

Lunch Books

A collection of stories by STEM Writers Nelson
Kate Shaw – Lorna Croft – Lorelle Baxter –
Orion Foote – Preston Wastney – John Du Four

Lunch Books

Pack Three

Midnight Snacks

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HAUNTING SPACES: MIDNIGHT SNACKS

In this third collection of short pieces of writing, Nelson writing group STEM – meeting on the ‘Second Tuesday Every Month’ – provides a selection of short stories and poems, focused on the ongoing nervousness we have with anything that invades our private space. Most centrally of course, this means the home, although consider too the growing number of allied semi-public locations: on public transport; in gyms and therapy centres; in waiting rooms, or in cafés, where we tell ourselves we’re ‘regulars’.

Some writers in this collection take one further step, to consider all the digital sites that inter-penetrate every physical location, seeming to offer us an extended and more mobile form of ‘selfhood’ – which may or may not be secure in its identity, or worth our investment in it, or even ‘real’.

What is it that haunts all these sites? How do they relate to the classic ‘haunted house’ which has evoked so many narratives? In imagining such stories, from inside our own locale, what are we carrying of the multiple insecurities already embedded into our fears of invasive forces?

Consider ghosts, for instance. Malicious ‘spirit worlds’, and the beings we imagine peopling them. Uninvited arrivals. Misinterpreted or misunderstood ‘others,’ dealt with in surprising ways.

Perhaps it’s an outcome of our recent lockdown experiences with Covid, placing extra pressure on the flimsy walls of home. Add in the shock of irruptive violence in the Christchurch Mosque attacks, and a renewal of gang violence – or maybe our hard-to-address nervousness over climate change, with actual catastrophic

instances of smashed homes and wrecked community, already reaching landscape scale.

Whatever is impelling it, this collection of stories carries all the hallmarks of the ‘haunted space’ response said to characterise US literature and film, where

The haunted house is ... a manifestation of contemporary anxieties surrounding the dissolution of the home, a symbol of the infusion of terror and violence into domestic space.

Across any number of genres: romance, ghost story, crime fiction, spy thriller, or disaster epic writ small, these stories about seemingly ordinary, everyday experiences, set themselves in spaces that are haunted. They sit, nervously, on the nexus between electronic connectivity and an accelerating erosion of the real life sanctuary once offered by the private home. They play across a once widely-held view that here, in sunny Nelson, even public space could be considered ‘safe’ – but maybe no more...

Each of these stories is, in some way, haunted – but by what?

Perhaps we can’t yet name it – or maybe, as the horror writer Stephen King once pointed out, it is in the act of *not* naming it that the true frisson lies.

Kate

KATE SHAW

Back story

I am an indie author from Nelson, New Zealand.

Though my passion lies with novels, I have found the art of short stories an intriguing challenge. My stories tend towards character studies, but often have a supernatural element.

My first series of novels, the *Danton Bay Trilogy*, is an urban fantasy, and a series of short stories connected to the trilogy was published in the *Down Under Fantasy Anthology*, along with the work of seven other fantasy writers from Australasia.

I have also been persuaded to try my hand at scriptwriting and in 2020 co-wrote my first short play. *St Brigid's Eve* debuted at the 2020 Nelson Fringe Festival, winning the Best Newcomers award.

Belonging to the STEM group has allowed me to extend my range of stories, stretching my imagination across various topics and challenging me to read the stories out loud, which I had hoped I would never have to do! The stories in this collection have been sparked by locations, theme ideas, the weather, or just interesting tidbits of information that have spiraled into a character or a setting that demanded to be written.

I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I have enjoyed writing them.

Sanctuary

She wakes to the chill of a silent apartment. Her threadbare blankets are irreplaceable now. It's quiet.

It's always quiet.

If she wanted, she could stay in bed. If she wanted, she could never get up.

She stares steadfast at the window. The tepid light stares back. Shaking her head, she pulls herself to sitting, her bones creaking as her body grinds into motion. Her muscles warm slowly now. They've given over seven decades of service, she can afford them a little time.

Time is the one thing she has, after all. Across the room, the open curtains hang limp, the light outside too thin to bother pulling them.

While you breathe, you endure.

She's still breathing.

Her brittle frame pulled tall, she rises, crosses to the kitchen, tugs on a cloth to reveal a tattered pile of leaves. Overuse has left them almost depleted. Half a cup of water remains in the saucepan. She sprinkles the leaves on top. The leftover water will afford her an early cup of tea. Rationed to the minute, the water turns on from eight 'til nine. She used to love cut flowers. Now, even the memory feels brazen.

Without bees, there are no flowers anyway.

The gas will last ten minutes. Freedoms roll hour by hour, district by district. As distancing increases, the city inters for weeks at a time.

No one in, no one out.

Home becomes a sanctuary. Home becomes a prison.

Turning from the stove, she moves back to her bedroom, throws the wardrobe doors wide. Her face softens as her eyes strafe the garments. Colours, faded but true, fill her eyes permeate her soul.

Outside, the world is bare. Nothing left but the here and now.

No occasions left to save for.

She takes a minute to admire the fabrics, moments in time enduring through silk and thread. From the bouquet, she chooses the long flowing dress. It's soft now, the natural fibres well used. So, unlike the synthetics. The neckline sits wide across her collarbone nearly off the shoulder. She supposes she would wear pearls around her neck. If they had survived. Lifting a small walnut box from the wardrobe floor, she sets it on the table. The thin light barely glints off the inlay. Lifting the lid reveals a treasury of pottles and tubes. Most are flaked dry, but a few still hold their cherished contents. She chooses carefully. Scraping the walls with her finger, she applies a dark red to her lips. The oil is thin, the tint barely visible. Still, it's something.

It's intention. That's what matters.

She steps out into her living room, the gown swirling around her ankles. The leaves are steeped, the water lukewarm. The light strains to filter in through the smeary window.

There's no need to wash the panes. There's nothing left to look at.

She's seen too much already.