

State Library Victoria: a wellspring for kick-starting creativity

State Library Victoria bears riches for writers looking for creative prompts or research, in photographs, manuscripts, realia and so much more. What might a bunch of writers make together, then, in a game of ‘pass-it-along’ that starts with just one item from the State Collection, we wondered?

We selected as a prompt the image ‘The dust is troublesome’ from the hand-painted manuscript of journalist and philanthropist Edward Wilson (1813–1878), held by the Library. Wilson has a colourful history as the founding editor of the *Argus*, opponent of the La Trobe government, sometime-radical pursuer of ‘truth and justice’, founder of a ‘school for the gutter-children of Melbourne’, and, contentiously, vocal advocate for the introduction of European flora and fauna to Australia.¹ The drawing is part of the work *Australia Felix: cartoons from the daily life of an infectionate uncle*, which illustrates Wilson’s time finding his feet in Australia as a migrant from the UK.

We invited six Victorian writers to ‘pass it along’, building a story paragraph by paragraph together. Here is the result.

Monica Dux

The dust is ‘troublesome’? Why is mum always so pretentious? She’d turned up unannounced, flustered and complaining, in that silly top hat (a ‘French fascinator’, she calls it), quite literally perched on her high horse. Okay, buying a horse made sense, since everything mechanical gets clogged so quickly now, but she knows I always dreamt of having a pony, and she never got me one!

I offer her a drink, but she says no, all the while fiddling with her dust mask. Which annoys me even more. ‘It’s because you don’t want to take your mask off, isn’t it?’

‘Nonsense, darling. I’m just not thirsty’, she insists, giving me a parched, passive aggressive cough.

‘Mum, you need to learn to live with the dust. It’s got vitamins, and minerals, and the people who got lost in the storm, they were probably going to get lost anyway, one way or another.’

But she’s not listening. She’s touching surfaces, then inspecting her fingers. Silently disapproving. How is anyone supposed to keep a house clean, when the world’s been enveloped in a permanent dust storm?

Finally, she stops fussing and spits it out. ‘I have something terribly important to tell you.’ And I know exactly what she’s about to say.



Kate Mildenhall

‘We’re going underground.’

Okay. Not what I thought.

‘We’re what?’

Mum leans forward to wipe my chin, wrinkling her nose as she rubs her dusty fingers. ‘I’ve joined a group, we leave tomorrow.’

‘Hang on. A group? Like protestors? Is that what you mean by “underground”?’

Mum shakes her head in annoyance. ‘No, dear. Literally underground. I’ve signed the house over and in return we get two berths in a brand-new subterranean village.’

I open my mouth but find I have nothing to say.

‘It’s quite a journey. Be ready. The transport arrives at 7am.’ She nods once as if that’s the end of it, fixes her hat and makes to leave.

‘Mum,’ I say as sternly as I can, ‘that’s madness. I’m not going to live underground because of some dust. And nor are you. You’ve been swindled. Who did you sign the house to? Give me their name. I’ll sort this out.’

Mum turns on me, raising one eyebrow. ‘Are you implying I’m not of

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The dust is troublesome





Edward Wilson, *The dust is troublesome*, watercolour with ink on paper, 16.5 x 22.9 cm, c. 1842–1878, H97.136/10.

sound mind?’ She tsks. ‘I assure you, I am. We leave at dawn.’ She strides out the door to where her horse waits, and I’m left wondering how on earth to get us both out of this mum-shaped mess.



Didem Caia

As I watch my mother leave, her horse trotting away with an air of self-importance, I’m filled with a mixture of concern and frustration. How did she get herself wrapped up in such an outlandish plan? Going underground seems extreme, even for her.

I gather my thoughts and decide that I need to take action. I can’t let my mother embark on this potentially dangerous journey without at least trying to reason with her. With determination, I grab my coat and rush after her.

I catch up, grab hold of her arm gently but firmly. ‘Mum, please listen to me. I understand you’re concerned about the dust, but this underground plan seems risky. Let’s find another solution, a safer way to deal with this situation.’

She turns to face me, her expression a mix of annoyance and defiance. ‘You’ve always been too cautious, dear. Sometimes you have to take bold steps to protect what’s important.’

‘But Mum, this is a leap into the unknown,’ I plead. ‘We don’t even know who you signed the house over to. What if it’s a scam? What if it’s not safe down there? We need to think this through.’

My mother’s gaze softens for a moment as she looks into my eyes. I can see the worry etched on her face, beneath the layer of dust that covers us all. She takes a deep breath and sighs. ‘I didn’t want to worry you, but the truth is, the dust is taking its toll on me. I’ve been experiencing breathing difficulties, and the coughs ... they’re getting worse. I thought going underground would give us a chance at a healthier life.’

Her vulnerability touches my heart, and I realise the depth of her concern. I had always seen her as stubborn and eccentric, but now I see a mother who wants to protect her child, even if it means making drastic choices.

Taking a deep breath, I let go of her arm and reach for her hand. ‘I understand that you’re worried about your health, Mum, and I appreciate your concern for me too. But let’s explore other options before committing to this underground plan. Maybe there are safer places we can relocate to, where the dust isn’t as severe. We can look for experts who can guide us through this situation.’



Lee Kofman

But, of course, Mum gets her way with me, as she always does. What else would you expect from a retired army general? She's always managed her family the way she managed her job and, to be honest, I've never really minded that too much. I'm the kind of a person who likes to be swayed in any direction as long as it's an interesting one. With Mum, it is always interesting.

Actually, life underground isn't as bad as I thought it might be. It's not even that dark. Of course, since the world got more and more heated and earth's electricity systems collapsed, the firefly-based lighting scientists came up with hasn't been as bright but there is something soothing about its dim, greenish hues. Something that makes you go gentler about things, something that makes you softer. And the lab-manufactured trees and grass and flowers look fresher and greener than the ones we had before the hurricanes and dust storms became an almost daily occurrence. Most importantly, I discovered as soon as we climbed the 2000 steps down to our new home, the people Mum chose to cohabit with, Our Tribe, as she calls them, are a fascinating, motley crew. There is one woman there in particular that I'd like to get to know better.



Emilie Collyer

I try not to stare too hard at her eyes, but I can't help it. Well, the place on her face where eyes usually sit.

'Have a good look,' she says. 'What do you see?' Her voice is like rain falling on dust.

'Um.' Mum has drilled into me never to comment on people's appearance.

'You found your way here for a reason,' the woman prompts.

Oh. My stomach flutters. The small dome-shaped room we are in glows with a green-gold light, and it smells warm like sunshine on skin.

'Am I ... a chosen one?' I ask.

The woman laughs but not unkindly. 'No,' she says. 'That's a bullshit idea propagated by an outdated, mostly androcentric way of seeing the world.'

My skin flushes hot. It always does when I'm embarrassed.

'We're all here for a reason,' she says, and her words cool my anxiety. 'Everybody sees things differently. This is how we create collective wisdom.'

Emboldened, I clench my hands and say: 'When I look at your eyes, I see whirlpools.' As I utter the words the pools ripple. They shudder. I get a very bad feeling that I've seen, or said, the wrong thing.





Contributing authors, left to right in order of contribution.

Nicola Redhouse

But the woman reassures me. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ she says. ‘What you see is the real me,’ and the place where her mouth would be puckers like the edge of a dumpling.

‘The real you?’ I ask, seriously confused now.

‘The dust makes us forget,’ she says. ‘Up there, as it thickened, we lost our way. We thought what we needed were more Things. Hats and horses and dresses and shoes. And the more Things we collected the more dust came. And we forgot.’

Her six arms wave floppily, giving the impression of one of those inflatable tube men you see outside used car lots. Then she makes a plaintive sound like a rubber duck that’s been squeaked one too many times. ‘Sometimes, we need our situation to get really bad, really troublesome, before we see we have to fix it.’

‘Troublesome’ is a strange word to use, in this circumstance. A turn-of-the-century-novel word. A word in etiquette-guide entry ‘P’ for petticoat hem-lengths.

The woman in front of me speaks again, her voice now guttural, like a foghorn or the singer Taylor Dane. ‘We have to do a purge of the Things. Dig a hole to the centre of the earth and throw them away. Tidy, tidy, tidy,’ her sticky voice booms. ‘Then the dust will go.’ And in the place where her eyes should be I now see: this wise creature who will save us, this Every Mother.



The authors

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