

Westerly

Online Special Issue 12,
Caretaking

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online
Caretaking

New Writing from
Western Australia

Essay

Fiction

Creative Non-Fiction

Poetry

In this issue

Omar Sakr

Elizabeth Tan

Jessica White

Sean West

Danno Hansen

Westerly

Guest edited by
Caitlin Maling

Caitlin Maling is a Western Australian writer with four books a poetry, the most recent of which is *Fish Work* (UWA Publishing, 2021). A fifth volume *Spore or Seed* is forthcoming with Fremantle Press in July 2023. Her current work-in-progress is a hybrid manuscript of non-fiction and poetry addressing Western Australian coastal ecologies and their writers.

Poetry

Omar Sakr
Relevant to the Day 11
Things That Saved My Life
Lately 12
John Kinsella, Tracy Ryan
and Tim Kinsella
Familial Caring 13
Tracy Ryan
Ecology 14
Tim Kinsella
To the Great Flooded Gum
of Toodyay 16
John Kinsella
Nurture 17

Sean West
Mermaid's Purse 20
Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon
Ghazal to a Mother's Love 21
Danno Hansen
Moth to a Flame 33
DarkLight 35

Photo Essay

Hannah Gregory
Withheld, Within,
Withstanding 22

**Creative
Non-Fiction**

Jessica White
Quintessence 26

Essay

Emily Potter
Resisting the 'White Family':
climate crisis, domestic noir,
and new communities of care in
Briohny Doyle's *Echolalia*. 37

Fiction

Elizabeth Tan
Funicular Simulator
(Carry Each Other) 49

Submissions 55
Subscriptions 56

The years of the pandemic have placed pressure on notions of parenthood, from the practicality of lockdowns to the existential confrontations of mortality associated with a constant tickertape of death statistics. At the same time, there has been an increasingly public debate around all aspects of choosing to have (or not have) children: environmental impacts, societal pressures, gender roles. Evidence of this can be found in the many recent Australian publications taking parenthood—and especially motherhood—as their topic. To take just a small sample, Natalie Kon-Yu's political memoir *The Cost of Labour* (2022) makes visible all types of work associated with childbearing, Sian Prior's *Childless: a story of freedom and longing* (2022) confronts being childless not as a matter of choice, while Gina Rushton's *The Most Important Job in the World* (2022) devotes a chapter specifically to the impact of climate change on choosing whether to have children. Additionally, Eleanor Jackson's *Gravidity and Parity* (2021) joins Astrid Lorange's *Labour and Other Poems* (2019) and L. K. Holt's *Birth Plan* (2019) as exemplars of full-length poetry collections considering birth and pregnancy. In her *Guardian* article tracing the publication of many of these texts, Donna Lu illustrates the dominant tonal trend of the discussion when she states '[t]here is an uncomfortable cognitive dissonance in wanting to bring children into an increasingly uninhabitable world, but often it is not enough to nullify the wanting.' (np) This pessimistic ambivalence runs opposed to the dominant populist discourse, which, particularly of motherhood, could be described as aggressively optimistic, or as Kon-Yu puts it (in the context of the pregnant person) 'bouncy, kale-eating, high-ponytail-wearing' (110–111).

In this special issue, I want to locate ways of thinking about caretaking, both from a parental perspective and on a wider ecological level, operating in the spaces between populist positivity and the negative emotions

rightly associated with climate crisis—the most common of which in current discourse is solastalgia. Coined by Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht in his article of the same name, solastalgia ‘is the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation)’ (48). It is solastalgia Sian Prior considers when she writes, in *Childless*, that she wants to tell her imagined unborn child ‘about the new word that’s been invented to describe how you feel when something in the natural world is being destroyed before your very eyes’ (48). I wanted to seek out work that unpicks joy and hope in caretaking, because I am not particularly good at them—both as a human and as writer whose work has been described as preoccupied with ‘interpersonal and environmental brutality’ (Jeffery np). I would like to say that in parenting and motherhood I found joy and hope, because that sounds like something I could sell. The deeper truth is that I found a greater incentive to seek out hope. As strange as it may sound, in becoming a parent there was decidedly less grief than I expected: for my old life, for my future self, for the world.

Albrecht addresses solastalgia specifically as a new type of mourning. He writes:

There is an expanding domain of human emotion tied to the feelings of grief and loss at that which has already negatively changed or disappeared in the here and now. In addition, there is also anticipatory grief and mourning for that which is currently under stress and will most likely pass away in the foreseeable future. (‘Solastalgia and the New Mourning’ 294–5)

However, almost contradictorily, I personally found in caring for my newborn a similar emotional landscape I encountered caring for my very ill father: something about the act of caring embedded me in the here and now. It made me wonder what would happen if we deliberately placed the role of the parent into wider questions regarding caretaking, rather than holding it as its own separate topic? Hence, in my solicitations for this issue, I wrote:

Freya Matthews says that it may not be possible to save the world without ‘first acquiescing in its loss’ (52–3). If we accept this, what does it mean to serve in a care-taking role for the Earth? Although it can be embedded with grief and bound by mundanity, caring is by necessity a hopeful and loving act, one perhaps most embodied in the role of the parent. Caring is a

complex and multifaceted role that occurs across and beyond systems. It is also especially fitting to consider ‘care-taking’ in 2022, an election year, when we approach the care-taker period in government—a holding pattern before potentially seismic change. I hope the issue will consider the ways in which people care, and where writing falls within that process.

The responses I received were as varied in both form and theme as you’d expect from trying to canvas such insurmountably vast topics. Yet, one commonality that emerged across pieces was that of reconfiguring ideas of community and kinship. In the piece ‘Familial Caring’, John Kinsella, Tracy Ryan and Tim Kinsella (three writers from the Wheatbelt who also happen to be a family) each offer poetic ideas of ‘caring’, carefully framed by their contextualising remarks which open with the idea that ‘[a] family is a community, if not a commune, and one that connects and crosses over with other forms of community.’ In her poem ‘Ecology’, Tracy elaborates on the nuances of how these different communities interact, stating that ‘Sometimes / the care is in leaving be. Other times, acting.’

John articulates how caring, or ‘acting’, for country means different things for different human communities within the context of ongoing colonialism:

We are not family to this country, but we are to each other, and together our different poetic voices attempt to contribute to a healing from out of the colonial destruction, to maybe contribute to another way through.

His son Tim’s poem ‘To the Great Flooded Gum of Toodyay’ offers one such way of reading and nurturing country without being appropriative, through focussing on the witnessing potential of the gum itself and the communities of parrots it fosters. Similarly, Sean West’s contribution to the issue, ‘Mermaid’s Purse’, centres on what may be observed or known, highlighting the limits of the human gaze as newly born sharks ‘flinch, then glide out / of view—quick to escape from you’.

In ‘Ghazal to a Mother’s Love’, Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon offers an extension to our consideration of interspecies kinship, where ‘The daddy long-legs, a mother, cradles her albino egg sac of blind love’. Here, Damjanovich-Napoleon approaches the spider as a way of pressing upon the similarities of parenting—across species and across genders. Uncannily, Jess White’s essay ‘Quintessence’ also takes the spider as its central object. The golden orb-weaver spider becomes a loom through which she weaves questions of romantic partnership and climate change,

all the while asking if there are limits to care and how we—like the spider—might create lasting webs of interconnectivity beyond ourselves that outlast a singular life.

Poet Omar Sakr's two pieces interrogate what it means to care and how parenting specifically functions within this: he asks, 'should we bring life into what is ending?' Hearing the neighbour's kid play basketball loudly, he states: 'through him I know that by virtue of not / killing kids, one can feel like a parent'. In 'Things That Saved My Life Lately', he illustrates how hope can exist simultaneously with trauma, searching 'snout in the air, furious / in search of her [his mother's] hands, and what, together, we might unknot.'

As we have seen in John Kinsella's note, this collection of works has been drawn together on unceded Noongar land, and work from our writers comes from the lands of many unceded Nations. Refracting these criticisms of colonialism, Emily Potter's article 'Resisting the "White Family": climate crisis, domestic noir and new communities of care in Briohny Doyle's *Echolalia*' links questions of how ongoing colonialism results in climate crisis with an interrogation of how different forms of community might offer alternate ways of living that tread lighter across ecologies.

It is important to highlight the obvious connection between questions of caretaking and the environment and First Nations peoples who have cared for and maintained these lands for tens of thousands of years. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, a Goenpul woman and scholar of the Quandamooka people, articulates that an Indigenous 'ontological relationship to land, the ways that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature of our relation to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable difference between us and the non-Indigenous' (11). The two poems offered by Noongar writer Daniel Hansen are demonstrative of this difference; 'Dead Moths' ends with a righteous anger at colonisers who 'did it wrong', 'burnt it wrong' and 'burnt us wrong', while 'DarkLight' shows the unbreakable empowerment 'of the Noyt / of the Koort / & of the Koortoomidj'. For readers interested in poetry that reflects similarly on First Nations' caretaking in all its irreducibility, I would encourage them to seek out more of Hansen's work and that of his contemporaries Evelyn Araluen, Alison Whittaker, Ellen van Neerven, Charmaine Papertalk Green, Jeanine Leane, Natalie Harkin, Elfie Shiosaki and Ali Cobby Eckermann, whose book *Inside My Mother* (2015) is a landmark text illustrating the complexities of these issues.

In a recent article for the *American Imago* special issue on 'Environmental Grief', Albrecht draws a careful distinction between 'the

experience of permanent loss that is at the heart of human grief', and 'the experience of loss in what we call the biophysical environment' which is 'rarely a case of extinction or complete obliteration' ('Negating Solastalgia' 20). He continues, '[s]olastalgia offers hope in that damaged places can be repaired' ('Negating Solastalgia' 20). I found the most hope in Elizabeth Tan's short story 'Funicular Simulator (Carry Each Other)', even if it was in the most unlikely of places: a blossoming of funicular-centred apps and games against a backdrop of a world changed by climate devastation and pandemic. With Tan's characteristic ellipticism and warmth, the image of the funicular becomes one of connection. At the very least, it says we should learn 'to do that much for each other[...]: let people love harmlessly the things that they love'. Here the word 'harmless' seems as key as the word 'love', and suggests that we must be aware in our choices, even in how we choose to love or to care, of the impact these choices have on the other lives around us—human and other-than-human.

In his *American Imago* article, Albrecht outlines that he has always believed 'solastalgia is an emotional state that can be countered and overcome', often through 'personal and community action' ('Negating Solastalgia' 20). Perhaps the pulling together of work into an issue such as this is one such type of action? However humbled we may be by personal limitations, the conversations that might occur across work may form a larger, stronger network capable of illuminating the way through and out of solastalgia. The visual essay and issue cover featuring the work of Western Australian glass artist Hannah Gregory (a member of my own family network) illustrates the beauty that can come from considering how things might layer atop one another. As John Kinsella writes in his poem 'Nurture', 'Proficiency / seems to rely on co-existence.' I hope the reader, in entering into this special issue, will find themselves in community with our writers and in consideration of the types of co-existence they are engaged in, whether through parenting, family, culture, ecology or all of the above.

Caitlin Maling, August 2022