

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Dr Meg Mundell

Organisation Name:We Are Here

Your position or role: Project manager & editor

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Drag the statements below to reorder them. In order of priority, please rank the themes you believe are most important for this inquiry into homelessness to consider::

Rough sleeping,Housing affordability,Family violence,Mental health,Public housing,Services,Employment,Indigenous people

What best describes your interest in our Inquiry? (select all that apply) :

Academic & research ,Currently or have had a lived experience of homelessness,Other (please describe)
Independent writer and community arts worker

Are there any additional themes we should consider?

Stigma and social exclusion

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

"WE ARE HERE: TEN TRUE STORIES OF HOMELESSNESS"

Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?:

This is a joint submission by 10 Victorians who have experienced homelessness. I am submitting it on behalf of the group. Full list of contributors (alphabetical order):

- Ayub Abdi-Barre
- L. Hammond-Lewis
- Liz Jett
- Rachel Kurzyp
- Jody Letts
- Meg Mundell
- Alex Presincola
- Debi Rice
- Cheryl Schalks
- Alice Star
- George Zammit-Ross

Other members of the group would also be interested in appearing before the Committe to discuss our submission.

FILE ATTACHMENTS

File1: [5ea902137dc13-SUBMISSION - Victorian Homelessness Inquiry 2020 - 'We Are Here' authors.pdf](#)

File2:

File3:

Signature:

Meg Mundell

SUBMISSION

2020 INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS IN VICTORIA

WE ARE HERE: TEN TRUE STORIES OF HOMELESSNESS

Authors:

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30 April 2020

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BACKGROUND TO SUBMISSION

These true stories represent the testimony of 10 Victorians with lived experience of homelessness.

The authors are all contributors to *We Are Here: Stories of Home, Place & Belonging* (Affirm Press, 2019), an edited collection of 40 true stories by people who have experienced homelessness.

With an over-arching theme of ‘place’, the book is a world-first contribution to the ‘own voices’ movement. The stories included in this submission are all extracted from the book.

These first-hand accounts explore the meaning and importance of ‘home’, the personal impacts of homelessness, the traumatic life events and structural factors that can contribute to it, and how the writers survived these experiences – whether living on the streets, in boarding houses, vehicles, or other precarious forms of shelter. Their stories also reveal the gaps in our collective response to homelessness, and the urgent need for more effective and lasting solutions to the housing crisis, both within Victoria and nationally.

The writers thank the committee members for the opportunity to have their voices heard. We also thank our partner organisations for making the project possible: Launch Housing, Roomers Magazine (Elwood St Kilda Neighbourhood House), Council to Homeless Persons (Peer Education and Support Program), and *The Big Issue* Australia.

We Are Here was supported by a City of Melbourne Arts Grant, with seed funding from StreetSmart Australia.

– Meg Mundell, project manager & editor, *We Are Here: Stories of Home, Place & Belonging* (Affirm Press)

INTRODUCTION

RIGHTFUL PLACES: WE ARE HERE

By Meg Mundell

This book is a strange hybrid: part creative venture, part research project, part social document. Written by people who have experienced homelessness, and themed around “place”, these personal stories and poems traverse new territory and re-imagine familiar ground – from rainforests to cattle stations, from Bangkok slums to earthquake-torn Mexico City, from beloved childhood places to danger zones.

We Are Here is an ongoing project with three aims: to explore understandings of place amongst people who have experienced homelessness; to investigate how creative writing might capture place-related knowledge and experiences; and to amplify a diverse range of overlooked voices, while challenging some stereotypes.

In 2018 I ran a series of place-themed writing workshops in Melbourne. All participants had known homelessness. In Australia, ‘homelessness’ includes sleeping rough, living in a vehicle or tent, squatting or couch-surfing; staying in a rooming house, refuge, caravan park, crisis accommodation or transitional housing; or in other inadequate, severely overcrowded, or temporary shelter due to lack of alternatives (1). Each week, the writers produced an astonishing volume and variety of work. The resulting book features all fourteen workshop attendees, plus twenty-four other writers, and four visual artists. Prize-winning authors appear alongside newer scribes. All the writers have some link to Melbourne.

There’s humour, joy and strength in these true tales, but also hardship, loss and trauma. They reveal just how easily, if our own luck turned bad, we might find ourselves unhoused. Nobody was encouraged to write about being homeless, but half the pieces here touch upon the topic. The only condition was that ‘place’ had to be present in some way.

Place is a vital pillar of human life: we are always, unavoidably, *somewhere*. Transcending setting or location, places are made of stories, people, emotions, relationships, actions, landscapes, sites, objects, images and traces. From our mother’s womb to our hometown haunts, places shape how we live and who we become.

But if you’ve been cast adrift from that most essential place – a secure home – how do you understand, experience and imagine place?

Tapping into what Norman Mailer called ‘the spooky art’ (2), creative writing opens a portal onto place-based memories and encounters. As human geographer Owain Jones argues, it offers a channel to access and convey ‘past emotional–spatial experiences’, those bygone moments that are ‘mapped inside us and which colour our present in ways we cannot easily feel or say’ (3). Writing also allows people to tackle sensitive topics safely, and invites readers to navigate shared terrain through ‘narrative empathy’ (4).

The book has four sections. In ‘Home Truths’, the writers explore meanings, memories and experiences of home; in ‘City Streets’, they evoke parts of inner Melbourne, with side trips to Bangkok and Dublin. ‘Cast Adrift’ recounts episodes of displacement, disconnection and isolation – being ‘out of place’ – while ‘Belonging’ explores community, togetherness, connection and hope.

From these pages, some clear themes emerge. One is that having a secure, safe home is vital to people’s wellbeing, inclusion and participation in society. The formative power of place is another. Childhood looms large, childhood homes in particular. While ‘home’ usually carries positive associations, for many contributors the opposite has been true. One-third of them disclose early

experiences of trauma, violence, abuse, neglect, family breakdown, grief or loss. These distressing life events often led to displacement.

‘Place attachment’, our emotional and cognitive bonds with specific places, is important to human identity, wellbeing, security and sense of belonging (5, 6) – particularly for children (7, 8). ‘Topocide’ is the destruction of bonds between people and places (9). When ties with place are broken involuntarily or unexpectedly – whether by distressing events, or by the ongoing displacements of homelessness – this can trigger stress and social isolation, disrupt sense of self, erode belonging and compound trauma (6, 10). This is also evident in pieces by writers from refugee backgrounds. And as several stories show, homelessness itself makes you vulnerable to further violence and harm: sleeping rough, or in substandard rooming houses, is stressful, unhealthy and dangerous, especially for women.

Some writers examine how places change, and how their histories fade or linger over time. The transformations they describe can be gradual, taking years or decades, or sudden and drastic, wrought by natural disaster, fire or gentrification. Other themes include resilience and resourcefulness, the desire to connect with nature, the enduring role of migration in shaping place, and the benefits of positive human–place relationships. In the book’s final section, the writers explore the making of human bonds with, and within, place – and how this can foster inclusion, community and belonging.

Homelessness is often seen as a result of bad choices made by flawed people (11). This convenient myth supports the illusion that it could never happen to ‘us’, ignoring the well-documented structural causes and unforeseen life events that can render people homeless. These include a dire national shortage of social and affordable housing, punitive welfare policies, inadequate social security, poverty, unemployment, rental stress, gentrification, family violence, sexual abuse, discrimination, injury, disability, mental illness and traumatic incidents (12, 13, 14). Some studies have found that ‘the homeless’ are seen as sub-human, ‘the lowest of the low’, incapable of rousing empathy (15). This denial of people’s essential humanity reflects poorly on the deniers, and causes real harm to the people being dehumanised.

Blaming people for becoming homeless fosters stigma and prejudice (16). It is also inaccurate. Research shows that choice is constrained by context: rough sleepers who framed their homelessness as a choice often exaggerated their own agency as a self-protective measure; sleeping rough is unpleasant and dangerous, but some ‘choose’ the streets over chaotic, crowded and temporary homeless shelters. As one writer notes, choice is largely about *perceived* choice: which options seem available to us. And for many rough sleepers, housing seems unattainable, and homelessness inescapable (11).

Marginalised groups are now making hard-won gains against discrimination and prejudice. Yet the 116,000 Australians who are homeless every year remain a shadow population, vilified and silenced. It’s partly categorical: for the vast majority who endure it, homelessness is a situation, not an identity. Other silencing factors include poverty, lack of resources and the ‘hidden’ nature of homelessness: the *visibly* unhoused, rough sleepers, make up only seven percent of the total figure. But prejudice plays a big part: the assumption that ‘the homeless’ have nothing to offer, and a parallel reluctance to disclose membership of this maligned group.

This project uniquely combines three strands of enquiry – place, homelessness and creative writing – to uncover new insights into how they might be connected. It also seeks to foreground the voices of a diverse group of people who are too often devalued, underestimated or ignored. (And they are diverse: see their bios)

This world-first collection of personal stories bears witness to the intelligence, creativity and strength of their writers. In doing so, it challenges many of the damaging myths and misconceptions about people who experience homelessness. Here, these writers claim their rightful place – in public conversation, in literature, in the world. We hope you enjoy the read.

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About the author

Meg Mundell is a writer and academic from Aotearoa New Zealand. She lives in Melbourne with her partner and son. Her books include *The Trespassers* (UQP, 2019), *Black Glass* (Scribe, 2011) and *Things I Did for Money* (Scribe, 2013), and her work has appeared in *Best Australian Stories*, *The Age*, *The Guardian*, *The Monthly*, *Meanjin* and elsewhere. Meg is a former deputy editor of *The Big Issue* Australia, and has also worked in homelessness policy, public housing and community engagement.

HOMING INSTINCT

By Debi Rice

Home is remote
Home is freedom
Finding home can seem impossible

Home is depression, overdose
Escape from home is freedom

Home is comfort, love, protection
I have none

Home is support
No place for judgement
No place for rules
Where you can say what's on your mind
Ha!

Home is evil, sad, confusing
Punishment, violence
Bad girl

Home is lonely
A place to hide shame and destruction
from the rest of the world

Open the door, I say
I wasn't born to follow
People hang themselves at home
Responsibilities are at home
Tick-tock, the rhythm of life
Mental illness is at home

Hidden away from the world
Elusive glimpses of home
Then disappointed, abandoned
Strangers again
More danger

Keep looking
Keep running
I'll find this place

The lights go on
The burden lifts

Safety is home

A fresh start
A new friend
Time to nourish
To care for the soul

Home is inside me
A sense of belonging
The key to my home:
being true to myself

About the author

Debi Rice is from Victoria's Western Districts. Raised by her mother, she never knew her father. At nineteen Debi became pregnant and was married for two years. Moving to Melbourne, she worked in the public service, in factories and shops, and as a disability support worker. She has survived ten years of homelessness, various mental health issues, and domestic violence. Strongly committed to social justice, she gained a Community Development degree as a mature-age student. Now a free-spirited sixty-one-year-old, she loves her children and grandchildren, and is a professional advocate and guest speaker.

FLEEING, RUNNING, BURNING

By L Hammond-Lewis

I have always been told to be quiet. By my friend in school who punched me in the stomach, in my backyard, near the paneled wooden fence that always gave us splinters. *Don't you tell your mum!* By my high school friend, who threw my favourite toy in my face, hard and at close range, so it left a bruise.

When the fighting gets bad at home between my parents, my father beats my mother as she huddles on the floor. I see his fist rise up and slam down with a force I've never seen used on any other human being. My siblings, all male, tell me: *Shut the fuck up, I don't care about our fuckin' family history. Stop saying that shit – or else.* I watch as the only other woman in my life makes herself smaller and smaller, giggling nervously to fill silences, withdrawing more and more from life, and from me.

Finally, I leave home.

At fifteen I have no idea about the world, although I think I do – because I lost my virginity to a much older man and can't tell anyone. *Slut.* Because I got expelled from one high school and sent to another, where a teacher got murdered. After I leave, my mother spends years trying to reconnect with me. My father shouts down the phone about getting DHS off his back: *Cunts and dogs!* After that call, he and I never speak again.

I grew up in an inner suburb of Melbourne – old industrial streets, small workmen's cottages, everything grey. I flee to a hilly area in the city's outer north-east. I am charmed by Eltham's mudbrick houses. It's so lush and green here, and I think everything will be better.

I live with women. We can talk about periods. We do our nails and watch 'Buffy'. We get drunk and dance for hours in circles.

The Mother of the house has certain ideas about how to live. She's written a script. She's also a psychic. She has two daughters; we are all very close in age. We do rituals and drink a lot of cheap alcohol. I'm told not to finish my meals, because ladies don't do that. I keep stepping out of line; the Mother keeps sitting me down for talks, shouting at me. I cry. I never get anything right.

She wants to perform primal scream therapy, sits me in the middle of the room: *Visualize your childhood bathroom. Why was there a lock on the door? You're in your bath with your father, he is touching you, what do you say?* She begins to speak in a rough Aussie accent. I tell her, *He didn't talk like that.* She says, *But aren't you all bogans?*

We do a blood ritual with a fancy knife, the kind you find in stores that sell incense, tobacco, T-shirts with wolves on them. Her daughters refer to me as their sister, but one of them soon stops talking to me. I never find out why. She growls at me, drinks lots of milk, eats raw meat. She says she's a werewolf.

We move houses regularly – because we can't make the rent, because we've burned bridges. But I'm too swept up in adventure to question this. And the Mother keeps telling me I am special: I am at a higher frequency, like them.

At school, I fail Year Eleven.

One day, when we can't pay that month's rent, we leave the house secretly in pairs and take the train out to the country to live with a man the Mother met over the internet.

I imagine country life will suit us better, but I can't go to school anymore because we have no money. Things get tense with the man. One night he leaves, screaming at us to be gone by the time he gets back. A drunk woman, someone from the Mother's past, comes to collect us. We sleep at her

place, all three of us crammed into one tiny room together. But within days the relationship between the Mother and the woman falls apart.

When we can't pay the rent, we leave the house secretly in pairs.

I am so far away from everything familiar to me: the lush trees, the hills. I even miss the grey. Here the dirt is red, and young children are terrifying. There's nothing in the local store; no one has curtains, it's all sheets and broken glass.

Then, finally, we have nowhere to go. We're placed in a motel for the night, then moved into a caravan park to wait for a place in emergency housing. We get groceries from a store behind a church, a portable building or converted shipping container. Everything is in packets and cans, orange and yellow. The Mother insists we wear our best clothes: we might officially be homeless, but that doesn't mean we should lose *class*.

The caravan park is scary: it's in an isolated area, it's cold and windy, and the van seems flimsy against the elements. Over the chicken-wire fence is a paddock where two beautiful shaggy ponies live. We pat them; it's really comforting to connect with an animal. But I don't say this out loud: one of the sisters is 'good with animals', and I'm not allowed to be that too.

Eventually we're moved into transitional housing, and I go back to school. Between classes I slip into the girls' toilets and sob. I've always struggled with school, but it's gotten much harder over these years. I cannot understand anything.

For a while I have a boyfriend, but he doesn't understand the way we live. His constant questions are one of the catalysts for making me leave.

I still don't understand everything that happened. For a long time I was angry, searching for answers. At some point, I accepted that it might never make sense: Why did I sleep in the laundry? Why say you love me when you don't? Why mess with my head like that? Why make me do all the shitty things you didn't want to do, then laugh at me and call me 'Cinderella'?

Staying quiet has its pros and cons. There's a point where things can switch around: where you go from owning your story, to the story owning you. I think myself as lucky, even though certain achievements came to me later in life: finishing VCE, getting sober; creating a little family of my own, one full of truth, love and safety. But at least I got the chance.

I've never told this story to anyone, except my partner. And now, you.

About the author

L Hammond Lewis is an artist and teacher living in Victoria. They have completed a visual arts degree at the University of Melbourne, and exhibited their work both nationally and internationally. One day L hopes to write a book, but between art-making and gardening, it's very hard to find the time.

OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

By Rachel Kurzyp

'Who do you think lives there?' Mum asked, pointing to a house with a yellow door and green roof. The expansive home stretched over two blocks; perched on a slight hill at the end of a cul-de-sac, it was protected on all sides by an ivy-covered wall, its letterbox a decorative golden slit.

'A doctor and a teacher,' I guessed.

'No, a plumber!' my younger brother shouted, swinging his legs high in his car seat.

We'd play the 'Who-lives-there?' game every time our blue Gemini's battery died and had to be driven back to life – which was every month. We liked the game so much that when we grew bored of watching movies or riding our bikes around the neighbourhood, we'd beg Mum to take us for a drive.

'We all set?' Mum would ask, turning her head to ensure we were buckled up. 'On the road again!' We'd laugh as the engine whined into life.

It was during these road trips, up and down Hobart's hilly streets, that I fell in love with other people's houses and all that existed within their four walls.

~

It's common to feel a sentimental or nostalgic attachment to where we live, to the houses we occupy. We ask each other, 'Where are you from?' and 'Where's home for you?', because we recognise that the answer tells us something important about the person. In real estate ads, magazine spreads and Instagram feeds, home is a building, a street address, a carefully chosen mix of decor.

But deep down, we know it's much more – a home isn't just *where* you are, but also *who* you are. Place and person mutually affect each other: while we can make a house into a home, our homes can also shape who we become.

A home isn't just *where* you are, but also *who* you are.

Growing up, my family home was a three-bedroom, cream weatherboard house with peach trims around the windows and a matching peach-coloured door. We had a wire fence encircling our front yard, and rose bushes that bloomed red and pink. We were too lazy to open the gate so we'd scale the fence when Mum wasn't looking, taking turns lifting our white terrier Polly over too.

My brother and I spent as much time as we could away from home; only when the sun sank behind the hills did we return.

Most of my high school days were spent at a friend's place, a three-bedroom, two-storey house with a double garage. She was an only child and her parents worked late, so I was a welcome addition to their family: another person to carry the washing in, set the table and walk the dog.

I liked pretending I was part of their family. I'd watch in wonder as my friend's parents squabbled over paying the bills, their arguments ending in a kiss and a hand squeeze instead of a back-handed slap and a verbal threat.

But just as I'd start to believe things could be different, the phone would ring. Then I'd receive a helpless look from my friend's mother. I'd been summoned: it was time to pack my bags and go back home.

Home is much more than four walls and a roof: it's a place when you form your identity, shape your values, and develop your sense of belonging. For many people, our homes are extensions of ourselves,

the public faces we put on for the world: the well-tended front lawn, the family photos on the mantelpiece, the overstocked pantry.

Our childhood homes are often the places we remember the most strongly. I have memories of hovering around the kitchen asking Mum when dinner would be ready; bickering with my brother over whose turn it was to pick a movie; seeing Mum proudly stick an award on the fridge; being safely tucked in at bedtime.

But I also remember the feeling of my stomach dropping as I turned the key in the front door. The vibrating sound a fist makes when it hits plasterboard. The way my brother's shoulders would slump, his eyes focused on the floor, as he took yet another berating from one of Mum's boyfriends, a rotating cast of men who used fear to dominate others and make themselves feel powerful. Inside our house raged a battle we could never win, and the armour we wore to protect us weighed heavily.

Most vividly of all, I remember standing in the middle of my bedroom one day, and thinking I could finally be free of it all: the shame, the sense of loss, the guilt, the stigma of living in a broken home. For the first time, I realised that my future wasn't set, that I could choose what and who I wanted it to be.

All I had to do was walk out the front door and never look back. So that's what I did.

Inside our house raged a battle we could never win, and the armour we wore to protect us weighed heavily.

My brother was fifteen, I was seventeen, when we found ourselves sleeping at the home of my then-boyfriend's mother. That first night we shuffled single file down her carpeted hallway to our allocated rooms. Her three-bedroom house, built from Huon pine, had grand ceilings and a fireplace that was the centrepiece of the living room. She lived alone and enjoyed the stillness of the bush surrounding her land.

I was grateful to her for letting us stay, and we nodded obediently to the house rules: no shoes on inside, money for bills was to be paid in cash, and we had to do household chores. Just as I'd done in our family home, I did my best to go unnoticed, conscious of being present in another person's space.

But no matter how much I wiped, whispered or remained behind closed doors, I couldn't shake the feeling that I wasn't welcome or wanted. Although we were told to think of ourselves as *invited* guests, we knew we had nowhere else to go until we found a place to rent. Maintaining pleasantries was exhausting. But I was afraid one wrong move would see us out on the streets, so I remained on high alert: continued to hold my breath, to flinch at sudden loud sounds. Watched for tell-tale signs in body movements, and told myself: just hold on for a little while longer.

Afraid one wrong move would see us out on the streets, I remained on high alert.

'Could you see yourself living here?' I asked my brother, standing in the entranceway of a two-bedroom apartment.

'Yeah, I'd have that bedroom,' he said, gesturing with his dirty sneaker.

Within a week, the two of us were settled into our first place: a white brick unit with a green roof, nestled at the bottom of a hill so steep it caused unknowing drivers' tires to spin and smoke if they tried to change gears on the ascent.

I wouldn't admit it to anyone, but I liked the noise, the towers of second-hand Tupperware in our kitchen cupboards, the way the glow from the streetlights filtered in through bent blinds, creating an

illuminated line that cut my room in half. While our new apartment wasn't home quite yet, it was the safe space we needed to take a breath, uncurl, and rewind.

Three months after I had left home, I found myself standing in front of that familiar peach-coloured door. I let myself in, sang out: 'Mum, where are you?' Polly answered, barking happily from the laundry.

I found Mum standing stock-still at the back door, facing away from me, cigarette smoke drifting into the yard.

'I'm here to get our bedroom furniture,' I said. 'Like you promised on the phone.'

She gave her cigarette a habitual flick, but didn't reply.

'Mum?' I asked. For thirty heartbeats I stood staring at the back of her head, willing her to face me. Finally, I walked away.

Once we'd finished packing our furniture into a ute, before closing the door behind me, I left the house key on top of the mahogany TV cabinet; the same spot Mum would always leave items she didn't want to lose.

My brother and I spent the first few weeks in our place getting settled: unpacking bags, arranging bedroom furniture, and buying household items we wanted but didn't really need.

When I stood back to take it all in, I was finally able to appreciate what a momentous moment this was.

With tears streaming down my face, I looked around lovingly at our new home: a place that contained our past and present, our possessions and desires, our heartbreak and our possibilities, all within its four walls.

About the author

Rachel Kurzyp is a Melbourne-based freelance writer, business owner, speaker and teacher. She has written for *The Age*, *The Guardian*, SBS, *Daily Life*, *Frankie* and *The Big Issue*, among others. Rachel is currently writing her first book, a memoir on what it's like to overcome childhood trauma. Knowing firsthand what it's like to be homeless, she believes that everyone has the right to have a place to call home.

UNDER THE CLOCKS

By George Zammit-Ross

The first year of the new millennium had just ticked over, and the world was abuzz with exciting new ideas and plans for the future. Few people noticed what I was doing, or even registered my presence.

I was living with a group of teens who had no fixed abode. We sought salvation in each other's company, shared an unspoken family bond, one we all felt had been broken or lost in any conventional sense. Ultimately, I was trying to escape from the horrors my original family had put me through.

Our ritual would begin most mornings at Flinders Street Station, under the old clocks. Some of us would travel from Sandringham, others from St Albans. I'd usually arrive from Greensborough, Heidelberg or Eltham, depending on where I'd been fortunate enough to secure a couch or floor for the night; sometimes I slept hidden in a friend's cupboard. Whatever our origins, we all had a common purpose: to find a safe place we could retreat to.

Our meeting place was at the top of the steps, in the grand entrance of the old train station, in a corner of the tiled floor. We'd sit in a circle, passing around a cigarette, exchanging stories. Discussing all the places we'd travelled to, the people who took us in, what we ate, who we met: all the details of the past twenty-four hours, from the smallest encounters to the greatest highlights. Sharing and comparing our own individual sojourns across Melbourne.

During the day we'd head off on our own missions: collecting money, cigarettes, clean clothes, the odd blanket for some extra comfort. In the afternoons we'd often reconvene at the water feature across the road, opposite St Paul's Cathedral. We loved that water feature: smooth concreted ground set with jet holes that shot up water intermittently. Running through these unpredictable spurts provided refreshing entertainment during the hot months, and an opportunity to wash away the week's dirt and cleanse our spirits for the unknown days to come.

My possessions consisted of the clothes on my back, the shoes on my feet, and the contents of a school backpack: an extra jumper, spare underwear and a wallet filled with what little cash I could muster up. A pen and scraps of paper to jot down notes, the ever-important Bic lighter, and a packet of cigarettes that was somehow always replenished by friends' donations, or a fifty-cent purchase from a passing commuter.

At night we'd huddle together and tell stories of our former lives.

Even at the age of thirteen I didn't want to be a scab, to bum a smoke for free. I wanted to pay my way, earn my keep somehow, not be a burden on anyone. Occasionally, seeing the coins held out in my small grubby hand, someone would say, 'Keep your money. Take another smoke for later.' Then I'd show my gratitude, thanking them for their kindness using my entire face: a smile from ear to ear, letting them know they were one of the good ones, someone who gave me hope. How much their small but generous act meant to me. I'd offer to help them, maybe carry their bags to the train, but they never trusted me enough for that.

When we couldn't find a safe place to sleep, or had overstayed our welcome on a charitable friend's couch, there was always one place that offered refuge.

In the heart of Melbourne's CBD, behind St Pauls Cathedral, was a concreted alcove, a small outdoor space hemmed in by towering bluestone walls that stretched up to the cathedral spires. It contained a rubbish skip, an old abandoned couch, and a set of steps that led up to a disused doorway.

Beyond it lay a large expanse of gravel patched with clumps of grass, which functioned as our front yard. Just around the corner was the busy footpath of Flinders Street.

This place was our home, our refuge: we called it The Squat.

Here we felt safe. At night, after the last trains had left the city and the screech and rattle of the trams had died down, we'd huddle together and tell stories of our former lives. What we had endured, what we had fled; every topic, from the little things we missed to the horrifying things no child should ever be exposed to. Together, we could heal.

Recently I took my wife into the city to show her some of my old haunts, the places that had such a defining impact on me. Our gathering spot at Flinders Street Station is now home to a double-sized vending machine. The street corner where we scampered through the water jets is now paved over, part of Federation Square. The rubbish skip is still there, but the place we fondly called The Squat has been vacant for many years; our gravelled front yard has become a car park. The day we visited, a film crew was occupying our old alcove. They weren't documenting Melbourne's growing homeless population; they were shooting a TV ad.

All the places that once offered us free shelter, sanctuary, are now being used to make money for big companies.

While I now have a safe home, I will never forget or ignore the struggles of those people who remain homeless. Who have nowhere to go, no choice but to occupy the streets and footpaths of our city, their predicament laid bare, in plain sight.

I realise that safety and security can often be taken for granted, circumstances can change when you least expect it; it happened to me. It could even happen to someone like you.

About the author

George Zammit-Ross (formerly Georgia Simon) has survived being hit by a train at age fourteen, being raped and sexually abused by family members, and experiencing homelessness. Despite this trauma, and living with an acquired brain injury, she has been an actor, model, personal trainer and disability support worker, and is now primary carer for her wife, who suffers from Primary Progressive Multiple Sclerosis. George has travelled throughout Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Mexico and South America, and is now writing her first children's book and her memoirs. She lives in Brunswick West with her wife, their beloved cats and a lifetime collection of books.

HANDLE WITH CARE

By Ayub Abdi-Barre

Throughout my ten years as a ward of the state in Victoria, I never found a place to call home. When I was six years old, my mother and I came to Australia as refugees from Somalia. Shortly after we arrived, I was placed into state care.

My mum was incredibly young when she had me and given the trauma that we suffered in Somalia, the turmoil of the Kenyan refugee camps we lived in and the intensity of our journey to Australia, I now understand why she wasn't ready to be a parent.

Because of the custodial agreement between my mum and DHS, I wasn't able to be placed in a foster care home permanently. This meant that I spent a lot of my time in residential care; a place where kids who have been removed from their families, and don't have other family or a foster care family to live with, are housed together under adult supervision.

Instability, uncertainty and disruption became the hallmarks of my childhood and adolescence.

I lived in eight different foster homes and many more resi care placements. The longest I ever spent in one place was just over a year. To this day, I find it difficult to feel settled; and calmness always feels out of my reach.

I was amazing at sports when I was younger – full of potential and bursting with talent, the teachers would always say. I felt the happiest and most connected to the kids around me when I was out playing sports. But because I was a ward of the state, being able to compete at events was impossible. There was no-one to sign my attendance permission slips, to take me to sports carnivals, or help me pay for my sports equipment. It's really upsetting to think of all of the opportunities I missed, including being part of the Victorian state hockey team.

I'm extremely grateful to all of the families and people who opened their homes and hearts to me, but there was always a sense of belonging missing from my life. Maintaining any connection with my culture and background while I was in state care was extremely difficult. I never met any other person of colour while I was in care, and all of my foster families were very white. It was isolating to be the only black kid, and I never had the chance to speak to people whose story and background were similar to mine.

I was evicted from state care and became homeless before my eighteenth birthday. Not many people know that in all Australian states, except Tasmania and South Australia, we cut off all kids in state care, including those living with a foster care family, when they turn eighteen. For me, and most other kids like me, that means no ongoing emotional or financial support. No case manager. Nothing. Within one year, thirty-five per cent of these kids will become homeless.

All my foster families were very white.

It was isolating to be the only black kid.

While most of my friends were celebrating their eighteenth birthdays, finishing high school, or getting their driver's licences, I was trying to figure out where I was going to sleep that night and searching for my next meal. It felt like a nauseating spiral with no end.

The extreme sense of anxiety, social isolation and fear I felt as a young homeless man was terrifying. These were meant to be some of the most memorable and formative years of my life. Instead, I was just trying to make it through each hour and each day desperately holding onto what was left of my sense of pride and self-worth. That got harder the longer I was on the streets.

There continues to be a crushing stigma around young homeless people, that it's somehow our fault we don't have a roof over our heads. That we have a criminal history or substance abuse issues. That we're out of control and dangerous. But most of us have suffered trauma, neglect, abuse – homelessness is just the result of it all. For me, there isn't a family to turn to when something goes wrong. There never was. I was really surprised that so many other kids I met on the street had state care backgrounds; just like me they had nowhere else to go.

Breaking the cycle of homelessness when you're young and don't have a support network or stable income is almost impossible. How can you go for job interviews when you haven't showered or eaten? Even if we get jobs, which landlord would want to give a twelve-month lease to an eighteen-year-old with no rental history or references? The barriers to having a normal life were enormous for me. Thanks to the tireless assistance of a social worker, I was able to break the spiral after three years, and secured a room in a commission flat.

I'm so proud of how far I've come with my life. I'm thirty now, and I have a home, full-time work that I love, friends that feel like family, and I feel confident enough to make plans for the future. I'm also a proud ambassador of the Home Stretch campaign, which is fighting to extend the age of state care in Victoria from eighteen to twenty-one, as it has been in places like the UK, US, Canada and New Zealand. I've had to fight my whole life, and I'll continue fighting for this.

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About the author

Ayub Abdi-Barre came to Australia as a six-year-old refugee from Somalia. Placed in foster care, he later became homeless. Now living in a share house in Carlton North, he's happy to call Melbourne home. Passionate about social justice, he works as a political advisor on topics such as the Australian–African community and the environment, and assists people from low socioeconomic situations to find safe housing. He's obsessed with sports (watching or playing) and will strike up a conversation about climate change if the chance arises.

NIGHT BLINDNESS

By Liz Jett

I hadn't eaten or slept for days. I was staying in a rooming house in Mount Martha. With nowhere to call home, I'd thought the new area might be a fresh start for me.

Instead, I was having a nervous breakdown. I had no friends, no mobile phone reception, and no TV. The radio had become my friend. All night I listened to it, and the rhythm of the songs kept me alive.

The man in the next room was stalking me. Instinct told me he was very dangerous. Whenever I left my room, he followed. So I stayed in my room, which meant he stayed in his. He could hear me pee, and I could hear him talking to women on the TV, calling them sluts.

I knew I was going crazy. I had to get out of there and find help.

Lonely and scared, I had no support. The stalker told the other residents he just wanted to be my friend. Nobody in that rooming housing cared anyway: they had their own problems, and usually excluded me. I was different – I didn't come from Frankston, or jail, or wherever they were from. I came from the city.

I knew I was going crazy. I had to get out of there and find help. I'd been to the police, but they said they couldn't do anything until the man got me. I wasn't waiting around for that.

So I made a plan: in the morning, I would run to catch the first bus. They only came once an hour, so I needed to be accurate.

I wrote a note to a neighbour I vaguely trusted, explaining why I was leaving. Knowing I was going to get sicker, I couldn't worry about my possessions, had to leave them all behind.

With nothing but my handbag, I crept out of my room, knocked on my neighbour's door, and gave him the note.

But the stalker was on the ball: he was listening out for me. He snatched the note from my neighbour's hand. Terrified, I bolted, running all the way to the bus stop. His prey was escaping, but the stalker did not follow. He was an opportunist, only hunting on his own territory.

The man in the next room was stalking me.

Instinct told me he was dangerous.

The buses in those beach suburbs always had music playing. I listened to it intently, feeling like Thelma without Louise. I'd braved the outside world, but I had nowhere to go.

I'd been homeless for some time, but had told no-one of my plight. I just disappeared. Anyway, there was nobody I could tell the truth to, and nobody who cared.

Sitting on the bus, I remembered a doctor in Heidelberg, someone I trusted. It was a long trip, but I have no memory of how I got there. I kept ringing the receptionist and luckily they stayed open late for me.

Despite the distance, I still go to that same doctor now. My loyalties are fixed. He helped me when I had nobody.

The doctor sent me to Saint Kilda Crisis Centre, and made an appointment for me to see my GP about my psychological state.

Another long trip I can't remember. It was dark when I got to the crisis centre on Grey Street, but the woman was kind. I sat there for a very long time. At last she told me there was a vacant bed at Hanover. But now it was dark, and I had to find my own way there.

This trip I do remember. My eyesight is bad, and I have night blindness. All day I'd had a musical rhythm going in my head and it had helped to keep me calm. Now the music was gone. Scared and alone, I got lost, became hypersensitive and distraught. Lights kept blinding me. I was screaming on the phone in panic, asking for directions, trying to find my way.

Thank god a taxi driver heard me and took me to Hanover. Hallelujah! When I arrived it was two in the morning, and I was in crisis. I was also very hungry. The staff told me to go across the road to McDonalds, but I was too afraid. I wasn't going back out there tonight.

I paced around, speaking rapidly to myself, as a staff member shadowed me like a lion tamer. He guided me to a room where I attempted to sign my name, then to another room.

A place of my own – for now, at least. I locked the door, climbed into bed, and slept for three days.

About the author

Liz Jett grew up in country New South Wales, in a single-parent family that moved around a lot. She has worked in retail, aged care and local government, and has a decade of experience as a sex worker. After escaping a violent marriage, she gained tertiary qualifications in social work. Now in her early fifties, she is a mother, activist and educator.

MOBILE HOME

By Jody Letts

Every morning, I awoke to face a personal battlefield. Each week I navigated a minefield of appointments, trying to cover ground and regain my independence. A digger gone AWOL (1), demoted by circumstance to hostile territory: living in my vehicle.

There were certain parallels with my former life as a soldier: bare necessities, minimum supplies, cramped spaces, improvisation skills and the wilderness. Survival hinged on my ability to adapt, evolve, improve the simple things – and to fly under the radar.

For any civilians walking past my car, condensation on the windows was a tell-tale sign that someone was punching out zeds (2) inside; window covers fixed that problem quick-smart. Open doors might reveal the hand-built timber-framed beds, but a rack of clothing camouflaged them nicely. Cabin manky and stuffy? Fit some fly screens to let in fresh air. Exposed secrets were tucked away in elaborate compartments; unintentional rocking resolved by stealthy movements; stores built up over several small trips, rather than one big conspicuous haul. A daily bird bath (3) kept me looking respectable.

I changed my forward base (4) regularly to avoid desperate or dangerous situations, on a constant mission to find safe parking spots: private enough to avoid detection, populated enough to merge into the landscape; adjacent to ablutions, but not crammed with foot traffic. Positioning myself near the target zone of my next appointment. Always ready with diversional tactics if approached by the enemy: Victorian Police, Council Workers or Park Rangers. ‘Hi, officer! I’m early for an appointment, so just sneaking in a quick gonk.’ (5)

Meanwhile, I felt the world dropping away rapidly: I kept losing track of what I was saying, unsure of where I was, confused about my thoughts, obsessing over the past and frightened of the future. Frustrated by the relentless need to be discreet, constantly paranoid my cover would be blown.

Survival hinged on my ability to adapt, evolve, fly under the radar.

A soldier, trying to go incognito on civilian turf. Exhausted, constantly moving, fighting to survive. Trying to find my place in the world, but just going around in circles. Searching for safety, a never-ending quest. Watching people find what they were seeking, when I was starting out all over again. Seeing everyone around me warm, when I was chilled to the bone.

Feeling defeated, constantly pretending I belonged. Trying to fit in, when I simply didn’t. Saying I understood, when I couldn’t. Acting out my story on cue. Living a lie, because I no longer believed in myself.

It’s not easy, doona wrestling (6) in a vehicle. But like a soldier posted to foreign soil, I found myself immersed in a new culture. My relationship with my car evolved well beyond rational decisions about fuel consumption, size or fancy features. Over those months, I found unexpected patterns of connection, openness and habitat. I never expected to love living in my vehicle, but when I got inside and shut the door, I was in control. I was safe. Yet in order to keep moving, to remain safe, I was reliant on my positive emotions and logical thinking; without them, everything in my life remained motionless.

At last, after a long search, I found four walls, but that too was temporary: a house but not a home, flea-ridden, unsafe and dirty. Still, I knew that if my new barracks went toes up, I had my vehicle as a back-up plan.

Then one day, an ambush: my faithful mobile home was stolen. Burnt to a blackened shell.
Destroyed.

That one safe space I'd had in the world was now gone. Its loss created a big void in my life. I was fearful about the future, but grateful that my vehicle had spent its final moments housing me.

My car deserved a full military funeral, but the budget wouldn't stretch to it. Instead, I had to make do with a salute and a silent word of thanks. Our shared tour of duty over, I shouldered my gear and headed outside the wire (7), striking out for territories unknown.

Glossary of military lingo

- (1) AWOL: absent without official leave.
- (2) Punching out zeds: sleeping.
- (3) Bird bath: quick wash of body parts, using wet wipes or a basin of water.
- (4) Forward base: secured forward operational level military position.
- (5) Gonk: to nap.
- (6) Doona wrestling: sleeping.
- (7) Outside the wire: area beyond the protective boundary.

About the author

Jody Letts is a former defence force worker who found herself living out of a van in the Melbourne CBD while suffering from work-related injuries, illnesses and mental health issues. Jody is committed to sharing her lived experiences through the Peer Education and Support Program (PESP), run by the Council to Homeless Persons. Working with PESP, she educates the public around homelessness and advocates for positive change. She also contributes to consumer participation with Dental Health Services Victoria and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

DARK PLACES

By Alice Star

I never felt like I belonged. I didn't fit in, not even in my own family. From the outside everything seemed normal – we did what a middle-class family did. Nobody could see the darkness that hovered around the house.

My parents fought and my mother would disappear for days, leaving us with my father, who abused me. I learned to survive by disassociating from my body and feelings. Loneliness was always there. I was teased at school. I didn't have many friends and preferred to be alone, riding my bike, doing jigsaws or reading.

To avoid being alone with my father I spent time with my mother, but she was emotionally distant and I didn't feel loved by her. I tried to please my parents, but always felt I wasn't good enough. My three sisters left home as soon as they could. They experimented early with alcohol and heroin. I did not go the alcohol route until much later.

I had no idea how to relate to other people. I made bad decisions, surviving on a daily basis. I hitchhiked to Sydney and got beaten up in a hostel. I witnessed and experienced violence. I survived being strangled. I became homeless, and got addicted to alcohol.

When I became pregnant I didn't realise until I was six months gone. I raised my son for five years. It was a traumatic time, as I was experiencing panic attacks and depression. My son has autism and epilepsy. I couldn't cope, and decided to give him up for adoption. But the media botched the story, painting me as an unfit mother.

I moved interstate, thinking I could start afresh. Unable to find accommodation, I couch-surfed for a while. I moved into a rooming house but the ceiling collapsed, so I moved to another one. But a man with mental health issues broke into my room, slept in my bed and ate my food. I had to call the police.

There was no way to see the darkness that hovered around the house.

I moved again and again. I never settled in shared accommodation, as I had no skills, and drinking was a huge part of my life. I began my recovery journey, but had problems with my mental wellbeing and health. Finally I found an all-women's rooming house, thinking I'd be safe. But I was told to be careful in the kitchen, in case I got bailed up with a syringe. I lasted a week then moved into a share house, but that soon fell through.

With nowhere to stay, I spent the night at Flinders Street Station. The next morning I went to a housing service. I didn't want to stay in rooming houses as I felt unsafe there, but that was all I was offered. I ended up sleeping on a friend's couch. I didn't want to outstay my welcome, so went into emergency accommodation for twelve weeks. With no suitable transitional housing available, I was moved into a bedsit with no bed or fridge, and unreliable electricity, where I lived for three years.

None of these places was home. I had no privacy, was ashamed of where I lived, and felt mentally unwell. My life hasn't been easy, but I am recovering with the help of my counsellor and doctor. I have problems with sensory overload and anxiety, but I'm working on it. I developed a hoarding problem, which is being resolved.

I now live in community housing, and do advocacy work for homelessness organisations: I share my lived experience, provide input on policy changes, and speak to the media. I love writing, creative art, singing and reading. I have joined a local multicultural sewing group.

A person without a home is more than their circumstances. Homelessness is a problem that should matter to us all. And I am now part of the solution.

About the author

Alice Star is a creative person who loves to write, sing and make art. Having experienced trauma early in life, she's on a journey of recovery, healing and creativity. She's now an advocate and educator, drawing on her lived experience to help improve understanding around homelessness.

NO PLACE FOR A WOMAN

By Cheryl Schalks

Being homeless is scary and dangerous, especially if you're a female on your own. I was lucky – if you could call it that – to have only been homeless twice without my partner. It's much worse for a woman alone.

Having been homeless on and off for over ten years, I've experienced many traumatic things in boarding houses. A boarding or rooming house can be just a regular house, an office block divided into rooms, or a hostel-type building. They're not regulated properly by government, and they're scary places.

For females, life in these hellholes is especially traumatic. You worry about being robbed, physically attacked, or worse. Often there are fifteen males to every female tenant. Many have serious mental health issues or drug addictions, or have just been released from prison.

Most boarding houses are run-down, filthy and unsafe. Doors don't lock, or are missing. Windows are broken, boarded up, or won't open or close. Mice and other vermin run around. You might be lucky enough to have cooking facilities, laundry and shower, but they're often coin-operated, broken, or disgustingly dirty. Random people walk in and out, taking whatever they please. It's not worth saying anything: either the landlord kicks you out, or other tenants make your life hell.

All the landlords care about is how much money they can get. Rents range from \$180 per week for a shared room – with bunk beds, and both male and female roommates – up to \$800 a week for a couple's room. Sometimes you sign a lease, other times it's just verbal; you might pay a bond, but it holds no weight, as all the money goes into landlords' pockets. You never see the real landlord, only a manager.

My first time alone in a boarding house was in Melbourne's outer suburbs. I was working in the CBD, so it was two hours' travel each way. My room could only fit a single bed and a cupboard, and I was only female in a house with four males. It was noisy and scary, as they partied all the time. I showered at work, and only went 'home' to sleep.

When my partner got out of jail they kicked us out, saying they didn't want an ex-prisoner living there. Then we slept in parks in the CBD, which was scary, with rats scampering around us. Sleeping rough is dangerous: some people go out looking to deliberately harass and hurt homeless people. You have to carry your blankets and clothes everywhere. You can eat, shower and do laundry at agencies, but only at certain times.

When you're homeless, you feel invisible – like no-one cares about you, no-one sees you.

So we tried boarding houses again. In one place, a male tenant picked me up by my throat and slammed me onto the ground, just because I got in line for food before him. Late one night this same man kicked in all the tenants' doors while waving an axe. When the police arrived, they told all us tenants to find other accommodation. They left the guy with the axe there.

One office block-style boarding house we stayed in had over 150 residents. The place was badly overcrowded, with ten international students living in one room. To get a lukewarm shower you had to get up at three in the morning. Drug dealing was done openly. Our tiny room had no windows or cupboards. I had to keep my belongings in a common area, where anyone could steal them. With no kitchens, people cooked in the hallways. Fire alarms were continually going off.

Watching TV one night, we heard an alarm. This wasn't unusual, so at first we ignored it. Ten minutes later we looked down the hallway: nothing. After forty-five minutes, alarms still blaring, we opened the door to be confronted by thick black smoke. I couldn't see any exit signs, just darkness.

Trapped on the first floor, with no way out, I phoned triple zero. The operator said to leave the front door unlocked and wedge a wet towel against it, then lie down in the bathroom, cover myself in wet towels, and wait.

It was the most terrifying experience of my life. When the fire brigade finally arrived, they didn't realise my husband was there too, so they had to leave us to get another mask.

The firefighters slowly guided us through the smoke and downstairs. Outside tenants stood around in their pyjamas, barefooted, with no phones or money. Paramedics checked over us as we coughed up black soot. Later we found out that a dealer was owed money, so he'd set fire to a car parked under the building. The landlord had taken all the batteries out of the exit signs, leaving the place pitch black: that's why we couldn't find our way out.

The firefighters slowly guided us through the smoke and downstairs.

With the premises declared unsafe, we were taken to a motel for few days. When the police escorted us back to collect our possessions, someone had stolen most of them. There were stolen IDs under our mattress and dead mice all over the room. For years afterward, I would struggle not to panic when I heard a fire alarm or a firetruck siren.

After the fire, I lived in more scummy boarding houses, both with my husband and alone. Living in those horrible conditions for many years, while struggling with drug addictions, took its toll. Eventually I became drug-free and wanted a better life. I left my husband, couch-surfed for four months, then lived in a Transitional Housing bedsit for eighteen months; they're not that different from boarding houses, except you have your own unit.

In my years of being homeless I met many females who'd been assaulted, robbed or raped. It didn't always happen outside: a girl or woman gets offered housing, or a bed for night or two, and is expected to pay in other ways.

When you become homeless, you feel invisible – like no-one cares about you, no-one sees you. It's hard to improve your life, living in these overcrowded, overpriced and dangerous places. But with no rental references, no money to move into private rental, and the waiting lists for public housing stretching for many years, we had no choice.

Now I'm finally safe and secure, living in my own place – an amazing one-bedroom community housing unit, near the city. There's a vegetable garden, and a barbecue for all the tenants to use.

I think about them sometimes: all those women out there, stuck in those horrible places. I hope they find somewhere safe too.

About the author

Cheryl Schalks: as an adopted only child who was often bullied, I thought the world was against me. My joy and escape was my championship swimming – I wanted to be the next Dawn Frazer – and my writing. I wrote poetry, short stories and a daily journal. Losing my mum at an early age, I gave up swimming but kept up my writing. I've published articles in *The Big Issue* and want to finish a book I started awhile ago about addictions.

OBITUARY FOR THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

By Alex Presincula

The first month. A new home, the lease signed. And what should be at least another year securely housed, a comforting feeling. A backyard with one of those clotheslines that can carry a full household's worth of washing, and a fence line bordered by a wall of gumtrees and the night dance of possums. A friendly hello when you walk past a stranger who's also nested somewhere along this quiet street.

When we move in, this street is a neighbourhood: rows of single-storied, free standing houses hidden behind the busiest of roads. It is an enclave: you wouldn't know the main road was there. Well-tended gardens display a passion for botany and space for families: room for children to play, to breathe; to make an insect friend, or assemble an army to conquer Chive Village or the Gum Nut Capital. Generations of children have grown up here in familial quiet. For any untended gardens, there is an ancient, quiet woman who roams the neighbourhood, setting things right: inch by inch, the lawns snipped, the yards tidied, unobtrusively made perfect. For this is her world.

Another local, this one hard and gruff-seeming, sprawled in an armchair in his garage-turned-cave. The mouth of his hideaway is always open, whether it is warm or bitter cold. You hear a whistle or the call of an umpire, see his silhouette shifting, hear him cursing passionately, a clue that his team was winning or losing. A roller-doored paradise that teeters on the fate of an egg-shaped ball chased by striped guernseys.

When the street was asleep, a turf war between the cats and possums would begin. A delightful, curious showdown of claws and hissing. But by sun-up, a truce was always agreed upon, one species retreating to the trees, the other claiming the ground. Telltale tufts of grass like green fireworks, fresh cuts that would need tending when owners awakened. Under a joint treaty, both species agree to protect the neighbourhood by day. When the human residents slept, they would resume their midnight duels. A celebratory dance of rustling leaves and feline yowls.

The destruction started slowly: a home leveled at one end of the street, then the other.

The destruction started slowly at first: a home being leveled at one end of the street, then at the other. One empty lot. Two empty lots, three. Trucks rumbling, wood splintering. A vacant house, the ghost memory of a home. A two-storey framework rising.

Now the street is a busy parking lot for trucks. In place of individual houses, identical towers of bricks, cement and wood spring up. Manicured dirt patches, one metre square, serve as the front yards. The scent of eucalyptus and pine replaced by the smell of chemicals and cement dust.

The landscape is literally ripped apart. Large agave plants, decades of natural architecture, a whole line of gumtrees that housed a generation of possums: all uprooted, dismantled, shredded, split. Replaced by mechanical noise that begins before sun-up. Noise that severs the cat-possum treaty, ending their nocturnal orchestra, scattering them.

The alliance is over. The human residents are asking: has anyone seen Buttons, Kit, Simba? Forlorn posters appear on lampposts: *Missing*. But they can't draft posters for the brushtail parents and their joeys. Now all three species face a new enemy.

Six months have passed since we moved in. The neighbourhood is a noisy graveyard, whirring saws and clanging hammers the new morning soundtrack. The rare quiet moments are the workmen's lunchbreaks. The few cats left wander depressed and friendless. The Gum Nut Capital has fallen, buried under a bulldozed garden, sealed under slabs of concrete, ready for two or three townhouses to be crammed onto one block. The lawns are pared back or barren, the remaining weatherboard shells abandoned. The skyline all cookie-cutter contours, an over-developed fortress wall.

The remaining residents recount local folktales: of the ancient woman who'd venture out daily, snipping and trimming, gardens flourishing in her wake. Of the unbridled passion, the roars of victory and loss, that burst from a hidden cave whose mouth is now forever closed.

And my once-home, our legal contract now void, has a sign hammered into its lawn. Most of my boxes remained packed: I am so used to being moved on, heading further west as the city sprawls outward. 'For Sale' signs now stand in for headstones: RIP, brushtail possums. RIP, old garden-tender. RIP, man-cave. RIP, the neighbourhood.

About the author

Alex Presincula, in fiction, is the third dragon rider in all dragon-inclusive stories. In reality, he's a budding writer. He's collaborated with musician Baz Kaybee on a biography and edited for *Phantasmagoria Magazine*, and is now working with artist Ben Coy on a short comic. Alex has studied Creative Writing at RMIT University (Bachelor of Arts), and Professional Writing and Editing at Victoria University. He'll collab, produce and edit for 10,000 hours, or until he can add a literary award to his bio.

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