

Winner — Medical student category

A new man

Czeslaw moves his walking frame up the carpet, shifting along noiselessly. He patrols the ward with calm precision, past the blue walls hung with the picture of the taffy pony and the picture he loves of bushrangers staging a bail-up.

"Now that is a proper painting", he remarks, pulling up alongside. Though his eyes have lost their pilot's acuity, he still loves an action scene.

"A survivor learns to navigate by any arrangement of the heavens"

As I have been taught in tutorials, I walk this procession with him, my eyes trained on his navy slippers. Lachlan, Murray, Murrumbidgee wards. He keeps a fast pace, a shuffling gait, walking-not-talking, a wide turning circle. A ninety-three-year-old hulking Pole with porous bones, walnut kidneys and mutinous blood. His body is a leaky vessel, each day becoming more pervious to the world around him.

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The hangar is behind him. The terrain below is fast becoming an impressionist's canvas, with height and the early morning strands of light. He turns to Normandy. It is unlikely that he will feel solid earth again. The vibrations move through him. Oddly detached, he is an officer of the Polish Air Force, returning home.

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"They've put me in ..." — he pauses, knocking on the thin plaster wall — "what is it called? Cardboard. Like an egg box. I'm an old egg". He gusts with laughter. The nurse steps past and grins at us. "You mean egg carton, Charlie?" He likes her — she is gentle but guards his bones like a terrier against the ravages of the enemy. For Charlie, that means the lino bunched up unevenly at the threshold, the shower step and the strong winds that whistle round the courtyard, slamming doors and buffeting limbs.

There is no purpose to his walk, but he still exhibits a lifetime's habit of certainty in his step. He steers like he's back in the cockpit of the Piper Pawnee aircraft, crop-dusting in the Riverina. Each movement is calculated in minute detail, calibrating the gap between the frame and the doorway, between his body and a low ceiling he once would have grazed.

It is after lunch and the gait assessment component of this medical examination has received much emphasis. My heart lurches as we take a corner, to arrive at Room 19.

"Thank you Mr Rogers, this is very kind of you to answer my questions." I don't think he's understood



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me — the hoary white eyebrows go up but still he pats the bedspread and tells me to sit down, while ignoring all the things he's been told about the frame, peremptorily flicking it to the side as he assumes his chair.

He tells me what I think I know already, that his blood is a standing army gone mutinous on poor rations. It's the same chronic leukaemia that he's lived with for some time, but things have deteriorated ("blasts") and he knows his number is up.

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Early morning. Landmarks identified. He's on a reconnaissance mission, and is losing altitude. Civilisation is his guide and for a second he contemplates it and is confounded. All at once they are here — three of them. It is impossible ...

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"I started here as a 'New Australian'", he offers. A new man from the skies of old France, broken Europe, another Polish exile. He looks hard at me down his crooked nose, blinding me with pale blue eyes — the farsighted gaze of a survivor. He seems so very old in that moment. The sometime president of the White Eagle Club is a charismatic man, though not given to flights of eloquence. He turns his deeply lined face to the window and we look out together at the lawn that slopes down to the banks of the river.

This is a holding pen where time stands still, yet there is movement, a silent accretion. The windflowers in their vases gather a fine veil of dust and the webs of daddy longlegs. Sinews long frayed are fed with Sustagen and jellies. The concentration of protein in urine samples rises and falls, the iron levels in blood wax and wane. The cleaner sweeps her vacuum cord in and out. Cells amass.

"I patrolled the skies in my silver capsule — an absurdity really, flimsy thing. I thought I would die then, when the oxygen froze." We talk of the planes and what they look like from the sky and ground. I learn that the enemy is easily identifiable by its shape outlined against the sheets of yellow earth. I learn that the light of the sun can hide a man piloting screaming



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metal. He seems happy to talk on, and a curious haze takes us over. "I thought I would die but really, I was dead already. In the world of probability I was fragments of bone and viscera spread over the earth. All that remained was for time to enforce its law of averages."

But this is not the world of probability, we concur. Czeslaw flew on after the war and was assimilated among the living, called himself Charlie Rogers and ate Riverine vegetables with his kielbasa. He tells me, "I came here after many years of wandering. I had a house and my wife and then the children." An afterlife in bronze, an Elysian Field with solid shapes. The building of a house, another peg riveting to the ground — hard brown bricks and a vegetable garden. "I wore a sports coat to the Saturday match." A Hungarian named Joe ran the general store and they would go to the pub and prop on the magnificent red gum bar.

"Have you ever smoked?"

"Yes, a lot of ham. Sausages. Pork. And a pipe."

"Do you drink alcohol?"

"Some beer."

He is enjoying himself now, and tells me more stories, stemming from the years of wandering, before Mary and the children. He worked at a mill in the bush, as part of an assisted immigration program.

"One night I went out to catch some fish. I was having trouble sleeping and I thought that I might creep up

and get one out of a deep pool. But I lost my way and the river twisted so much, round tall tussocks that created shadows like men's. I thought then, 'I am a displaced person'. But in a moment, I recognised the stars of Orion, upside down of course." A survivor learns to navigate by any arrangement of the heavens.

We are back in the room. Curiously, the only relic of his life here is a Western Bulldogs Football Club poster, "Sons of the West" all smiling brightly. There hasn't been time really to collect photographs and the silver cross and a jar of rollmops, not that his appetite is up to it. His daughter will bring them on Sunday, knowing he still craves a taste of the Baltic.

Looking at him, I don't — I can't — believe he will die. He is immortal — the consummate survivor. So I finish a little awkwardly, thanking him for his time (a smile), and he shakes my hand with great firmness.

"Although this is not the world of averages, how many unlikely years can there be?"

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The noise now is deafening. Propellers careen, smoke rises from the fuselage. Gravity reaches up to give him new weight. The pieces rip apart and down below life is studded with Lombardy poplars — so elegantly remote — pinpoints of green in a fabric of maize and barley. ■

The MJA Dr Eric Dark Creative Writing Competition was judged by Leah Kaminsky, MJA Deputy Editor, Poetry and Fiction.