

This was published 1 year ago

Autumn is coming: writers reflect on the change of season

February 28, 2019 – 5.20pm



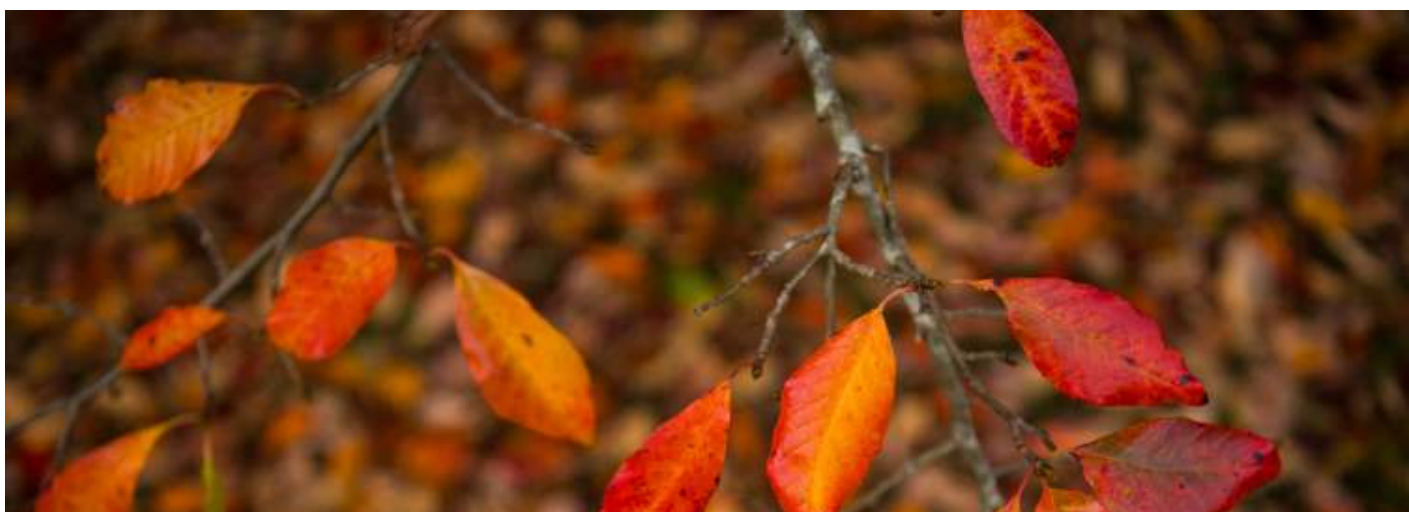
The Southern Highlands

By Mark Tredinnick

1.

Last night, weary from a day at the desk and wondering how to write anything about autumn in the Highlands not better said already, I got on my bike, and I rode into the dusk, and there I found the season: Vermilion clouds taut across a six-thirty sky, cornflower blue and luminous, ultimate and intimate at once.

Fall is the dusk of the year; autumn is the year about to come inside. The season is a slantness of light. You feel it on your skin. All the light is late light in the fall: mature and weathered hours, a life grown worthy of its suffering. And in the paddocks across the river, fall was seven horses at a sudden canter in a rising breeze. Farther along, fall was poplars, stepping out of summer fatigues and growing taller, lean as memory, leaves the colour of love. Fall was spent summer grasses beside the track, slashed and laid in rows and rolled and left like carpets in the fields. And it was the scent of that, sweet as sarsaparilla.





Coloured leaves herald autumn at Blackheath in the Blue Mountains. WOLTER PEETERS

[Fall was a roo that came out of the gloaming along the Bong Bong Commons and joined the track and for three ks bounded 20 metres ahead of me, as I rode for home, insisting on a way that looked sketchy in the dark.]

2.

Forgive me if I call it *fall*. *Fall* is the older English usage, and I like it better - its antiquity and trim, so apt for the season; its fitness for purpose, its spiritual intimations (the end of paradise, the failing of the year). This Icarus of a season.

3.

If I were truly local, I'd know the season by the pattern of migrating birds, by the fruiting of the plants, by the flowering of others, the nesting of the mammals. This is Gundungurra Country; Dharawal people shared it, passing through. In the Dharawal calendar of seasons, this is Bana'murra'yung, when the year cools, when the lilly-pilly fruits and the tiger quoll looks for a mate. It's time to make cloaks and try them on. A threshold time. A leaving for the coast.

4.

Yesterday, walking the Wingecarribee at Berrima with my children, speaking of climate change and wombats, I looked down and saw the lilly-pilly putting out its purple fruit beside the track. Up on a sandstone ridge we climbed, two fantails, among grey gums, flaunted their courtesan tails and seized, if not the season, the whole day. Two robins tried on yellow coats, making ready to leave. The afternoon before, along the same track, Jodie and I scared a dozen eastern rosellas from the bracken on the banks ' and that's how autumn is down here, I thought: an elegant outcry, a sumptuous kind of letting go.

5.

[Fall here is a lyric season, minor keys and plangent chords. It's slow with longing, Persephone gone back down into the ground. It's how she's missed.]

6.

On a Sunday morning late in February, I sit beneath a liquidambar and write. This American tree has stood for 80 years beside the house, and this warm morning its leaves, like paws, hang limp; its spiky fruits, downed by corellas on Friday afternoon, strew the ground, a thousand mild-mannered mines; and in the higher branches, the first amber lights come on. The sky behind is a saturated blue. A black butterfly tacks loosely past, some of the sky caught in its wings. Not so

much flying, as falling with style. Like autumn in the highlands.

Mark Tredinnick's books include *Fire Diary* and *The Blue Plateau*. Many of his poems, including *Raven*, shortlisted for this year's Porter Poetry Prize, are set in the Southern Highlands. His collection *Walking Underwater* appears later this year.



Writers reflect on autumn, Linda Jaivin (left), Mark Tredinnick, Fiona Wright, Garth Nix and John Purcell. LOUIE DOUVIS

The Inner East

By Linda Jaivin

Never mind the official date - autumn arrives in the city on the morning you look

up to see a crisp blue sky, scrubbed of its summer haze. The blue may go and come a few more times before settling in - Sydney is not one of those cities that simply turns the page and moves on when the calendar calls a new season. It's not so disciplined as Beijing, for example, where your head suddenly feels cold on the day the traditional almanac tells you to change to a warmer hat. Sydney was never so logical, and climate change is making it ditzier still.

For harbour swimmers like myself, the water glitters with late-afternoon temptation all the way through April. As the season wears on, you do need to be game enough to take on the freaky swarms of blubber jellyfish that *phap* and spark under your hands and feet and in competition for the same warm currents. On our forays to Neilsen Park during blubber jellyfish season, my neighbour and I tend to swim and shriek in tandem. The open-air Boy Charlton pool can be an easier choice. It doesn't take the bendy concept of autumn too seriously either, closing only on May 1. When it does close, it leaves its rainbow collection of hard-bodied, hard-core tanners bereft until it re-opens four months later, at the start of Sydney's other slippery-slidey season - 'spring'.



Rushcutters Bay is an inner city dweller's backyard. HENRY ZWARTZ

By May, the leaves of the plane trees, which shade the streets so pleasantly in summer, have put on their mediocre autumn show of turning a muddy brown and dropping to the pavement. There, they are whooshed away by the leaf blowers, the collective drone of which is to autumn what the thrum of cicadas is to summer. Denuded, the plane trees spend the rest of the season twitching their witchy stick-fingers in the early dark and silently plotting their trichome-spitting revival in spring. Autumn in the city has few floral heroes, but one must be the broad-leaved paperbarks, which push out delicate bursts of scented cream-coloured flowers that look like someone has given the flamboyant bottle-brush a straight-eye-for-the-queer-guy makeover.

Rushcutters Bay Park is my backyard, and anyone who follows my Instagram account sees far too many photos of it. I know that autumn is really settling in when great herds of activewear-clad local fauna, having grown slothful and

indulgent in summer, and understanding that they will become so again in the winter hibernation, invade the park in the early morning with fresh autumnal determination to run, box, skip, jump, hurl and lunge past the park bench where I sit working on my novel. Summertime may be for making new year's resolutions about fitness, but autumn is now-or-never time. Carpe those shortening diems and all that. At its peak, the clamour of barked commands and purposeful panting can drown out the bell-like tinkling of the riggings on the expensive yachts in the marina. But this din is itself outdone by the joyously raucous squawks of the sulphur-crested cockatoos, my favourite birds, as they circle and swoop upon the masts of the yachts and poop on the hardwood decks. O, cockatoos - you all-season clowns!

Linda Jaivin is an essayist, cultural commentator and the author of 11 books, including the novels *A Most Immoral Woman* and *The Empress Lover*.

The South Western Suburbs

By Lachlan Brown

After the apocalyptic heat of summer, you notice the poetry in Macquarie Fields again: Bangladeshi grandmothers walking the streets at dusk; roast pork arranged into sacred mountains at the back of the Palms Pacific grocer; kaleidoscopic sunsets expanding like centrelink forms; the gated community of Macquarie Links huddling into mortgaged shadows.

So yeah, there's poetry here. But when you search online for the Macquarie Fields Poetry Prize you find nothing. It's like it never even occurred. Wasn't it funded with riot money? The same money that helped your parents deck out the community centre with appliances and whitegoods that routinely got stolen.

Maybe you just dreamt that you won that prize. The ceremony was held out the front of Franklins before it went bust. Poets read shortlisted poems alongside the beeping of scanned groceries. Your mates from the church youth group showed up and cheered like a footy crowd when your name was announced. At that precise moment a shopper emerged from the supermarket, her trolley stacked with groceries. Blinking and bewildered, she pushed her way through the small crowd. That's a pretty accurate summation of poetic glory, don't you think? That's probably the 'load and bless' Keats had in mind in *To Autumn*.

Glenquarie Shopping centre later reorganised itself and a Target moved in. You remember the moment you first walked down there to ponder its significance. It wasn't the biggest shop, but the Target logo seemed weirdly immense, like some Christopher Wren church dome or a statue of the Buddha. You told your friend Luke about it because he understands why this stuff is both hilarious and terrifying. Then you wrote an Elizabethan sonnet called *They Built a Target in Glenquarie Shopping Centre*.

In his Sonnet 73, Shakespeare reminds us that autumn is that time of year where you're meant to meditate on mortality's approach. The impermanence of life, day

becoming night, 'death's second self', and all that. In Macquarie Fields you learn this best from the doomed site across the road from the TAFE on Victoria Road. For a while it was a KFC, but a fire gutted the place. A guy from your church worked there. Every week during the evening service he would ask God to reopen that KFC. This went on for a couple of years. Eventually a Chicken Express took up residence in the shell of the building. It lasted a short while before going bust.

Next, a Red Rooster appeared alongside a heap of fanfare. But by then everyone knew that the site was cursed. A guy called Darren wrote a review/poem that said, 'So little chicken for ure money'. Red Rooster closed soon afterwards. Then, in some eastern suburbs phoenix ninja move, an Oportos assembled itself in that very spot. What the heck? So, in the bard's words, 'As sunset fadeth in the west', there are now Bondi burgers for all.

God may not give you what you want, but he will always give you what you need.

Lachlan Brown teaches literature at Charles Sturt University. He is possibly the winner of the Macquarie Fields Poetry Prize and is the author of two books of poetry, *Limited Cities* and *Lunar Inheritance*.

The Blue Mountains

By Stephanie Bishop

In autumn, the morning air takes on a different feel. After months of soupy humidity what I suddenly notice is a new texture to the atmosphere; the air is thinner, lighter, drier - sharper against the skin. There is a new scent too: a marbling of eucalypt, acacia flower, wood-smoke.

I have always been an early riser and wake in the dawn when there is only the sound of birds, the house perched not far from the edge of a gully. At that hour, a pale blue gloom hangs over the trees, the light just showing over the ridge. We came here seven years ago, when we couldn't afford to stay in Sydney and wanted more space, and somewhere for me to write. Since then we have been slowly adding to a large old garden, hiding the house in the midst of a small forest of quince, plums, citrus, dogwood, magnolia, lilac, birch, preferring to feel ourselves properly outnumbered by trees. During the searing summer months that grow longer and longer, the garden turns into a jungle, and in autumn we at last venture out to tackle this; the walls of



vine, the insidious roots of bamboo and wild ginger. There are quinces to pick, flowers to stake, seeds to go into the vegetable beds.



Novelists Joanna Nell (left) and Stephanie Bishop.
LOUIE DOUVIS

But this isn't a new place for me: I've come and gone from the mountains for much of my life. And although I've written each of my books while travelling or living in other countries, somehow or another I've finished them all here. The cause for return has often been the usual gamut of births, deaths and marriages, but something more elemental has also been at work, the pull of the whittled gold light, the particular way in which bird song bounces up and up into this thin, high air, the smell of dry conifer, and crushed leaves underfoot – the things I notice most as the glare of summer drops off into autumn and we head down into the gully once more.

Up on the ridge the air is dry and warm, but as we descend it cools and takes on the smell of wet sandstone, leaf mulch, mud. In the crevice of the gully the light is grainy to the eye, and slightly aqueous. We follow the creek for hours until we reach the swimming hole with its gold-brown water, warmer now after the summer. Come much earlier though and the water is mind-numbingly cold: the squeals of a wild swimmer can be heard a long way off. But the paths around our house are far from the beaten tourist track, so we can run them, or hike the kids here, to the swimming hole, and rarely see another human. Our son tears ahead, a sprinter by nature ('I have a giant energy pack inside of me!', he yells), while our daughter plucks the courage to dive in first. Afterwards we dry off on the rocks, before traipsing back up into the brighter light, our skin tingling from the swim.

Stephanie Bishop is the critically acclaimed author of three novels. *The Other Side of the World* was named Literary Fiction Book of the Year in the 2016 ABIA awards and *Man Out of Time* is longlisted for the 2019 Stella Prize.

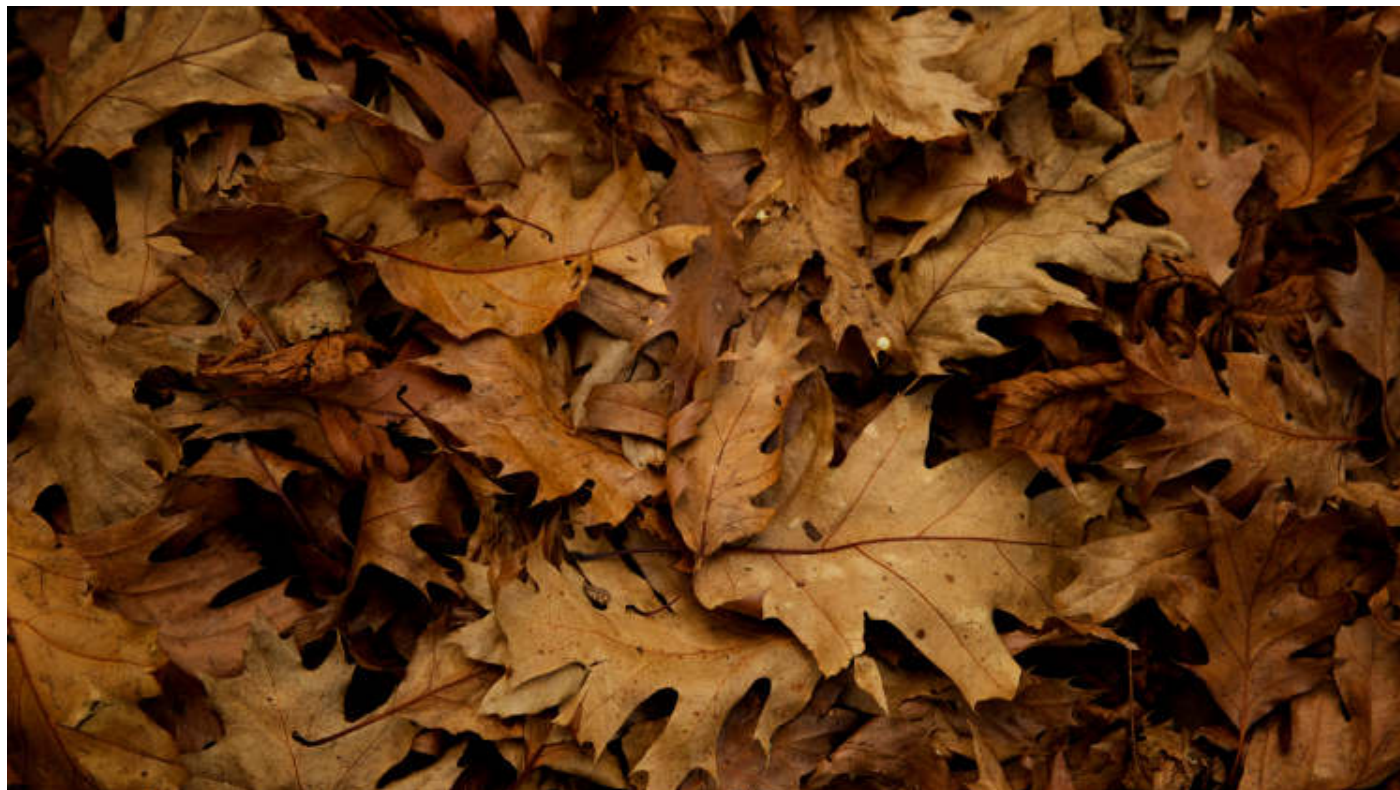
The Inner West

By Fiona Wright

Where I grew up, the trees were not deciduous. They were mainly fast-growing eucalypts, spindly-leaved casuarinas, the thick bottlebrushes from which honeyeaters would hang, upside-down, their white throats bared to the sky. Autumn I barely noticed, somehow, especially in the years where summer lingered, as it does for even longer now, the days still warm even as the evenings shortened. But here, autumn is obvious: the gutters fill with leaves, golden-brown and toasty. The magnolias, the golden ash, slowly strip themselves back to bony branches. The light thickens: some days, just before sunset, I walk through the back streets of Erskineville and the air itself seems to glow.

Autumn always brings a gentle kind of melancholy to me, because of what it seems to augur. The year has turned serious - the high abandon on the early months, their sticky warmth and languor left behind, and the winter cold

approaching. Work starts again, in earnest. I start to feel the ways in which my house just isn't built for colder weather, how the high ceilings trap the chilly air, how that air creeps through the gaps between the walls and the floorboards, how the windows don't entirely seal. I start to feel the ways in which my body isn't built for colder weather. In autumn, I unpack my heater, my overcoat, my boots. I steel myself.



Autumn brings a kind of gentle melancholy because of what it augurs. WOLTER PEETERS

(My housemate feels this differently: she suffers over summer, sighing with relief each time she steps back from the street into our shady house, standing directly under the blast of the air-conditioner in our kitchen, arms outstretched and face uplifted. The heater, the overcoat, the boots - each of these things is for her a tiny jubilation.)

I have a row of bulbs in my front garden, jonquils and earlicheers, that have moved with me from house to house, that came from the garden in my childhood home, and I watch for their first green shoots to come spiking through the soil. Last year, the jonquils didn't flower, because it didn't quite get cold enough. The fruit ripens on our mandarin tree, and I make jars of curd and jam.

There have been hot cross buns in my local supermarket since Boxing Day.

*

I've been away from Sydney, away from the inner west, these last two autumns: in the first, on the south coast of Victoria, by a beach with icy water and a vicious wind; in the second, in Shanghai, watching ancient oak trees come alive, pink cherry blossoms suddenly fill the parks, their papery petals catching in my hair. Each time I was alone, and vaguely homesick, and this felt right, somehow, felt fitting for the time of year. It's a funny thing, homesickness: I sometimes think it's more a longing for a kind of rhythm, for the familiar circularity of simple, gradual changes like those when the season turns. You come to expect the cold, my friend who lives in Canberra says, and you miss it when it doesn't happen.

Fiona Wright is the author of two poetry collections, *Knuckled* and *Domestic Interior*, and essay collections *Small Acts of Disappearance* and *The World Was Whole*, which is longlisted for the 2019 Stella Prize.

The North Shore

By John Purcell

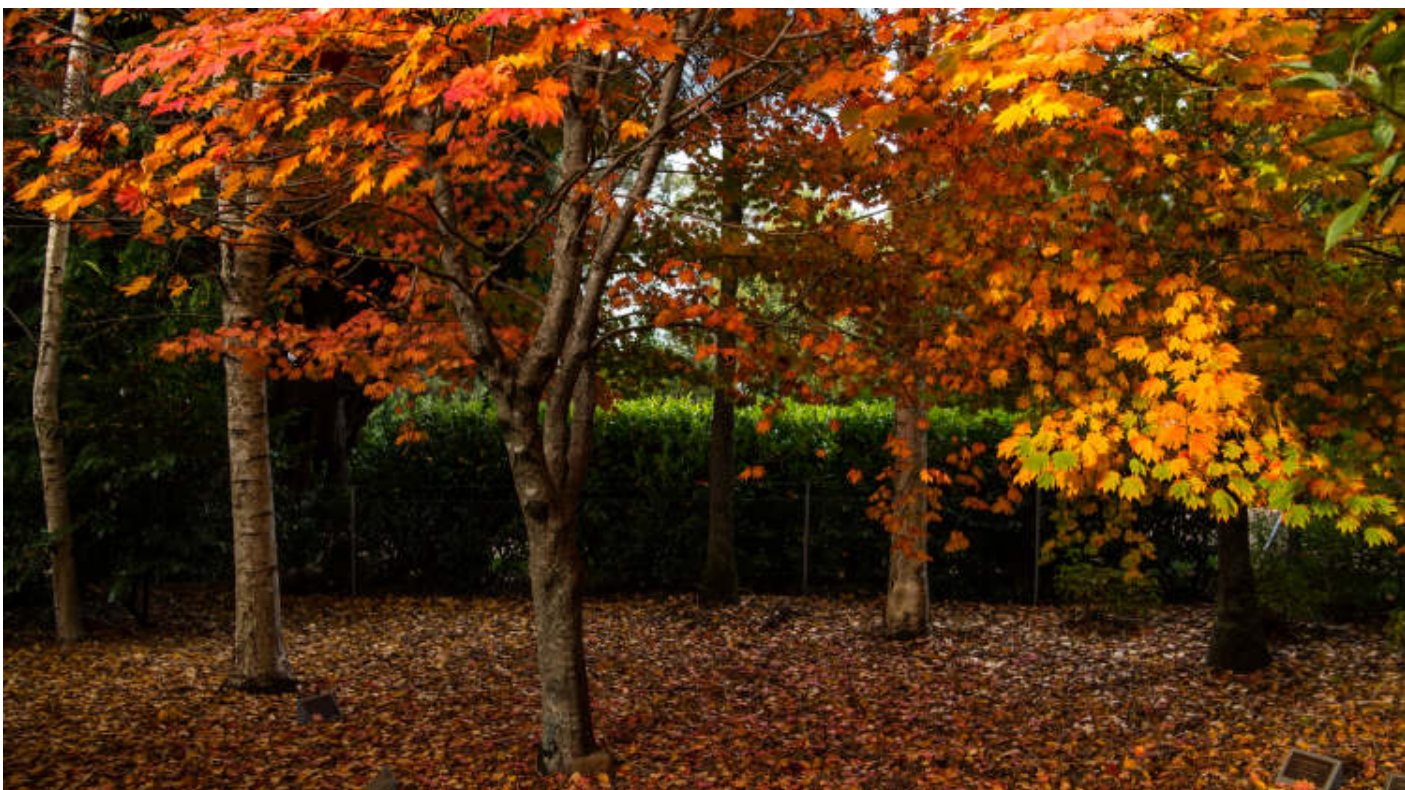
Off the lead, the dogs race ahead through the graves. On past walks they have spotted water dragons near the shallow creek which divides the cemetery. Sometimes, rabbits. They have lost their little minds, barking like maniacs in the slow falling dusk.

When do you know it's time to leave? My wife and I are discussing the possibility of selling our house. We have come to the point where, we both agree, to stay would mean decline.

Heading home, we crunch through the fallen leaves and, stopping to let the dogs sniff, look up at the last of the sun's rays set the red and orange leaves of the sweet gums alight. It's autumn in Davidson.

Autumn is a barely even a season in Sydney, but not so in the northern suburb of Davidson. Someone, at some time, sitting on some committee made the decision to line the streets with *liquidambar styraciflua*, which are native to the USA and are decidedly deciduous.

For a few weeks the suburb puts on a spectacular show then the beautiful leaves fall and decay, leaving skeleton trees for winter making it appear far colder than it actually ever is.



Dog walkers crunch leaves underfoot. WOLTER PEETERS

We both agree we need to leave Davidson and move closer to the city. We are in between the suburb's primary uses - the incubation of youth and the mothballing

of the aged. Our children are grown but we are not ready to retire. It's time to return to life.

The dogs are barking again as we reach our street. It's dinnertime. They're small dogs and the pitch of their barking tears through a person. Especially here.

On the way to nowhere, Davidson is a bubble of suburbia which intrudes into the heart of Garrigal National Park, the only land hereabouts the Guringai people, the traditional custodians of the land for more than 5000 years, might still recognise.

I've never known quiet like Davidson quiet. At first it unnerved me and then it became a comfort. I felt secure in its dull embrace. I suppose I mean a particular kind of silence, too. The absence of human noise. In this silence I feel acutely aware of every noise we make as a family, every raised voice, even if it's just calling the kids down for dinner. A car boot closing, the grating of a rake on the concrete driveway, our aging, aching, whining garage door. Sound carries far in the void and I feel responsible for each and every incursion.

But now the kids have grown, even our house is falling silent.

Surrounded by bush, nature is the noisemaker in our suburban bubble. Brush-turkeys strut across tin roofs. Insects produce a wall of sound in summer. In the evenings, cockatoos and kookaburras act like delinquent teens, screeching and laughing, wrecking the joint. During the night, while bats feast and cavort above, frogs play singles and doubles tennis til dawn. Pock, pock.

Our walk over, my wife feeds the dogs. I look around the living room assessing the work before us. We have accumulated so much. It's time to shed unnecessary encumbrances. But before we do anything, there are leaves to rake.

John Purcell has worked in the book industry for 20 years. His novel set in the world of publishing, *The Girl on the Page*, is out now.



There are leaves to rake. WOLTER PEETERS

The Northern Beaches

By Joanna Nell

The Northern Beaches knows how to party. In summer, Sydney's laid-back northern neighbour becomes the gregarious entertainer. The wild child. The party animal. When cloudless days stretch into sultry nights, my little piece of paradise welcomes visitors with popped corks and coronary-inducing cheese platters.

With carefully-coiffed sands and more smiling baristas than you can shake a KeepCup at, it's little wonder the beaches can pull a crowd. Holidays bring the stressed-out and cashed-up to kick back and wind down. At Palmy, you can spot big names and no names on adjacent beach towels, slurping pine-lime Splices and wondering aloud if it's too early for wine.

When the party's in full swing, it's bumper-to-bumper on Pittwater Road and not even a Northern Beaches permit can magic a parking spot. I've seen grown men weep as the last sourdough loaf slips over the counter at a certain French bakery. And it's natural selection on Avalon crossroads where only locals know the rules.

There's a sense of relief when autumn returns - the sensible adult to call time on the rave. It empties the beaches and stacks the B Line double-deckers. It reverses the tide and the tail lights snake south. At The Spit, autumn pulls up the drawbridge, settling over the Northern Beaches like a post-lunch torpor. Beyond The Bends, God's own country kicks off its sandy thongs. The peninsula turns insular once more.

The new school term unfolds like a fresh page in a contact-covered exercise book. I see smiling parents at school gates, weightless with the return to routine. Kids' shoes are still shiny and socks cosily paired, while oversized blazers hang un-lost in lockers. Autumn noses are snot-free, the flu still a vaccine away. There's skiwear at Aldi and hot cross buns on the shelves. What's not to love?

But it's also time to say goodbye to excuses and hello to activewear. Autumn heralds the end of the cheese and the start of mindful walks around headlands or fat-burning climbs to the lighthouse. It's time to eat kale and, yes, to take that funny-looking mole to the doctor.

The season relaxes in warm water and sleeps soundly through cool nights. Autumn saves me my favourite spot at my favourite cafe, a skinny flat white and the last of the holiday reads from bookshops beginning with B.

When March fills the shops with knitwear that's too hot to wear, the Northern Beaches are still barefoot. At the languid pace that is the default, there's time to remember why we endure soulless commutes for this lifestyle, what makes us trade the convenience of taxis for the freedom of surfboards.

For me, there's only one place to be at this time of year. Nothing beats autumn in a glassy Pittwater bay that echoes with cicadas in a final refrain. I like to imagine that Mother Nature is throwing some kind of ironic after-party once the last jet-

skis have buzzed off. Smug cormorants dry their wings, with bellies full of fish. And the kookaburras laugh like they're in on the joke.

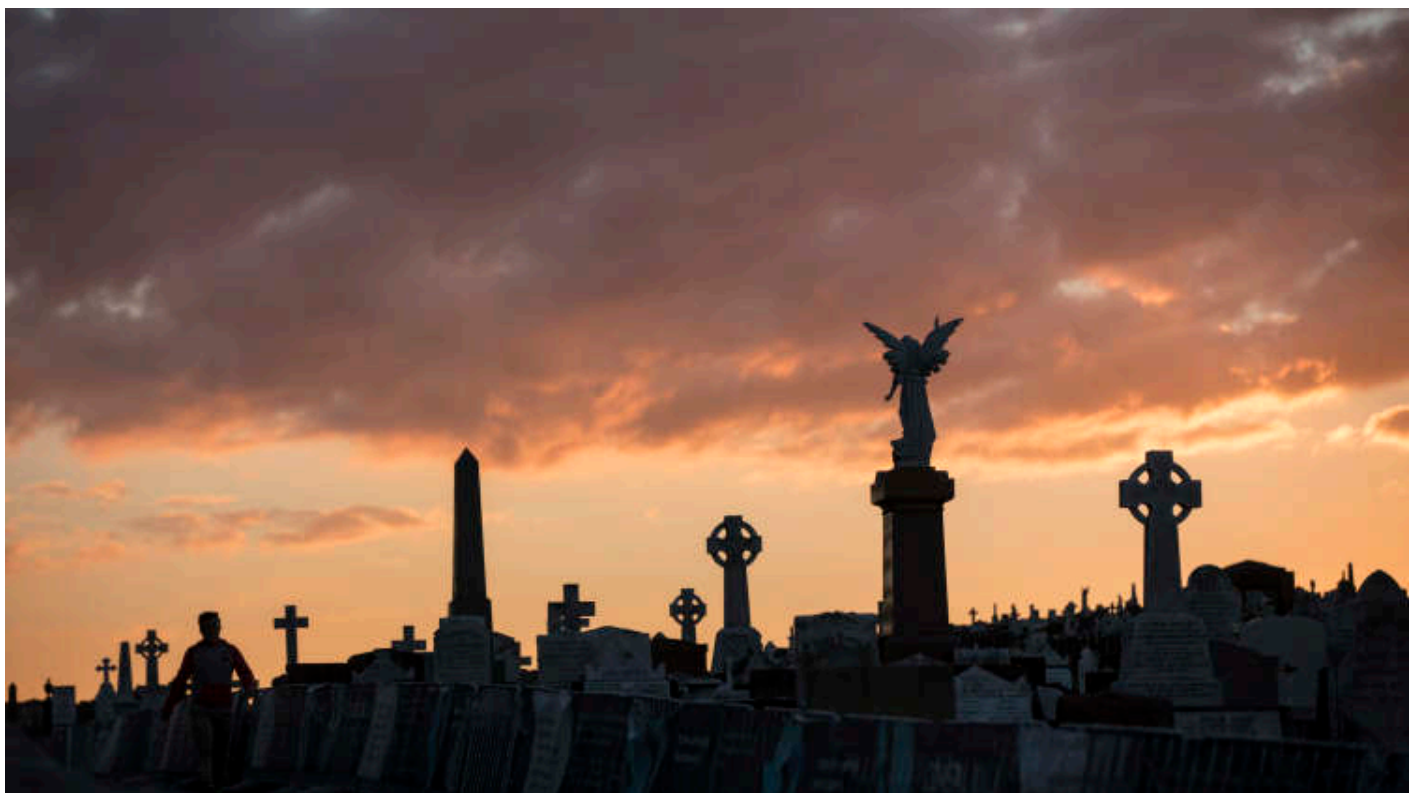
Joanna Nell is a GP whose bestselling debut, *The Single Ladies of the Jacaranda Retirement Village*, was released last year. Her new novel, *The Last Voyage of Mrs Henry Parker*, will be published in October.

The Eastern Suburbs

By Garth Nix

It's very peaceful in the company of the dead. Waverley Cemetery is surprisingly quiet, particularly in the higher regions towards St Thomas Street. In the autumn, as the summer crush at Bronte beach and on the coastal walkway thins, you can stand in the middle of this wonderful graveyard by the sea and it is almost entirely quiet, save for the crash of the waves on the cliffs below.

I love to walk and think in Waverley cemetery. The only drawback is that dogs are not allowed in. So I could not take our dog Sam there, when he was still alive, and so for the five years he was with us, we had to walk around.



I love to walk and think in Waverley cemetery. JESSICA HROMAS

Sam was diagnosed with cancer at the very end of summer last year. The beginning of autumn, when the days thankfully become a little cooler, and the night comes sooner, but the sea is still warm to swim.

Forbidden the cemetery, Sam and I used to wander along the sandy path through the wind-bent acacia trees that line the cemetery fence on Trafalgar Street, down to Calga Reserve. There on the grassy knoll above the sandstone cliffs next to the old tram cutting, Sam would snuffle around while I looked vaguely at the sea, or across the bay to Bondi, and worked out story problems or plot points. Then we might turn for home, or descend to Bronte Park and the shady, almost rainforest-like stretch of Bronte gully, and the labrador paradise of the pool below the

waterfall.

For night walks Sam and I would go westward to Varna Park, the local leash-free dog area, to throw a tennis ball under the brilliant arc-lamp - and then have to search when Sam invariably dropped it in the darkness beyond the light. I'd quarter the ground kicking at clumps of grass, with bats flying above, and kookaburras querulously talking to each other in the biggest of the gum trees, likely telling each other to go to sleep. All the while, Sam would sniff and piss about, happily oblivious to his dereliction of retrieval duty.

In the daytime we frequented Queen's Park, always made more glorious for Sam when autumn rains filled the reedy drains on the northern side, allowing him scope to practice his alchemical ability to transmute his coat from gold to dark, evil-smelling mud.

Sam lived through that autumn, and winter, and into spring. Longer than expected, less than we hoped. He was happy and active right up to his last days, one of which he spent at another of his favourite places: Rose Bay Beach, where a dog can enjoy a run on the sand and a Sydney Harbour swim.

I have lived in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney longer than anywhere else, the great majority of my adult life. More than 25 years in Bondi, Paddington, Coogee and Bronte. But I did not know or enjoy them half as well as I might have, until I went walking with our dog.

Garth Nix is a *New York Times* bestselling author of fantasy and science fiction for adults, young adults and children. His latest book, *Angel Mage*, will be published in October.