Creatively Writing Towards The Future

At Longbeach Place with Mairi Neil
December 2015
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Foreword

People on the outside think there’s something magical about writing, that you go up in the attic at midnight and cast the bones and come down in the morning with a story, but it isn’t like that. You sit … and you work, and that’s all there is to it.

Harlan Ellison

In writing class, we use prompts to trigger poetry, short stories stories, and memoir whether we are writing an article or essay, writing the first draft of a larger project, or writing a finished short piece.

Writers have homework topics or revise what is written in class, an earlier assignment or write something new for the next session. We give feedback on assignments and the various creative exercises. Throughout the term everyone is given the opportunity to find their writing voice and develop a sense of unity and rhythm with their writing.

The audience for well written nonfiction and fiction has expanded, in large part because of the increasing demand created by the internet and e-publishing opportunities non-existent a decade ago. What excites me about teaching creative writing is working with students – regardless of their interests and experience levels – to help them achieve their writing goals, including the possibility of getting their work published.

To record our stories is important and in class we learn various creative writing skills and techniques to make our stories as interesting and unique as possible. Poetry and prose, adding illustrations - all make writing varied and appealing to readers.

Please enjoy this interesting body of work and perhaps think about joining us - good writing, whether non fiction or fiction needs to be encouraged and practised. In class you get prompts, motivation, encouragement, feedback and the discipline to keep writing. To finish what you start and of course, the opportunity to be published in a class anthology!

Mairi Neil,
Writer/Tutor

Writing Creatively Towards The Future

(Cover: Examples of craft from Storybook Yarn Art Trail 2015)
I live on the corner of Station Street and Edithvale Road, opposite the railway station and next door to Oke’s Milk Bar. I’m in Grade 6 at Edithvale State School No. 3790, which sits at the bottom of Edithvale Road, just before the swamp and my friend Bev’s dairy farm.

Mr. Dickson is our teacher. He’s a bit scary because he’s strict, but he makes the lessons interesting. We march into school each morning and stand beside our desks until Mr. Dickson says, ‘Good morning, girls and boys.’

We reply in chorus, ‘Good morning, Mr. Dickson.’

He tells us, ‘Be seated,’ and I sit alone in the second back desk because I talk too much if someone sits beside me. It’s easier to concentrate on school lessons if I have no distractions. If you have bad eyesight, you sit near the front along with the boys and girls who are naughty, or not very bright.

We learn arithmetic, spelling, dictation, reading, nature study and other lessons. Nature Study’s my favourite. Mr Dickson tells us about butterflies, worms, birds and flowers. We write notes in a special grey book interleaved with tissue paper so that the drawings we do in pastel don’t smudge against our writing. I like drawing, especially birds, and each year I enter the Gould Bird League competition hoping my drawings win. My favourite bird is the Kingfisher – so pretty and mainly bright blue. My other
favourite subject is Arithmetic. I'm good at addition, subtraction, multiplication, fractions and decimals.

We have knitting and sewing classes. For sewing we hand-sew a pillowcase. It takes ages using a fine back-stitch. The boys do woodwork, but I don’t know what they make. Mr. Dickson gives us good advice. I’m sure I’ll always remember it. He tells us to put our best efforts into everything we do. ‘If you knit a hot water bottle cover for a friend make the same effort as you would if you’re going to sell it.’ He adds, ‘Don’t think, because it’s for a friend, it doesn’t matter if you join the wool with a knot instead of splicing it, or you don’t bother to pick up a dropped stitch.’

Before we go on an excursion by train, he warns, ‘Never put your elbows or arms outside the train window. If another train goes past, your arm will be chopped off!’ I’ll definitely remember that!

When I was in the lower grades, WW2 had just finished, but we used to bring food to send to England because the people there didn’t have enough to eat. Mummy always gave me a tin of condensed milk to add to the parcels. We get free milk at school every day to drink before morning play. Sometimes it’s warm because it’s stored in the shelter sheds. Mr Dickson says, ‘The Government gives you milk to make sure you grow up with healthy bones.'

The boys and girls who don’t go home for lunch take turns in weaving scarves on looms in the hallway outside the classroom. I always walk home at lunch time, sometimes with Kathleen, Lorraine or Nola who turn off at Clydebank Road. If Mummy has gone to town she leaves the back door key on the shelf in the wash house. I check the clock in the lounge room to make sure I return to school before the bell rings. Sometimes if Mummy is going to town she’ll give me a shilling to buy my lunch. I love these days and
go to the fish shop and buy chips and potato cakes. I may buy an apple from Mrs. Layfield at the green grocers with the change, or an ice-block from the milk bar near the school.

The boys play football and the girls play basketball for sport. Boys and girls play rounders together, but we have to watch out for magpies who nest in the tall pine trees. One boy was pecked on the head!

I’m good at class work, but not very good at sport and never get chosen for school teams. This makes me sad because my sisters are good at sport and excellent at swimming. I struggled to pass the Herald Swimming Certificate.

There’s a girl in our class who has a glass eye. She takes her close friends to the toilets and removes it to show them. I’ve never seen it and don’t want to. We’re supposed to go to the toilet at play time and if we need to go during class we have to put up our hands and ask to leave the room.

If someone asks Mr. Dickson, ‘Can I leave the room?’ He corrects them, ‘You can leave the room, but you may not.’ He reminds us that you can do lots of things, but it doesn’t mean that you’re allowed to do them. He also reminds us to say please. I always remember to say, ‘May I leave the room, please, Mr. Dickson?’

A girl is repeating Grade 6. She has bosoms already. Her dull hair is like straw and she isn’t very bright. There’s a cruel rumour that she doesn’t wear pants under her school dress so the boys drop their pencils on the floor to check. The boys are not very nice. She has a big red scar across her elbow and tells us she was run over by a ten ton truck, but we don’t believe her. Sometimes she runs away from school. I don’t blame her.

Another girl has been wearing a pixie hat to school, even in the classroom. She had nits and her hair was shaved off. Luckily, I’ve never had nits or worms. They both seem yucky.

I work hard at my lessons because next year I hope to go to Mordialloc-Chelsea High School and join my sisters. My big brother goes to Caulfield Tech. I don’t know what I want to be when I grow up, but I’m good at writing and help put a school newspaper together. Bev’s Mum is a typist. Unfortunately, by the time she has typed up our sports results and other stories it’s no longer news. Maybe I’ll write made-up stories.
An Edithvale Childhood

Betty Nelson

Lady Dugan officially opened the Chelsea Bush Nursing Hospital on 5th July 1941 in time for the birth on Fathers’ Day, Sunday, 7th September of two baby girls. I was one of those babies and the other was Adrienne Beames, daughter of well-known football identity Percy Beames. In later years Adrienne was to excel in squash, tennis and athletics, becoming an unofficial world record holder in the marathon in 1971.

In the May of 1941 my family had moved from Murrumbeena to the perfect location in Edithvale on the corner of Station Street and Edithvale Road close to all modes of public transport, the shops, schools, churches and the beach.

Our home at 225 Station Street on the corner of Edithvale Road and Station Street

My father died from a combination of Dengue fever and kidney stones in the February of 1943 whilst serving with the RAE 2/3 Docks Operating Company on Thursday Island. Not yet 30 years of age, my mother was left to rear four young children under the age of 6. With the support of the local community she was successful in her bid to obtain a War Widow’s pension.

Edithvale was considered a beachside resort in the first half of the 20th century and was the destination for summer holiday-makers from the inner city and country areas. Most people travelled by train carrying their heavy suitcases down the ramp to be met by the billycart brigade. Young boys and girls offered to transport the visitors’ luggage in their carts to their accommodation for a tip of threepence or sixpence for their efforts.
Visitors with a bit of extra cash hired a black taxi from the rank outside Oke’s milk bar on Station Street.

Edithvale came alive during those summer months. The Esplanade became a blaze of light when the annual carnival was held on the central park. It was no where near as large as the Mordialloc Carnival which sported several rides and side shows but, being in walking distance of the locals and holiday makers, it was always busy with customers buying lucky envelopes, tickets on the spinning wheel and trying their hand at hoopla while children enjoyed their rides on the merry-go-round. The more hardened gamblers enjoyed playing “Housie-Housie” in the Life Saving Club hall.

On very hot nights the beach was crowded as families sat on the sand enjoying the sea breeze, paddling in the shallows or fishing for flounder. “Beware of the stingrays at night as they venture into the warm shallows”, we were warned.

A playground overlooking the beach provided hours of entertainment for small children as they queued to use the swings or slide. Again we were warned, “Check the surface before you slide. You may burn your backside”. Today’s play equipment is much more user friendly.

The kiosk in the Life Saving Club building provided thirsty customers with cold drinks, ice creams, and boiling water for their teapots. The kiosk has now been replaced with a comfortable café supplying beverages and light meals.

At some time long before we moved to Edithvale the bayside beaches had diving boards a couple of hundred yards offshore. By the 1940’s only a few posts remained but they were still an attraction to swimmers who would clamber up the rotting poles to take a dive or rest. Very few people swam beyond those posts. The fine white sand that Edithvale is renowned for, wasn’t perfect for building castles during the “Sun” newspaper’s children’s annual sandcastle competition but the addition of a bucket of seawater to the mix made all the difference. Add some shells and seaweed and the
mounds of sand transformed into castles. Wide sand banks formed where children could make wet muddy sand castles and dig canals. Babies could safely sit and splash in the warm shallow water between the shore and the sandbank under the watchful eye of their parents.

All year round the Unity Theatre on Nepean Highway was an attraction to young and old. The Saturday matinee was the highlight of the week for the children. For an entry of 9d. per ticket we enjoyed cartoons and serials before interval and a full-length movie after the break. Hop-a-long Cassidy was a favourite. Sometimes bun-eating competitions were held on stage during interval with the winner receiving free entry to the following Saturday’s matinee. Double feature evening programs changed twice a week and many patrons had permanent bookings. With the introduction of television, custom declined and the theatre finally closed its doors. Today the building houses a large St. Vinnie’s op-shop.

We could safely walk to school unaccompanied and return home for lunch. Classes were large with around 50 students in a grade. Teachers were mainly single young women, some of whom had just completed their education at Mordialloc-Chelsea High School, and they must have found it difficult to control so many children under their care. Not far from the school was the Edithvale swamp. For years Councils had attempted to drain the swamp which occasionally flooded across Edithvale Road. Our Grade 4 teacher took groups of children to the swamp during the lunch recess to plant willow trees but I doubt if they ever survived. Now this nuisance of a swamp has been developed as the Edithvale Wetland providing a safe haven for numerous varieties of birds.
Wells Road has now been built up and the dairy farms replaced by housing estates, shops and businesses, a retirement village and a pub. However, during our childhood we would wander through the paddocks collecting mushrooms, wild flowers and yellow daisies for daisy chains but we had to watch out for the cows. When we sighted the green gasometer, we knew we were at Northcliffe Avenue and we could take a shortcut to our grandparents’ home in Vincent Avenue.

The three local churches, the Church of England in Lochiel Avenue, and the Presbyterian and Methodist churches in Edithvale Road, were important centres of the local community. As members of the Methodist Church Sunday School all the children formed a choir to sing at the annual Anniversaries, performed in concerts, attended fancy dress parties, annual dinners and prize giving. The annual Bazaar was one of two highlights. Various decorated stalls filled the church hall and the children participated in the competitions for best decorated bikes and prams. I am sure the local newsagent ran out of crepe paper on these occasions. The second highlight was the annual picnic held in the Dandenongs with the destination being Ferntree Gully or Kallista. We travelled in a furniture van with makeshift seating and sang all our favourite pop songs as we left Edithvale behind. The children from the Hills would pass us on the way as they headed to the beach at Edithvale for their picnic.

I haven’t shifted far from my childhood home, now living in Parkdale, and I have seen many changes in the City of Kingston over the past 70 years, but the beaches are still a wonderful attraction along with some great adventure playgrounds for children. Gone are the mayoral balls and beachside carnivals but we now have Food and Musical Festivals open to everyone from within the City of Kingston and elsewhere. The two local public hospitals, the Chelsea Bush Nursing Hospital, and the Mordialloc-Cheltenham Community Hospital have long been closed but have been replaced with other medical facilities.

I have always lived near the sea and would never consider moving away from the City of Kingston as it boasts some of the cleanest and safest beaches on Port Phillips Bay.
This Is I

Toula Nikolaou

I am from an island from far away where the women wear black, the coffee is strong and an old house high in the mountains beckons.
I am from a childhood home rarely happy, where I learnt to protect myself from anger and angst. I am from a mother who knew much, but was never able to transform her loneliness to creativity.
I am from a house where there was little happiness but
I am also from a marriage where someone loved me to distraction and treated me like a queen.
I am from another world where someone loved me deeply.
I am from baked coconut biscuits savoured by a visitor on Saturday afternoons.
I am from a house where politics were discussed freely.
I am from fields of buttercups I would pick for my mother.
I am from a childhood full of animal smells, of horses dark and shiny with snorting breath floating on cool winter mornings.
I am from a school nurtured by a teacher who helped me relate to the environment and seek a place of joy, without hunger where children are loved. I am from a place where books engulfed me; where Enid Blyton would light my way.
I am from a father who took me fishing on cool summer nights. I am from a man who was sad and angry, hateful sometimes and sometimes loving. A man who gave me a voice and helped me understand the political world.
I am from many, many things of light and shade, black and white, from struggling teenager to thinking adult. From marrying young and living with husband, George, to his end.
I am from a dark place, but am now in a lighter place.
Sometimes I feel George is here for ever.
Hands
Toula Nikolaou

His hand rests against the white sheet. It is brown with nice fingers and white, strong nails. 'Will you please cut my nails,' he whispers. 'I can't do it.'

I should do it, but he doesn't want me to. I feel sad.

The nurse sits on the bed and takes hold of his hand. 'You have nice nails, George.' She turns his hand over. It is dark brown and gnarled. 'I see you have a worker's hand, rough and soft at the same time.'

I slip into a memory of my father... his workers’ hands. I’d catch him sometimes opening his hand and studying it. He constantly looked at his hands. First, the right hand and then the left. 'What are you looking at?' he’d say.

Embarrassed, I looked away, but wondered why he does it. Does he think about all those houses he built. All those dreadful companies that exploited him.

I gaze at a photo of a young man mending a net. A curly-headed man. Smiling. What drove him? It is a photo from Greece. Ithaca. Young, he is so young, and handsome. He left the island never to return. How hopeless it seemed. All that pain, and yet there were good times too.

Good times. He used to take me to Greek dances when I was a teenager. He took me to Luna Park, and to his relatives, their coffee shop in Middle Brighton. I’m nostalgic. I see my uncle in his shop. Strong hands kneading dough for bread for the customers. His hands were soft and white. Big hands that moulded the dough so gently. I remember he had a big moustache. I liked him very much. He gave me all the Enid Blyton books that once belonged to his children. Happy times rummaging in the big chest of books. I am now alone. These people gone from my life.
I stare at my hands. Study them carefully. First one then the other. They are starting to resemble my mother’s hands. Nails, untidy. They seem to grow all over the place. I never examined them. They always seemed to be there.

Age creeps up. I was always vain. At thirty, I thought I was old. I look at my rings. I wear George’s ring now. He never wanted it really. He had a friend whose finger was cut off, caught in machinery at work.

George, poor George dying at 68. Not very long is it? I have his ashes at home. People are always advising me to do this and that about George. I can’t do it. I want to know he is still around.

I wanted a photo to keep in my wallet. Searched high and low. One day, while dusting my bedroom, there it was - a small photo of George before he became ill. How it got there a mystery, but what a strange coincidence. Serendipity.

My mother’s hands were always busy, working for years, never a rest for her. She moulded pastry for pistachio, meatballs, stuffed capsicums. Household chores. Washed clothes. All by hand. She could be gentle. She allowed me to have whatever animal I found in the street. She never said, no.

She is gone, now. Almost 22 years since she died. Young!! I have a photo of her on my wall holding Charlie, her little dog. Her hands rest on the small dog. She appears serene like a Madonna.

These people I’ve loved. All gone to a place that I do not know, but I am glad they were part of my life. I am a far richer person for knowing them.
I am from a mother who loved ornaments I would buy for a few pennies. Now I have to care for them. They will disappear when I am gone. I am from the tears she shed when I gave them to her. Silent tears. "Here mum these are for you." (Who will have them when I have gone?)

Her warm, soft hands would touch me sometimes. Would wash my father when he was sick. Shiny, brown hands full of strength.

I am from a father who would get me to hold the rivets on his boats. 'Hold here.' My hands, small, would hold the hammer.

I am from a womb that bore me with great difficulty, a painful world. A woman who ached like a tree falling, toppling in a forest, branches breaking in pain. I am from a place where roses grew in profusion against the shed door. I would pick them for my mother. 'Here, these are for you.'

I am from a dark sea where waves shatter against rocks. Where my father watched a waning moon flash on the water. I am often in that space with my father. Rivulets of water run down my legs. Silver, crashing waves weave around the rock. A black rock in the distance. It stands like a sentinel in the distance, a beacon. Yes Black Rock. I know the place well. My childhood dark, brooding like the rock.

I am from a house with warm odours of bright, aromatic scones baked on a Saturday afternoon. Sharing these with siblings. Mmmm these are so fluffy. They break down like fairy floss at Luna Park.

It was called Carrum House. A light in my childhood. Golden buttercups shining under my chin. Honeysuckle scent brings back my youth; sitting on a toilet at the end of the garden. Honeysuckle, golden droplets of colour, soft to the touch as bees descend and suck the warm nectar. I love you Carrum. Magpies warbling in the distance heralding the dawn.

A white dress starched, cascading with lace. White lace up to the neck, hugging a youthful girl's body. Long, dark, luxuriant hair falling around the shoulders. A Greek girl from a place where an eerie grandfather left five small children and a wife silently lying with child at her breast. The dress, the best money can buy, wrapped around my body, becoming rivers of lace.
The Greek word for ‘return’ is nostos. Algos means ‘suffering.’ So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return.

Milan Kundera
Creatively Writing Towards The Future

Naso

Toula Nikolaou

A raging torrent, ripping down the gorge.
No hope for the weather-worn rocks.
It spills over into my dreams. My dreams sad with bestial omens.

Handcuffed, leaning towards a wall. A bang, a fall to the ground. Crushed bones. White arms. He lies, gasping. The words from his mouth seething; angry breath coming from a red mouth. Down, down into his venting spleen.

He sees me standing there. He calls, but I cannot go near for I fear the rantings of a mad man. He burns the eyes that have watched for years.

He will not save me, but he will try to drag me under. He will not succeed.
Am I like him? Destined to suffer, what, I don’t know.
I always wondered what he did and the reason he did it at all.
But I want him back. To explain something. Something.

What did he want of me? I do not know, but I feel my destiny lies with him. There is still time to find out.

Remember a wedding. A girl-child breathing his breath, doing his tie. We are close. Glistening eyes looking deeply into a hurting heart. Pain too much to bear.

I will bear it no matter what and I shall put him away, so far away, I will not think of him evermore.

And in the end, we were all just humans, drunk on the idea that love, only love, could heal our brokenness.
I am doileys and lace in my mother's place
Cabinet filled with treasures long collected
Sliding glass revealing vase shaped like a boot
Crystal goblets, ashtrays, bowls and trays
But no mementos from her mother's place

I am lily-of-the-valley and hyacinth on laminate tables
Picked from gardens on afternoon walks
Blue hydrangeas stem pounded with kitchen mallet
Violets in a chipped vase releasing delicate scent
Like the talc, I buy her from the Mothers' Day stall
Because I know she likes it

I am cheap bead necklaces on a once-proud neck
Belted floral dresses hemmed just at the knee
Thick brows on grey-blue eyes that have seen much
Coloured sandals adorning shapely legs
Not revealing toes frozen in snowy lands long ago

I am red-polished nails on freckled hands
That wipe and clean and bake
And give comfort and stroke us with care
That cook semolina pudding when I am sick
And chicken soup with egg noodles on cold Melbourne nights
So far away from whence she came

The same soup her mother made long ago
From chickens slaughtered and plucked in a yard
The feathers filled doonas, the giblets and marrow
All used to good purpose in small rural towns like hers
Where no mementos remain
From her mother's place

I am my mother and her mother...I am my mother and her mother...
Do You Have Any Fears Or Phobias?

Denise Weiss

How timely is this question? I have just completed a very expensive course entitled 'Fearless Flyers'. I started investigating fear of flying courses online several months ago. My daughter and her three children live in America. Although I have been to the USA several times, it is nine years since I last visited there. That means I have missed the births of two of her children.

I was there for her wedding. I was there a year later for the birth of Yisroel Dovid, her firstborn. I was there again when he was nine months old because, well, because I just had to see him again. He is nine and a half years old now, and I haven't been back. I can't fly anymore. I don't know why. I'm not sure what happened nine years ago, but some change occurred.

I recall being unwell before flying home from that last trip. I know I was sick on the plane all the way back to Australia. I felt like a wrung-out rag by the time I got to Melbourne. Then I went through menopause. And I never flew again.

I just worked a little harder to make sure I could save the money for tickets to fly my daughter and the children to Australia every year. While he was alive, my father contributed too. Nothing made him happier than to see them. He planned for weeks what to shop, buy, cook, prepare for the day of arrival. He had the spending money prepared for his favourite (and only) granddaughter. Her favourite biscuits were on the table. All was ready.

But then my son decided to go overseas. Not just go overseas, but live overseas. My anxiety increased. At forty-eight, I was an empty-nester. Both my children were a continent away. The three of us were on three different continents.

I tried to keep busy. I took on as much work as I could. I taught classes at three different neighbourhood houses each week. I joined a gym. I enrolled at TAFE to do further study. I took homestay students. I tutored students privately. I read books, trying to understand what had happened to me. I had coffee with friends. But I missed my kids. I missed being a mum. And a grandmum. I had nothing to ‘mother’. And I couldn’t fly to them.

I would dream about visiting them. I would daydream about visiting them. I would imagine places we would go. I asked them lots of questions, which I’m sure they hated.
Creatively Writing Towards The Future

But I needed to know what their lives were like - what they did, who their friends were, what they ate. It was the closest I could get to them.

My computer skills were improved. They had to. It was my means of communicating with them. As much as I hated computers, I simultaneously marvelled at how great they were, the immediacy and frequency with which I could speak to my kids. I set up new accounts. I downloaded things. I could see them. I could hear them. I bought speakers. I bought a camera. I increased my internet capacity. I changed providers. When my computer 'broke', I went berserk. ‘Fix it now’, I would yell at the Indian person on the other end of the line I'd been waiting on for forty-seven minutes.

I was now having panic attacks, palpitations, irregular heartbeats, insomnia, attacks of Psoriasis and Psoriatic Arthritis, Lupus, Costochondritis, Tinnitus, Fibromyalgia… I was attending clinics at the Alfred Hospital constantly and being referred to new ones. I was seeing a heart specialist, podiatrist, hand therapist, rheumatologist, occupational therapist, dermatologist, psychologist, orthotist and finally, a psychiatrist. They said I had anxiety.

I was avoiding freeways, lifts, public transport, cinemas, social situations. I was cancelling work and social arrangements. I wanted my kids home. Them my stepmother died. My father was distraught. I did my best to look after him. My son came home but left again. My daughter visited. Flying was not happening for me, but neither were many other things.

My son has now informed me that he will be leaving Australia for good in 2017. ‘But what about me?’ I asked. ‘You can come with us,’ was his reply. So I begin to panic (pardon the pun).

Thus started my search for ‘fear of flying’. Thank G-d for computers. In seconds, I had more information than I could take in. I kept coming back to a course called ‘Fearless Flyers’. It cost almost as much as a flight to the USA. For me, it was prohibitive. A kind person helped me with the cost. Before I could chicken out, I sent off the money and the application form. Time was short. They only run two courses a year in Melbourne. I needed to get my act together.

So on October the seventeenth, after a sleepless night, I arrived in Essendon at the Qantas Training Centre at 9 am ready to conquer my fear of flying. By 5 pm that day, I felt a tiny glimmer of optimism, maybe, just maybe, I MIGHT fly again. I imagined myself in my daughter’s house, looking after the kids, going shopping together, surprising my cousins… I smiled that night, imagining a future that included travel, holidays, FUN.
On October eighteenth, Day Two of the course, things changed. Driving through the tunnel on the way to Essendon, spun me out. My headache worsened mid-morning when we sat in a plane (on the ground with the door open). I took the stairs; the others took the lift. The flight simulator experience finished me off, sitting in a tiny black space with five people packed into it, instruments above, below and behind, narrow windows, 'turbulence' flinging us around, being thrown forward as we 'landed'... you get the picture. I closed my eyes, trying not to vomit and desperate for it to end. ‘That was amazing,’ said one woman as I stumbled out. I didn't feel the same way.

The following weekend we would be going to the control tower, followed by the climax of the course, lunch in Sydney, flying there and back.

It took me two days to recover from the previous weekend. I did not manage to complete the course. I've resigned myself to being ‘grounded’ for the remainder of my claustrophobic life. I felt better after deciding that.

So, in answer to the question, I say yes. I have a fear of flying. I am claustrophobic. I don’t know whether either is fixable. I have my meditation CD and my breathing exercises. I have Valium. I have had hypnotherapy. I have done the ‘Fearless Flyers’ course. Well, half of it. Perhaps I’ll take a train to Sydney…
I've always had a fascination for hands. You can tell a lot about a person by looking at their hands. When choosing a boyfriend, I always observed their hands. They had to be nice.

My parents' hands were so familiar to me. I can remember them so clearly - my mother's slightly bent fingers, my father's beautifully shaped ones that his grandchildren inherited. Mum's freckled hands were always busy doing something. Mine often remind me of hers now that age and the ravages of arthritis have changed them somewhat.

I used to have nice-ish hands, I thought, a bit like my dad's. I especially liked my ring fingers and little fingers. They were the ones damaged first, swelling up into fat red sausages, bending downwards and remaining that way, while I stared on with amazement. Even now, I will hold them up and look at them and imagine them being straight, as they once were.

But the wrists my hands are attached to cause the greatest angst. My right wrist has gradually deteriorated to such an extent that it has changed the way I do everything. The x-rays show a tangled mess of bones, the doctor mumbling something about it not being much of a wrist anymore. It's too late for fusing; a suggestion years ago.

I shuddered at the thought of surgery that would lock it into one position for the remainder of my life. 'But I'm right-handed,' I said to the doctor, who was busy scribbling something. I left, hoping for a miracle, which never came.

Now, I have pain all the time, worsening with each year, as well as a severe deformity, which causes me to be self-conscious, although I'm sure people are not looking at it ALL the time. It's a bit like a claw now, altering the way I pick things up.

I have a box full of devices given to me by the hospital, the hand clinic, the occupational therapist and others who gave me aids to assist me in the home. I didn't want to wear the splints, some custom made, others, 'off-the-shelf', that gave me some relief at times. I was told not to carry the heavy teaching bags that I have lugged around for thirty-five-odd years. I suppose I should have listened.

Lately, I have noticed my left hand, the ‘good’ one, starting to resemble the right. It was the hand I had to ‘teach’ to do many of the tasks the right hand couldn’t do anymore. I’m a bit worried about that. I’m worried about my future.
Creatively Writing Towards The Future

I need my hands. Both of them. How will I write the stories and poems I so enjoy? How will I teach my students and write on the board as I talk? How will I do my puzzles, knit my scarves, finish the tapestry I bought in 1986 and colour in the book I just bought that’s supposed to relax adults. Is it any wonder I’m not RELAXED?

I need my hands to make cheesecake and roast chicken for my son and to wipe my granddaughter’s face and the highchair and the coffee table. I need to arrange the flowers I occasionally buy myself at the market and to change the doona covers on my bed. And to type messages to my daughter who lives far away.

My computer is my lifeline to her. It’s the umbilical cord that keeps us connected. My fingers must never stop typing, even if it hurts. Even though my hands are no longer nice, they must still function. They must not stop. I’m still hoping for a miracle…
My Love Is…

Denise Weiss

My love is a delicate flower
With petals soft
And easily torn

My love is a wide plain
Embracing the horizon
Kissing the sky

My love is a river deep
Gasping to survive
Gurgling its final breath

Then my love is gone
And I mourn
Forever
Creatively Writing Towards The Future

Fear

Mairi Neil

I’ve been scared of heights (acrophobia) for as long as I can remember. Not heights in an enclosed space like flying, but when you are high up a mountain (even a hill) and looking down. The air circulates, there is no anchor, you can be grabbed or pushed over the edge. Like a scrap of paper you’ll float to the ground or like a boulder tumble and rumble crashing to your death.

I don’t know why I have this fear and let imagination focus on the horrors of losing my grip. I can’t remember falling off a ladder and I never slept on a bunk bed until I was nine years old and on the ship coming to Australia, and by that time my fear was well established.

The deep recesses of memory are mined and I wonder if the fear started at middle primary school, Holmescroft, in Greenock, Scotland.

Limited gymnastics scheduled every morning (or maybe two-three times a week) at Holmescroft, following expert advice that exercise first thing in the morning is beneficial to the brain as well as the body. We walked to the hall in white blouse and navy blue knickers to start the day. We jumped over obstacles, skipped and played ball games, scaled a wall ladder, somersaulted on rubber mats, and climbed a rope dangling from the ceiling. The exercises organised and graded to ensure everyone learnt the skills the curriculum deemed necessary.

I close my eyes and can smell the equipment with years of impregnated sweat from thousands of school children. I can feel the harsh texture of the rope as I gripped and pulled myself up its plaited length. It was a snake, swaying and wriggling although anchored by a classmate holding it steady.

The soft white skin on my hands ached and my upper legs chafed against a rope that could have been an iron bar. The effort difficult as my chest tightened. I heaved and puffed straining muscles rarely used. The teacher nagged, ‘Hurry up.’ ‘Use your feet more’ ‘Put some effort in.’ ‘Hurry up, there’s a queue.’ ‘For goodness sake stop huffing like an old woman’.

Higher and higher I crawled. Classmates egged me on. Some giggled calling me names: Frog, Toad, Caterpillar, Beetle. What did I look like creeping and hauling on this rope? Could they see up the leg of my knickers where the elastic was loose?

The white ceiling grubby with marks from balls and even blobs of ink where smarty-pants pupils aimed their pen nibs dubbed in ink. The ceiling blurry from perspiration
trickling into my eyes I wanted this ordeal to be over, but knew I couldn’t take my hands off the rope to wipe my face.

Tiny fibres sticking out from the rope tickled my nose, made it itchy. I wanted to sneeze. I looked down and my stomach lurched. The wooden floor jumped and wobbled around like some of my impatient classmates.

Miss King’s face all glasses and teeth, the parting of her grey hair a squiggly line, the clasp holding her bun in place, mottled brown like Granny’s. ‘Hurry up, girl,’ she repeated, ‘we haven’t got all day.’

The room echoed with the slap of sandshoes skipping, stamping and running. Balls bounced, breath after breath of panting children floated into the atmosphere as they exercised. Or was that panting breath mine?

I gasped for air, was losing my grip. The rope swung in the air. Someone had let go of my lifeline. My arms melted. I needed the toilet. The giant snake thrashed violently. I needed to be on the ground before I vomited.

If I took my hands off the rope I’d fall and crash, so I let my legs dangle, slid towards the floor. My hands ached, red hot, as if scalded. Thud. The wooden floorboards hurt. Legs and back throbbed.

Miss King’s scarlet face spat anger. ‘You stupid girl!’ Was she saying it to me, or the girl who’d let the rope sway? or to both of us?

Friends hauled me up. Commiserated. Even comforted as I wiped snot and tears with the sleeve of my blouse. A blouse, white and fresh that morning to ‘do you a few days’ according to Mum, but now rope-stained and sweaty, I would not ‘get another turn out of it.’

Eight years old and bullied into climbing a rope by an insensitive teacher. is that when my fear of heights began? Perhaps…

On my travels, I’ve avoided climbing atop monuments and staircases leading to fantastic views, mountainous paths with scenic panoramas forgone because a panic attack or heightened anxiety makes me ill.

The fear is a curse, but I concentrate on what I can do, rather than what I can’t and celebrate the fears I haven’t got - like one poor student’s fear of buttons (Koumpounophobia) - now that would be awkward and limiting!
I am from a river that flows to the Atlantic, the River Clyde revered in song and history.

I am from ancestors who fished for herring, salmon, haddock and cod, but Uncle Jimmy’s rainbow trout from Loch Thom caught for Friday night supper the most delicious.

I am from breakfasts of porridge oats soaked overnight and sprinkled with salt, pan loafs toasted and spread with homemade bramble jam or McRobertson’s orange marmalade. Siblings vying for golliwog badges, too young to understand the racist connotations and white privilege.

I was born in a house with a bay window facing a busy square, four churches like four corner pillars; their Sunday bells clanging and disrupting sleep of shift workers like my father.

I am from a house of Gaelic voices, singing songs of lost land and power — and of love. Grandparents who proved culture can be retained, transplanted and celebrated if you remember the poems and stories and dance with joy.

I am from purple and white heather, tall pine and birch trees and the mystic rowan; a rainbow of dahlias and carnations and redolent roses nursed through wintry weather in cosy greenhouses along with homegrown tomatoes.

I am from mountains that rise beyond the town, well-trod paths like deep scars leading to Loch Thom, Loch Long and the Holy Loch, made unholy by nuclear submarines.

I am from the Free French Memorial, a Cross of Lorraine on an anchor, gleaming white atop the Lyle Hill, reminding us of WW2 while lovers walk in peace.

I am from the McInnes’s, McLeans, Campbells, McKinnons, Dinwoodies, the Browns and Courtneys. Hardworking Scots and Irish, innovative and imaginative, they valued education, independence, but also social justice.

I am from laughter, song, music and love outweighing well-known Celtic tempers and angst.

I am from a world 12,000 miles away and very different from the country my daughters call home, yet they know and appreciate the beauty and magnetism of the glens, misty mountains and dark isles. The everyday humour and struggle of proud and hospitable people.

I am from potatoes and strawberries nurtured in ground tilled by my father. Mum’s staple dinner table repertoire of mince and tatties, apple pie and custard; her midnight or midday feasts of scones, soda bread and pancakes.
Creatively Writing Towards The Future

I am from a world of ugly liberty bodices and vests heated in the linen press to withstand icy winds from bitter winters, shoes polished like mirrors for Sunday school, Brownies and school days where harsh discipline hurt hands and feelings, but built a solid base for learning.

I am from puritanical Calvinism of the Church of Scotland tempered by parents who thought for themselves.

I am from Greenock, a merchant town that built the Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth and Australia’s submarines and produced engineers admired the world over.

I am from Irish grandparents I only know through stories yet I carry my grandmother’s name and some of her creative genes. My Scottish grandfather gifted me his love of reading and learning, talent with words and the romance of stories. The desire for social justice ran in the blood of all my grandparents.

I am from dreams of freedom and choice, coal dust and pebble beaches, walks by the River Clyde and rocky ferry rides to Kilcreggan and Dunoon, rambling and bramble hunts through the hills of Braeside, daisy chains and buttercup tests, October’s Halloween with guising and galoshin’, penny bungers and burning effigies of Guy Fawkes in November, and midnight services, Christmas carols and nativity plays in December.

I know my roots, understand my history and love my family - who can ask for more?
Mairi Neil

I stroll through a city in recovery
Shipping containers like giant lego blocks
replace houses and shops
crushed and swallowed
when the ground had shaken
and buildings cracked and fell
as if an ogre wielded a wrecking ball
the aftershocks relentless…

Remnants of high rise offices
jut like damaged teeth
and the iconic cathedral
hunches behind steel fences
like an injured guard dog
no longer providing sanctuary
no longer able to watch over
and protect the population

Shaken like the earthquake’s victims
I struggle to cope with such devastation
sorrow and grief clouding the air
despair and anxiety infiltrating
people and places like toxic fumes.
Fearful grandmothers unable to sleep
seek reassurance from teenage charges
ashamed of the role reversal

And in the middle of this war zone
a park appears, new life blossoming
Mother Nature’s resilience astounding
A visual feast mirroring a Monet masterpiece
a carpet of bluebells bobbing in the breeze
beneath branches burgeoning with white buds
A bridal party caught in timeless pose
Beauty and joy a balm to the soul
Where I Am From

Jaime Bastias

I am from the earth
from the mountains of Chile
and the great deserts of Australia
I am from water, the seas all around
and all life within
I am from God who made the earth
He gave me my family
I am from a garden of tall trees
and beautiful flowers
I am from a teacher
who taught me to read
and appreciate poetry
I am from a loving family
friends in Chile and Australia
I am from the air and the sky
God is all around
Jaime Bastias

Treasure being young
Youth will never return
When I want to cry
I cannot
And yet I cry without wishing
Love has been the blue history
of my heart
She was a sweet woman
She looked like a sunrise
bloomed like a flower
but withered too soon
In this world of sorrow and affliction
Like a moon disappearing
beneath the horizon
He timid as a boy child
let her slip away like the dying sun