‘anyway, it’s all over social media. Novi, hi, good you could join us. We were getting worried we would never see the money.’

‘Sorry guys.’

‘Hope the *dangdut* was worth it.’ Okto danced his shoulders.

‘Gentlemen, to business.’ Agus adjusted the baby’s swaddle. ‘Desi, take us through the protocol for this transaction.’

Desi cleared his throat then spoke clearly and deliberately to the six other men in the video call. The practised rounded vowels of Desi’s pronunciation matched his wrinkle-free shirt and cleanly-parted hair. ‘In this meeting’s agenda, three resolutions have been proposed. If we unanimously agree to all of them, each of us will send our codes during this meeting to Juni.’

Desi gestured towards screen with two hands, palm up, as if passing a platter. 'Juni has several important responsibilities. Juni will combine all the codes in correct order to reconstitute our private Bitcoin key. As, I'm sure you recall, we own a thousand coins in total, reflecting the All or Nothing club's five-thousand-US-dollar investment in Bitcoin when its price crashed to five dollars. That was ten years ago today.'

'Pity we didn't wait two more months for it to hit the two-dollar-fifty floor.' Septimus, chin on hand, goaded. 'Nail-biting, hey Juni. Wah, almost lost half our savings! But you held fast my brother. Thank God you didn't know how to sell Bitcoin.'

Desi's head shook violently as he muttered inaudibly. He took a deep breath, then lifted a white page and read, 'For each of our investments of one-thousand-and-eight Aussie dollars, we can expect a return in the range of US six to seven million with the Bitcoin price hovering around forty-five-thousand US dollars. Juni will send the private key through encrypted means to the institutional buyer in Singapore, who will transfer payment directly to the US dollar investment account that I have set up for us in Singapore.'

'Good to have friends in high places,' said Septimus.

Desi continued, 'Juni, please confirm your understanding that this process is correct.'

'Yes.' Juni came on screen in pyjamas surrounded by an orange Bladerunner backdrop. 'That is correct.'

Desi typed, then looked up at screen. 'From the total proceeds in our Singapore account, a small amount will be withheld for our Mount Kinabalu investor summit. The remaining balance will be divided in seven then transferred immediately to your respective nominated accounts. It is a clear-cut process. Thank you, everyone, for promptly returning the sale-and-transfer agreements. All have been received, indicating that everyone is aboard to sell the Bitcoins today as we had agreed verbally at the All or Nothing gathering in Perth in 2011.'

‘I’m on board, but ...’ Septimus winced as he rubbed a scarred hand backwards through thick stubble. ‘I’m wondering about the clause in the sale agreements we signed that gives the buyer a 3% discount on the current Coinbase exchange price.’

‘Coin exchanges have a cost.’ Juni’s eyes rolled. ‘And a risk in cashing out. This transaction is not small change.’

Okto came on screen. ‘I think we would be happier if we knew who the buyer was. This is not like, back in the day, when you transferred Bitcoin for little bags of rare, exotic weed.’

‘Man, what is wrong with you.’ Juni looked skyward, clenching fists. ‘Thanks for reminding me why I got the hell out of Perth. I can’t wait to be free of this. Okto, if you don’t destroy the video after this transaction closes, I’m coming after you.’ Juni mouthed an expletive.

‘Brothers,’ Julian spoke slowly as he came on screen with a scruffy grid-filled whiteboard in the background. ‘Brothers, we have a bond that can’t be broken. Perhaps, Desi can provide some information about the buyer so we can be more comfortable with the transaction.’

‘OK.’ Desi came on screen. ‘The most I can say is that the company is a subsidiary under Temasek. This is the safest way to complete such a large Bitcoin sale. Without the discount margin it was not possible to get a sale contract ahead of the transaction. This contract has a confidentiality clause, so I can’t say anything else except that it has taken me weeks to negotiate. So, please give me a break here.’

‘Thanks Desi,’ said Julian, leaning into screen.

Desi breathed deeply and paused for further comment, but none came. ‘Before we do anything, we should formalise the resolutions we made ten years ago at our smoky gathering in Perth.’

‘Can’t wait,’ said Juni.

Desi glanced at notes on his page. ‘Resolution One, we use some of the sale proceeds to meet in Sabah so Julian can guide us up the slippery

slopes, as promised, to the summit of Mount Kinabalu. It is impossible to do that this year because of COVID-19. However, I propose we reserve one-hundred-and-forty-thousand US dollars from the Bitcoin sale to pay first-class travel, meals and accommodation for the mountain trek on a mutually agreeable anniversary date.'

A smile returned, completing Desi's amicable demeanour. 'One seventh of this, twenty-thousand dollars, could be a cost deducted from any of your individual tax liabilities arising from the Bitcoin transaction. Gentlemen, please vote Yes or No on the poll appearing on your screens to confirm whether you support this resolution.' Desi squinted at the screen.

Novi blinked sweat from his eyes, then touched 'Yes' on screen.

Desi nodded while registering the votes. 'Thank you, all, we have unanimous support for Resolution One.' After pausing for effect, Desi continued: 'Resolution Two is that we undertake to do what we agreed on the day after our 2011 gathering. That is, each of us would destroy all copies of the nine-minute video of us dancing at the All or Nothing gathering. This video of us as unruly students was to provide motivation for each of us to maintain securely our respective parts of the alphanumeric string comprising the private key for our Bitcoins. But after today's transaction, it will no longer serve any useful purpose; quite the opposite in fact. So, do each of us undertake to destroy and do everything in our power to destroy each and every copy of that video once your share of net proceeds from the Bitcoin sale has been transferred to your nominated account?'

'What a tragedy to lose that video memory. Such good-looking fellas, we were.' Okto flexed his biceps. 'So free, so wasted, so easy.'

'I'm publishing the poll now, vote Yes or No whether you undertake to destroy all copies of that video.' Desi concentrated on screen. 'Six votes are in favour. One person is yet to vote. Come on. For some of us, the existence of that video is rather stressful. Oh come on, Okto.'

‘It’s not me. I’ve already voted, yes.’ Okto laughed. ‘I’m so insulted. Must be another deviant.’

‘Septimus,’ several of them shouted as their faces flashed on screen. ‘Where are you? Hey, dancing queen? Septimus, you deviant! Come on!’

‘Sorry, staff issue. I’m back.’ Returning to seat, Septimus flicked a dishcloth off his shoulder. ‘What are we doing?’

‘Voting on whether to destroy the video after receiving the transfer.’

‘Oh, yes.’ Septimus frowned as he read the resolution. ‘You should see my vote ... on screen, now!’

Desi returned to screen. ‘Confirmed. Seven votes affirmative. We are all resolved to destroy and do everything in our power to destroy every copy of that video once the transfer share has been received. Now, before voting on the third and final resolution of this meeting on the sale of Bitcoin, there is Agus’ discussion item in the agenda. Agus?’

‘Thanks Desi.’ Agus came on screen without the baby. ‘I think it is important that we go around the group, and find out what everyone intends to do with the Bitcoin proceeds.’

Agus paused to pick at baby dribble on his shirt. ‘Anyway, back when we were students, I didn’t think the fifty dollars a week I struggled to set aside for the All or Nothing club from stacking shelves would lead to much, let alone to six million dollars or more. I am grateful to Juni for suggesting Bitcoin and aggressively convincing us to invest the whole club’s fund in it even as the price fell through the floor. Thanks Juni. You’re a legend. Also, thanks Desi for organising the banking and tax advice for the pending transaction. Thanks everyone else for being solid, *mantap*, brothers who supported each other as broke, and not so broke, students in Perth. I should also add, thanks for leading me astray back then. It was a rich and fulfilling experience. OK, let’s go around the group to learn what we intend to do with all that money! I’ll go first. Yes, I will quit my factory audit job and buy a nice piece of land. Then move my family from Batam back to Sumatra. There, I will pretend to farm

or invest in a cycling shop. Novi, you were last to join the meeting, how about you?’

‘Easy *Mas*. I’ll buy land in the new capital city for my municipal-area-network business.’ Novi smiled and mumbled. ‘I will be an Indonesian hero for building the sovereign network. Be another oligarch with a pet tiger.’

‘You have talked about this for years, but hasn’t the capital-city project been killed by COVID-19?’ Agus waited for a response. None came. ‘Never mind, Novi, from your isolated plot in Kalimantan it will be a short flight to our party at Mount Kinabalu. Who would like to speak next?’

‘I will keep doing what I’m doing,’ said Desi. ‘Six million doesn’t go very far in Singapore investing, where I enjoy my career.’

‘Yes,’ Septimus nodded. ‘Like Desi, I will keep doing what I’m doing. Run my little restaurant in Perth, but buy the property instead of paying rent to a landlord. Maybe buy the adjacent buildings, and become a greedy landlord too. I tell you, things are booming here.’

‘Without a partner and kids, you’ll own half the restaurants in Vic Park before you’re dead,’ Okto said. ‘When I’ve blown my stash on cars and parties, I’ll be sure to move in with you rent free. In the meantime, I will be planning my exit from public relations for a certain Western Australian mining magnate. But, I will probably never get around to quitting. Too *hardlah*. So, consider me stuck, floating between parties and media events, with more cash and hangovers than usual. Love you, boys.’

After a pause, Julian came on screen. ‘I can’t wait to get my hands on US six million. I will quit my family’s construction business, and build a resort, cafe and guide business on a hill near Kinabalu national park. I will rip up the palm oil trees, replace them with native forest. It will be a sanctuary for animals, particularly you party animals. Novi, you can stay

whenever you get sick of networking the smart city, or whatever it is that you will do. In the meantime, I will recreate paradise for all of us.'

'Amen to that, Julian. I hear you, brother,' said Juni. 'After this transaction, I hope to never write another algorithm or deal with the Machiavellian politics inside a big tech organisation. Instead, I will buy a little property north of San Francisco and do nothing except get fit for our hike up Mount Kinabalu. Perhaps on the summit, I can think of something else to do. I can't program any more. Look, you see this hump on my back. See.' Juni turned sideways to show a slight hunch. 'See, what has happened to me. I'm so pissed off with my job. But, after this transaction, I will dedicate my days to getting rid of this hump, my hump, my fugly manly hump. I will be the best looking of you guys on Kinabalu summit. Wait and see.'

'Thank you, all, for the enlightening dreams and career nightmares.' Desi coughed a laugh at his own wit. 'OK, for the final resolution, Juni will you add the hyperlink for everyone's code transfer to the chat?'

'Done.'

'Thanks, Juni. For the final resolution, I would like everyone to complete the poll now showing on your screen once you have pasted your part of the alphanumeric string to the field that opens from the hyperlink.' Desi concentrated on touching the screen. 'There, it wasn't so hard, I have just pasted in my part of the string for Juni to reconstitute the private key. Now, I will respond Yes to the poll confirming that I have transferred my part of the private-key string to enable the sale of 2,000 Bitcoins and to receive my one-seventh share of the proceeds from the sale less twenty-thousand dollars towards the cost of the Mount Kinabalu meeting.'

Desi stared at screen. 'Great, that's three now four affirmatives on the poll. We still have three more to go. Septimus, are you still with us? OK, two more to go. We have two more outstanding? Who hasn't completed

the process? Juni, don't forget to do the poll too once you have entered your code.'

'I've done that already,' Juni banged his hand down in frustration. 'It's 3 a.m. here. Jesus, Okto, paste in your code.'

'Sorry, *Mas*.' Okto laughed. 'I couldn't help but hold you in suspense. Pasted and affirmed. Got you all.'

'OK, that makes six on the poll and seven once Okto votes yes,' said Desi smiling.

'I voted Yes already,' said Okto.

'Juni, do you have six or seven of the codes in place,' asked Desi.

'Just six, one is still missing.'

'OK, let me open up the poll results.' Desi was no longer smiling. 'Novi! Novi has not responded. Novi, have you lost your Internet connection? Has the power dropped again? Must be raining.'

'Novi, where are you?' sung Okto. 'This is not like you, baby. You are the most boring and predictable among us. Novi, a network engineer shouldn't drop from the network.'

'Novi is still in the meeting. Novi, Novi!' Desi peered at the screen. 'Maybe he has fallen asleep. I can see the top of his head, his forehead, I think.'

'Novi! Wake up man!' Juni shouted, then turned from screen. 'Sorry, love, just a work issue. OK, I will. Yes, go back to sleep.'

'Hey, I'll call his other mobile numbers,' Julian picked up a phone and began working the screen. 'The first one is ringing.'

'Hey.' Septimus leaned sideways into view. 'That screech, is that the ring tone?'

'A *pangkis* recording.' Julian mouthed the sound. 'Novi linked Indigenous songs to contacts so he knew who was calling, and from where. He knows this is me from Sabah.'

‘Maybe he can’t hear it with the headphones on. Try again.’

The piercing sound of a *pangkis* cry came from a mobile phone on Novi’s bedside table, animating the surrounding air but not him. Novi lay motionless, chin-on-chest, in bed with a phone propped against a towel on his otherwise naked belly. On screen, Julian held the phone and an anxious look.

The *pangkis* waved outwards, dampening through Novi’s body on one side and deflecting off an oxygen cylinder on the other. The high-frequency soundwaves ricocheted through a window into humid southern winds that carried the cry across Jakarta Bay. The *pangkis* skimmed across low-frequency zones over Java Sea to the northwest coast of Kalimantan where it was relayed home.

Inspired by viewing (on 10 September 2021) Yee I-Lann, 2021, *Pangkis*, a single channel video by of performers Tagaps Dance Theatre wearing the woven sculpture, ‘7 Headed Lalandau Hat’.