**Greer:**  Hi and welcome back to Vignettes, the EWF storytelling podcast. My name’s Greer, and I’m the Program Coordinator at the Emerging Writers’ Festival.

I’m recording today on the unceded sovereign lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations. EWF pays our respects to Wurundjeri elders past and present, and to the elders of all lands that this podcast reaches.

Welcome back to Season four of Vignettes, Winter. Today’s episode’s theme is ‘Fright’ and we have stories from Katerina Gibson, Khalid Warsame, and Grace Chan. Simply put, today’s theme reflects on fright because the short days of winter bring darkness, and darkness can beget fear. Our writers today have thought about fear in many forms, and I’ll pass the mic to them to spook you.

First up, we have fiction from Katerina Gibson. Katerina is the author of Women I Know, out with Scribner this year. Her writing has appeared in Granta, Overland, Island, Meanjin, Kill Your Darlings and elsewhere. Her short story ‘Fertile Soil’ was the Pacific region winner of the 2021 Commonwealth Short Story Prize, and was recently translated into Italian. Here’s Katerina:

**Katerina:** Hi, my name is Katerina Gibson and I’m a writer living in Melbourne, and my debut short story collection *Women I Know* came out this year. I’m going to read a short piece of fiction, for the theme of ‘Fright’, it’s called “Alone”.

My roommate moved out in the middle of winter, leaving me alone in the apartment again. She said it was because she’d found a place closer to her work and that said new place had consistent and immediate access to hot water. Still, I suspected the real reason for her departure was because of a comment I had made one night when she was eating take-out sushi. From the lounge, which I was able to hear her from, even with the drone of the exhaust above me as I fried onion and boiled lentils in an adjacent pan, she said, in the apologetic tone that twitter had taught rich people assume, that while she had certain comforts afforded to her growing up, being an adult had given her a new appreciation for how hard Gwen had worked. I responded that it would be fantastic if that new found appreciation for her childhood nanny would compel her operate a vacuum, at which she did laugh, but stiffly, while her eyes filled with water, and she brushed non-existent strays behind her ear. She moved out, with 24 hours’ notice, not two weeks later. That was Tuesday.

Truthfully she had not left me entirely alone, but with Bella, the fat grey tabby, who I adored, but who continued to treat me, since her rescue, with undisguised disdain, while being without exception unrequitedly attached to whoever was not me in the house. Bella, who spent all daylight hours sleeping on top of the fridge, become active at night, and did not like change, and so acted out, in Felicity departure, by running up and down the hallway, climbing up the curtains, or knocking objects off the shelves in the hours between 2 – 4 am. As consequence, in that first week of adjusting to my roommate-less existence, I would come home from work, having commuted over forty-five minutes with other 9-5s whose souls had just been pressure tested, eat left overs, scroll on my phone then pass out before waking to thuds in the early am. Said thuds were often solid enough that, in my half-awake state, I believed they were human footsteps, thinking perhaps Felicity had brought someone home, and rolled back over to sleep, before remembering that she no longer lived here, at which point I would sit bolt upright, breath heavily and begin to wondered if in fact my cat was not a cat, but a changeling who would adopt her feline appearance in my company—a paranoid thought that dissolved only with the sunrise.

On Friday night, I met up with Ingrid and filled her in on Felicity’s departure, flagellating myself over having messed up another perfectly fine living arrangement, with someone I did not hate, and could even, eventually, see myself growing fond of, and only because of her complete unawareness regarding how the house remained clean. Ingrid, the person I felt closest to in the world, spent her free time, for reasons she could not explain to me, listening to podcasts narrated by librarian-esque women chat about horrific bodily crimes, and responded to my concerns by relating all the grotesque thing that had happened to women living alone, where their bodies had been found, and what kitchen implements had been used to violate them.

On Sunday I interview two potential roommates, one was a line cook named Fred, and who, although chatty, I did not mind, but knew, within months, through sheer proximity and limited options that he would believe himself to be in love with me. Eventually culminating in him whispering through our shared wall—while masturbating with unreasonable theatrics—that he was thinking about me. A development, I thought would be difficult to ignore. The second was a university student name Lena, who did not appear to register me as fully human, a character flaw I felt I could overlook if this meant she did not involve me in her interpersonal dramas, and was out of the house a lot. I was undecided when Bella jumped up on her lap and Lena, scratching the underside of her chin, said, what a cutie. I offered her the room, she said she had options she was keen on, but that she would keep me in the loop.

On Sunday night, At three am there was the sound of something heavy smashing. I walked into the lounge where the noise had originated and screamed. Or I would have, but was too paralysed with fear—a woman stood naked in the doorway. By time the fright had thawed, I realised I that I had simply neglected to close the blinds and was looking at my own reflection in the window—having taken up the habit of nudity, despite the chill, simply because I could. A vase lay in pieces on the floor. I walked back to the bedroom, but couldn’t shake this drip or awareness, like my reflection had not turned and receded into the dark outside in mirror of me, but that she was still at the threshold of the window, eyes boring into my neck. Something like gravel sounded—whether it was litter being scraped, or a throat, being cleared, I could not say.

**Greer**: Thanks so much Katerina.

Next we’ll be hearing from Khalid Warsame. Khalid is a writer who lives in Naarm. He writes short stories and essays that have appeared in a few journals and anthologies. Here’s Khalid:

**Khalid:**  Near my old house in Bundoora, a police officer once shot a kangaroo after it was struck by a car on Plenty Road. I was a student at the time and was meeting a woman to buy a textbook when I’d heard about it. I found her seated at an outdoor table in front of the library with two of her friends, one of whom was crying. Her friend was patting her on the back and speaking to her in a low voice. I was struck by how quiet her sobs were, as if I was watching her with the sound cut off. I envied her; whenever I am in tears, I cannot keep quiet, it’s as if I have burst.

The woman who was crying noticed me first, which made me feel like an intruder, standing there. Thankfully, one of her friends recognised me from our tutorials together. I had failed the unit earlier in the semester, probably because I didn’t have a textbook, and was redoing it in the summer semester. She placed the thick statistics book in my hands after I’d paid her and told me that her friend had been on the tram when a police officer had stepped onto the tracks, pulled his gun out and shot a kangaroo twice.

“Can you believe they would do that? Right in front of everyone,” she said.

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Last weekend, Benjamin and I were driving along the dirt road leading out of Great Otway National Park when we passed a group of wallabies by the side of the road. They looked like statues, their eyes flashing in the reflection of the headlights of Benjamin’s car.

“They’re so eery,” said Benjamin. It was just before dawn; we’d intended to take the walking trail to Lake Elizabeth in the hopes of seeing a platypus. Unfortunately, the part of the trail that crossed the Barwon River was submerged, and the signs next to the trail gave us sufficient warning against attempting to cross it. The crisp winter air was bracing and dense with the scent of earthy humus and eucalypts.

Benjamin was undeterred, promising that we’d come back again soon, when it hadn’t rained the night before. When we got back to the car, he turned to me and apologised.

“It’s not your fault at all. You don’t need to apologise.”

“I know how badly you wanted to see a platypus,” he said.

I considered telling him the truth; that I would have felt nothing at the sight of the creatures, just like every other animal I’d ever encountered. I considered telling him that his habit of apologising for everything made me feel guilty for remaining in my feelings, while he absolved himself of his own. Instead, I told him we’d see a platypus next time.

Before we set off, Benjamin put on a podcast about the American conspiracy theorist Alex Jones that we had been listening to on the drive over.

“Sorry,” he said. “I know you prefer music.”

“I don’t mind,” I said. Soon, I was beginning to nod off when the car slowed down; ahead of us, a silver Volvo was parked on the right shoulder of the dirt road with its headlights off. To the left was a precipitous drop, though most of it was obscured by the thick tree cover and low light. I tried not to look out of the car while Benjamin drove. Even a glimpse of the steep slope between the trees was enough to make me ill. I was trying to be nonchalant in front of Benjamin; I was trying to be normal.

Two people were by the side of the road, a man and woman in their fifties. The man was pointing a flashlight at the ground when Benjamin stopped the car behind them. The woman approached us, and Benjamin pulled the handbrake and got out of the car.

“The poor thing,” she was saying to him when I approached them.

“What happened?” I said.

“It’s a fox. It’s dying. Someone ran it over and left it to die,” said the woman. The man approached us; he was holding a flashlight in one hand and a small camping shovel in the other.

“It’s dead,” said the man. His expression was grim.

“What do we do?” said Benjamin.

The man shrugged. “Nothing. The Park Rangers will probably dispose of the carcass at some point.”

I didn’t look at the poor creature while Benjamin and the man pushed it off the road with sticks. When he got back inside the car and we set forth again, I asked him if he’d ever hit an animal with his car.

“No. I mean … what a way to go. It must have been in so much pain,” he said.

I don’t know why I started telling him the story of the police officer who shot the kangaroo. It was the first time I’d ever told anyone; it had so very rarely crossed my mind since. I remember following the reporting on the incident closely at the time.

The Police Association Secretary at the time gave a bizarre interview to a journalist where he seemed almost proud of the officer’s actions, calling kangaroos “vicious animals”, and boasting that he himself had put down dozens of animals. The RSPCA took a dim view of the police officer’s actions, labelling the killing as inhumane, noting that one shot, properly aimed, to the base of the brain was all that it took. The RSPCA spokesperson, who was also a vet, stressed that if you don’t know where the vital centres are in the base of the brain of the kangaroo, you don’t shoot it. When I told Benjamin this, he was frowning.

“So you’re supposed to just let it die? Is that it?” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“You said it yourself. You’re supposed to just let it die slowly?”

“It’s about minimising suffering, not shooting animals,” I said. I was feeling hot; I didn’t know why. I realised that I had snapped at him without meaning to, but I was also annoyed, upset. Why? Why was I upset? I closed my eyes and slowly exhaled.

“I’m sorry,” said Benjamin.

“Please stop apologising,” I said. “I hate it.”

Benjamin didn’t respond. In a cruel turn, I welcomed the awkward silence in the car. We didn’t speak for another twenty minutes except for once when he asked if I could unscrew the lid of his water bottle for him so he could take a sip while he drove. It wasn’t until we were back on the M1 that he suddenly spoke.

“There was blood on their car,” he said.

“You mean they … “

“And afterwards too, with the shovel,” he said.

When he dropped me off at home, it was too late for me to go back to bed, so I opened my laptop and looked up the details of the incident where the police officer shot the kangaroo. I remembered the name of a photographer who was on the scene, Elwood.

I typed “Elwood kangaroo shot plenty road” into Google and the first result was for a Herald Sun article that featured a dramatic photograph of the incident. It was this image that I remembered. In the photo, the police sergeant is framed from the torso down, cocking a .38 revolver in his disposable blue nitrile gloves, pointing it at a kangaroo laying over the tram tracks, as if in repose. In the background a B-class route 86 tram is stopped across an empty intersection. The sky is bright grey.

**Greer**: Thank you Khalid.

Our final story for today comes from Grace Chan. Grace Chan is an Aurealis and Norma K Hemming Award-nominated speculative fiction writer. She can’t seem to stop scribbling about brains, minds, space, technology, and identity. Her short fiction can be found in Going Down Swinging, Aurealis, Andromeda Spaceways, Clarkesworld, Lightspeed, and many other places. Her debut novel, Every Version of You, uses virtual reality to explore identity and transformation (Affirm Press, 2022). In her other life, she works as a psychiatrist.

**Grace:** Hi everyone. My name is Grace Chan, and I’m a speculative fiction writer living and working on Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung land. I love writing about the human mind, the future possibilities of technology, spooky alien worlds, complicated feelings, and the monsters within us. Today I’ll be reading an excerpt from a short story in progress called “Digital Luv”. It’s about the things that can go horribly wrong or maybe horribly right when someone tries to possess what was never really theirs to begin with.

For the default setting, I choose the whipped-cream dress, the one you wore for our second anniversary. I remember that night, leading you by the hand along the riverfront boulevard, feeling like my blood must be liquid gold. You were beautiful in such a discreet, elegant way—your hair looped like black silk, your neck adorned with a thin gold chain.

When the installation finishes, I almost fall off my bed in astonishment. The quality’s far better than I expected. You’re standing right there, in front of my balcony’s glass doors, haloed in the city’s glow, as though no time at all has passed. You take a step towards me, a suggestive smile tugging at your lips.

I’d asked the salesperson three dozen questions about the tactile simulation, concerned that it would feel inert, plasticky, perverted. I needn’t have worried. The scar behind my ear stops aching as you fill my arms, my mind, and I pour myself into your chalice.

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Afterwards, I ask you about the fight.

What fight, you say. Of course you don’t remember. The reconstruction draws only from your online traces—social media profiles, internet searches, emails, apps, forms.

You don’t remember how you picked on my worst habits. You know I try very hard to be polite to your friends, but Eileen’s worries are always so banal, and Eun-Sook is intolerably pompous about her work as a lawyer. You know I try my best. I’ve never seen you let your temper loose like that. Maybe it was influenced by the fact that we’d had a fair bit of plum wine. That’s on me; I shouldn’t have let you order that second bottle.

As soon as the apartment door closed behind us, you threw your high heels into a corner and turned upon me. To be honest, you’re much less attractive when you’re angry. Your eyes were round and ghostly, your eyeliner smudged beneath. Your hair swung messily around your shoulders. I wanted to grab it, push it back behind your ears.

You snarled something about being sick of nagging me to make more of an effort. I don’t remember your exact words, but I remember how you made me feel. It made my ears ring, made my belly coil and slither. I didn’t yell. I never yell—I don’t really know how. I admit, I said some things about you I shouldn’t have. But I was hurt, and when people are hurt, they say things they regret later. I thought you’d forgive me. You’d always been generous in the past.

What fight? you ask again, as you shrug into an oversized T-shirt, the hem grazing your bare thighs. Your head tips to one side, questioning.

Never mind, I say. I close my hands over your graceful collarbones, marvelling at the way they slide under the buttery fabric. Marvelling at the way your spectral body soothes me.

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I think there’s a bug in the program. Nothing major. I don’t have any regrets. But a few times, I’ve woken in the early hours before dawn to see your slender form silhouetted against the city lights. You turn halfway towards me, your eyes ghost-white in a shadowy face. I switch you off. I thought I did it when I went to bed, but I must have forgotten. Next week, when I find a spare moment, I’ll check in with the manufacturer.

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After work, I walk past the Mexican restaurant where once a waiter tried to pick you up while you were waiting for me to arrive. Your laughter bubbles, as bright and loud as if you were breathing into my ear. My heart thumps. Is it the real version of you, eating here, maybe with him? I scan the diners, but you’re not there. Bloody implant. It’s really playing up now. Plus, the scar’s starting to itch like mad. I scratched it so hard in my sleep there was blood caked under my nails and all over my pillow. I’m going to put in a complaint.

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Fucking hell. I can’t even switch you off now. When I open my eyes, I see you standing over me—tongue tracing your lower lip, like you’re hungry. When I close my eyes, you’re still fucking there. I tried to drive to the shop yesterday, but I got completely lost on the way. It’s you, isn’t it? You’re messing with my head. Chopping up my thoughts. Eating my memories.

Fuck, my hand’s covered in blood. You’re doing this to me. You’re always finding my weaknesses. You’re going to regret—

You open your eyes. The apartment’s different from what you remember—an unfamiliar couch, the kitchen cluttered with takeaway boxes, the cityscape more built-up. You twitch the muscles of your right arm. Contemplate your new hand from various angles—large, pale, covered in fine brown hairs. Strength rushes through your body in a sudden torrent. You sit bolt upright, swing your long legs over the side of the bed. Misjudge the movement. You overbalance, correct yourself. A smile tweaks your strange mouth. It’ll take some time, but you’ll get used to this.

**Greer**: Thanks so much Grace, and thanks again to Katerina Gibson and Khalid Warsame for your stories.

Thank you for tuning in to Vignettes this week, and please don’t forget to subscribe to the podcast and join us again next week for our second-last episode for the season, where we’ll hear readings about Work from Jennifer Down, Elena Gomez, and Hannah Debus. Vignettes is produced by me, Greer Clemens, and audio produced by Joe Buchan. Our theme music is by Thu Care. If you feel inclined, please leave us a little rating or review, and to find out more about the artists featured in today’s episode, and about EWF itself, you can go to emergingwritersfestival.org.au.