**Episode 1 – Hibernate part 1**

**Greer:**  Welcome to Episode 1 of Vignettes, the Emerging Writers Festival storytelling podcast.

My name’s Greer, I’m the Program Coordinator here at EWF, and host of this season of Vignettes.

I’m recording today on the unceded sovereign lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations, and the live recordings featured in today’s episode were also made on Wurundjeri country. EWF pays our respects to Wurundjeri elders past and present, and to the elders of all lands that this podcast reaches.

Welcome back to Vignettes. Over the next five weeks, we will bring you stories from across the continent. We’ve reached the last season in Vignettes’ cycle, with Spring, Summer and Autumn already covered: so across the next five weeks, I’ll be introducing you to themes inspired by winter.

We’re beginning with two episodes recorded live at the 2022 Emerging Writers’ Festival. EWF takes place in June, as winter sets in, and the theme for the evening was Hibernate. For our first episode, we’ll be hearing personal essays from Renay Barker-Mulholland and Hayley Singer, and poetry from Ursula Robinson-Shaw. So that you can hear the enthusiastic applause with which our readers were met, I’m going to let my past self introduce our first reader:

Hi everyone! Welcome to Late Night Literature at the Emerging Writers’ Festival, my name’s Greer and I’m the Program Coordinator here at the Emerging Writers’ Festival. Thanks so much for coming to our first ever live recording of Vignettes, EWF’s storytelling podcast. Tonight’s readings will make up the first two episodes of the Winter season of Vignettes, so it feels appropriate to thank you for braving the cold to come and hear from our five readers tonight. The loose yet wintry theme for tonight’s readings is ‘hibernate’.

I’m just going to kick off, and so first up I’m stoked to introduce Renay Barker-Mulholland. Renay is an artist, writer, and creator, a proud disabled, Biripi / Dungutti woman, and a staunch feminist who is dedicated to fighting for disability justice.

**Renay:** Yaama. Thank you for coming to listen to me read. Quick background, if I can wrangle my words quickly. My work reflects a lot of my lived experience with disability, mental health. And my reflection on the theme came to me on a cold winter morning. So, here we go:

Am I dead?

I can’t move my body,

Are these thoughts

tumbling around in my head?

Have I carked it?

You know, gone?

D-E-A-D, dead!?

One way I check that I’m still kicking,

Is to pause and focus on what I can feel,

But I can’t discern one bit from another,

Nor recognise what is real.

Then I become aware of a heat,

And some rational thought brings me back,

my panicked mind chucks it’s teetering load  
Before my very last straw snaps.

The warmth that defrosts me,

from my vividly cold dream,

Is my life force, my kanyini

burning since my first days,

Not boom and bust,

but a slow burn,

Smouldering,

One that never burns out

Or fades away

I recognise my panicked self,

My heart thumping hard in my chest,

And with deep breaths

And some time to reflect

I’m able to identify that mess,

It was more than a dream,

it was a paralytic nightmare,

hideous nightmare,

so nefarious and cruel,

Powerful enough to convince myself,

I’m definitely being lied to.

“You fucker! You lied to me! You said that we were safe!”

I picture my brain screaming this,

As it jumps out my ear and

gets in my face.

I’m wide awake now, and still in bed

Just hoping for the winter sun,

To rise, ignite some crackling flames

So this nightmare won't be what won,

If I find myself lingering in my thoughts,

suspended in nervous contemplation,

I reach out for that generous warmth,

To ease my mind's anticipation.

This warming fire grows from love?

Me being on Country with mob,

These people, places, dreams and stories

Living neither below or above,

The stories and energy I’m composed of,

Are not latter or former.

Each return with the roundness of time,

And each time cold things get warmer,

When I face scary things I’m still tied to,

I battle to keep the fire going,

It’s takes so much not to relent when

I can feeling myself slowing,

Until the flame melts the cold

And the love comes freely,

comforting and bold.

These safe spaces that support me,

Throughout inevitable circles of mind

I have learnt to cultivate and share with others,

with my fellow crips, my kind.

And I didn’t really know what to call it,

Before I came across the work of Sins,

Sins Invalid, Shayda Kafai,

and the book called ‘Crip Kinship’,

Shayda talks of Dreaming,

And how we can use it to manifest,

A world where every one of us,

Us crips, us Bla(c)ks, us with Madness,

We can manifest a world where ‘...all body, minds, are embraced,

in accessible, revolutionary love’.

A world where everyone has a place.

Revolutionary love and dreaming keeps me warm,

through change and harsh seasons,

My protective layers weather the storm,

Dreamers give me something to believe in.

Those times when I was hurt. unprotected,

My fire was low on fuel.

I learnt the lesson (again and again)

that cold times can be nasty and cruel.

Remembering how to keep warm,

has taken patience and a lot of time.

Now I've learnt to hibernate, to protect myself,

to dig beneath the frost line.

And in the days to come when I awaken with a jolt,

unsure if I’m alive or dead.

The warmth that helps me to re-emerge,

Will burn brighter and hotter and red.

Thank you.

**Greer:** Thank you so much Renay. So, next we’re going to hear from Ursula Robinson-Shaw.

Ursula Robinson-Shaw is a writer living in Naarm. Her work has appeared in Overland, Cordite, Sydney Review of Books, Best of Australian Poems, Best New Zealand Poems, and elsewhere. She is a co-director of sick leave.

**Ursula:**  Hi. These poems are hibernation-themed in the limited sense that I wrote them in lockdown, on unceded Wurundjeri land, in my fucking apartment, which I was not allowed to leave.

I’m going to start with a poem called “All Is Good in the Pig”.

when the sky rose big and gold the first day unbelievable god said   
all is good in the pig and there I was,   
Desire, wet as a whistle…   
 to whom do the spoils go?   
dead mammon, collarbones …   
ceramic leopard, cattle, banker’s lamp …   
 to whom the spoils? I scream to my career girls.   
cast to the top of a pile of pearls, they wake   
and want for nothing…   
 the wheel of time goes soft …   
doom say the anchors, what left to do   
but decorate the clouds …   
 I scream to my career girls, let’s have a worm farm   
or a baby, we are just   
dumb enough to make of this life   
what we have extracted: culture,   
climate, cocktails…   
they want the same things they always did …   
 girls, I am the last to die …   
spilling out of the jaws, ringing in the ears,   
don’t mind that, the angel’s tone,   
the swing of the two-handed sword resounding …   
 figs, husk cherries, lemon,   
levitations of the evening,   
beautiful, luminous skin …  
nobody to bother you, not even with praise,   
not even to ask you to leave …   
 girls … what wicked sign crackles across the surface of the seas?   
… you will be fine, of course, career girls,   
you have made it cosy here …   
 call on your saints, girls, pray for a little   
walk-up apartment, keep faith …   
hope is the thing with credenzas, three breeds of crawling vine,   
the thing with beer money, glassware, burning wings…   
 my beautiful girls. my piggies.   
I have seen things. nothing special,   
the things of undergrounds, boutiques,  
some nights of love… of course the moon …   
lusts like the colours in the air, the song of bare feet on the carpet,   
the eyes of men, chicken, green olives,   
double-handling in the feminised labour market,   
moral confusion, sex roles, I have   
left a trail mix of pistachios   
like butter …   
 girls, looking at your phones, so medicine is poison, so the water and the air   
and the fruit are poison, what of it,   
to-morrow the struggle but to-day the jam, ask yourself:   
how should I, only small, go against the heavens,   
shoulder burdens, take my finger out of a pie …   
 ahhh yes, baby ducks,   
between goats, peonies, country road, brand new prius   
eight hundred dollar rattan chair there are glottal threads stringing up   
the one to the other, I know,   
it looks like danger, all the black tape, like a costume, a cold case,   
but horror is frivolous, I read that somewhere …   
 girls, my gain is not your gain but your loss is my loss,   
evil keeps the same pace …   
look upon my living room pastoral   
look upon my brilliant dress   
look upon my shining eye say yes

This one is called “Paranoid Phantasy”

*I want to suck your eye out*, I say,   
you say, *please do not* — but I can do it any way you like,   
hammer, pitcher, kitchen knife,   
what is love if not the execution of metaphors,   
and, as always, I will do a clean job —   
you say *let’s go for a walk*…   
like you don’t get it…

In all the timelines where I have a backbone   
I take my fulfilled body to a new form, offer what I have   
to you, or some disciplined other…   
 In those times I really mean it, sex is a micropayment   
off a loan of indifference, clothes ripple   
with hostile potential, the mind shivers,   
moulders, falls in, grows back, ringing like death metal   
in a cave…

Analysts study artists like children watch movies,   
to get horny   
and learn how to talk… it can’t all be cocaine, you say,   
but I don’t see why not. I call my psychiatrist,   
so he can tell me I’m pretty. good luck excluding me   
from the community of reason, my charismatic landscape   
of reality controls, a prime example   
of what not to do, professionally, at the pub …

The worse I feel, the more godlike. I am downtrodden and female,   
but I was your husband in a past life. Statistically this is dangerous news…   
Couples scream outside our house. There’s something about it …   
it’s so realistic. Love is a new way to talk about yourself, and then it’s not,   
it sucks and blows with the wind,   
the plumbing sours, the bliss goes out,   
the air wears down again …

*in the mood for an aggressive drive*, I say, for the fifth time,   
style is just repetition, don’t I know it, standing there with a drink in my hand —

In my office it is always 3am   
and a crisis, skinning traumas for luxury boots,   
smiling like new leather at my own devices, condemning ‘sincerity’ —   
 YES, I am afraid of feeling,   
I am only brave about desire,   
I try to describe what I have witnessed, and find   
it is too late to fail better. Here I am,   
in my individual personality,   
a completely imaginary and self-contained problem,   
rotating helplessly —

The thing is, I’d rather be devastated than bleaked out,   
I face god like a flower seeks the sun,   
my throat boils, I tell myself, YOU HAVE COMMITTED NO CRIME — and if I have,   
I’m resolving a set of contradictions,   
and I deserve to be rewarded for the work I’ve done …

(applause)

This one is called “Doing Meth with Luara”

General Prologue, Brain dump, every month is cruel,  
Bathing in a drought, in a tank, it’s the season and it’s warm,  
we are waking up startled at the waste of our spirits, I’m sad to say  
my hands shaking, I don’t think it’s a Problem, or is it Nature,  
only middlebrow critics make a fuss over addiction, battery hens, petrochemicals,  
heavy metals, the thrum of panic undercut by  
the thought of gleaming kitchens, our adult lives  
what the decadents died of, or was it for, carried off  
in any case, fearless as a box of wine, cruel to themselves, real villains of taste, come baby,  
I’ll read your fortune, such pleasure in confirming  
what little is known, tho we can only guess and your guess  
is better, or that depends were you at the pub last night or in a bathroom with your friends or on  
some premiere poet’s carpet, howling o no  
I can’t be trusted, I have no motives, the figure crouched inside is but a  
trick of the light — nobody asks, things matter  
less now than ever, and so the more, Lu says despite their  
hard work and commitment, she can’t trust them,  
bon vivants, 2.5 kids and garden plots, cheese and wine, those Verso sale motherfuckers,  
might be small differences and narcissism thereof to say the mortgage class should not  
be garbed in the aesthetics of revolution, but, she says, when we cannot  
help but build our lives around this want, what plain idea  
is so beautiful it can’t be resisted, and pain  
is so easily forgot, and how good is your money if nobody wants you dead, nobody comes,  
but we do, we come, we come for bread,  
we stay for roses, we get rooted, I am having dreams again, we get up, we do the work but not  
the way we want, isn’t it funny. I’m pretty sure it’s not meth but there’s only one way to find out

Thanks.

**Greer:** Thank you so much Ursula.

So next up, we’re going to be hearing from Hayley Singer.

Hayley writes essays about literature and ecologies, queer embodiment and activism, multispecies justices and injustices, and on reading and writing as worlds end and begin again. Her writing has been published in Sydney Review of Books, The Lifted Brow, The Monthly, Cordite Poetry Review, and Writing from Below. Her first book, Abandon Every Hope Who Enters Here, is forthcoming with Upswell in 2023.

**Hayley:** Thanks so much Greer.

I’ve driven up from the lands of the Yalloc Bulluk people, Bunurong Country, and I want to pay my deep respects to the traditional custodians of that place, as well as the custodians of this beautiful place, Naarm. I also want to pay my respects to First Nations people here today.

This feels like a real handbrake turn from the beautiful reading we just had. This extract comes from a longer work about growing up, finding and losing identity and love in queerphobic places and times. In *An Archive of Feeling*, queer theorist Ann Cvetkovich writes that for queer people – and not only for queer people, but in this context that she’s writing in – for queer people, sites of desire can also be sites of trauma. Trauma in a world historical sense, but also as connected to everyday textures that might go unvoiced; that are seen as not catastrophic. Or are, simply, not seen. So this essay and this extract is about both, and I promise you Greer, I get to the theme of hibernation at the end.

Can you hear me? [audience-member's glass clinks] Awesome. That was a beautiful response, thank you. Okay. So this is from a longer work.

\*

I did not know what would change for me when I saw the film *Boys Don’t Cry*. But this is what happened: time slowed down relative to the world outside.

It’s the year 2000. Mum runs a small video hire business. We have a hundred videos at home. Maybe more. New ones coming in, going out, all the time. We live in a not-quite-suburb of the Gold Coast’s hinterland. Acreage. Our street is a cul-de-sac and we share in it with a country music singer, a man who tends his modest marijuana plantation, and a kid who keeps trying to set her house on fire. I want someone to show up and tell me I’ve lost something. Or that I could find something.

I watch it on VHS. Hilary Swank as Brandon Teena meets Chloe Sevigny as Lana Tisdel. They are in a bar, a neon-lit bar called Oasis. Lana sees Brandon and asks, *Who are you*? and opens her eyes wide to look tough. This is how Brandon first sees Lana’s blue eyes. This is how Lana first sees Brandon’s brown hair, brown eyes. Brandon’s unblinking eyes. Brandon’s lips. Brandon’s jaw line. Brandon swallows. *Who are you? Who are you?* Lana is heading to the stage to sing a country ballad, ‘The Bluest Eyes in Texas’ with two of her friends—Candice and the one whose name I can never remember.

The sonic geography of this moment: Lynrd Skynrd’s ‘Tuesday’s Gone’ hits the air with electric guitars, thick and ambient. Everything in my suddenly unquiet body reverberates, distorts. The sound feels unmistakeably mid-western, though I have never been to the American mid-west. What I hear are sounds of isolation and hard luck. Sounds of coal trains, empty diners, tyre yards, water towers. Outlaw sounds. Sounds that are proud to walk alone. So they are probably a lie. A romantic lie about life in a rural, mid-western town. There’s love, longing, loss and a confession of one’s inability, or refusal, to change layering up in the lyrics: *Lord I can’t change, Lord I can’t change, Lord I can’t change*.

In country music people are finding and losing. Losing sanity, love, losing out to the law, losing to drink, losing themselves to dust, getting swept up by the wind, hopping on trains and never looking back. You might be beat, but you’ll never be broken. This is the fantasy of country songs. But, people who get beat—really beat, repeatedly, beat—can get broken.

In this early part of the movie, no one has been shattered. Brandon and Lana are just starting. I want to pause. Rewind. To intrude. No, not intrude. I want something kinder. I want to orbit. To be enfolded in Brandon’s gaze. To live off the sugar of his looks. This world. The speeding cars. Racing hearts. Dust clouds. Caravan parks. Beer. People watching TV on the couch, just like me.

I believed I was seeing my own past life. My body contained residues of these scenes: the Nebraskan textiles, the frizzed and crusty hair, the plaid shirts, ripped denim, the disco ball at the skating rink. I understood how these people were trying for love. Love so impermanent it could dissolve in water. Loss of love is what this is actually about.

Back then, I was in love with the idea of love. I was with these people as they sang karaoke, as they couch surfed, lied, got jealous, made out and fought, got homeless, wandered off or ran away. They ran from home, even when they were entirely shoeless. Even when it was entirely mid-winter in the Great Plains. Where the cold dry air comes down from Canada. Where the temperature of the soil drops rapidly. Brandon, Lana, their friends, ran from caravans or institutions or cars. But they were always shot back to the trailer parks of their childhoods. Back to the homes of their parents, or their girlfriend’s parents, or nearby.

So I watched the film, feeling I had shared in all of this before. First there was Brandon. Then his love. His love of love. Then my love of Brandon. His desire to make a family, get and hold a life together. Love was cleaning the house. Making breakfast. Kissing. Roses, love poems and pizzas. My corporeal body leaned towards the phantom of his.

His death came suddenly. He was twenty-one. It was New Years Day. Here’s what happened: Two men assaulted Brandon on Christmas Eve 1993, and no one arrested them. The two men had heard rumours and wanted to know if Brandon was biologically male or female. They locked Brandon in a bathroom and demanded to know. And once they knew, they drove Brandon to the outskirts of town. In the morning, Brandon gave a statement to the police. The police wanted to know how come Brandon was running around like a guy, making girls think he was a guy. Brandon wanted to know why he should answer those questions. In the early hours of New Years Day, 1994, those same two men who assaulted Brandon executed him and two of his friends in a farmhouse in a town called Humbolt. Decades later, Jack Halberstam would write that this execution was more like an *earthquake … than an individualised event: its eruption damaged more than just the three who died and the two who killed*.

When the poet Kwame Dawes looked up at the Nebraskan sky and wrote that in winter it appeared to have been *battered with aches*, he joined other writers who saw places where violence felt natural. As if violence erupted from soil that had been farmed to extinction and was plagued with bankruptcy. As if certain places, their people, are just somehow always downwind of disaster.

Humbolt is an hour and a half drive south from where Brandon was born and less than thirty minutes from Falls City where he met the men who killed him. Between Falls City and Humbolt is a town called Salem. There are twenty-two places in America called Salem, a word that originally derived from the Hebrew word “shalem,” meaning peace.

After the real Brandon was murdered, the real Lana Tisdel made a collage of photos of Brandon’s face. She cut the letters of his name out of pizza boxes, coloured them in red and purple. When Swank received an Oscar for her portrayal of Brandon saying, *I want to thank Brandon Teena for being such an inspiration to us all*, the real Brandon’s mum was still paying off her son’s funeral.

I don’t know where my mum, my sister, the cats, our dog were when I watched this film, at the beginning of a new millennium. But when the player spat the video out, I felt empty. All I knew was this film, the wake it left. I wanted to start again. I thought if I kept the film on loop, I could make a space-time machine out of the cassette’s magnetic tape. Time would twist. The ground would bend. The world could be handed to Brandon, newly, differently, safely. And I could live in that world, soul-wise. Leave my body where it was, at home, on the couch: go into a kind of dormancy until the conditions of the world were right for us.

**Greer**: Thanks much Hayley, and thanks again to Ursula and Renay for reading at the first ever live recording of Vignettes.

Thanks also to you, for listening to Vignettes, and please join me next week to hear Luke Patterson and Polly Sara’s readings from this same night, and over the next few weeks to hear more readings from emerging writers. Vignettes is produced by me, Greer Clemens, and audio produced by Joe Buchan. Our theme music is by Thu Care. To find out more about the artists featured in today’s episode and the team behind Vignettes, you can go to emergingwritersfestival.org.au.