

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.

MY MOTHER NEVER LIKES TRAINS

Vannessa Hearman

My mother has a deep fear of trains. Train tracks, level crossings, railway bridges, metal carriages, and the rattle and vibration of trains all scare her. She refuses to get on trains if she can help it. Trains fill her with terror. She never rides trains in Melbourne, preferring trams and buses. When I lived in Melbourne and she did take trains, I saw how she stayed well away from the edges of platforms and kept close to other passengers. If a train was needed to get somewhere, she had to ride with someone else. When she walked to my place, not far from her house in the northern working-class suburb of Coburg, she timidly hung back from level crossings. She waited well until there were no flashing lights, no sign of any silver carriages, and either crept across slowly or dashed across very fast, nearly catapulting herself across the tracks.

I rode a train with her across the bridge between Denmark and Sweden once, and back again. That was a special occasion because of her love for Scandi-Noir. She swallowed her fear to ride that train across the bridge because she was a fan of the Scandi crime series *The Bridge*. As we rattled across the Øresund, the body of water separating Denmark and Sweden in the south, she peered out of the train window to gaze admiringly at the metal scaffolding of the bridge and the inky waters of the sound. She was not deterred by two grumpy old ladies who told us sternly that our suitcases were blocking the aisles. Perhaps she was too busy dealing with the mixture of fear and giddy excitement that came with being on that train.

My mother was not always so anxious. She was a brave, adventurous, single mother who married a man she hardly knew to give us a better life in Australia. As she kept telling me, she escaped Indonesia. I didn't know why escape was so important to her. Why was she so desperate

to leave and why did she fear trains so much? Were those two things connected? Her abiding anxiety about trains was always there, lurking, as I grew up. Did she try to tell me about her fear? I don't remember. I do remember, though, that she began telling me the story of trains once I started researching Indonesian history, especially the history of our little pocket of Indonesia, the areas around Surabaya and Malang where my mother spent almost four decades of her life.

Her fear of trains comes from memories of those other places, far from Scandinavia. When my mother was twenty, a terrible series of events happened in our homeland. The story of trains involves Indonesia's mass killings of 1965–66. Half a million people, mainly leftists, were massacred and the Indonesian Communist Party banned, as part of an army coup. Hundreds of thousands disappeared into detention as part of the army's dismantling of President Sukarno's supporter base. My mother was a student activist at university. She was also Chinese. The Chinese, in twisted Cold War fashion, were accused of conspiring with China to assist a communist coup in Indonesia. The army made out the Communists were trying to take power in Indonesia, so they had to do so instead to save the country. As punishment, Chinese shops were ransacked, their contents looted or thrown on the ground. On her journey between Malang, where our family lived, and Surabaya where she studied, my mother's bus travelled over a sea of mungbeans, corn, rice and whatever else was being thrown out from the Chinese shops. There were checkpoints on the road and buses were stopped and checked for 'communist fugitives'. She told me, 'In those days, I had to be really careful what I said when I opened my mouth.' She spent those years keeping her head down and spending the rest of the time working out with her friends how to protect and hide those wanted by the authorities, 'We would ride our bikes to friends' places and there hold meetings to work out who needed to be hidden, and where we would put them.' She was never detained but was forced to report regularly to the army for a few months.

Among those in what I have referred to as Indonesia's underground railroad, being smuggled into safe houses or disappearing into hiding someplace, was a young man, a former activist. He found work with my mother's older brother, organising freight to be transported on trains. In a time when the army was persecuting more and more people to keep their control secure, it was not long before they came for him. The young man who had remade himself to survive underground wasn't going to give up easily. When he saw the men coming towards him, he took off. In his haste, as he ran, he didn't see the train coming. Perhaps he never knew what hit him, so swift and hard the metal carriage ploughed into his slight figure. But my mother saw the whole thing. Perhaps the heartbreak was not only in seeing another human life taken, but in imagining the loss, the loss of someone who had successfully outwitted the system only to be taken away so gruesomely and thoughtlessly. The waste of it all.

The massacres, torture, and killing of over a million people leave traces, whether within us, our families, or in the landscape in which we walk. My mother reacts physically to memories of these events, feeling dizzy and nauseous. So the book I wrote on these massacres in East Java, in our homeland, sits on her bookshelf, a source of pride, but not something she can physically bring herself to read. She was there, she tells me. She doesn't need to read it in a book.