**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.

Thank you for tuning in to the final episode of the Winter season of Vignettes. It’s been such a joy to collect and hear stories from some of our favourite writers across the last four episodes, and this last one is no exception: today we’re hearing from Maya Hodge, Eric Jiang and Zhi, all writing on the theme of “Touch”. I often think of summer and spring as the seasons that provide the most sensory stimulus, but that can also mean that in the cooler months, the senses are almost starved, and their coming alive can be all the more startling or moving. With a theme so trained on the senses, it didn’t feel like a coincidence that today’s episode is brought to you by writers who I came to know through their poetry: poets have a special affinity for the senses, as you’ll no doubt notice today, even while these writers move outside that form.

Our first reading is from Maya Hodge. Maya is a Lardil and Yangkaal poet, curator and creative based on the lands of the Kulin Nation. Her writing has been published by Overland Literary Magazine, Cordite Poetry Review, Blindside, West Space and this mob publication Black Wattle. Maya is a co-winner of the Mildura Indigenous Writers Award (2018) and last year was awarded Runner Up of the SBS Emerging Writers' Competition.

**Maya**: My name is Maya Hodge. I am a proud Lardil and Yangkaal woman. I’m a poet, curator and artist based on Wurundjeri Country here in Naarm.

This first poem is called If I could speak:

If I could speak I would tell you whose hands held me and twisted my body into netted shape. I could tell you the way those hands weaved time and knowledge into every single knot I hold. I’d tell you I still hear the distant ocean and sea tumble against shore, the birds cawing in the steady breeze and the kids giggling to each other as the sun kisses the skyline. I can also feel the absence of the kids who aren’t here, like an indent of a seashell in the sand of a receding tide.

I’d tell you that the person who made me was loved, who loved, laughed, danced and sang. Who could create things with their hands with steady eyes and bulja. They felt sorrow and pain, they may have grieved for some time and felt the sting of jealousy.

I’d tell you about the way they slung me over their shoulder as they took me across Country to the ocean and the trees. How they lay me gently on the ground full of food for their family. How I was taken by white hands far away into the night, across sea and into darkness - only to be slid back into the light. I’d tell you about when I recognised a Countryman looking at me as I looked at her. Gazing as time threads through the space between us. We reach out to one another, meeting for the first time.

This second poem is called Ephemeral:

As I walk through this place

Through rising rock and

Curdling creek

My significance

Streaks like a star

In the night sky waykuu

My heart soars

Like the wrens

The way

Strips of bark drip

Towards land

With trust

The way my brother and I

Watch the tides lap the shore

And our footprints

Are what is left

When we leave

The way my mother and I

Sit together in

Connected silence

And I think of time

Ephemeral

A circle

Where we will meet

Once again

Where we will walk

Through ghost gum

Gripped lands

With joined

Hands

Deep love

Hair filled with sand

And I’ll smile again one last time

As I rest and let time

Swallow me whole

As the cosmos collides together

Above us

Eternally ephemeral

In physical form

But our spirits will remain

Living on.

**Greer**: Thanks so much Maya.

Our next reading is from Eric Jiang. Eric is a Chinese-Australian writer/director living and creating in Sydney. Their practice spans print poetry, digital poetry, film, and theatre, while contemplating queer futures, familial cultural exchange, and joy. Eric’s poetry appears or is forthcoming in Liminal, Cordite, Going Down Swinging, and more. He has edited for The Waiting Room Project, an art space in the Sydney Sexual Health Centre, contributed interviews for FBi Radio’s Race Matters, and produced sound pieces for Signal Boost, an audio development program facilitated by the Wheeler Centre. Here he is:

**Eric**:

Is an interruption a kind of touching.
Is an interruption a kind of touching.
Is an interruption a kind of touching.
Is an interruption.

Voices holding voices, flirt with voices, a voice brushes the arm of another voice ...

Sometimes an interruption is a complete overlap, two hands briefly touching when someone passes you the salt, other times you just get the salt.

A voice nestled into another voice, a beam of light into an afternoon, syllables float together, plosives and fricatives fitting right into each other, doesn't this feel safe to you?

Don't interrupt me.

Don't interrupt me.

This is my part. Don't speak. Don't.

Don't.

Don't.

Do--

In kindergarten, if you correctly Jinx someone that means you get to punch them whenver they talk, as though you've literally stolen their voice, or at least own it, or command it. As though you stepped on someone's foot foot, so prepare to die. That kind of playground energy. And there were rules about it either being valid or not valid if you were under a roof? What the hell was that about?

It's all unbearably violent and it's happening in schools everywhere.

In Midnight, an episode of Doctor Who (David Tennant's era), a mysterious force possesses a woman called Sky. She repeats what everyone is saying. At first, the delay is quite long. If the Doctor says, "What's up." A few seconds later she says "What's up?". Soon it's almost instant. Then she's saying it at exactly the same time. It's one of the lowest budget and most chilling episodes, because in general you want your voice to be your own. There's a personal space of the audio, which Sky, or rather, the demon possessing Sky, completely encroaches on.

In one of the moments before the most chilling sequence, the Doctor and Sky rattle off the square root of pi. I would never ask you to remember the square root of pi. But they nail it, and make irrational numbers seem scary.

There's a drama game which I'd always wanted to play. It's when you both say a word at the same time.
You count down.
321
Cauliflower / Running.

And then you say another word at the same time.
321
Laptop / Water

But it's not just a random word, it's like you're trying to find the word in between in meaning, or sound, or some kind of quality.

And so then you get closer, closer and closer. And eventually.
321
Spill / spill.

And collision. You're the same.

A semantic touching.

You've had the same thought, and you're as close as you'll ever be.

Then usually if you're playing this in person after you get the final word you do a robot dance. I wish I could show you but it's really hard to evoke via audio alone.

When the intention is to be the same it's not so bad. There's no punching, there's no treading on someone's feet, no frustration. It's like you're both lost in a forest and keep calling out to each other, trying to find your way to the other person. There's a point where you can finally see each through the thickets, and it's exciting. But you still have to chop your way to through the undergrowth to finally, finally touch.

Harmony is a kind of touching, a method of non-violent unison, where you're somehow saying the exact same words, or singing them, but on a different plane. Somehow touching and not touching. Once you get into the hang of singing a third above, which is like three notes above a meldoy, you can do it like anytime, and it always sounds kinda good. It's an audial touching in a particular, specific way, like all touching is.

After a bad play, someone on King street says "that's an hour of my life I won't get back", but the whole point of time is that you don't get any of it back. but to remember is to reach for something, to feel it enfolding on the current moment. You don't get the time back but maybe you get the feeling, which is the byproduct of time that you want anyway. so you reach and reach and it feels good but you can still never touch the thing itself that is passed, which is a tragedy, which is what has to happen anyway.

Choreography is a kind of contact, a touch.

Somtimes I think that if you're watching just one dancer move, they could just be making it up on the spot.

But when you watch two dancers move in perfect sync, that's how you know they have the same thought, the same pattern to move from, a kind of not-touching that feels like touching.

Is to be simultaneuous to be in a kind of contact? A kind of holding, a pressing against each other without every really pressing against each other.

A melody guiding an elbow, that kind of thing, or your battered by a rhythm at the same time. It feels like i'm with you,
 it feels like they're with each other

occuping some kind of the same space,
 not just occupying but enveloping one another.

The word asymptote is derived from the greek "not falling together". I would love to be "not falling together" with you.

One value approaches zero as another approaches infinity, something that we can't ever reach but we kind of say we can?

A gesture of reaching, a gesture of grasping,

It's not unlike a hapless claw machine, but even then sometimes they win.

In a clamorous foodhall, my date talks about how they used to play ice hockey, and how the thing they miss most about it the feeling of the psychic connection between the players. They haven't felt anything similar since.

Down a vineyard blanketed hill, two friends talk about a reiki massage one of their mums got. It was lifechanging, apparently.

In a small room, someone explains how quantum entanglement is when two particles link together in a certain way no matter how far apart they are in space, no matter how uncrossable that distance is.

In a distant suburb, we're doing the same three bows for the same dead people that we do every year. It's intergenerational and ritualistic and so constant it's almost physical.

In a city overseas, I'm retreading the same suburbs I did before, and I'm
 trying to feel closer to a version of myself from before, and I think it's working.

Is a continuous conversation like different points of time folding against each other connection without touching?

Having the same thought is a kind of closeness. Is it the step beyond closeness? Surely at some point they are the same thing.

If true touch is impossible, maybe we just call some kind of almost-touch touching, some kind of not-touch touching,

I feel like there are so many ways to touch without touching, so many ways described by language and science and play.

And no matter what, I think I know that I want to spend all my time and energy to get as close as we possibly can.

**Greer**: Thanks so much Eric.

Our final reading for this episode, and for this season of Vignettes, is from Zhi. Zhi is an experimental poet/artist based on unceded Ngunnawal, Ngambri country. They are the author of the award-winning collection of poetry, blur by the; and is one half of the experimental poetry/sound duo known as 莎瑜 (ShaYu). Currently, Zhi is developing a digital practice which stems from his love of Microsoft Excel. They love lo-fi stuff, emotional maximilism and not being perceived.

**Zhi**: Hi my name is Zhi, and today I am going to be reading an abridged version of NOTHING, BUT, an essay I’ve published in Aniko Press (Issue 3: Fantasy) so here we go:

*What are you thinking about?* M asks as we lie in bed, under the sheets.

 Nothing, I say gently, brushing my hand against their arm. Slowly: back/forth; back/forth*. Just trying to remember how you feel against me, the way the linen sounds like waves as we move under it,* the way light falls across your face, the way it lights your eyes

 I say *nothing* but truly,

I mean
I am trying to remember everything.

I laugh, the sound abrupt. W*hat?* they ask, amused and curious.

*I’m going away for a week. Just one.*

\*

Once, they said to me, *I don’t miss anyone. When I moved away, I didn’t miss my parents. The only person I’ve ever missed is B – because she was emotionally abusive.*

Yikes, I did not want to be missed. I curb myself from expressing this, that which feels tainted now with their context – the feeling of *missing*. Every time I feel the urge to say it, I trim it from my tongue the way my mother would fat from her serve of pork.

I won’t say it. I don’t want my earnestness to be met with silence.

\*

Before I left, it fell out of my mouth that I’d miss them. Oops. I expected ambivalence. I was prepared for it.

*I’ll miss you too*, they said, their features soft. They meant it.

I felt conflicted, *but you don’t miss anyone*.

*No, but I’d miss* you.

*Well. If you do, tell me. But tell me, only if you mean it*.

\*

After a slow morning of loading the car, I leave for my road trip. This is the first I would take on my own. I arrive at the campsite and pitch my tent. I don’t put the pegs in so I can pack up fast the next day. The afternoon was spent reading in the sun, in the low, small camp chair M got me for my birthday. The sun is so bright it singes the white of the pages, so bright the text swims aflame in my eyes.

I spread ricotta and anchovies on toast, drizzle over some honey. When I bite into it, it is crunch, cream, salt, sweetness, the pull of flesh of anchovy, resistant. I sink deeper into the camp chair, turning my face skyward. It is all bliss.

\*

I make my way to C’s wedding where I will spend two nights on her farm. This is the first time I had visited after seven years of friendship.

The night before the wedding, I play pool with the boys.

I was taught pool by a meticulous man who broke all the steps down for me: *arch your hand like so, straighten the cue, don’t bounce it off like that, keep it straight.* Five years on, I don’t remember a single step. I bend at my waist over the pool table, contorting my fingers into the hazy memory of an arch he once taught me, taut at the wrist.

I had a crush on this man. I don’t think I ‘have a type’ but assimilating all my love interests in my mind, I see that I am attracted to precision – a perfect counter to the vagueness I feel within my being.

I: an emptiness, a bending around a shape, a perimeter around a distance becoming distance itself. *Missing.*

\*

I play a round of pool. Poorly. Then, collapse onto the couch, staring into the fluorescent bulb above me.

I check my phone. No reception – and, so am forced to sit with my longing with no avenues of making it known. I miss M, I miss C. Unreachability broadening distance. I am trying to understand the idea of *missing*, the texture of it – the absence of a thing, felt. Acutely.

Imagine not missing a thing, how settled they must be. Not wanting, not dully aching for a single thing.

I wanted to reach across the distance and say to them *I miss you.*

\*

When I say: *I miss you*, do I mean: *I am lonely.*

\*

The day of C’s wedding, I get up when the sun does and go out onto the lawn, patting down the picnic blanket to set up my gas stove and Aeropress. Make two coffees: one for the bride, the other for the groom.

As the water boils, I watch two birds in the sky, pink-bellied, circling.

双 (pair) two winged creatures flying as one.

\*

To paraphrase the writer Jennifer Nguyen, sometimes birds are just birds.

Two birds flying as one on the morning of a wedding does not make them a pair, does not make them symbolism for eternality, does not mean either bird will stop experiencing loneliness in its lifetime.

\*

For the wedding, I put on a sheer organza dress striped with blue, orange and white of varying widths. It is the lightest, most exquisite piece of clothing I own. The dress collaborates with the body: the body giving form to the dress, the sheerness interacting with the skin to shade the blue and orange specific to the wearer.

A string of buttons cinches the dress together at my side, starting from bust to hip. I stand before the mirror and guide each button through each loop using the reflection. I do them all up, keeping my eye on myself. The boat neckline grazes against my collarbones softly, deepening into a ‘V’ at my back. I turn in the mirror and feel the hem of the dress caressing my ankles.

This is the last time I will wear it before winter. It will soon be too cold.

\*

I twirl and twirl and twirl, the organza, lightness around my calves like longing ballooning out around me. It is like this, missing you, I mean – I wear it, nearly immaterial, but ever-present.

*I miss you*, meaning: I am living, I carry you with me.

 **Greer**: Thanks so much Zhi.

And a huge thank you to Maya Hodge and Eric Jiang for reading on this episode, and to all the artists who contributed to this season of Vignettes – it's been such a pleasure to listen to you and share your work.

And thank you for listening! I hope Vignettes has been good company, and that you’ve discovered a writer whose work you’ll keep following. As always, if you want more information about the work of any writer you’ve heard from this season, please visit emergingwritersfestival.org.au.

Vignettes is produced by me, Greer Clemens, and audio produced by Joe Buchan. Our theme music is by Thu Care. If you want to keep in touch with EWF, please give us a follow on Instagram and Twitter, and we look forward to seeing you in 2023!