

# westerly<sup>55:2</sup>

*the best in writing from the West*



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# westerly

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## Editorial

This second issue of *Westerly* for 2010 has WA writing as its exclusive focus. Richard Weller's recent book, *Boom Town 2050* (UWA Publishing, 2010) suggested to the editors that while West Australian writers are not reaping the rewards of the current resources boom in WA, their work is nevertheless booming in its own way—vital, committed, and not daunted by the conspicuous lack of financial return. It has been an exciting and illuminating experience to bring the work in this *Westerly* together. Representing as it does a range of forms and voices, some well-known, others new to us, we hope it captures some of the diversity and energy that marks writing in Western Australia.

As we celebrate the vibrant future of West Australian writing, we also recall its rich past. Two eminent and much loved West Australian writers passed away in 2010; Randolph Stow in May and Alec Choate in August. In this *Westerly* we have included a special section to honour Stow's life and work, including previously unpublished poems, and it will speak for itself. Stow's sister, Helen McArthur, his agent, Vivien Green and particularly his old friend and fellow WA poet, Bill Grono have been instrumental in bringing this section into being. Our thanks go to them all.

Dennis Haskell, former *Westerly* editor, has described Alec Choate as that rare character in modern literature, a celebratory poet, not afraid to value beauty, that unwelcome guest at the party of modern art, and determined always to praise “the dance of life” (*Schoolgirls* 75). Choate was a migrant from England and loved Western Australia, the place he

named 'Summerland', which was also the short name of the anthology of poetry and prose to celebrate WA's sesquicentenary, for which he was Poetry Editor.

In his long and productive writing life, Alec Choate published seven collections of poetry, beginning with *Gifts Upon the Water* in 1978 and ending with *My Days Were Fauve* in 2002. He was, like Elizabeth Jolley, one of a generation of West Australian writers who found their way to publication through the establishment of Fremantle Arts Centre Press. Alec's awards for poetry included the inaugural Tom Collins Poetry Prize, the Patricia Hackett Prize, the 1986 Western Australian Literary Award for Poetry (the forerunner of the Premier's Book Awards) for *A Marking of Fire*, and the 1997 Premier's Book Award for Poetry for his collected war poems, *The Wheels of Hama. Vale*, Alec Choate.



Photo of Alec Choate, kindly provided by his son.

## Big Pictures

### Richard Weller

In 1972 at the conclusion of his book *A Sense of Place*, Professor George Seddon warned that ‘some planners’ were contemplating the possibility of ten million people settling on the Swan Coastal Plain by 2072. Underpinned by a scientific and an aesthetic appreciation of the landscape, Seddon urged Perth to stay small and go slow.



It was also around that time that Paul Erlich's book *The Population Bomb* cast a pall of Malthusian pessimism over the entire planet—one that Buckminster Fuller neatly encapsulated in his text *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*. Along with E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* these were the key texts for a generation of romantics; by which I mean people who, in the tradition of romanticism found revolutionary truth, beauty and inspiration in landscape, not urbanity—and certainly not sub-urbanity.

And yet here we are, nearly all of us living in suburbs. And if the population continues to grow as it is, we will be building many more. To be precise, for the Australian population to reach 42 million by 2056 as the Australian Bureau of Statistics believes is plausible, we would need to build an extra 8.7 million houses. That is, we need to build about 13 Perths in the next 46 years.





On a recent visit to Australia Erlich said that not only would Australia *not* become a nation of 42 million but many of us would probably have to evacuate. In 2004 Tim Flannery said something similar about Perth; he said it could well become the 21st century's first ghost-city. He recanted once he found out that the cunning and resilient West Australians had hooked themselves up to a desalination plant. On the other hand, Harry Triguboff, an eastern states developer, says Australia should be a nation of 100 million, living no doubt, in his apartments overlooking the rivers that he thinks should be re-engineered so as to flush the palliative monocultures of the nation's food-bowls.

By virtue of an annual application of 200 million tones of fertiliser, Australia can feed 50 million people. In 2002 CSIRO concluded that we also have enough water and energy to sustain 50 million people: that is 50 million living what they referred to but didn't clarify as 'a moderate lifestyle'. But we are not moderate, not by a long shot. It takes about 5 times more stuff to keep your average Aussie alive than most other people on the planet. To put it another way, if the



Chinese, the South Americans, the Indians and the Africans lived like we do then we would need 5 planets to plunder. Given that we don't, then we will need to get more out of this one and we need to do so precisely at a time when the planet's fundamental organs are evidently hemorrhaging. And as we attempt to lift billions out of poverty the carbon clotting the atmosphere will only thicken.

Just reaching everyone in the global community now with the basics of food and water is challenging, but it is estimated that by mid-century the global population will leap from 6.5 to 9.5 billion. To feed the extra people we will need to produce twice as much food as we do now with less arable land and less water than we have now. Despite the fact that the application of new technology always creates new problems, if we are to avoid stupendous loss of life, we will have no choice but to attempt to engineer our way out of the crisis—engineering in the old sense of building barricades to hold things in place, but also engineering in the sense of genetics so as to increase nutrient yields in a denatured world.



Cities rise and fall with floods, fires and famines and their idols usually go with them but what is different this century is that for the first time since the agricultural revolution (10,000 BC) the population of the human race is expected to finally stabilise. This is due to the urbanisation of populations, and all that comes with it. The question then will be whether this planet, as engineered and managed by us, can sustain 9.5 billion living a ‘moderate’ lifestyle. If it can then we will be the first species in history to have grown well beyond natural limitations and lived to tell the story. Every other time a species has excessively flourished it has created the conditions of its own demise.

So what about the Swan Coastal Plain, a place where an extraordinary diversity of species is currently threatened by our divine mandate to multiply and dominate? Perth is predicted to grow to a city of 4 million or more by 2050 and it’s already one of the most sprawled cities on earth. At best the growth necessary to accommodate the extra millions would be infill development not further encroachment on the unique bio-diversity of the region. That said, the region does have lots of cleared, degraded land that it could spread into and in doing so keep the fading Australian dream of a freestanding house and garden alive. That dream will become nightmare however if there are no jobs ‘out there’ and no form of cheap individual mobility to replace cars powered by fossil fuels.

Even if all the existing Australian capital cities and some of our regional centers could absorb their respective growth projections (and given the current mood of the electorate and the strain on infrastructure it is not likely that they will) there will still be many to accommodate somewhere as yet unspecified. There could be significant growth between Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne, particularly if serviced by high-speed rail. There could also be significant growth between Mackay and Cairns—perhaps appealing to an aging demographic. There could be new cities in the north, at Lake Argyle and in the Pilbara, and to bring this story to a close, there could be, as George Seddon feared, significant growth on the Swan Coastal plain.





Currently we are attempting to objectively examine the possibility of a network of new towns from Geraldton in the north to Dunsborough in the south. But instead of erasing the landscape we are trying to forge a form of urbanity that responds to its specific conditions. We are doing this in two ways: first, we are only using cleared land. That land is then evaluated for its capacity to produce food which in turn determines population. Second, we are not only reserving all the existing vegetation but also reconnecting the fragments of that remnant vegetation so the gene pool of the Swan Coastal Plain's biodiversity can flow and evolve as climate change inevitably kicks in. When we do this, we find that the Swan coastal plain could indeed be a bioregion that supports 10 million people. If it doesn't happen by design it will happen by stealth.



Images from *Boomtown 2050: Scenarios for a Rapidly Growing City*, by Richard Weller (UWA Publishing)



## Reasons for Play

**Fay Zwicky**

Spruce from their analyses  
those soulful characters,  
spectacles driven backwards  
across furrowed balding fronts,  
intoned: 'The trouble with you,  
you never learnt to play.'

Said in such tones that  
what could she feel but  
drab and heavy which  
is today's word but  
nonetheless friendly.  
And she laughed about the  
rough end of whatever  
it was she'd clutched.

'Yes, you are so right'  
she said, furious with  
concentration and an old  
handicap; 'Morally, I have to  
stay out of it. My absolutes  
have proved dodgy but yes,  
I've never learnt to play.'

And born to the Freudian  
persuasion, she continued,  
'While I was being the eldest son  
you never were, you were earnestly  
at play with Elizabeth and Ellen,  
Elaine, Evelyn and Etcetera'  
which were the popular  
names of the period and  
not to be lightly spoken.

Eldest girls don't play early or  
lightly. Clamped by mysterious  
authority requiring lineaments  
of gratified desire, they look  
obsessed and condescending,  
but are negatively capable.

Eldest girls believed, born to  
the Freudian habit, that all  
could be explained, with a belief  
that even Hitler, Stalin, and  
war's fires could not destroy, that  
there was always reason  
behind frightfulness.  
They couldn't leave a burning house  
without trying to help the arsonist.  
Who knew how to play.

They travelled blind, naïve to  
universe's rim like their great  
grandmothers who'd fled the old  
world's burning houses, voices  
tuned to ironies of apprehension.

Like them, they learnt the new  
land's language late, became  
its wary fire wardens, learnt  
how to warn without accented stammer,  
learnt how to leave a burning house  
alive, divest themselves of glut  
and test whatever solo flight  
could bear once they took wing.

# El Alamein at Night

Alec Choate

Winds do not stir, the desert's dust is still.  
The battle sunset's red and  
disregarding smile fades  
from the sky: the dead look small  
and stale, and grey, and bodiless,  
just scraps, even to their friends,  
privileged to loiter here.  
Darkness should gentle us, as we turn to stare  
above the haze to where star after star  
spreads out the teasing tapestry of heaven,  
teasing our snatched dreams, drenched in war  
and drained of faith. War crouches down, save for  
one nervous Very Light which trembles far  
out on the smoke-smudged skyline and then fades,  
or for some lonely gun-glare. A beast that feeds  
on death, but surfeited now; at last engorged,  
compelled to rest, war crouches down...

Loitering, our view  
before the hysterical  
and twitching warscape, is of war at its blind kill,  
its random choosing or passing by. No-one  
arming at dawn doesn't believe he won't win  
his little victory, see the day right through.  
At night the dreams of men are mockery. With blood  
of those we fought  
or fought with, our young  
eyes bleed. We do not hate.

Those of us who have not been hit,  
whose minds and bodies  
are whole, may live for years,  
though whenever our bodies are still  
the stars and scraps will return,  
turn and return in the inhuman stillness.

© The Estate of Alec Choate, 2010



wet is the world she weaves

## Scott-Patrick Mitchell

she is river, untamed torrent  
curving world around her

. she is current, back  
bone's home & settle

-ment. on all sides, people  
gather to build their lives

. bridges define a town

. at the edges she is sure

. lifting, she adorns gown  
, fluid silt has found, sediments

a distinction of where she has  
come, from where she's gone

, who she is now. how we bow  
into her, dip branching leaves

, tree roots nutrient identity

. wet rearranged phonetics me  
& you, dripping together like

words do. georgette  
, voile, silken soil. to

keep moving is the purpose of  
movement. to enrich world she

flows & knows, she beds her  
head to dream pebbles rubbed

& read, drowned runes dredge

. silt is a warning without  
wear, of rivers rushing

, rapid love froths the top. plop

, she sets paper swan in motion  
toward ocean where what we wish

fish make & become through an  
origami reversed. mountain's spring

begun this song she continues  
humming across land she is

running. cities fan around her

.

## Sleep without Cameras

Marcella Polain

### 1

This is where we lived when it was hot, out on the porch on a summer evening. Our father would carry the television out there. And this is him, my little brother. His skin is still baby-like, freshly washed and shining. He's glancing away—he did that a lot, as if he always expected something to sneak up—over his shoulder, towards the front door, just as this is taken. Do you think he knew what would one day happen there, in that place behind him: our mother fumbling for her key, her hands shaking, the heavy thud of a stranger's feet closing in fast? Look—his eyes are as round and solemn as the sea. His hair glitters in the camera flash, his pyjamas stamped with red fire-engines. You might think the sea isn't round but I'm not so sure. Think of the globe. Everything in this world—even straight lines—seems to eventually become round to me.

There are no dates on these photographs. Sorry, but I was never one for doing that. There are no dates on memories. We put them away somewhere. Then, at intervals, we bring them out. They appear, disappear, re-appear, all out of order. I have often thought that one

day I should sort them properly, line them up according to the story. I remember that, on cooler evenings and from across the lounge room, I would watch how he would sit with our father on the sofa, snuggled in behind his knees, in that triangle adult legs make when an adult draws them up alongside their body. You know that irresistible space. Together the two of them would watch television and I would watch them, their visible skin—face, throat, hands—luminous blue in the shifting TV light. Afterwards, when our father was no longer, I would watch my brother and our mother. She never made that triangular space. Instead, he would lean his head under her arm, against her soft warm side, and she would encircle him with her mothering arm, pulling him close. I would watch the same blue light wash over them. Much earlier I had discovered that, whenever he looked up at me, I couldn't help but smile at him; that whenever he took my hand, something happened inside my chest that made me happy. I was twelve years old when this photo of him was taken. I remember clearly the first time I saw him, tiny and wrapped up, asleep. No-one else made me feel like that. And here he is—right here, in my hands—his whole life was ahead of him, and it is so long ago now and we are both squarely middle-aged and sometimes it feels as if it all never really happened, that particular childhood.

But it must have because I'm still the sister, still phone at Easter and Christmas, leave messages, send packages for his children in December and at birthdays, collect them from the post office a week or so later. So, I guess it must have happened, that childhood and everything else. The woman behind the post office counter cocks her head and smiles sympathetically, shrugs. And I find myself smiling back with my mouth—you know, quick and thin. As if this means nothing. The packages aren't anything to do with me—goodness, no! This is simply an errand I'm running for someone else. A kindness for a neighbour, you know the kind of thing.

## 2

This is him a year later, at three. Fearless, a too-large riding hat on his head. Someone else's hat; someone else's horse, too. Someone who had lifted him up, set him in the saddle, adjusted the stirrups, turned in his feet, pushed down his hands and heels, pressed in his elbows, knees, smoothed and threaded the reins through his too small fingers, showing him how to do it, all in a rush. Something it had taken me years to learn. Look how he's sitting. When I look at this, I can imagine how he must have felt, the horse's body rocking hugely beneath him, how he must have watched its mane bob, ears twitch, watched that kind stranger leading it, the stranger glancing back at him, how he must have given that stranger his round solemn sea-like eyes, maybe his big infectious smile. I remember clearly all three bodies, mute and intent, slowly circling the gymkhana ring. I was there, you see, behind him, in my own hat, on my own horse. In an old biscuit tin in my wardrobe I keep my only sporting prize: a red ribbon, Dressage, second place. Somewhere he has a certificate with his name in copper-plate: fourth.

One day, many years later, he told me that he can't remember any of it, asks if our father was there. Well, I was taken aback, had to press my fingernails into my palm to stop tears because he hates my tears, and I told him yes, he was there, standing in the shade of a tree, his forearms leaning easily on the top rail of the round yard. The flighty bay he had bought for me was shying and rearing just like it had in the stock yard he had driven me to one warm afternoon, a place in the bush made of corrugated iron and skinned grey tree limbs. Horses had pushed up against one another in the corral, pushed up against the inside of the rails, heads high, nostrils flaring, eyes wide, white-rimmed with fear. I didn't tell him that part, of course. I just saw it again and saw, also, our father's face when I had appeared in the living room wearing my jodhpurs and riding boots, carrying my hat, and he had stared at me and asked me why on earth I was dressed like that. I was puzzled; I always wore them when I rode, he knew that,



and, besides, I had read the books: *My Friend Flicka*, *Black Beauty*. Of course a horse must be ridden before it's bought. What did he mean why was I wearing them?

When he had stopped the car in the empty, grey-sand car park he had got out first, spoken to me over his shoulder as I scrambled out behind him: *No need to bring your hat*. I remember I had hesitated then tossed it onto the back seat and caught up to him at a trot. Inside I stood alongside him, stepped up onto the bottom rail of the yard, up on my tiptoes in my boots, and hooked my arms over the top rail so I could see. All the knots in the timber rail beneath my arms had been worn smooth. I squinted through the dust as the horses pressed and shifted like a school of fish. I admired the skewbald, looked to our father, back at the skewbald. I had waited, wondered if these horses, frightened and shifting, were actually broken in—but why would he buy me a horse that wasn't? I looked about for saddles but there were none, on the wall just a few lead ropes and halters, a stock whip. Stockmen glanced at me from beneath the brims of their hats, their eyes flickering up and down, their smiles twitching as they turned away, and I felt suddenly embarrassed, confused. Like I wanted to hide myself.

And so, months later, there we were, me following my brother around the inside of the gymkhana ring. And then, a little while later, I found myself back there, this time at a starting line, staring down a column of forty-four gallon drums, a cluster of poles, each with a small red triangular flag. I could feel my horse's skin twitch, his short, anxious breath, his trembling, his tossing head, hooves dancing, dancing in the sand. And the starter's gun was loud and the crowd shouted, and he shied and reared, and I battled to keep my seat, saw the others racing away, felt my face flush, eyes fill, and turned and turned my horse again on a tight rein to gather him in. Then there he was, our father in the shade of a tree, his arms easy along the top rail, his head back and mouth open, laughing hard. That's how I had described it to my brother: *Laughing hard*. And my brother had looked at me, incredulous: *Really?* And I had to nod slowly and

look away. Because it's not in keeping, is it, with the way we like to remember the dead. I know that. Then, in the silence that followed, my brother told me, his head bowed so I couldn't see his face, that he has no memory of our father at all, and I had stared at the top of his head, at his fingers fiddling with his serviette, and had cast about for something to say. It had been then that I had remembered out loud how someone we didn't know had chosen him at three, lifted the hat from their own head and settled it on his. *Strong arms*, I said to him, *choosing you, lifting you up*. And he had listened in silence, eventually lifting his head and looking back at me.

The last time we had dinner together I told my brother's wife the story of that first gymkhana, of his first ride on a horse, the one he couldn't remember, and my sister-in-law teased my brother a little: such a small boy not knowing what to do—weren't you afraid, did you wail, fall off? I listened to this, then looked up from my plate and straight at my brother, opening my mouth to speak. But he turned to look at his wife and told her that he had done well, that he had, in fact, won. I had blinked at him then closed my mouth; across the table his back was straight, his body drawn up, just as it had been on someone else's horse with their hat on his head, doing his best, his fear in check. His wife murmured: *They must have taken pity on you*. And I had to look down at my plate then, cut a piece of food very carefully. Eventually I had spoken as casually as I could into the silence: *Not at all. He did very well*. And then I had picked up my glass carefully between my thumb and forefinger and had sipped a little wine, thinking of that other time, at this table, not so very long before, when he and I were alone and I had told him that story. So. This is what happens, I had thought. And had sipped a little more wine and let the silence settle before smiling brightly at my brother: *This sauce is delicious*, and then turning to my sister-in-law, smiling again: *How's work?*

It was a small concession, I had later told myself. He was so little, so fatherless.

## 3

This photograph—oh, dear!—is my awkward thirteen-year-old self, chasing my hat along Sorrento Beach. Look how skinny I am! I am always surprised to see it, didn't know it was being taken, and wonder which of our parents had the presence of mind. It's afternoon: you can tell by the sun on the water, the wind-chopped sea. We had driven an hour from the hills, sitting on our scratchy towels spread along the back seat, peeling our backs away from the green vinyl. We arrive at the deserted beach and fling open the doors, tumbling out, already running, and the southerly snatches my hat, spins it through the air. I take off after it, sand whipping the backs of my legs, my hair mad in front of my eyes as I run, the roar of the wind and the sea and his voice calling after me, wailing. The hat flies and rolls and I chase and chase, then at last in a lull I pounce and have it, then run back as fast as I can into wind and sand, shielding my face with the crook of one arm, the brim of that hat gripped tightly in my other fist, and I reach him, with his body hunched, his back to the wind. And there's sand in his ears and neck and hair, his eyes screwed shut and sandy and wet with tears, his mouth wet and open and sand in his teeth—I could see into his mouth—and his howl still coming like a cloud, all disappointment, and I can hear our parents shouting from the car park, waving, calling us, bringing us back. He knew what everybody knew: our day at the beach was already over.

Weekends were not all like this, though. Other times we would arrive at the sea to a gentle breeze and our father would lift my brother onto his shoulders, the way he would later lift his own children. Oh, he would squirm and giggle, just as I've seen them do, and I would watch our father hold my brother's knees firmly with his two big hands and stride into the water. He would swim the two of them out to sea, a long way out it seemed to me, toward the horizon, out where I knew even adult legs could no longer stand. And then at last he would turn and swim them both back, and I would watch until our father found his feet again and stood, holding those little knees

against his shoulders as he climbed the slope to the shore. Only then would I let go my breath and I would be surprised by the sudden realisation that I had been holding it. The things we do without even knowing! Sometimes I could see my brother clinging even harder to our father's face in the long swim back to land; other times he would stretch his arms wide, wiggling his fingers and laughing, and it looked as if he were somehow the one in control, keeping them balanced, as if he was kneeling on the surface of the sea, hovering there and, with his own small body, saving our father's life by holding our father's head above water, like a ball between his knees, until they were both brought back by some invisible current. From the shore I would sometimes hear fragments of my brother's frightened voice, his eyes round bright blue. Then I would see him suddenly smile his enormous laughing smile when, I think, he felt our father's feet grip, his legs steady. I would watch our father clamber back, grinning, watch him reach up and grasp my brother under his small arms, watch his little legs carve a swooping arc as our father swung him gently down onto the wet shore, would watch him jumping, jumping, shivering, jumping, hear his frightened, excited voice: *Do it again. Do it again.*

#### 4

This is him at five in cowboy clothes. And this, him at twenty, in his graduation gown over black dress-trousers and white business shirt, open collar, no tie, sleeves rolled, as if the whole thing is no big deal. What strikes me is the similarity in the way he is standing in both photos, playing at being tough. Our mother must have taken the first one, a Christmas photo—there is one of me, too, at about the same age, as a cowgirl—but I'm not sure who took the second. Maybe a girlfriend I don't know about; something about his unguarded face.

When our father died, my brother had asked where he had gone—that heart-breaking question—and our mother had waved her hand as if casting a spell: *To the stars*. Later, when he was in

his twenties and I in my thirties, I played him my favourite Joni Mitchell record with the song that made everyone stardust, and he had laughed—dedicated atheist—and scoffed at the lyrics as I sang along, waving me away as if he were the magician. But for many years after our father's death, I know he went outside every night in his clown-print, his animal-print, his striped pyjamas to blow kisses at the sky.

At first we had all stepped out, stood on the edge of the front porch where he had sat at two years old and someone had taken that photo of him glancing back at the front door, his face freshly washed and shining. Our mother had switched off the porch light and we had stood, the three of us in the dark, looking up. And then I looked at my brother in our mother's arms, at his clean and solemn, just-four year old, wide-open face, at his outstretched arm, the smallness of it, and his fist against the night like a pale anemone, opening, closing. I looked at our mother, at her hands hooked beneath his arms, holding him up, just the way our father had done when he swooped him down through the air to the ground, just the way our mother had done when she lifted him each night so that he could receive on his forehead our father's kiss. And then I did something of which I am forever ashamed. I bowed my head and walked away, softly, quickly, on my toes down the corridor to my room. I closed the door gently, carefully and, covering my face with my hands, slid into bed. And there I pressed the heels of my hands as hard as I could into the sockets of my eyes to obliterate that image: my little brother's face looking up, the cold blue wash of night, and our mother blinking, her eyes shiny with tears. I became very busy at my brother's bed-time: turned up my music, practised the piano, put my hands over my ears and frowned hard at maths. Then one night a long time later I watched my brother get up from the sofa, say goodnight to us and go to his room, and suddenly I realised he had stopped doing it. In the shifting half-dark of the TV, I turned back to the screen so that no one would know that I was running through all my memories to

try to find the last time I had heard the front door open and close at eight o'clock. But there was nothing—not even a space where that memory should be.

We sleep without cameras, so there's no photo of this, just the pictures in my head as I wake in the night, middle-aged and frightened—I'm not sure of what—my breath ragged. The floor is patterned lino—small geometric shapes in autumn tones, endlessly repeating—and it is not what it seems; it is slick with water I can't see. I step into the room and my legs slip violently from under me.

Another night I enter a room that looks like a room but is not a room; others stand in it normally, speak normally to me, but I can't speak back, can't even breathe. I can only swim, must swim, swim for my life, swim through what others can breathe but what is water, unbreathable for me. I don't understand. I swim up to the ceiling in the farthest corner, lift my chin until my nose breaks the surface and finds, at last, a pocket of air. I tread water madly to keep myself there, alive, take a breath and dive, open my eyes and look down through the water, down to all that is below, all that looks normal and undistorted and clear. People walk on the floor as if in the ordinary air, speak in ordinary voices. I can hear them clearly. I can't speak. I can't hold my breath long enough. I look up again, at the ceiling above me, then swim toward it, up to the surface, find that air pocket, dog paddle there. I breathe, breathe, great lungful of air. They don't even know I'm there, I think, and I can't tell them. I wonder how much air I have, how much time. I dog-paddle, breathe. My body begins to tire. I wonder how long I can live like this.

Years later, in the middle of yet another night: my brother and I sit beside a very calm sea. He cups his hand to my ear and whispers: *When he took me into the ocean, when he was swimming beneath me, I saw a brightly coloured parrot fish with a beak like a bird and white shiny teeth swim, smiling, into his open mouth.*

And then last night, the dream that sent me here, to this story and these photos again, all this silly remembering: we lie side by side in the shade of a tree, looking up. The sky is luminous and broken, pieces of unearthly glowing blue surrounded by leaves so still and so perfectly green some hand must have painted them. Nearby, horses graze, lifting their heads occasionally to turn to us and blink, ears pricked. Their tails flick. My brother says, so quietly it could be the breeze: *He leaned on the railing. I watched him. He didn't know. He opened his mouth to laugh. A dragon fly flew out. Its wings were rainbows. He closed his mouth and he saw me looking. He smiled and at me and placed a finger against his lips. Sshh.*

Yes, I say, as I turn to face him. *That's right, just as I remember it.* And I watch as he kisses the tip of his own finger and, with one soft, steady breath, blows that kiss up into the broken blue heaven. We watch it rise, stall, then begin its drifting descent, shimmering and iridescent, back to earth and both of us.

# Flora Smith



Navigation gone  
we lived amongst gaps, my compass skewed  
by ferrous fears and the lustrous pieces of your astrolabe  
stolen by slate-grey days; love absent, inarticulate and spent.

Mornings, I run my hands  
over the hollows and dunes of you left in our sheets.

I am a map-maker.  
I can chart this arctic dialect of loss.

# Argo

## Roland Leach

The *Argo* is rotting on Corinth Beach,  
the timbers lifting like waves, rising like asps,  
the heroes have departed,  
the women abandoned.

It is time to take stock  
of shifting loyalties and betrayals,  
admit we have been fleeced.

The great have declared themselves deities,  
dividing up the loot in daylight on the streets,  
as if it is the will of the gods  
and we may have once agreed,  
acquiesced to the logic of the world,

but it is time to reassess,  
find our own boat-builders perhaps  
or dare to imagine  
that we no longer need  
great men on the prows.

The rotting plank is about to fall.

higher than ever

**Kevin Gillam**

do you wake to find yourself swimming in ancient water,  
pulling as if through honey but remaining still  
emerging chafed by time?

do you sleep and see paragraphs of white cockatoos  
in your book of sky, their only sense in  
shadowed underwings, sleek and fleeting?

do you hover between eyelids and curtain,  
crave a lengthening of the anaesthetist's white flood,  
live your hours like scattered accidents?

do you decide to become ocean,  
a briny suspension of story and wind tossed denouement,  
cathedral for the hymns of gulls?

do you then choose to ride a warm updraft,  
read the scrawl of cirrus, live a weightless creed?

Framed

## Vivienne Glance

Before my camera  
stretched out, innocent and naked  
smooth like a woman's hip,  
the earth blushes  
as the sun bleeds.

Unseen photons  
fill the mouth of my lens  
pixel by pixel  
they are swallowed  
into the belly  
of this machine.

My gaze consumes  
the pinks and browns  
of rocks  
the ambers and ochres  
of crevices.

I taste timeless dust  
vapours  
reach out for scarlet texture—  
I can only touch  
this image.

## History and the Novel: Refusing to be Silent

Jo Jones

‘Yes We Canberra’, a satirical commentary program by the ABC’s comedy group, The Chaser, was produced to accompany the 2010 Australian election campaign and included a segment titled ‘Life at the Top’. This segment showed what seemed to be something like an indigenous version of a panel discussion where four indigenous elders sat cross-legged on the earth in a Northern Territory outback setting and discussed the election issues. The juxtaposition of this indigenous context, movingly dignified in its simplicity, with the issues of the campaign—broadband, low-level political debate, funding for mediocre Australian films—made the to-and-froing of election debate seem trivial and startlingly self-centered. The Chaser, with (perhaps unusual) sensitivity not only draws the viewer’s attention to the overwhelming disparity of economic and social privilege in this country, but the complete absence of any discussion of indigenous issues during the 2010 election campaign—a troubling invisibility that quickly begs a comparison to the 2007 Labor victory and former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s apology to Indigenous Australians that occurred soon after. In the last segment of ‘Life at the Top’ to screen before the election, one of the elders posed a question concerning Labor’s track-record on Indigenous affairs. They respond:

Elder 1: What have they done?

Elder 2: They said 'sorry' to us once.

Elder 1: When was that?

Elder 2: Three years ago

Elder 1: And what about since then?

Elder 3: Lots of things. Every week they remind us that they said 'sorry' three years ago.

Despite the wave of optimism following Rudd's apology it seems that very little in terms of social justice for Indigenous Australians has changed. The absence of important discussion from public debate is a sobering reminder of the continuing presence of the thinly-veiled racism and social conservatism that influenced the nation during the twelve-year Howard era. While it would be both unfair and inaccurate to equate the Labor leadership's disappointing reluctance to keep indigenous issues on the public agenda with Howard's refusal to acknowledge the type of past injustice brought out by (among other investigations) the *Bringing Them Home Report*, a little-discussed but noteworthy speech given by Rudd at the launch of Thomas Keneally's *Australians: Origins to Eureka* gives some indication of a degree of historical and political denial that is, arguably, prescient of the conservatism and instrumentalism of many Labor politicians that the Australian public has witnessed in the recent election campaign.

Statements made about history often work as political touchstones and Rudd's key points were illuminating in terms of his own and his government's understandings and values. After Rudd's 2008 apology to indigenous peoples, one would be forgiven for thinking he considered himself aligned with the views expressed by then Prime Minister Keating in his landmark speech at Redfern Park. Rudd's speech represents Keating and allies in the History Wars (debates about the extent of the damage and destruction inflicted by settler society on Australian indigenous peoples conducted by politicians, commentators and historians) as being at the extreme and fanatical end of a polarised debate and, in doing this, parts company with an

important cultural movement peopled by distinguished intellectuals, politicians and activists who have dedicated their careers to increasing knowledge of national history and attempting to bring about justice and reparation to indigenous Australians. By positioning himself at the moderate centre in terms of views on the national past, squarely and simplistically between the denialists and the revisionists (whom Howard famously termed the ‘Black Armband Brigade’), Rudd implied that ‘true’ or ‘good’ history is fixed and apolitical—a notion which is at best naïve and at worst a totalitarian weapon. Troublingly, he called for an end to the disputes of the History Wars when this type of debate is, surely, crucial for a functioning democracy.

It has been up to participants in other spheres of Australian public and cultural life to keep Indigenous stories and histories alive in the national consciousness in the past decade, particularly in the past two years, whether through the medium of television, such as *The Chaser*, or through films such as widely acclaimed *Samson and Delilah*. The participation of public intellectuals, particularly historians and writers, has also been crucial here. While most current politicians clearly do not want to re-enter the fray at this particular juncture and the debates have died down to an extent, the continual discussion of the more troubling elements of our national past in various forums by historians and novelists have encouraged the continued consideration of not only the national past but, most importantly, the ethically vital issue of social justice for Indigenous Australians.

In his speech at the launch of Keneally’s book, Rudd described the existing discussion of our national history as ‘arid and intellectual’, but many Australians don’t see it that way. In an August 2009 episode of the ABC’s high-rating panel show *Q and A*, broadcast from the Melbourne Writers’ festival, the audience-generated discussion focused largely on history and the national, colonial past. The conversation between writers Richard Flanagan, Tara June Winch, Kamila Shamsie and politicians, Labor’s Lindsay Tanner, and Liberal Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbot (then Shadow Minister for Families and Community Services), made for lively and compelling viewing.

Australian history in its various representations, including politicised and often controversial ones, clearly has currency in our culture. Rachel Perkins' 2008 documentary series *The First Australians* demonstrates that an audience exists for the type of indigenous stories that are generally considered as the unofficial part of Australia's history. SBS's Australian version of *Who do You Think You Are?* follows prominent Australians as they track different genealogical paths which, similarly, include stories of immigration and colonisation. This energised engagement with Australian history challenges Rudd's perception of existing debates and his covert denial of the type of cultural sentiment that accompanies the success of these types of popular histories. When a *Q and A* audience member asked: 'Do we struggle to talk about our identity in any depth because we risk feeling further implicated in the brutality of our colonial past?' he communicated one of the most vexed, complicated and critical questions that faces the Australian nation. The question conveys not only the regret that troubles fair-minded non-indigenous Australians, but also the difficulties involved in discussion: that historical revelation and unfolding interpretations are hard to mentally and emotionally assimilate and even harder to respond to. How should a nation act in the face of such a past? The former (now retired) Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner's comment on *Q and A* that 'the biggest weapon you can use on these things is silence' can be used as a rejoinder to the Prime Minister's call for the end of vital debates on Australia's history.

More than two years after Rudd's lauded apology on behalf of Federal Parliament to the Stolen Generations it is time to revisit important questions of history. Why does the past matter? What are the effects of engaging with the stories and events of the past? What roles do emerging representations of the past have to play in our society? How does our relationship with history matter politically and affect what we do in the present? How can we act or live ethically in a country founded on racial violence? A strand of public debate that emerged out of the History Wars is particularly relevant when considering these questions. In a 2006 *Quarterly Essay*, the historian



Inga Clendinnen asked “The History Question: Who Owns the Past?” in which she discussed the relationship between history and fiction. Clendinnen’s claim is that it is the scientific and verifiable methods that give historians greater authority on the past than writers of fiction texts, who have laid various claims to historical authority. In her view, fiction can delight and intrigue, but ultimately provide little of real intellectual or political value. In the debate that was generated around the historical fiction question, historians including Clendinnen, Mark McKenna and John Hirst, drew attention to the limitations of the novel in representing historical events. These statements made by the historians rightly pointed out that chronology and veracity are necessarily subjugated to the demands of narrative and that, above all, novels rely on human emotion and empathy rather than rational analysis to create connections with people who lived in times past. The historians are correct in their claims that literature cannot compete with history on certain types of truth claims; however, I would contend that different types of historical fiction also have an equally important, if different, role to play in questions to do with the place and significance of Australian history in our contemporary life.

Historical fiction is important in considering the questions posed earlier. While the pursuit of empirically verifiable versions of events is of great value and has made important contributions to Australian political and intellectual life, the connection between the individual and the national past involves an imaginative engagement that can be provoked by histories but is also (and more traditionally) the domain of fiction. Powerful and often deeply felt links between the individual and the past, while never providing direct access to the people and events of that past, have the potential for enabling effects. Fictional representations have a role to play in the discussion about how the past can affect the present in social and political ways. In fact, fiction is as vital as history in keeping the important events alive and well in the national consciousness, and has its own valid claims to truth. For

this reason it is important to acknowledge that both fields play their own different and important roles in defeating the dangerous silence about the past that Tanner referred to on *Q and A*.

What historical fiction has to offer Australian culture differs from that of history in four ways. Firstly, it encourages a consideration of the place of the past and the imagination in political life. Indeed, an individual connection with the past through fiction and, in particular, the novel, has been part of the workings of a liberal progressive agenda since the eighteenth century. As I will explain later, there are limitations with this type of liberal empathetic engagement; however, it is surely necessary to consider the role of such engagement in any analysis of the relationship between history, politics and culture. Secondly, imaginative relationships made with the past through these fictions can potentially enable an ethical engagement with 'difference' that works in other and important ways than the kind of connections made through non-fiction history texts. Thirdly, fictions can perform a meta-historical function, provoking an examination of the workings and limits of our representations of the past in traditional historical forms. And, finally, history is constantly limited by what it cannot prove or reveal, while fiction, through art, can enter events to an extent beyond what is traditionally regarded as the province of historical enquiry, engaging with the force of human experience that exists beyond the limits of traditional historical representation. These may be events which, for various reasons, were not recorded but endure in memory and traces.

Kate Grenville's 2005 *The Secret River* is a good place to begin a discussion of individual novels because this novel, and Grenville's statements at the time of its release, became the crux of debate about the differences between and relative merits of history and fiction. *The Secret River* is also a useful example of the historical novel in its traditional, linear narrative form, one that has been popular and influential in Australian literature. As with all fiction (and history), the form of these narratives is intrinsically bound to politics. At the heart of historians' objections when *The Secret River* was published

was Grenville's reliance on empathy (an emotional or moral category) as a path to historical knowledge (an intellectual category). Among the most controversial, and it must be said naïve, statements Grenville gave about the story of emancipist Thornhill (the character based on her own ancestor Solomon Wiseman), was that by visiting the locations at which events had occurred and partaking in some similar experiences, such as riding the gunwhale of a boat in rough weather, she was able to access the responses of her ancestor and those like him.<sup>1</sup> In an act of transfer she suggests that a similar process of experiential change occurs when reading a novel. In her view, the reader can vicariously experience nineteenth-century life (or eighteenth-century life in her next novel, a type of prequel to *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant*) and understand the experiences of those who lived there, exposing colonial violence as a sequence of miscommunications and misunderstandings, rather than an intrinsic aspect of an often brutal, virulent, and dominating political and social system.

By contrast, historians alert us to the variety of human experience and how individual human subjects are shaped by the very historical and geographical specificity of existence. As Clendinnen notes, the belief in historical insight accessed through the so-called re-experiencing past events—what she calls a 'time-leap'—is not only impossible but ideologically dangerous, drawing as it does on the assumption that the knowledge and memories we have from our own experience gives us direct knowledge of the lives of others so very different from our own (20). In this sense empathy, which modern novels rely on to form meaningful relationships with their readers, is not enough to afford historical insight. According to Clendinnen, such insight is achieved through an objective appraisal of the past, albeit an appraisal informed by sensitivity and compassion. Therefore, to tell a story of an early nineteenth-century emancipist, relate the details of his motivations and decisions, including the decision to participate in a massacre of an indigenous tribe, suggests we can access and understand someone so historically and culturally different from white Australians (no matter how much we base the narrative around

historical details and events). The unalterable otherness of individuals of past times is erased in this type of narrative, as is race difference, for example when Thornhill's wife, Sal, concludes on her visit to the Aboriginal camp that their presence there is morally compromised because the local indigenous group are much more like the British Thornhills than Sal has previously thought: 'They was here...Their grannies and their great grannies. All along...Even got a broom to keep it clean, Will. Just like I got meself.' (288) It is the similarities here, rather than differences, that provoke moral responses.<sup>2</sup>

The 'time-leap' made by traditional realist historical novels is also apparent in the more stylistically complex work of David Malouf, such as the acclaimed *Remembering Babylon* and *The Conversations at Curlew Creek*, which can also be construed as ethically problematic, revealing an underlying reliance in the universality of human experience that has, in the past, been co-opted to underwrite concepts like colonialism and paternalism. Malouf has made a number of statements similar to those of Grenville about being able to re-experience colonial times through the insight afforded by the universal reach of empathy<sup>3</sup> and conveys his stories through an all-encompassing romantic-transcendent poetic. In *Remembering Babylon*, for instance, while the narrative of a Scottish settler family on the edge of the colonial settlement in nineteenth-century Queensland is historically informed and sensitively rendered, the story hinges on the possibility of a type of transference where settler characters gain profound and indigenised insight and connection to place through moments of heightened and mystical experience. One of the central characters, Gemmy Fairley, a castaway who has spent the last ten years with an indigenous tribe, works (problematically) as a type of conduit for indigenous experience and understanding. As has been argued before, the very materiality and specificity of existence, through an investment in universal subjectivity, is erased here.<sup>4</sup> Put simply, these novels can be interpreted as perpetuating the notion that the social codes and sets of behaviours that seem appropriate and necessary for one group can be applied to another

without due consideration of cultural, social and psychic differences. While it is important to acknowledge that Malouf and Grenville made every effort to base their stories in historical truth and to be respectful of the indigenous culture they are representing, the novels remain largely ideologically determined by the limitations of the traditional historical novel form.<sup>5</sup> In erasing differences between groups of people, such novels thus effectively reproduce the ideological beliefs they seek to contest.

This type of ambitious imaginative leap founded in empathy which informs the traditional historical novel assumes that we should not maim, massacre, enslave, exploit or marginalise indigenous Australians because, underneath a veneer of dissimilarity, ‘we’ are all the same.<sup>6</sup> These assumptions also underpin a rather naïve and politically problematic strand of the reconciliation discourse in Australian culture—the belief that if Australians could realise our fundamental similarities and put the past behind us we could *move on*. This is a way of thinking that reduces reconciliation to a feel-good, guilt-assuaging exercise for the benefit of non-indigenous Australians that tries to affect spurious closure. Recognising deep-seated difference is important. It lends support to concepts like self-determination and meaningful consultation with indigenous communities on indigenous matters. It makes Australians question the assumptions and methods of an initiative like the Northern Territory Intervention. It may cause us to respond in outrage when we hear, as we have recently, that consultation in a number of Territory communities was undertaken in such a way as to exclude the indigenous community from fully participating.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the politically enabling potential of humanist empathy, the foundation of liberal democracy, must be acknowledged. This type of liberal goodwill and the recognition of racial inequity was made possible by a progressive race agenda in the early 1990s, including the clear acknowledgement of past injustice that led to the Mabo decision. Perhaps what Australians need to revise here is the type of empathy we aspire to have as a nation. Rather than

empathy that relies on universal similarities, scholar and novelist Gail Jones contends we should aspire to a concept she attributes to theorist Dominic La Capra called 'unsettled empathy': this is where imaginative and authentic connections are with those who are different, but the assumption that full insight or understanding can be gained is resisted (Jones 2004). Unsettled empathy is a difficult and ongoing process where one is careful not to project one's own culture/experience/belief system in the guise of understanding. In Jones' novel, *Sorry* (2007), that begins in the 1930s, her young, damaged and sensitive protagonist Perdita realises at the very end of the narrative the difficulties of accessing and understanding the life and psyche of another, even if, as in Perdita's relationship with her indigenous friend Mary, you love them deeply. Throughout the novel, constructed as a fable and allegory, Perdita has recurring fantasies of falling snow, its delicate evanescence figured in stark contrast to the red vastness of the remote Pilbara where she lives. Even in the most insightful individuals, the seduction and blindness of whiteness and white privilege runs deep. Perdita's eventual apology to Mary for a life-destroying error achieves neither closure nor redemption, but becomes an irresistible ethical imperative. We are unsure of what it meant to Mary, but we know it was necessary and important. Like the national chronology of white occupation, Perdita's story has pieces missing. It acknowledges that the memory of events can be lost and that, even when regained, such damage can never be atoned for or completely understood but must be approached with remorse and the intent to make amends. In this way unsettled empathy, expressed through Jones' historical novel, is a more ethical way of approaching difference. In *Sorry* the personal is clearly political and demonstrates the way that the bonds of affection and imagination made between the individual and those who are different affects and changes lives. In this way a tale founded skillfully in historical realities, while still a fiction, communicates knowledge of the past and political events and systems, such as colonialism, imperialism and their effects, in such a way that has clear contemporary political and ethical relevance.

Surely this is an important and worthy form of communicating certain types of knowledge about the past that contains important truths.

Like *Sorry*, Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999) is rooted in painful realities of earlier times in Australia. Whereas Jones navigates the terrain of white remorse and regret, Scott deals with the challenges of indigenous survival, part of which involves negotiating and re-negotiating relationships with historical events and history itself. The Miles Franklin Award winning novel self-consciously exposes the limits of traditional history when coming to terms with individual, cultural and national pasts. In a web of stories largely derived from Scott's Nyoongah family in the Esperance region of Western Australia, Scott's protagonist, Harley, struggles to deal with the new-found knowledge of both his indigenous heritage and the racially motivated abuses of his Scots-born grandfather by whom he was raised. The structure of Scott's novel—a spiralling, non-linear collection of stories spanning generations back to initial white-indigenous contact—exposes the limitations of relying solely on traditional historical sources. The stories include fragments of archival evidence such as government correspondence and records, sections of local histories, stories of families conveyed by elders and Harley's own imagined versions of events, informed by these other sources. In accessing the stories Harley (and Scott) comes up against a problem evident in much contact history—that important events went, deliberately and for different reasons, unrecorded. One such event is recorded in a complementary volume of family stories, co-written with Scott's Aunt Hazel. The volume tells of a massacre that occurred around the turn of the century that had been covered up, both by the white pastoralist family who conducted it and the indigenous group who were its targets. The surviving people from the indigenous group left the Ravensthorpe area where it occurred (Hazel claims that even to this day no Nyoongah people live there) and when asked of their origins often said they came from Adelaide rather than be identified with the massacred group. It seems this was partly because the trauma of the experience and loss was so painful

to recall. Only the stories remain, told in fragments amongst kinship groups in the indigenous community. In *Benang*, Scott re-visions a version of this massacre, the brutality of the pastoralist murders, the reluctant complicity of a white ancestor, the inexpressible pain of Harley's Nyoongah great-grandmother who witnessed the events and the aftermath, including bodies hanging from a tree and the land itself responding in sympathy and horror to the scene. This story may never be part of a national history because of a lack of empirical evidence or the understandable reluctance of Nyoongah people to open up the story to outsiders, but there is an important truth here.<sup>8</sup> It is clearly an essential and defining story of both loss and survival, as the Nyoongahs in the region endure and connect to their ancestors through culture and place.

Similarly, Alexis Wright's first novel, *Plains of Promise*, set initially in a mission community in the Gulf country, deals with the silences of history where communities and individuals experience devastating social and psychic breakdown in a way that eludes record and memory. The damaged central character, Ivy, abandoned by the indigenous mission community because of tribal difference and by the white clergyman who has repeatedly raped her, disintegrates into mental illness and dysfunction, with no sense of past identity and little memory of the abuses she has endured. Historical fiction thus provides the means to enter into these spaces of experience that traditional histories regard as speculative and conjectural and which thus lie outside the scholarly domain. Entry into the past experiences of the dispossessed necessarily involves imaginative and speculative journeys which contain their own truth.

Historical novels can be striking in the challenge they lay down to the very notion of the impossibility of historical representation—that sources are never objective, tellers of stories never disinterested or unbiased, as poststructuralist historiographers such as Hayden White have emphasised.<sup>9</sup> In fact, in these novels, history is conceptualised as an abyss and, like human relations themselves, often dizzying in its unfathomability. This concept of history has been compared to



the Kantian notion of the sublime; something the human mind can approach but never fully comprehend. Rodney Hall's fascinating and critically neglected historical novels of the late 1980s and early 1990s, *The Yandilli Trilogy*, are narrated by characters who are unstable, deluded, even psychopathic, and strange events are glimpsed through the fractured lenses of fragmented consciousnesses. In Hall's *Captivity Captive* (1988), based on an actual event in the Southern Queensland outback town of Gatton, the details surrounding a grisly crime unfold as the brother of murdered siblings tells his tale. The more the reader learns of the increasingly gothic traits of the Malone family, the less likely is the truth of the official deathbed confession of a neighbour that begins the novel. Grotesquely inverting the national pastoralist myth, the outback becomes a place where the traumas of settlement, and their less-than-heroic effects, are pronounced. This is seen, for example, in the inwardness of isolated family and social groupings. In novels such as this, the notion of history as a trajectory of progress is exposed as a shimmering humanistic fantasy. Instead, history can be black and opaque, as impenetrable as the psyches of the individual who conceived and enacted this bizarre unsolved crime. Neither are Hall's novels merely relativistic exercises in postmodern playfulness and reflexivity. If colonial tales are considered instrumental in the making of a nation, Hall's work (published in Australia's bicentennial year) is a highly politicised warning against the dangers of isolation and the self-destruction inherent in the power plays that may lurk under the guise of national unity.

Like Hall's novels, the self-reflexivity of Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001) is biting political. History itself is not safely sequestered in the past, but shifts and morphs like the pages of Gould's book itself that, within Flanagan's narrative, reveals something different every time it is opened. History permeates the present. One conspicuous example of this is the way the deranged commandant of the Sarah Island settlement, where Gould is imprisoned, pillages the environment in a grotesque manifestation of aggressive capitalism. This situation is not intended as a faithful reproduction of the

events of the penal settlement but, rather, a comment on the way the destructive alliance of big business and government in Tasmania in the present emerged out of the exploitative ideologies of colonialism and imperialism of early settlement, and that have dominated Australia (of which Tasmania is presented as a microcosm) ever since. The eponymous narrator of the novel announces from the outset that he is deserving of our trust, but is also a professional and compulsive liar. Rich in postmodern paradoxes, Gould tells his tale of convict conniving, sensual pleasure and sheer desperation. Through the character of Gould, Flanagan ironically suggests that we are at our most truthful when honest about the lies that we live with. The novel reveals the way that history itself, like other concepts of the Enlightenment, such as reason and democracy, can be corrupted to the service of their opposites: the irrational, libidinous and the will-to-power are always ready to surge and grasp the fragile political cultural construct we know as civilization.

On ABC's *Q and A* Lindsay Tanner acknowledged the inherently political nature of history when he stated '...the question of identity and the past is all wrapped up in one fundamental thing and this is that history is a living thing. It's not settled, it will never be settled.' Engaging with the past events and their interpretation is vital in connecting with a national community. This also includes facing the important and unavoidable historiographical fact that stories shift with interpretation and that even traditional, empirical history is limited by the partiality and separateness of experience. A consideration of these points is needed in asking vital questions of the Australian nation. Fiction has long been part of this critical and imaginative process. Neither is this discussion limited to the so-called chattering classes. Many historical novels are of interest to a wide audience and are even taught in secondary schools all over the country.

Other nations with histories of atrocity and violence have grappled with these questions for longer, with fiction taking an important role, for example, Bernard Schlink's bestselling *The Reader* generated widespread discussion on ethical and political issues about the German

national past. They do not exist merely ‘to delight’ as Clendinnen, somewhat condescendingly, puts it (34). Like other countries that live with spectres of history—Germany and the holocaust, South Africa and apartheid, the United States and slavery—Australia, at a time of global political change, needs to ask what type of country we wish to create in the twenty-first century. Facing the events of the past and the workings of history itself can lead to ethical action to tackle issues and inequities of race. As Richard Flanagan said in the same *Q and A* discussion, ‘[this argument] in the end, is not about our past. It is an argument about our future.’

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## Notes

- 1 Grenville originally made this statement in an interview with Romona Koval on Radio National's *The Book Show*.
- 2 To be fair to Grenville, she attempted to amend some of the more politically problematic elements of *The Secret River* in *The Lieutenant* within the narrative. The protagonist Daniel Rooke and the indigenous girl, Tageran, become friends; however, the character of Rooke ultimately

recognises how little he can comprehend the complexity and extent of Tagaran's motives and experiences. He, importantly, begins to accept uncertainties as an endpoint. I would still claim, however, that Grenville ultimately runs into similar ideological difficulties as in *The Secret River* as she remains so reliant on the realist historical novel form.

- 3 This is cited in McKenna (3).
- 4 A number of critics have detailed their various ideological objections to *Remembering Babylon* in the last two decades. A useful overview of these publications is provided by Randall (2004). Other relevant articles include 'The Obstinacy of the Sacred' (McCann 2005) and my 'Ambivalence, Absence and Loss in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*' (Jones 2009).
- 5 The ethical limits of realist form has been most convincingly argued by theorists Dominick La Capra in *History in Transit* (2004) and Derek Attridge in the companion volumes *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) and *J. M. Coetzee & the Ethics of Reading : Literature in the Event* (2004). I would also claim that, even through the narratives of both *Remembering Babylon* and *The Conversations at Curlew Creek* contain moments of heightened experience and transcendence, the form remains essentially realist in terms of the construction of characters and the 'well-made' action of the plot.
- 6 For an illuminating discussion on the limits of the liberal ideology of reconciliation see Atwood (2005).
- 7 A recent report—the 'Will They Be Heard' report—has evidence to support the claim that indigenous groups were unable to participate effectively in community consultation in the Northern Territory Intervention and that much of the bureaucratic language and systems made the process inaccessible. See <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2009/s2751206.htm> for further information.
- 8 The Nyoongah peoples' treatment of this site of massacre is further explained in Scott (2007). Also, further insights into this scene are offered in Emmet (2007).
- 9 It seems that Australian historical fiction writers have never used the defence that history, like fiction, has its own problems of realist form which, in traditional histories, prematurely forecloses on meaning and interpretation. One might speculate that this is, firstly, because the writers have a great deal of respect for the work done by (particularly revisionist) historians and, secondly, because they would not wish to undermine the politically effective allegiance between revisionist history and a progressive Indigenous rights agenda.

## River Hunt

### Cas Rawlins

There is a child in my class.  
She's the one that chews paper and can't leave the scissors  
alone, can't leave things be. She thinks smiling down.  
The push-bike replicates my simple, trim notion of her as I pedal  
leaning, racing against bush shadows, the terrain.

I like it this way, shotgun slung and finding my  
way to the river—by myself, the ting, ting of gears  
and bearings. But then I am *Balanda*. No Yolngu  
would hunt Magpie Goose alone.  
They would gather, they hunt together.

She cries face planted, indigenous-black smearing melamine,  
when she's upset this girl, when they tease her sometimes.  
She can frown a face of worry, her daily intention  
culminates the laughter and sadness in desktop dribble  
and dabble of the Yolngu, her people.

And I, just making my way to the river, not losing it by counting  
cycles on the pedal. This track, that one. How many revolutions?  
It is like a maze. There are animal tracks everywhere going to all  
the important places. I project like one small part of the larger  
canvas, trying to find that important place, my place.

Much later I discover the river. I can hear the paper-winged  
mob churn and blend evening's edge across the distance.  
Sheltered polyphonic conversations swirl and drone,  
drone and swirl the earth. Their appeal is humorous  
and enticing...and I remember the child again.

Yes, the light is really failing. Too late.  
I leave  
without a shot  
on the verge of darkness  
fearing I might lose the way.

## Ruby's Last Dollar

Reg Cribb

(A play about an elderly Poker Machine addict—Ruby Constance. In this scene we meet Ruby as a very young girl on the streets of Sydney on VE day—1945. She meets the famous Movietone ‘dancing man’. We see her—and the whole country—full of hope and optimism.)

### SCENE 2

*Sydney 1945*

*The young, barefoot girl walks to the front of the stage and stands beneath a shower of paper that is cascading down on her from above. All is quiet at first and she looks skyward with a kind of naïve wonder. A noise starts to take shape as if her consciousness is summoning it up. The sound of a full blown celebration, faint at first, begins to bellow around her. Sirens are going off, whistles and horns are being blown and the din of a million people singing and cheering can be heard. She climbs up to a spot above the celebration and watches. A gangly man in a suit and hat enters and dances his way gleefully around the young girl like the famous dancing man of Elizabeth St on VE day.*



LONNY: Hey! What are ya doin'?

RUBY: Don't know.

LONNY: Don't leave me down here like a pickled onion.  
Come down.

RUBY: Why?

LONNY: 7 million people in this beautiful bloody country darlin' and they're all dancing...except for you. I bet you're a beautiful dancer.

RUBY: Maybe.

LONNY: Aw c'mon. Every other day of my life I'm just an electrical fitter from Petersham but today....I'm Fred Astaire.

RUBY: No you're not, you're drunk.

LONNY: I'm a gangly mad streak of joy reekin' of piss but I've kissed every perfect stranger coz today...every stranger is perfect!

RUBY: Well I'm real happy for ya.

LONNY: Hey some Movietone fella with a camera just filmed me, top of Elizabeth St. I might be famous. They might put my face on a coin.

What's ya name?

RUBY: Cat's bum.

LONNY: Cat's bum?

*She pouts her lips forward in the shape of a cat's bum.*

I think I love ya cat's bum.  
What's ya proper name?

RUBY: Ruby.

LONNY: I'm Lonny.  
Where ya from Ruby?

RUBY: Don't know but I shouldn't be here.

LONNY: Shouldn't be here? Everyone's here today.

RUBY: I gotta get back to Sister Dorothy...that's where I live. She'll be out lookin' for me.

LONNY: Guess what Ruby?

RUBY: What?

LONNY: It's the end of the war...

RUBY: I know that...

LONNY: But not just that! It's the end of all wars. Ha ha! I can feel it!  
Come down, this is history! Think about it...no more war!

RUBY: How do you know that?

LONNY: Coz there's a place called America. They won't let any more wars happen.  
And we're stuck to 'em. Like Clag.

RUBY: People will always wanna hurt each other.

LONNY: Aww who'd wanna hurt you?

RUBY: Dunno, but I feel safer up here.

LONNY: Life is all a big game of chance darlin'. But I know one thing. This country's movin' forward...as of today. All bets off. We'll never run outta money again, we'll never run outta water and we'll all live in a big house together. All of us!

RUBY: No thanks.

LONNY: In 50 years time we'll be loved...*yeah* ...loved by society as the keepers of wisdom and all the young people will bow to us like Gods coz we lived through *this* time in history. We'll grow old with our Grandkids at our feet and they'll never get tired of our stories!

RUBY: You're mad.

LONNY: C'mon cat's bum lets go somewhere and get real drunk. Let's get so drunk we wake up in Venice. Let's get so drunk that we wake up married to each other.

RUBY: I'm only 15.

LONNY: Ah well God love ya! Your whole life is stretched out before ya like a skyful'o'tinsel. Don't you worry. These are lucky days! Anything is possible. Come on, come down. The only thing people are dyin' of down here is pure bloody joy! Most days I'd never tell ya to come down...but today aint one of 'em.

*Ruby comes down to the ground.  
Lonny gives her a big friendly kiss.*

LONNY: I gotta confession to make...

RUBY: What?

LONNY: I'm not Fred Astaire.

I'm Bob *Hope*!

Ha ha!

*He dances off into the victory celebrations.*

*Ruby watches him go.*

## Recipe for Risotto

Josephine Clarke

Call the family in. Tell them to be ready at the right time.  
Remind them of where they come from —  
butter from the Alps, rice from the sodden Lombardy plains,  
their *nonni* from lines of brothers,  
the Goldfields, the woodline,  
to abandoned shacks in the karri.

Cover the base of the pan with white butter.  
Let it sing.  
Add onion thinly sliced, garlic finely chopped  
and saffron from the autumn crocus.  
When you arrive at a yellowing chorus  
drop the rice in:  
three handfuls for each one at the table,  
two extra for the dead in the room.  
Recall those times you could not afford such extravagance.  
Let the wooden spoon keep the rice moving in quavers.  
At the high translucent C, add a glass of wine,  
carefully chosen—it will bring another voice to the ground base.

When you draw from the simmering stock  
remember where eggs come from,  
how much of a hen we use in our lives.  
Keep the rice covered in her relinquishing.  
It is the hen's gift to the rice, make certain it is received.

As soon as the rice has gorged itself—*sostenuto*,  
hold on to that note,  
the journeys,  
the sacrifices.  
Add cheese, more butter  
—light a candle.  
Put the lid on.  
Don't let in any forgetting.

# A Migrant Writer on the Bus (Thinking of Kundera)

**Danijela Kambaskovic-Sawers**

The body crosses over quickly

but characters stay behind  
and roam ghosted streets.

Shuffling their feet,  
they look for shops no longer there

and squabble urgently  
in an inaudible language.

Should one make an effort  
and force stories out

or allow the body to just sit, invisible,  
amidst its irrelevant geography  
and enjoyable clutter

and let the imagination  
migrate at its own pace  
a language an eon?

The outward gaze  
compares tree shapes to remembered trees  
colours of landscape to remembered colours

Drinks from surrounding faces  
to quench old thirsts  
kindle new tastes

the invisible parallels unfurl  
to tape-measure the distance  
between us and us  
between home and home.



am I not?

## Janet Jackson

in stark black lines on white  
the cane toad  
    with lumps and warts drawn as rounds and discs  
    inked eyes  
    a curve as a hint of tongue  
comes out of the night  
with its croak: am I not?  
    am I not, too,  
    made for some  
    place?

Meltemi

David Hutchison

The light of a full moon, bronzed by the smoke rising from the two Burnt Islands, lightened the high bulk of Santorini as the ferry crossed the caldera towards the mooring. The air was faintly sulphurous.

‘Walpurgis night,’ Martin said.

Eugenia snuggled closer to him. ‘I wonder what vampires do when they retire,’ she said.

Before they left Athens, a Greek friend, Anna, had told them that some Greeks believed that vampires retired to the island, although she had not explained what retirement meant for vampires.

The ferry anchored a hundred metres from the floodlit quay. Several launches headed towards it. On the quay there was a bustle like a Middle Eastern bazaar. About thirty mules and donkeys and their muleteers—men and boys—jostled to be closest to the edge. Martin and Eugenia were able to board the first launch but, when they reached the quay, they were separated in the crush of muleteers clamouring to be hired. Martin called to Eugenia to wait for him at the top. He had a sudden seizure of panic that she might disappear; they had met only a few weeks before.

He mounted the nearest donkey. It was one of those brownish grey donkeys common in Greece, with the dark crucifix mark along the spine and down the shoulders. Greeks claimed that it celebrated the donkey that Christ rode on Palm Sunday. He clutched his bag with one hand, the pommel of the saddle with the other. As soon as the donkey felt his weight, it set off, swaying impatiently at each sharp turn of the steep, zigzag path. The cobbles were worn to glassy smoothness, so it had to tread like a cat, its head bowed to inspect the path—or from weariness. Occasionally, as if to remind the rider of the risks, it moved dangerously close to the low stone wall, swayed, and tilted him towards the precipitous drop. The climb may have seemed more frightening at night—the darkness exaggerating both height and steepness. Beyond the range of the floodlights, the water of the caldera was black. The base of the rising smoke from the islands glowed faintly red.

Eugenia called to him when he reached the top. Martin took her arm and turned left along the narrow path at the rim of the caldera, as most of the passengers headed in the opposite direction towards the centre of town. They found a small hotel, and took a room at the front. As they had been among the first to land, they were in bed when the muleteers took their beasts home along the path. The clip-clop of their passage was muffled, either by the thick pumice blocks of the hotel's walls, or because their hooves were unshod, so that they could be sure-footed on the glassy cobbles. They turned to each other and spoke, simultaneously.

'Face the wall, my darling, while the gentlemen ride by.'

Eugenia, although of Greek parentage, had been brought up in England. When Martin murmured 'Masefield,' she replied, 'No Kipling'. He was chagrined to realise that she was right.

They explored the town of Thira in the morning, in pleasant sunshine under a blue sky. It was a classic Kykladean scene of white cubist houses with blue shutters and doors and blue-domed churches strung out along the edge of the steep slope. The cats, sleeping on balconies and flat roofs, seemed to be posing for another poster—even

those that were half-starved and mangy. On the far side of the town, a pumice mine was a pale grey scar against the nearly black volcanic rock marbled with narrow bands, sometimes fantastically convoluted, of red, green, bisque, yellow, cobalt, and mauve. Pumice dust rose from the metal chute down which ore plunged to a freighter moored at the loading jetty. A grey scum fanned out over the calm water.

They found a taverna for an early lunch. Martin ordered a bottle of the local wine, one of half a dozen different brands of rosé. The bottles had crudely printed labels, every brand showing a volcano erupting. Their names evoked the geological violence: *Ephaisteon* (volcano), *Seismos* (earthquake), and *Lava*. He chose *Seismos*, which seemed marginally least threatening. It was fresh and *spritzig*.

‘I’m surprised that they can grow anything on this soil,’ he said.

The soil was dry, ashy, and porous; any rain that fell on it sank immediately, leaving scarcely any trace on the surface. The cisterns were frequently empty and drinking water had then to be shipped to the island in tankers. In the tiny bathroom at the hotel, there was a sign: DO NOT LAVISH THE WATER.

Eugenia held out her glass. Noticing that Martin was rolling a mouthful around his tongue, she said. ‘Don’t.’ She did not want him to pronounce judgement. ‘Just enjoy it.’

They had a second small bottle to accompany the crusty bread they used to soak up the olive oil on their plates. The wine and the warmth made them drowsy, so they returned to the hotel for a siesta, followed by languid lovemaking. It did not seem possible that they had known each other for such a little time. Martin rolled over. In the shaded room, Eugenia’s skin glowed golden. He leaned towards her and licked her shoulder. His tongue tingled as it had when he sipped the wine.

‘Efgenia!’ He insisted—having only recently learned the language—on pronouncing her name in the Greek way. ‘Effy...that stuff Anna said about vampires...’ His voice was husky and his tongue still too affected by alcohol for clear articulation.

Eugenia nodded drowsily.

‘She also said,’ Martin continued, ‘that some Greeks can’t stay for long on the island. After a day or two, something in the atmosphere gets to them. How do you feel? You’re Greek, after all. Do you feel haunted?’

She did not like the qualification, *after all*. ‘No! Hungry,’ she said and swung her legs off the bed and reached for her clothes.

Her delight in all sensual pleasures had attracted him to her from the first. She loved food, but something in her burned it up so that she was, although well shaped, not plump. His gaze lingered on her waist, and the dimple where her spine ended above her buttocks.

Over the evening meal, they planned an excursion to Akrotiri on the following day. It was fortuitous that a large part of this Minoan town, on the southwest tip of the island, had narrowly missed destruction when almost half the island was blown away.

In the morning, the wind sounded ominous, moaning around the exposed hotel, suggesting that later it would be a buffeting gale. Martin jumped when he touched the brass door handle.

‘Static electricity,’ he said. ‘The wind sounds ominous.’

‘It’s probably a meltemi,’ Eugenia said. ‘It’s the worst of the summer gales.’

When they went out for a late breakfast, the sky was hazy. The plume of pumice dust from the mine works reached well out across the caldera, mingling with the darker plumes from the Burnt Islands.

The bus to Akrotiri passed through fields of vines, tomatoes and small plots of pistachio. The soil on this, lower part of the island had been laid down earlier, giving it time to rust into fertility. The vines were not supported on wires or trellises, but sprawled on the dry, gritty soil. Some longer canes were intertwined to form circles like large wreaths. The uncultivated ground between fields gleamed with yellow chrysanthemums. Here and there, the dry bed of a torrent slashed the earth. The wind, rising by the hour, whipped up dust clouds, which, here, were red, not grey.

Martin noticed that Eugenia moved a little away from him on the seat. He felt the pressure of her thigh against his lessen and then cease. He looked at her. She seemed a little peaky.

‘Are you OK?’

‘Yes!’ She sounded curt. He was not convinced when she added, ‘Just too warm.’

There were few visitors at the site. Martin was glad that they could walk around the excavated streets almost on their own. The houses, preserved and supported for so long by volcanic ash, resembled those still being built in villages throughout Greece: simple box shapes. In a clear space under the extensive corrugated iron roof, were hundreds of large *pithoi*—terracotta storage jars.

‘Ali Baba,’ Martin muttered.

Eugenia did not respond.

Apart from these big jars and the magnificent frescoes, the guidebook noted that few domestic artefacts had been found—and no human remains. The Minoans remained mysterious. Most of them must have been alerted by early tremors and sailed away from the island before the catastrophe.

‘I find it hard to connect with them...Minoans,’ Martin said. ‘They left so little here. I wonder if they really looked like those people in the frescoes.’

He turned. Eugenia was walking slowly back towards the entrance. He called after her and she turned. In the orange light—sunlight filtered by dust—she had taken on the colour of one of the women in the frescoes, which he had seen reconstructed in the museum in Athens.

‘It’s too stifling...I’ll wait outside,’ she said.

Martin walked on.

‘Rot! It’s superstition!’ The voice was American. A middle-aged man in denim shirt and jeans, wearing white sneakers, held out a book towards Martin, pointing to an open page. Martin took the book and,

leaving a finger at the page, closed it to look at the cover. There was a photograph of Thira on the jacket. It was Lawrence Durrell's *The Greek Islands*.

'Read that bit,' the man said, pointing to a paragraph when Martin re-opened the book.

Evangelos Baikas of Akrotiri had this comment to make upon the excavations just concluded. He said, 'This summer my family could not work in the fields because of the ghosts. In the mountain that came from the sea, there are ghosts where now they make excavations. I saw them. One morning when I went to collect the tomatoes and it was not yet sunrise, a big white light covered a great ghost, covered with a shield. There were many, all in movement, yet they looked firm. They went towards the sea in the direction opposite from the sunrise to escape from the light, which goes towards the west.

The wind roared outside and the eerie orange light dimmed noticeably. Martin handed back the book.

'It is a bit eerie though...the light, the ruins,' he said. 'I wonder if it was Atlantis.'

He found Eugenia huddled in the shelter of the bus stop. Despite the colour of the light, she looked pale. 'Are you alright? You look as if you've seen a ghost.'

She looked at him, sloe-eyed like those women in the frescoes. 'Don't be silly.'

She sounded nervy. Martin wondered if it was the electricity in the air.

'I'm sorry,' he said, edgily. 'Perhaps we should go back. The wind's getting up and I've seen all I want to see.'

She allowed herself to be pulled up from the seat but resisted being drawn closer to him, and released his hands as soon as she was

steady on her feet. The bus arrived, with its headlights on, covered with dust.

Fortunately, they had closed the windows of their room and little of the dust had penetrated. Eugenia shook herself.

‘Ugh! I feel filthy. Grit in my hair...my teeth...’

Martin stroked her hair, feeling the fine grains of pumice. There was a crackle of static electricity as she pulled away from him quickly. He glanced at his palm. It was grimy. Eugenia undressed slowly in the gloom and went to the bathroom where she stayed a long time.

‘Don’t lavish the water,’ Martin called. ‘I want a shower, too.’

She did not answer. He undressed while he waited. When she came out, wrapped in a grimy towel, she said nothing as she lay down on the bed. He went to shower. When he was stepping out of the confined cubicle, he cut his shoulder on a piece of wire projecting from the reinforced glass screen.

‘Damn!’ He wiped the steamy mirror and turned his back on it, peering in the gloom at the small cut, which was bleeding. He dried himself quickly. The towel had flecks of blood on it. He pulled several tissues from a box and stood beside the bed, holding them out to Eugenia.

‘I cut myself. Can you stop the bleeding, please?’

He lay down with his back to her. She dabbed at the cut with a tissue and then applied her lips to the small wound and sucked powerfully. He pulled away sharply, feeling ridiculous as he did so.

‘Just put a bit of tissue on it. The blood’ll dry soon.’

She held a piece of tissue against the cut with her thumb for a few minutes and then rolled away from him and drew the sheet over herself. The room was beginning to feel chill. She was soon asleep. Martin lay for a while and then dressed and went out. The wind had eased, but the air was still full of dust. At the travel agency, he inquired about an earlier ferry to Andros, the island they planned to move to in three day’s time.



‘There’s one at nine tomorrow evening,’ he was told. ‘If the wind dies down and it can moor. Do you want a cabin? It’s overnight.’

He asked the woman to pencil in a reservation to be confirmed in the morning.

They left the ferry at Gavrión on the west coast of Andros to travel by bus about twenty kilometres along the coast and then, across the island through a fertile valley, with many walnut trees, to the capital Andros. Among the flowers along the way, Jerusalem sage, poppy and sage dominated. The farms looked prosperous and most of the houses were larger and better finished than on other Kykladean islands. Many houses had old Venetian dovecots, although few seemed to house doves.

The bus dropped them at the upper end of the town where a barrier prevented vehicles from entering the lower part on a narrow, rocky promontory. The road beyond the barrier was marble-paved and the cubist villas on either side were large and well built. All had elaborate doors of carved pine, and blue shutters. They were the houses of rich ship-owners.

They found a modest hotel about half way down the promontory and took a room, which had a balcony overlooking a small plateia with a church on the far side. Two large daphne trees in the plateia were in full bloom. At dusk, tiny Scops owls perched on the electric power lines and hawked for moths gathering to the sweetly perfumed blossoms.

‘It’ll be quiet here, without cars. We can leave the door open on to the balcony,’ Martin said.

Eugenia looked less peaky; the short sea trip must have done her good. One of the owls uttered two piping calls, like notes from a panpipe. In a nearby street, they found a quiet, clean taverna where they dined well and drank a soft, pink retsina with a peaceful name and label. It did not prickle the tongue like the Santorini wines.

Martin was glad that Eugenia was more at ease. However, she turned away from him when they went to bed early.

‘Not yet,’ she said.

At least it was not permanent.

Rain fell during the night, softly and unheard, leaving no more than a heavy dew in the morning. The breeze had veered to a different quarter and was fresh and dust-free. They packed a frugal breakfast of bread, feta, and dried figs and walked to the inland end of the prosperous town. There they entered a marble-paved lane, running southwest between high stone walls, past more large villas, towards fields lush with weeds and wildflowers, shaded by large pine trees. Unlike most of the Kyklades, the island was well watered, fecund. At the end of the lane, the landscape opened out. The fences around the small fields were made of large standing stones alternating with horizontal stacks of similar slabs. The standing stones, still wet with rain, shone in the morning light; the hills appeared to be strung with sparkling necklaces.

Eugenia took Martin’s hand. He turned to her and said, ‘Effy...’

‘Please don’t call me Effy or Efgenia any more,’ she said. ‘Say Eugenia...the English way.’

‘OK!’ he said, trying not to sound offended. ‘I just...’

She touched his lips with her fingers. ‘No need to explain.’

She reached up, pulled down his head, and kissed him reflectively.

‘Hello Martin.’ She sighed. ‘I feel I’ve come back.’

‘From where?’

‘Some kind of...of distraction...I’m sorry.’

‘What happened, back there on Santorini?’

‘I’m not sure any more. It was like a dream, a nightmare...While I was waiting for you at the bus shelter...A sudden blaze of light and...’ She clutched his arm. ‘A crowd of shadowy figures.’

‘An illusion.’

‘It didn’t seem like it.’

‘All that haze, the dust, the setting sun...Small clouds, perhaps, eddying with the wind.’

‘No! Figures! They moved towards the sea and disappeared... towards the west.’ Her eyes clouded with puzzlement.

‘Eugenia!’ He folded her in his arms. He was sure that she had seen mirages, or had suffered hallucinations brought on by the oppressive *meltemi*. He was on the point of saying this.

‘Don’t explain,’ she said.

He sensed that she did not want the wonder—or the terror—to be denied.

This Rainstick

Jenny de Garis

This rainstick  
is a wash of sounds  
    shingle on a Shetland beach  
    wind lifting dune-sands on Orkney  
    a magician's wand  
    baring Skara Brae  
    like the curls of a fossil

The seeds in the stick stir memory  
beyond this skull-shell that  
houses my thought

Summer solstice in a long fog  
I remember—lured by an island  
—launching out  
    across an isthmus like a mooring rope  
the sea unseen on either side  
my lifetime floating in mist  
midday and midnight the same strange light

I recall exactly the cliff we climbed  
to arrive at the tiny island's human marking  
where the monks left beaten silver hidden  
    —and their bones

Another summer comes  
to Western Australia where I  
upend the stick in Kambarang  
—the Nyungar season of decreasing rain  
November gardens gasp  
and air is a weight on the skin  
I will go out  
and tilt the rainstick  
near my wilting plants

Let the music  
of the stick  
rain on dry ground  
wherever this may be  
fill cracks and fissures  
whisper into creek beds  
sluice the hills  
till rivulet  
is river  
heading for  
the sea

## Blind Run, Wilson Inlet

**Graham Kershaw**

All around, subdued resistance sings  
in high leaves, the rustle and shift  
of dignitaries in silken robes  
restless in dark galleries above,  
the whisper of black fire somewhere,  
the threat of rain or storm or war.

Low over water, among the shadows,  
disgruntlement slinks in, shadowed ducks,  
the mutter and gossip of smaller folk,  
a malingering gull's last complaint, all this  
half drowned by the sea's great insurrection,  
the blur and roar of a city's brim,  
unseen beyond the Nullaki.

Myriads of arcs and curves assuage  
the inlet's hundred bays, blossoming  
through a million rays, all tending to one  
elusive locus of eccentricity. I crouch to smell  
and taste the water's dimpled skin,  
as loose as silk, as grey as lead,  
to cool my brow on the great calm mind  
of one small bay.

The smoke and lights of home  
are cloaked by trees; I can't know where  
she waits for me. Running in the dark  
from the lookout, blind with the memory  
of house lights below, like lit coals  
smouldering in the dark forest's crib,  
a bat's wing brushed my face  
as soft as any woman's cheek.  
Now I hover breathless, waiting,  
dipping my hand into the landlocked sea  
of forty-seven winters.

# Those Rottnest Bags

Tim Edwards

Back then they came to the island,  
Stamped with the red imprint,  
of that famous dingo;  
traces of flour,  
still powdered into the seams.

But there were soon dragged,  
up tracks of shifting sand,  
their mouths brimming,  
with tails and vacant eyes;  
their sides punctured,  
by the needle bones of flared fins.

On the long wobbly ride home,  
they sat moist and plump,  
in wire baskets,  
or old milk crates,  
their skin glistening with beach sand,  
and the shaved glass of fish scales.

Stiffened by gut and sea water,  
they wore the bad bleeds,  
like a badge of honour—  
became small starched flags,  
hung to dry,  
on the cottage clotheslines.



## Moving On

### Helena Kadmos

Abby came in as I packed fruit between the marked assignments in my brief-case on the kitchen bench. Her hair curtained her face; one leg of her *Little Miss* pyjamas was hitched higher up her thigh. She tried to pass into the kitchen but I edged across the opening a little and she drew back. She flicked her hair behind her. Her dark eyes stared, but I was stunned by how lovely they were. I looked for signs of remorse but couldn't see any.

'Good morning,' I said.

She shifted her weight onto one leg.

'Where's Dad?'

'He left early.'

I spread my arms on either side of me, forming a triangle with the bench top. My fingers curled under the laminated surface. Abby rolled her eyes.

'Can I get some breakfast?'

'In a minute.' I leant forward onto my hands. 'Do you realise how late you were?'

'Oh, c'mon!'

'I said *eleven*, and you deliberately disobeyed me.'

‘I didn’t...do it...on *purpose*,’ she replied loudly, as if I was slow to understand. ‘I thought Letiesha was watching the time.’

‘It was your responsibility to be home on time.’

‘I bet Dad doesn’t care. Why do *you* have to go mental over it?’

I winced. Why wasn’t Martin here to help me? I gripped the bench top harder. The flaking chipboard underneath the laminate caught in my fingernails. Abby’s curls swung about her face as she paced the floor.

‘That’s *it* Abby. This is your last term before your exams. I’m not going to let you stuff it up.’

‘*What* the?’

You won’t be going out with friends again until the exams are over.’

‘Oh, get *real*!’

‘In a few months you can go to all the parties you want.’

‘That’s not fair! It’s *one* mistake!’

‘One too many. You’ll take our faith in you more seriously next time.’

‘*Your* faith?’ Abby spat. ‘*You* didn’t want me to go anyway. I heard you and Dad fighting about it.’

‘Well, I was right then.’

Abby pushed the heel of her hands into her eyes and lifted her shoulders. I sensed the effort she was making to try and contain herself, and suddenly I felt uncertain, as if I was the one pushing the limits. It felt familiar. My mother and *I* in that position, circling each other and never meeting in the centre.

‘Abby...’ I began more softly, but she cut me off.

‘Just stop *controlling* me!’

‘I’m trying to help you...to get through this year...you know?’

She drew herself up to full height, still just short of mine. I flinched. She glared at me.

‘Then just leave me alone,’ she said. ‘Cos your help *sucks*.’

Her words hit me in the chest. I quivered inwardly. I knew better than to let Abby think that words said in anger were irreparable. And

there was nothing that I was prepared to return against her. But she must have seen the pity flicker in my eyes. She sucked in her breath and spun around. It looked like a cat-o-nine-tails, the way her hair whipped around the doorway and out of sight. A door slammed, shattering me in its wake.

I travel away from the city in the mornings, so there are always plenty of seats. Around me people slouched against blue velvet upholstery. Some yawned; some tried to extend the time they had to themselves with books or ear buds that connected to their pockets or bags. Discordant rhythms drummed softly. I felt heavy and reclusive, as if Abby's anger clung to me and I didn't know what to do with it.

At the next station a woman I couldn't remember seeing before got on the train. She was tall and very pregnant. She carried a small handbag, a book and a travel mug. The sight of the mug irritated me. *Doesn't she know that eating and drinking aren't allowed on the train?* She sat on the seat opposite me, tucked the mug between her knees and opened her book to a marker half way through. *Life After Birth*, read the yellow title above a black and white photo of a woman and child playing and laughing.

I stared at the woman, noting each detail, pausing sentimentally on her belly. I remembered how my own body had felt; purposefully pushing outwards in curves I was proud of. Now my remnant paunch was a nuisance.

I judged the woman to be a little older than me, yet her clothes were like a girl's. She wore red knee-length pants with bows at the hems, and a pale orange top with puffy sleeves. But her face had the seasoned markings of middle age. Her skin, free of make-up and freckled, fell in tiny terraces underneath her eyes. Her red hair was grey at the temples, and drawn back from her forehead with plastic combs. When she moved the curls bounced perkily. Above strappy silver sandals her calves were firm and also freckled. I crossed my legs, blotched purple at the back by childbearing.

She sat very straight, holding her book high above her belly, sipping occasionally from her mug. There was an air of unburdened optimism about her that I, churning with disappointment over the fight with Abby, almost resented. Then it occurred to me that this might be her first pregnancy. The unflattering term that I'd heard doctors use for older first-time mothers came to me. *Elderly prima gravida*. There was something satisfying about the way the phrase distinguished me from this woman. I recounted, almost smugly, that when I'd cradled my babies' heads, the skin on the back of my hands had been taut like new sheets; that the breasts I'd fed them with had been high and firm. I sighed. Back then, I hadn't understood what childbearing and aging would do to me. Even though I did, in time, lose most of my pregnancy weight, my body has never been the same. Now, my skin is stretched, my muscles lax.

We travelled past choking queues of city-bound traffic. I wondered about the woman. *What kind of life did she lead? Was she married?* Then she looked up from her book directly at me, interrupting my thoughts. I turned away to look down the carriage.

The train slowed near a station and she stood up, fumbling to stop the mug falling to the floor. At the door people gave her a wide berth. She nodded slightly, confidently claiming the space offered her. As a young expectant mother, I'd been shy of that sort of attention, yet now I envied the way her body accorded her special status. She stepped onto the platform without a backward glance. I watched her curls bobbing over the top of the other commuters' heads. As the train pulled away my eyes followed her along the ramp, hoping to see which direction she took, but my view of the station disappeared quickly.

My stop was next. Only a few people got off at this time of the morning; twenty minutes later the platform would be swarming with teenagers. I flipped open my phone while I jostled through the small crowd, pressed Martin's name into the phone and reached his message service. It was seven forty-five. *Where is he?* I spoke quickly after the prompt.

'It's me. Can you ring me during recess? And...thanks for sticking around to see Abby this morning!'

I shoved the phone back into my bag and looked around to see if I'd been overheard. The platform was empty, but I still blushed. I flattened my hair back over my head and held the ends against my neck. I imagined Martin hearing the message and how annoyed he would be at my sarcasm and at being put off guard at work. I wondered if I would hear from him.

The cold in the underpass swamped me. I walked through the tunnel, its blue tiles sprayed in black and silver graffiti. Out in the street the crossing guard was still placing his flags, so I had to wait for the traffic. I stepped on to the road during a short break and skipped across both lanes quicker than I normally would. The thrill of playing with Martin's temper fired my step. Why should he be spared the brunt of it, the awfulness of Abby's rage?

I slowed down on the hill towards the high school. Spats with Abby, like the one that morning, were increasingly frequent. Some days I felt I'd barely recovered from one before another hit. *Does she feel the same?*

The departmental office was empty when I got there. Stacks of photocopied worksheets lay in criss-crossed piles on my desk, nudging a framed photo of the kids. A pink Post-it note curled away from the top sheet. Caroline's handwriting read, *Let's talk at recess. C.* I tapped the note nervously, toying with ways to get out of the meeting. My phone beeped. I assumed it was Martin, but the message read, *basketbl 2day hom 5.* I felt my face drop and realized I'd been frowning. Abby was good at letting me know where she was; reminding me of her schedules. *Was I being too hard about last night?*

After school I went down to the back of the garden to bring in the washing. Strong winds had blown all day, so the clothes and linen were unusually soft. I struggled to swing a sheet back over the clothes line so that I could find its pegs, but the breeze continued to play with

it and it parachuted above me in a blue cloud. Martin hadn't rung me back, and my convictions from this morning were waning. I pulled too hard on the sheet and tangled myself in it. When I heard someone call for me the sound was muffled, as if very far away. I was tempted to stay hidden. I pulled the sheet from my head and looked back at the house.

Paul leant against the back door, his long hair a red splash against the white doorframe. His jeans bowed outwards as he slouched. He held a pick between his fingers. So he'd been home long enough to get his guitar out. I called to him but my voice was lost in the flapping sheet. I pushed the folds away from my face and saw a shadow pass behind Paul. He turned, said something into the room, and went inside. I knew it was Abby he was talking to. The sky went blue again and I grabbed onto the sheets and drew the corners into my mouth. The air I sucked through them tasted of lemons.

Inside I folded the sheets and carried them into the hallway. Both bedroom doors were shut, but I could hear Paul's playing. All semester he'd worked on a composition and it was nearly finished. He strummed, plucked and slapped the guitar in the new style he was practising. I tapped on his door and pushed it open. The music stopped.

'That sounds great,' I said. 'I like it where you pick up the tempo and then drop back again.'

'Cool!' he said.

It amazed me that young people could abbreviate such a small word. But I knew that Paul didn't really need my opinion. He was just tolerating the praise for my sake.

He started playing the section I'd referred to, strumming with extra flourish as he made his way towards the door. He smiled and lifted one silver-studded eyebrow into mock arrogance. When I looked up into his face I couldn't see anything of the little boy that my life had once revolved around, cuddling and nursing him constantly. After Abby was born, he'd never let me wander from his sight for long before he came looking for me. Somewhere along the way, his nervous

apprehension had given way to the confidence he now strutted before me. When he reached the door he bent down and kissed the top of my head. Smiling, I pushed him away with my elbows. I nodded to the loose manuscript and clothing that littered the floor.

‘Clean up that mess when you’re finished,’ I said. He scowled and drew his pick down onto the strings in a loud, hard chord.

It was silent behind Abby’s door. I edged closer to it and leant against the surface.

‘Hello, Abby.’

She grunted back a short reply. As I rested there, my daughter felt far away, and the barrier between us seemed greater than the thickness of the door. My cheek peeled off the door when I moved.

‘Dinner’ll be ready soon.’

At the cupboard in the hallway where we keep the linen, I squeezed the sheets into the only empty spaces I could find. As I stepped back to shut the door, a pink plastic arm fell with a rustling sound out of a brown paper bag on the top shelf. Crammed up there were things we didn’t use anymore. The arm belonged to Abby’s first baby doll. I couldn’t remember packing it away. Its fingers curled as if beckoning.

I stood on tip-toe to push the arm back into the bag, which moved a little, revealing a patch of light coloured wicker. I gasped, as though I’d stumbled upon a fragile living thing. I lifted down the small basket carefully. Inside, a blue and white cloth covered an old coffee set that I’d bought when Paul was very young. Its small cups and saucers, cream coloured with gold rims, made a much better tea set than the plastic ones from toy shops. It was nearly complete; only the lid of the coffee pot had broken in all the years we’d used it. I fingered the china gently. The tiny handle on the cup only just fit between the pads of my fingertips.

I looked up at the shelf again and remembered other cupboards and drawers around the house that I hadn’t opened for years: dark, silent spaces filled with objects that were important to us once. Those places had helped to order a world that spilled randomly about me

when the kids were young. I'd delved in and out of those cupboards every day.

It occurred to me that many items had at some point been used for the last time without me being aware of it. How had I stored these cups? Had I shoved them into the basket carelessly, assuming they'd be brought out again, while my eyes followed a trail of Lego that also needed clearing? Would I have handled them differently if I'd known I was putting them away for good? I thought of the woman on the train collecting the bits and pieces that come with babies and early childhood. The time between the beginning and the end of infancy seemed hazy to me. I suddenly wished it was very clear. Standing in the hallway in front of the accumulated contents of my family's life, fingering a small china cup, I felt as though I'd missed something important, almost sacred.

I was reading in bed when Martin came home. I watched him undress, slowly and deliberately, like he always does. He pulled his shirt off and hung it over the back of the chair.

'I spoke to Abby,' he said finally.

'When?'

'Just now. She's still awake.' Leaving his boxers on, he lifted the quilt and fell heavily into the bed.

'I wish you'd been here this morning,' I said. 'We had an awful fight, and this evening she didn't say a word all though dinner.'

He closed his eyes. Soft pockets of skin settled on his cheekbones.

'I told you I had a meeting.'

'Last week, maybe?'

I waited, but the urge to prompt him became too strong.

'Well? What did you *say*...to Abby?'

He lifted onto one elbow, bracing himself.

'That parties aren't a good idea until her exams are over.'

My relief that Martin had backed me up was bittersweet. He'd made me wait for it, but had proved, once again, that we really did work



together. Our show of unity made me suddenly sorry for Abby. I put my book on the side table and slid under the sheets. Martin's fingers stroked my thigh. I focussed on the ceiling where the cornice above the bed was freckled with mildew. Abby hated *me*, and somehow I felt that it was linked to Martin.

'Why am *I* the bad guy?'

'Because...you're here.'

I turned, twisting my nightie under my waist.

'And where are *you*, Martin?'

His head jerked back slightly and he rolled back on to the pillow, letting his hand slide off me. I hadn't meant to push him away. I leant over him. My breasts fell against the bodice of my nightie and through the opening they looked elongated, almost foreign. Their emptiness made me feel vulnerable and for a second I mourned the loss of their old fullness. I lay on his chest and looked into his face. I buried my hand in the thick, grey-flecked curls behind his ear.

'Do you remember the tea set?' I asked. 'The one I bought for Paul, for his second birthday, I think.'

Martin ran his fingers lightly over my back.

'The one Paul used for tea parties?'

'I found it today. There's so much lying around this house we've forgotten about.'

'Are you hinting it's time for a clean out?'

'No...maybe.'

I reached across, turned off the lamp and moved back to my side of the bed. But in the dark I felt unsettled again. After several minutes I spoke.

'I...don't want her to go, you know. Abby, I mean. I'm...I'm not sure what I'll *be*, when the kids aren't here anymore.'

Martin groaned as if I'd woken him.

'You'll be a *grandmother*,' he joked, digging me in the ribs.

'Don't be stupid.' I turned away from him. Tears pricked my eyes and I was ashamed of them. Martin didn't respond straight away. Then he nudged closer and I felt his lips against my ear.

‘You should go for that head of department position,’ he whispered.

‘I’d never get it,’ I said, annoyed that he was missing the point.

‘You might,’ said Martin. ‘Didn’t Caroline ask you to apply?’

‘She tried to catch me today, but I made excuses.’

‘Jenny, you’d be great at it.’

‘It’s the time. I’d have to go in earlier, stay late.’

‘So? You don’t have to be here every afternoon anymore.’

‘I know!’ I snapped. ‘Still, I *miss* them you know. It’s silly, but...I loved it.’

Martin pulled me towards him.

‘The early days? You were always exhausted. You never had a minute to yourself.’

*Is that what it was like?* There were days, I remembered, long and difficult, that felt as though they’d never end.

‘There was more to it than that,’ I said softly. ‘I think it mattered to Paul and Abby that I was there. I think it sort of *made* me too, somehow; staying focussed on *one* thing. Well...that’s how I thought of it then.’

‘There’s more to come,’ he said. He yawned and buried his face deeper in my neck. ‘We’re not free of them yet.’

I cupped his hand in mine. He still hadn’t got it. It wasn’t just about the children. But thinking about it now, and Abby growing up, and the doll in the cupboard, I was reminded, warmly, of a time and place that I’d left behind a long time ago.

His arm was heavy and I knew it would keep me awake. I lay still and waited until the slowing of his breath told me that he was asleep.

My bare feet stuck to the boards as I walked quietly across the room. In the hallway I stood on a chair and pulled the bags down carefully from the top of the linen cupboard. In other rooms I fished out boxes from the backs of cabinets. I carried them all into the lounge room and sat on the floor in a small circle of lamplight. Wide awake, I sorted through the odds and ends of a life I hadn’t thought about for a long time.

I'd kept our favourite picture books, as many as fitted into a cardboard box. There was the one about a little girl who loved to build cubby houses, and *Chubby Engine* which I knew by heart. I needed to read it, then and there, trying it silently at first, but that didn't work. I had to whisper to get the intonation that felt right.

*'I am a chubby engine. I work the chubby line. I have a chubby coal car, it keeps me running fine.'* Some of the pictures were familiar, as if I'd seen them just days before; some were new all over again.

I brought a bowl of soapy water to the floor and sponged Abby's doll, scrubbing a stain off the hair-like grooves in the plastic scalp. In a storage box I found Paul's Duplo. He'd spent hours building skyscrapers and trains and ships. Martin and I thought he'd be an engineer. But only a few years ago he surprised us by wanting to be a musician.

In the bottom of a kitchen cupboard I fished out the wooden tray that I'd used with the tea set. With flowers, a plate of sandwiches, and a pot of "honey tea", it had been a favourite in the garden for picnics. The intricately carved ridge that formed handles at the ends was dusty. I wiped it clean.

I stayed up for hours. There were some things I couldn't find. Abby had a pink corduroy dress that Mum had bought her. I'd loved it and was sure I hadn't given it away. But I couldn't find it. I wondered what I'd been thinking when I'd passed it on. When I thought about the dress, and other items I no longer had, I wished I could touch them just once more. So I took great care now to notice each thing. There were some that I just couldn't let go of. There was no predictable pattern to my choosing, but a sense that a particular cup or book or string of beads contained some of the sweetest memories. For all those, I found a place in the cupboards again. Then I cast aside the items that held no memories or promises anymore, into boxes for the Salvation Army or for friends with young children. And I dwelled for a moment, on every decision that I made.

In the hallway I balanced the tray on one arm and knocked lightly on the door. I opened it without waiting for a reply. Abby was under the quilt. I'd bought the cover, printed with large frangipani flowers, when we redecorated the room for her tenth birthday. It matched the white furniture and purple walls, now covered with posters of pop stars and a pouting Keira Knightly, Abby's favourite actress. The flowers on the quilt had lost their intense colour. I wondered why I hadn't noticed its shabbiness before.

Abby's hair spread behind her on the pillow. She looked warily from under the sheet.

'I thought you might like breakfast in bed,' I said.

'O-kay,' she murmured with exaggerated suspicion. She sat up against the wall. Her feet neared the end of the bed. I placed the tray on her lap. Buttered toast, and a Milo. A hibiscus flower alongside the cup was already closing.

'The picnic tray!' Against the wall Abby's curls gave her an odd halo. 'I haven't seen it in ages.'

At the foot of the bed I stooped to pick up a blouse from the floor. It was white and as slippery as water. It slid over my fingers onto the end of the bed. I wasn't expecting anything and didn't see Abby's face when she spoke again.

'Thanks, Ma...for the toast.'

I hadn't gone back to bed until the early hours of the morning and now tiredness nagged at me, but I wasn't bothered by it. Abby's toes made small peaks under the quilt. I quickly pinched them. They didn't retract.

'You need a new bed. I could take you next week, if you want to go looking.' I glanced around the room. 'And maybe on the holidays we could freshen the walls up a bit.'

'Who'll pick the colour?' she asked.

'You, of course.'

Her eyes widened. I was pleased to see that in spite of her attempts at times to make me feel irrelevant, I could still surprise my daughter.

The pregnant woman boarded the train again. She walked towards me and I tried to catch her eye, thinking she might recognise me. She sat next to me and glanced, smiling politely. I nodded back. Her body spread outwards unapologetically. In several places her thigh, hip and elbow nudged me. I felt overshadowed. Her blue dress gathered at the neckline so that it ballooned over her body. There was a sense of resignation in her clothes that I pitied but understood. When Paul and Abby were babies clothes had meant little to me. I'd rarely felt that the world beyond me and the kids ever noticed me anyway. I'd felt most at home, secure even, in track suits and sandals. But I spend more money on clothes now, and I take more interest in how I look. I picked at miniscule beads of fabric on my beige pants.

The woman didn't have her mug today, but the book with the mother and child on the cover poked out from a side pocket of the bag at her feet. I sensed something was different about her, something subdued: a new discomfort perhaps? Maybe it was just tiredness. I knew that her cumbersome belly would both delight and torment her. My thoughts about her the day before seemed churlish to me now. Where she was heading was, after all, a place I'd once been. Outside the window, trees blurred past in flashes of light and dark. I wondered if I could enter that passage of early motherhood at this age, as she was about to. I doubted it. Motherhood is a one-way journey. A new baby now wouldn't be a welcome prospect. Beside me the woman was staring straight ahead. I smiled to myself. We were on different journeys, or at different stages on the same road, and mine no longer involved the exquisite illuminations and the embracing seclusion of babyhood.

I recalled that I'd seen all of my family that morning. Martin had brought me a cup of tea before he left for work. It was unexpected but very welcome after the late night I'd had. And Paul was up early for a change. Over breakfast he told me that his composition was finished, his face shining with a sense of his own brilliance. Abby had smiled gratefully when I took in her breakfast. Each a simple, but welcome gesture.

The woman stood up for her stop and wove her way through the crowd to the door. She seemed more self-conscious than she had the day before, excusing herself and apologising when she bumped against someone else. And then I looked away, staring lazily through the window, and almost missed it. As the woman squeezed through the huddle of passengers waiting to board, I saw something shadowy, like a dove, flap to the ground at her feet. The platform cleared and there was her book, its marker on the paving beside it. Its brightly lettered cover blew open and shut in the breeze. She kept walking. I moved to the edge of my seat. While the train paused there was time for me to spring up and call to her through the doors, but I didn't. I felt suspended, as though she and I didn't share the same universe. It seemed that if I'd called to her she wouldn't have heard me. Although we were close in age, it seemed that years separated this stranger from me. Transfixed, I waited for someone else to see the book and run after her as she walked slowly up the ramp to the overpass, cradling her belly in her hands. No one did.

The train began to move. Slouching back against the seat, I decided that it was just tough luck about the book. The woman would find out for herself that she'd lost it. Maybe she'd turn back for it. Maybe it wasn't important to her after all. As I travelled forward, my view of the woman on the overpass slipped away. The train hurtled through the suburb, and my thoughts turned again to the place I'd just left, as home after home flashed past the window.

## Linguistic hooks iny nj

Continuing verb ends iny nj, doublegee barbs on kangaroo skins.

### Tim McCabe

The Noongar of old were tracked.

Observers watched them, from afar and up close.

The writer's hand of old moved across the page, and our eyes now follow the markings they made, our eyes follow their lines and make sense of their alphabets, sure, even now as Aboriginal writers re-present themselves to the world we follow them too.

For the Aboriginal hand that leaves his tracks on the page has swapped one medium for another.

One such writer I regularly track.

He knows this, he knows I am tracking him, so he doesn't give too much away.

I track his linguistic baggage too, baggage that holds to his fur like doublegees attached to the skin of a kangaroo.

I see by the way he is hopping, he is burdened by what he carries. The linguistic continuing verb endings hook iny nj into him as he goes careering across the page.

And in speech I am kaadidjiny not 'jenny' or 'jinny' not kaad-did-jinny but, I am kaad-did-jin more like him, than to the others I listen to stumbling upon the linguistic hook when they talk...

As I said I have seen these linguistic hooks that lie embedded in them, and hold them down, sharp hooks they fester in their flesh like the wooden barbs of the doublegee.

Now the old man who taught me, his lips danced and curled and his tongue was on fire, like kalamai waarngkaa...he would lick his words and send them on their way.

How I wish I could speak like him, and track his talk along the tracks and laneways of his old pads of home.

I once wandered with him, we three his missus and me...we travelled to old haunts of his and her people.  
Very often when not playing up for me, the anthropologist watching, I heard him whispering or voicing what the old ones used to say...  
He was a Master of the linguistic iny nj, their hooks he'd have used as toothpicks, and doublegees had no hold on him.  
And he didn't leave words on the page, he didn't have to.  
The lands about him were his pages, and his tracks and those of the ancients lay connected.  
His palimpsests and theirs lay about him, names, places and happenings and quick was his recall.  
Belly laughs made him convulse, till coughing fits over took him...  
The land as you know was read by him, read as text.  
And his stories remain in his landscapes, his language remains to be awoken, but, I only hope, that his tracks are cleared of the doublegee and hooks that linguists will surely one day lay, hooks like fence snares for hungry kangaroos—hop beneath the wires if you dare  
But then, who knows, across the page and onto the earth you will be seeing hearing 'kaadidjin' them bounding free to see—find their way and true form free from the hooks of the linguist inquisition and impalement...  
Free from the hook, the nj that too few understand so that now their fur carries jinny-plenty of doublegees...we will all be kaadidjin, and watching the page.

Kaadidjin means thinking/listening.



## Moths

### Mallery Koons

Our lantern invited them in while we played  
Rummy. They sounded like cashews dropping  
into a bowl as they threw their fragile bodies

against hot glass again and again.  
We dealt the cards, played a round, re-dealt;  
they thrashed. When we put out the lantern

and switched on our flashlights, dazed moths  
flitted to the glowing beams. Our hands  
joined them; together we made shadows

on the canvas walls: monsters chomped on moths.  
Now we lie up to our chins in sleeping bags,  
the lights off. Moths flutter towards the tent flaps

where slivers of moonlight wag fingers  
at woolly bodies unable to escape. The soft brush  
of wing on fabric mimics our whispers.

## Small Things

### Peter Bibby

To you and me it would appear a nothing.  
Little more than a shining film, a patch  
Of damp, not so much collected  
As alighted overnight on the bitumen  
Of the practice nets, in a corner of the park.  
It's enough for a magpie to take a drink,  
And probably makes the magpie's morning—  
The tall trees roar, glistened by the wind,  
You and I make hay while we can,  
With delicate placement, the tip of its beak,  
The bird draws from a trace of rain.

## Transubstantiation

Richard Rossiter

Father Pat Canning stared at the ceiling. There was something he had to do today; he could feel it. He had heard the early morning muttering of birds and now eased himself over onto his good side, where his heart didn't seem to be straining to pump the blood around his body. Slowly the feeling shaped itself into words that formed a sentence and then the thought emerged: this was the day of the funeral. Finally she was dead; she'd gone before him, beat him to it.

Sitting in the corner of the common room at the home, they used to laugh about it, the conspirators. She would giggle and put her hand up to her mouth, apologising to Father for such girlish behaviour. Others, sitting by themselves or in small groups, grey and wavery, would look at them. He could see the resentment in their eyes: Why didn't he talk to them like this, have a laugh about something? If they'd asked, he would have told them, 'Because you don't think death is funny. You're frightened. And Angela and I, we're having a little competition.'

He sat on the side of his bed for a while, letting his head adjust. He'd retired, but he'd promised her he'd do it. 'It's not much of a deal

though. What do I get if I win?' She'd looked at him and smiled. 'My prayers, so your soul won't burn forever in hell.' He stood up slowly; he felt alright, certainly not hellish, but if anyone had asked him he would have replied that he didn't feel anything, which these days was how he felt most of the time. He supposed the right word for his condition would be 'vacant'. *Vacare*, to be empty, to be free. Devoid of thought, reflection or expression. Not lived in. That was true. This failing body had never truly been inhabited. A convenient vessel for the mind or soul: he couldn't really tell them apart.

Whose turn was it this time? Faidiva or Candela? Such wonderful names. Where would the Church be without them? They had faith, those women. For that matter, where would he be? With the shakes getting worse, he had trouble enough putting on his clothes, let alone the vestments. They would know, he wouldn't have to decide between them. He made his way into the tiny kitchen and placed a saucepan on the stove to warm a little milk. He smiled as he thought how much he liked warm milk on his cereal as a child and now he'd started doing it again, not through necessity. He wasn't a parodic toothless old man. He liked it better this way, so that's what he'd do. The same with every other little thing in his world: he would do whatever pleased him best. Angela said he lacked self-control, that it was a good thing to forego pleasures—and that as he had so few, he would have to choose carefully to make sure he made a real sacrifice and not just a pretend one. He should have no more than one glass of wine with his dinner, and sometimes none. He should make more of an effort with other patients, or clients as they were now called, the ones who didn't know who he was, or who they were. Presumably they meant something to God, because no one else seemed to care about them. No visitors, blank looks in their eyes, snoozing away the day, not living, but not wanting to die. He had no patience with them. It's true, he always seemed kind and asked them pointless questions, but, watching him from her corner, she knew he couldn't wait to get away. One pleasure that did come to mind was reading in bed. Perhaps he would give it up for lent, or limit himself to half an hour.

‘What pleasures are *you* willing to forego for the improvement of your soul?’ he would ask her. And each time her answer was the same. ‘I have run out of pleasures, so there is nothing for me to give up—not for lent, or any other time of the year.’

He would miss Angela.

But now he’d better get dressed and make his way to the chapel. He had promises to keep. Father Pat Canning wondered about her family, who would turn up for this funeral. She’d never married but had lots of brothers and sisters. He didn’t know how many were still alive. They said they wanted something simple, they would leave it to him to choose the readings. Without thinking, he knew which ones he would use.

He watched them moving into the chapel, some piously genuflecting, others hesitant as if troubled by some memory of a religious past; he could spot the lapsed ones from a mile away. A few chatted sociably, probably catching up with friends or relations they hadn’t seen for years. There were one or two couples who sat staring straight ahead into the emptiness, with nothing to say to each other. There were no young children present. He watched Faidiva, or was it Candela, light two candles. He watched the pall bearers, well, pall pushers really, as they adjusted their faces for the short journey down the aisle. The coffin had a single, and no doubt expensive, wreath. He rose to his feet, steadied himself, and began the service.

As he uttered the familiar words of the Mass for the Dead, *Eternal rest give to them, O Lord; and let perpetual light shine upon them*, he thought of Angela lying there in her coffin and wondered if the light had begun to shine on her in the darkness. Was she, even now, greeting the angels, her namesakes, as they bore her into everlasting life? Then he would have the last laugh. In the past year she had become increasingly cranky, turning on him as if he had offended her, saying dreadful things. At first it had been the Holy Ghost that had attracted her ire. ‘What do you think those doves are doing perched on his head?’ she’d asked him, as if he were personally responsible for the images in her mind. ‘Shitting,’ she said. ‘That’s what birds do

when they sit on you. They shit.' In the last month she had been at her worst. She kept talking about her first communion and seemed to remember, word for word, those prayers of so long ago. She would call out in a loud voice:

'Do you renounce Satan and all his works, and all his pomps?'

And then in a whisper, she would reply:

'I don't renounce Satan, especially his pomps.' And she would turn to him, 'Do *you* know about pomps, Father Canning? Is that what you do when you dress up and walk and talk in a stately fashion?'

And then back to her imperious voice:

'Do you believe in the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting?'

'How could I?' she would reply. 'How is that possible?'

And then she would crouch down in her chair and look up at him and say in a clear voice: '*If we eat not Thy Flesh and drink not Thy Blood, we shall not have life in us.* Isn't that true, Father? But you'll have life in you, won't you Father? All that flesh and blood. *I believe that Thy Body is meat indeed and Thy Blood is drink indeed.* That's it, isn't it Father? That's you.'

He tried to tell her those things were no longer said, not like that, but she did not hear him.

He turned to the congregation, the audience, those mourners. Who were these people? 'Jesus said *I am the Way; the Truth and the Life.*' Then he spoke to them about the life of Angela, about its continuation, about the soul, about the body. They stared at him, expecting more. Perhaps he should try to say something about what she had meant to him in the few years that he had known her—the conversations they'd had about books, their childhoods, her sense of humour—but then his mind went blank and no words came.

He knew he could not look at the coffin because if he did he would hear her voice again, spitting out fear and awe, her challenge to him. He returned to the altar, his face expressionless. No doubt he looked pale and they were probably wondering how long it would be before he joined her. His head felt thick and his eyes would not focus

properly. Fearful, he uttered the words. '*This is my body.*' He could feel her approaching, closer, oppressive. '*This is my blood.*' Then she was upon him, 'You eat the flesh and drink the blood of your god. What are you? A pagan, a vampire, a cannibal? You are no priest, no servant. What is this terrible thing that you believe in?' There was a pause, then her laughter filled the chapel. He looked at them, sitting so still and quiet. Could they not hear her? Didn't they know she had escaped? '*Do this in remembrance of me.*' And he bowed his head. He placed the host in his mouth and then she flew at him, grabbing him around his throat and he began to choke, the lump of flesh bloody and tough, he tried to swallow, but still it stuck there. He could not get it down, he could not breathe; he reached for the chalice, the wine, he placed it to his lips and tasted the bitter rust, the stickiness of God's blood.

He turned to the coffin. He could see the light. Father Pat Canning, delicate as a bird, light as a feather, moved towards it, smiling.

RANDOLPH ('MICK') STOW  
(1935–2010)



Stow at Dedham, Essex, summer c. 1970–71



## Clichés

### Randolph Stow

*Beir mo shoraidh d'oh dùthaich  
Tha fo dhubhar nan garbh-bheann...*

*Bear my greeting to the land  
That is under the shadow of the rugged hills...*  
Mary MacLeod, ca 1615–1705

On the silver cup  
iced water makes a frosting  
that lifts like mist at dawn.

Cream freesias in my grandmother's jasper jug  
with a sprig of brown boronia  
intoxicate the room  
at the leap of the jamwood fire.

Once I was a child in a hayloft  
looking down over yellow straw  
on a spume of apple-blossom.

The wheat-green sea of the Hebrides  
smashes in a grey cave  
among dewed, jittery birds.

Do you remember, Elizabeth, the scent  
of bruised Geraldton wax leaves  
by the ruined tennis court  
in the year the Japs were coming?

A small New Mexico town  
lost in the winter dusk  
and the spiced smoke  
of pinyon rising.

Thaw on the Rio de las Ánimas  
and the ringing crack and chink  
of ice breaking up  
under a bareness of cottonwoods.

Loch Laxford a crazed pane of ice,  
sun gilding razor edges;  
on the leafless shores  
red sticks of bare bog myrtle.

A Suffolk coaching inn,  
windows open on the bowling green;  
all gloaming long, the trill  
of blackbirds, drifts of mignonette.

Two weeks from San Francisco, and the wireless  
breaks its silence; from Fiji comes  
the flute and harp of Mozart, over  
the hush and wash that crowds the open portholes.

A ship at night,  
every joint of timber creaking.  
I am alone,  
five miles above the moon.

A canyon of empty warehouses; Shad Thames.  
It can only be from old miser's hoard  
we have these ghostly riches; cinnamon and cloves.

Ted loves his wife; in every little check  
of his square dancing shirt, she has embroidered  
a rose; her tribute  
on the cenotaph of his maleness.

An alien apple-tree flowering in the woods  
and, as I fill a kettle at the stream,  
of my grandmother's window, gleaming.

My mother touched me for the headache; on her fingers  
a scent of springtime carrots.

*Tha'n nathair bhreac' na lùban*  
*Air na h-ùrlair far an d'fhàs*  
*Na fir mhór a chunnaic mise.*

*The speckled adder is coiling*  
*On the floors where the big men I saw*  
*Did their growing.*  
William Livingstone, 1808–1870

Cliché: a printer's plate or block; a photographic negative

© Randolph Stow 2001

## Country & Western

### Randolph Stow

In the laundromat  
Of Aztec, New Mexico  
The cowboys launder  
Their bow-legged jeans.

In the supermarket  
Of Aztec, New Mexico  
The Navajo ladies  
Trolley their beans.

Their skirts are vast,  
Their bobbysocks tiny;  
On leather jerkins  
Old coins are sewn.

In the Christmas air  
Of Aztec, New Mexico  
Drifts the spiced smoke  
Of sweet piñon.

Gone with the snows on  
The La Plata Mountains,  
Gone with the wind  
My tumbleweed years;

And cottonwood leaves  
On the freezing river  
Are arrows to springtime,  
Foretaste of tears.

Christmas 2005  
remembering  
Christmas 1964

© The Estate of Randolph Stow 2010

# Merry-Go-Round

Randolph Stow

This is the playground circumnavigation:  
The leap in space and safe return to land,  
Past sea and hills, boats, trees, familiar buildings,  
Back to the port of one assisting hand.

Adventurers learn here; but do not venture  
Yet from their circular continuous sweep  
From start to start. Where going is home-turning  
Nothing is lost, what's won is all to keep.

The gulls stoop down, the big toy jerks and flies;  
And time is tethered where its centre lies.

© The Estate of Randolph Stow 2010



The original merry-go-round in Geraldton with unidentified boys. Image with kind permission of Geraldton Regional Library.

## Moving Among Strangers, Darkly

Gabrielle Carey

My study, says my partner, has transformed into a shrine to Randolph Stow.

On one wall there is a photo of Stow as a stunningly handsome, James Dean-like, young man. He is looking quizzical as he gazes at the Western Australian landscape around him and appears to be wondering, as he did in so many of his books, how to make sense of his familiar, yet profoundly alien surroundings. Immediately it brings to mind—at least, brings to my mind—the first line of *Tourmaline*. ‘I say we have a bitter heritage, but that is not to run it down.’

Displayed on my bookshelf are seven Stow first editions. The first in the line-up is *Outrider*, with plates by Sidney Nolan. The second is *Tourmaline*, also with a specifically-designed Nolan cover, and the third, *Midnite*, with drawings by Ralph Steadman. Then there is *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (dust jacket slightly torn), *A Haunted Land* (perfect condition) and *The Bystander*, with my favourite cover design of all: a tall blackboy, as we called them when I was a child, now known as the grass tree, or, even more correctly, the Xanthorrhoea. I am currently trying to justify increasing our mortgage by \$7000 so I can purchase *Songs of Vagabond Scholars*, a collection of medieval

poetry translated by Stow with lithographs by Donald Friend. I am enamoured of the title; perhaps because a vagabond scholar seems such a beautiful and appropriate description of the writer himself. Number 7 of the one hundred copies produced of this collectible is being auctioned in Melbourne tomorrow. Should I call now and leave an absentee bid? My partner is not convinced the shrine needs any more Stow relics. But he hasn't seen *Songs of Vagabond Scholars*.

The desk is also covered with Stow papers and paraphernalia: books, articles, and one special folder that holds a few letters and a number of cards—precious correspondence that I was privileged to have with Stow over the years. Most precious of all are copies of scanned letters from Stow to my mother. One when he was in his final year of high school; another while at university. Apparently, during this period, they corresponded regularly. Unfortunately, only two letters remain; of these, one is torn and incomplete. When I saw it I immediately understood the frustration of the archaeologist; how was I to make sense of these fragments? Piece together a life-long friendship from only two surviving documents; written by a renowned recluse to the most inscrutable being I've ever known, my mother?

As children, my older sister, my younger brother and I, were all given *Midnite* to read or had it read to us. For me, it was one of the pivotal reading moments of my young life, equally significant as *The Little Prince* and *The Red Balloon*. I have since read *Midnite* to my daughter and then my son, and several times again for myself. The book never disappoints. Not just funny; it is LOL, as the teenagers say. Not just insightful—about Australian history and the Australian character—it is positively wise. And of course, exquisitely written. (I pity the poor primary school children of contemporary times whose library shelves are jammed with the over-production of Paul Jennings and Morris Gleitzman rather than this masterpiece of Randolph Stow's.)

When I first read *Midnite* I didn't know that my mother had grown up with the author. (Despite the fact that the scene in the book



where a drunken bushranger is caught by a Mr Macpherson is an anecdote directly based on my great-great-grandfather's discovery of the infamous Moondyne Joe in his Houghton cellars.) Even when my mother did mention her connection to Stow, she told me very little. I understood almost nothing about what had bonded her to a man she hadn't seen for decades, with whom she'd exchanged Christmas cards for fifty years; the man she called Mick, even though his name was Randolph. And no matter how much I tried to probe about her friendship with Stow, my mother remained resistant to interrogation. For a while I fantasised that they were secret sweethearts and lamented this great missed opportunity. If only my mother had married the man she had grown up with and been so fond of! I might have had a writer for a father! We might have remained on the Houghton Estate and become wealthy, land-owning, fashionable vintners! With hundreds of acres of grapevines, an orchard and a river running through the backyard! Not only that, I might have had someone to tell me stories—the proper family-lore that I longed for and that both my parents seemed so reticent to reveal, or perhaps were just incapable of telling in the way I wanted them told—as stories, with characters and dialogue and quirky, idiosyncratic details. Stories, in other words, in the way that Stow would have told them.

That short-lived fantasy was before I was aware of the twelve-year age difference between Mick and my mother, or the fact that Stow wasn't the marrying type. I suspect now that what bonded them was a certain sense of being outsiders in that conservative and parochial world of rural Western Australia. Although neither of them may have realised it consciously as they were growing up, both were desperate to escape. I wasn't destined to claim my tiny place among the landed gentry after all.

The last time I was in Perth—the last time, that is, before my recent trip to attend UWA's superb Stow send-off in August—was in March 2003 for my aunt's funeral. My willingness to accompany my mother

to farewell her sister wasn't all duty and self-sacrifice. I was keen to see Western Australia again, to visit Oakover, my mother's family home on the Houghton Estate since 1859, where I'd spent two long, hot Christmas holidays as a child. Ever since I'd realised the extent of my heritage after studying the label of the Houghton Centenary Port—a gift for my fortieth birthday from a friend, Elizabeth Webby, oddly enough, who had hurriedly grabbed a bottle from her cellar on the way out to my party—I had been itching for more information. But most of all, I was intrigued by the idea of catching up with long lost relatives. I'd always felt the loss of our huge extended family on the other side of the continent. They were my kin, my tribe, my mob, and yet I wouldn't recognise any of them in the street. And they wouldn't recognise me. Perhaps they wouldn't want to recognise me. I got the impression that they considered our family as outsiders, as not really belonging to the clan. There had been very little communication over the years—only the rare Christmas card—and no phonecalls or flowers or get-well messages during my mother's life-threatening illness. I couldn't imagine why my mother was so marginalised by her own family. Had there been some serious family split? Or was it just because she'd married a left-wing activist? They had disagreed with my mother's stance on the Vietnam War of course but in those days everyone did. Surely that wasn't the reason for staying out of touch now. Perhaps it was just that my mother had been away for so long that they'd simply forgotten her. Or perhaps her leaving Western Australia permanently was interpreted as a rejection of them. After all, no-one had forced her to go; she was the one who'd decided to leave the vineyard, the church, her family.

Outside the arrivals lounge of Perth airport in 2003 the air felt clean, the atmosphere as unhurried as a country town, especially for someone who'd come directly from her inner-west ghetto in Sydney. The taxi took us through dry flat suburbs, driving without the slightest stress or urgency. I peered out the window and watched as small houses were gradually replaced by large properties. We were approaching the Swan Valley, my mother's homeland. Grapevines stretched from

the road down to the river. Boutique wineries advertised tastings and fresh table grapes.

We turned off the highway and stopped briefly before a set of ornate gates. A large sign read: 'Sandalford Roe Estate, est. 1840.' Below a plaque showed the Roe family crest: a reindeer surrounded by grapevines with a scroll underneath reading: 'Vincit Veritas'. The gate opened automatically and we drove down a smooth, well-maintained road.

Until that moment I had only been dimly aware of the second wine dynasty associated with my family. I had known, of course, that we were heading for my Uncle John's house—Uncle John was the husband of my recently deceased Aunt Margaret—but I didn't realise he was *the* John Roe, descendant of the first Surveyor-General of W.A., John Septimus Roe. Neither did I realise that he had only recently retired as general manager of Sandalford Wines, or that although he'd sold his interest in the business, he still owned and harvested all the vines, still lived on the property and was probably a multi-millionaire. These are the kind of factual details that my mother had always been known for omitting, even before she had a brain tumour.

Now it was all there in front of me: the acres of vines, the huge winery swarming with visitors, the Sandalford label on signboards everywhere. We drove past the entrance to the Sandalford gardens and restaurant, past the busy carpark full of tourist buses, past the cellars, processing factory and warehouse, past the Sandalford ferry that brought visitors from the city to the Sandalford jetty for wine tastings and wedding receptions.

'You didn't tell me we were staying on the actual vineyard!' I whispered to my mother.

'Didn't I? You've been here before though...'

'I don't think so. I only remember Oakover.'

'But surely we visited?' she responded vaguely.

'Maybe. I don't remember. I was ten.'

'Was it that long ago?'

The next morning I woke early, still trying to adjust to the time difference, and decided to go for a walk along the river before breakfast. Outside dawn had just broken. Clouds of mist were rising slowly from the river, swirling and dissolving like steam from a silver mirror. A line of ducklings trailed out from their homes on the riverbank, gliding smoothly over the reflections of river gums. I walked down to the Sandalford jetty and peered into the muddy brown water of the Swan. River skaters sat lightly on the water's edge, their thin legs pressing tiny indentations into the skin of the river. This was the same river I had paddled in with my brother during our holidays at Oakover. It was so quiet and constant, so fluid and yet so permanent. I watched as a canoe glided past, oars dipping into the glassy water, dipping and lifting, the edges of the paddle streaming in sunlit ribbons. My mother had also paddled down that river in a canoe, more than sixty years ago, with her sister Margaret. I too, had inherited a love of canoeing; the way a canoe could glide in silence, how unintrusively it sat on the water. I watched enviously as the early-morning canoeist disappeared around a bend; the broken surface of the water returning to a flat, golden mirror of riverside reflections, the stillness and silence regained. The beauty of the Swan was one of the few stories my mother had told, over and over; that morning was the first time I really understood what she'd been missing.

One of the other stories she told over and over was about Randolph Stow. It was from his days as a schoolboy at Guildford Grammar School, situated on the other side of the Swan River from Oakover. 'I'll never forget,' she'd say, 'how he swam across the river one afternoon, holding his school clothes high in one hand.' Presumably Stow had stripped down to his underwear and then paddled, one-handed, across the muddy water, so he could visit Joan, my mother, and her family. Indeed, I got the impression that during that time in Perth he was virtually adopted by the Fergusons. I never quite understood why he seemed to be such a regular visitor or how the families were connected. So I simply explained it to myself by imagining he must have felt very alone, being so far from his home

in Geraldton, and that the Fergusons were somehow acquainted with the Stows in the way that all the old established families of Western Australia seemed to know each other. Little did I understand just how small and interconnected the Swan River Colony families really were. First cousins married first cousins (my grandparents), second cousins married second cousins (my parents, Joan and Alex) and absolutely everyone, it seemed, was in some way related to everyone else, as confirmed in a letter I received from Stow in 2009.

*When I was last in Australia, all of 35 years ago, I was sifting through some stuff I'd left in my mother's house, and found an old newspaper cutting about Joan and Alex's forthcoming wedding. It said that the bride and groom were related, through the Rev. George Sweeting. I knew the name well, as he had an Academy at which my grandfather Sewell was a boarder in the 1880s, on or near the site of the later Guildford Grammar School...Of course, relationships like that were typical of the old Swan River Colony families. My grandfather's oldest sister (of an age to be his mother) married a Brown: so the Sewells had Brown cousins, who had other Brown cousins (such as my housemaster at Guildford, Bim Brown), who had Ferguson cousins. (I remember overhearing Bim on the telephone to his cousin, your grandfather, saying: 'Don, I can't have you sending that boy back to school drunk'). Also, my grandfather and Douglas Ferguson of Houghton were devoted friends, in the Victorian manner of Tennyson and Hallam. My grandmother remembers visiting Douglas after he'd been ill and said: 'I never saw two men who so loved each other; they were quite funny.'*

And the connections continued. Since my recent trip to WA, I have learnt that my aunt regularly babysat Stow as a toddler, that my grandmother played tennis with Stow's grandmother, that, as a schoolboy, Stow spent a summer holiday with my aunts at the Carey beach house in Geraldton and that, during Stow's time boarding at Guildford Grammar, Oakover was like a second home.

*One year, I think 1951, I was able to repay your grandfather's hospitality a little: there was a strike of grape-pickers for more pay, and he recruited me and another Guildford boy to help out. There possibly still exists a 1951 Houghton White in which I, and Craig Mackintosh, had a hand.*

The Randolph Stow vintage. If only the man and his work were as valued as Western Australian wine. There is a C. W. Ferguson Cabernet Malbec to commemorate my great grandfather, there is an entire Jack Mann range to memorialise the 'legendary' Houghton winemaker. There is even the idiotically-named 'Bandit' Savingnon Blanc to commemorate Moondyne Joe, complete with prison-garb arrows on the screwcap. Ferguson, Mann, Moondyne Joe; these are all names that probably have some vague resonance for most Western Australians. And yet, if you mention the name Stow, most people, or at least, most people outside academic circles, look at you blankly. And when the region's—nay, possibly the nation's—greatest writer dies, one might be forgiven for feeling that the ripples barely register on the national consciousness.

It could be argued—indeed, has been argued by several editors I've spoken to about publishing some kind of recognition of Stow—that obituaries have appeared in most major newspapers, that such-and-such mentioned him on their blog, that so-and-so put a note on their website. In other words, what more could I want in an era when old Aussie authors are dropping every other week? I can tell you what I want. I want to know where this man sits in our cultural-literary consciousness. I want to know whether we are fully aware and appreciative of the great literary inheritance that his work embodies. Or is this a gift that we have left half-opened as we rush to celebrate the Young, the New and the Not-so-difficult?

When Henry Lawson died he was given the first State funeral. When Patrick White died we held public rallies to preserve his house as a museum. When Randolph Stow died, his old university held a magnificent memorial event but his books remain out of print and unread and it feels as though he were a ghost long before his time. And yet, isn't Stow as much a key to the Australian character and psyche as Lawson or White? Maybe the truth is that where White and Lawson reflect the Australian consciousness, Stow reflects more of the mysterious, dark and difficult-to-know unconscious. If that's the case, then his work warrants our attention all the more.

I will be forever grateful to my mother for many things but particularly for introducing my siblings and me to the work of Stow, which we, in turn, passed on to our children. He is truly part of our Western Australian, as well as our national heritage. And it is testimony to his greatness that even in an Australia that has transformed since the days Stow decided to abandon it, his books still penetrate. Indeed, in some ways, I believe they are more relevant and prescient than ever. Stow was, after all, a kind of seer, a visionary, perhaps even a prophet. Maybe the truth is that, like Joyce, we are still learning to be Stow's contemporaries.

Amid the paraphernalia of the Stow shrine, there is one item of correspondence that proves to me, more than any other, that Stow was a magician. It is a letter written by my six-year-old niece (now seventeen).

*Dear Mick,*

*I really enjoyed reading Midnite. I think I enjoyed it because of the names of the characters and places. Do you have any children? How did you get the idea for the book? And did you get the idea of Mrs Chiffle from Grandma?*

*I usually ride my bike to school so just when I get to the paddock I leave it at her [Grandma's] house. There is a cat next door to her that keeps coming in but can't talk.*

*Grandma gave me the book to read. Lots of love, Sinead.*

At the bottom of the letter are some carefully drawn sketches of the animal characters in *Midnite*; Khat, Red Ned, Dora, Gyp and Major.

Stow's postcard in return is enigmatic. Polite and gracious as always, he carefully ignores all of his young reader's queries.

*Dear Sinead,*

*Thank you very much for your letter and for the lovely pictures of the animals in Midnite. I liked the smile on the cat. I have a black and white cat who is getting a bit old now (she's 13) but is as cheeky as when she was a kitten. When the vicar came to see me she used to sink her claws into his leg, which he didn't like very much. She was a stray kitten, and she picked me up in a pub called 'The Billy', one hot night when all the doors were open, so her name is Billy. In India that means 'she-cat'.*

*All good wishes to you and your Grandma.*

*Mick Randolph Stow*



## Randolph Stow: A Memoir

Tony Hassall

I first encountered the work of Randolph Stow in 1965. I had arrived at Monash University to tutor in English after an Honours degree that included a wide range of English and American literature, but no Australian works. Dennis Douglas was teaching a pioneering subject in Australian Literature and *The Bystander* was on the reading list. I bought a copy—for 11 shillings and threepence—and was immediately taken by its evocative power. Some years later I found *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* remaindered for \$2.14 in a Newcastle bookshop and, recognising the author, bought a copy. It was love at first reading. I was captivated to an extent that very few books, Australian or otherwise, have engaged me in a lifetime of reading. Set in the West, on the other side of the continent, it resonated in an unforgettably rich and poetic manner with my own childhood. Having written about it at length elsewhere, I will only say here that after a quarter of a century of teaching *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* to undergraduate students in subjects from first year to fourth year Honours, I don't recall a single one who didn't enjoy it, and I have never tired of revisiting its graceful construction, familiar images freighted with poetic significance, and emotional poignancy.

Not long after it was published, *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* was prescribed for study for the NSW Higher School Certificate, and I gave talks on it to teachers and students for the English Teachers' Association. In 1973 a revised article based on these was published in *Meanjin*, and I remember receiving a modest payment for it from Clem Christensen, which he had thoughtfully converted to sterling, since I was on Study Leave in Oxford. I also remember having great difficulty locating *Meanjin* in the Bodleian: the librarians were not overly keen to look for an obscure colonial journal. When I persisted and they finally found it, they told me rather patronisingly that if I had given them its proper title, *Meanjin Papers*, they would have found it sooner—I wonder.

Incidents like that in Oxford persuaded me to turn my attention to Australian literature seriously when I came home in 1974, just as Stow was leaving Australia to make his home in England. I realised that if Australian scholars weren't going to provide critical and scholarly scrutiny of Australian texts, no-one else would. So I started teaching in the Australian Literature subject we had set up at Newcastle, where I was then working. I also progressively bought and read all Stow's earlier books, including an already rare copy of *A Haunted Land*. I was profoundly moved by the tragic intensity of *To the Islands*, and fascinated by the enigmatic religious confrontations of *Tourmaline*. I read all the poetry, the anthologised public satires and the private poems of alienation and grief. I waited anxiously for new Stow works, and was especially heartened when *Visitants* appeared in 1979 after a decade of ominously 'real' silence foreshadowed by the title of his 1969 *Selected Poems—A Counterfeit Silence*.

Elegantly constructed and superbly well written, *Visitants* was clearly another masterpiece, set in the Trobriand Islands where Stow had worked in 1959. Its harrowing account of the psychic disintegration of Alistair Cawdor, a visitant estranged from his own people, the Islanders and finally from himself, is hauntingly paralleled by the Islanders' descent into the self-destructive madness of a Cargo Cult uprising. When the tragic power of this *tour de force*

was followed a year later by the quieter intensity of *The Girl Green as Elderflower* a sequel tracing the recovery and return to human society of Cawdor's alter ego Crispin Clare, it was clear that Stow's long silence was over, and his seemingly stalled career was embarked on a brilliant new phase.

Encouraged by this renewal, I proposed a book on Stow to University of Queensland Press, and started work on *Strange Country*—at that time a rare book-length study of a contemporary Australian author—in which I set out to articulate my admiration and affection for his work. Writing a study of a living author in mid-career presents a particular set of challenges, as anyone who has undertaken that task will attest. I chose to address these by suggesting that I send each chapter in draft to the author for comment and correction, to which he agreed. As it turned out, and despite my initial trepidation, this worked extremely well. Stow was unfailingly helpful in correcting facts and suggesting additional sources of information, but did not dispute or seek to influence my readings and interpretations. The only comment he made was praise in passing for the epigraphs I chose for the chapters. I could not have hoped for a more generous and cooperative author with whom to work.

While the book was in process, I conducted a long distance interview with Stow for *Australian Literary Studies*. In the days before email, I posted a set of questions and he taped his answers on a cassette and posted them back. I transcribed and edited the answers, and sent the revised version back again for correction, amendment and approval. It was a long way from a face-to-face journalistic interview, and follow-up questions to answers travelled back and forth in a slow and cumbersome manner, but in its own way it suited us both to work at a distance. The interview, published in 1982, shed much light on the reasons for Stow's decade-long silence, and on the experiences in the Trobriand Islands and later in Suffolk that he drew on extensively in *Visitants* and *The Girl Green as Elderflower*.

In 1983 I travelled to Western Australia to research Stow's background. In Perth my wife Loretta and I were invited to meet his

mother Mary and sister Helen, who talked to us generously about their son and brother. In Geraldton we were again treated very hospitably by Sewell family and friends, who showed us the landmarks and told us stories of the young Mick Stow, as he was known. We were welcomed to Sand Springs station (Sandalwood in *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea*) by Eric Sewell (the original of Rick) and his wife Ayria, who outlined in fascinating detail the factual basis for many of the characters and scenes in the book. We were also taken to see Ellendale and the distinctive 'flat topped hills to the north' of the town.

*Strange Country: A Study of Randolph Stow* was published in 1986, including a chapter on *The Suburbs of Hell* (1984), the last book that Stow had published. And in 1988 I was invited to edit an Australian Authors volume on Randolph Stow. The format of this series dictated one complete novel, episodes from others, a selection of poetry, and some essays and interviews. The novel I chose to include in full was *Visitants*. More recent and less well known than *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea*, it was, in my opinion, just as accomplished, and deserved a wider circulation. I again consulted Randolph Stow and he was again generously helpful in preparing the selection. I was particularly pleased to be able to include all of the poems that he then wanted preserved, and it remains the fullest collection of his poems in print, including a number of uncollected poems written after the publication of *A Counterfeit Silence*.

In September 2009 I received an unexpected email from a reader in the Northern Territory. She had recently become enamoured of Randolph Stow's work and was, she said, 'ploughing rapidly through all his books.' She then asked me about his *Bird Scarer Boy*, which she had found on the internet. I was surprised by this query, as I had never heard of the book. So I went to the internet and there it was, 'Published on November 1, 1987' by Secker & Warburg (Stow's London publishers) with its cover displayed and its ISBN numbers listed. I must admit I was dismayed. I was supposed to be an authority on Stow, I had written a critical monograph on his work, but I

had never heard of a book of his that was published 22 years ago! I immediately ordered it from Amazon, where it was listed. When they couldn't find a copy, new or second hand, I tried Blackwell's, and I also tried to contact the publishers, though Secker & Warburg had years earlier been incorporated into Harvill Secker. They didn't answer and Blackwell's couldn't find a copy.

Increasingly desperate, I finally worked up the courage to admit my shameful ignorance to the author himself and asked him about the book. In October 2009 I received the following reply:

*I'm amazed and rather saddened to hear of this phantom novel THE BIRD-SCARER BOY, with (as you tell me) an ISBN, jacket and projected publication date. Barley Alison (of Secker & Warburg and The Alison Press) used always to be nagging at me to write another novel, or lots of novels, and I must have told her in detail about the research I was doing into 'peasant poets' [mainly the Suffolk poet Robert Bloomfield, who described the bird-scarer boy and much else in THE FARMER'S BOY] with a view to writing a Suffolk historical novel. Other poets I studied included John Clare (of course), the Australian John Shaw Neilson and the illiterate Gaelic poet Rob Donn (Robert MacKay). This must have led Barley to make lots of notes and plans, and someone going through her papers after her sudden death (circa 1994) must have jumped to the conclusion that this phantom book actually existed. In fact, I had decided that the research was its own reward, and that I'd lost interest in writing fiction. It makes me sad to think of Barley taking it so seriously.*

That explanation was a great relief to me, as well as a salutary caution about accepting what is 'documented' on the internet. Later, in March 2010, I finally received a reply from Harvill Secker informing me that they could not trace the book or its ISBN.

In 2000 I was asked to write an entry on Stow for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* volume dealing with Australian Writers

1915–1950—it was published in 2002. I sent a draft of the article to Stow for his approval, which he gave. I wanted to ensure, in so far as I could, that he would appear in all the appropriate reference sources, and after I retired in 2005 I volunteered an entry to the online *The Literary Encyclopedia*. A commissioned entry is also forthcoming in Blackwells' *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*. When I offered to submit these to Stow for his approval, he politely declined, citing increasing ill health and confidence that they would be appropriate. While I was grateful for the latter, I was very sorry to hear of the former.

The last piece I wrote was a *Commentary* article for *Australian Book Review* in 2009 celebrating his work. When I sent it to him he replied: 'It made me feel rather like Fanny Burney, of whom it was said that she lived long enough to hear the judgment of posterity upon her.' Sadly that was my last letter. As it happened, the *Commentary* piece proved to be timely, and I was particularly pleased that he was able to see that his work was remembered and celebrated in his native land.

Stow's silence since 1984 and his long residence in England has meant his work is less widely known in Australia. When he died, I was surprised to receive calls from journalists, including some literary journalists, who were largely or even entirely unfamiliar with his work. It was not, however, forgotten. In 2009 the *Australian Book Review* asked its readers to vote for their favourite Australian novel. I was delighted when *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* came in at number 18 out of 290. I had voted for it as my favourite Australian novel, just ahead of *Visitants*.

## The Story of a (Post)Colonial Boy

Roger Averill

In many ways Randolph Stow was a solitary figure, someone content with his own company, happier in silence than in small talk. The fact that he published five novels and two volumes of poetry and had won the Miles Franklin Award before he was 30, and that after turning 50 he more or less maintained a writerly silence, means his life was also strikingly singular. While acknowledging the obvious importance of these intensely individual elements to Stow's character, in writing his biography I am aware that these are only part of the story, that his life must also be understood in the context of a collective, a clan. What follows is a discussion of Stow's colonial heritage, how this influenced his sense of self, framed key experiences in his early life, and is reflected in his representation of indigenous-settler relations in two of his most widely read novels, *To the Islands* and *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*.

When, over ten years ago, Stow and I first corresponded about the possible shape his authorised biography might take, he admitted to being 'a bit of a genealogy-nerd' and suggested the book include 'a short introductory section on family history; not everyone's cup-of-tea these days, of course, but I think, in the case of colonial

families, it's interesting to know where people came from...'¹ I was not surprised by this suggestion, because by then I had already come to understand the importance of Stow's colonial heritage to his sense of self. While elements of Stow's paternal line can be traced to the Domesday Book (1086), it is his colonial forebears which most fascinated him. These date back to Francis Eppes I, who, in the early seventeenth century, was among the first Europeans to settle in the colony of Virginia. One of his descendants, Elizabeth Randolph Eppes—a second cousin of Thomas Jefferson—married the Reverend Thomas Quinton Stow, Randolph Stow's great-great-grandfather. An Independent (or Congregationalist) minister from the small Suffolk village of Hadleigh, the Reverend Stow was a member of the London Colonial Missionary Society. Soon after the Colony of South Australia was declared in 1836, Reverend Stow was appointed its Colonial Missionary and, in October 1837, he and Elizabeth and their four sons arrived in Adelaide. Two years earlier, Stow's maternal great-grandfather, George Sewell, had travelled from his home in Maplestead, Essex, to the Swan River Colony. There he met and later married Elizabeth Logue and, in 1866, after the birth of their sixth and last child, George Ernest Sewell (who was to become Stow's grandfather and who died in 1935, shortly before Stow was born), the family moved to Champion Bay (now known as Geraldton). It was there that Stow's great-grandfather occupied land which he called 'Sandsprings' and which Stow renamed 'Sandalwood' in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*.²

Many of the descendants and relatives of these early immigrants have lived interesting lives as, among other things, prominent pastoralists, jurists (including a Judge of the Supreme Court of South Australia), an editor of the *South Australian Advertiser*, a Kalgoolie prospector, a renowned painter of wildflowers (Marian Ellis Rowan), and a pioneer of Australian ethnography (Catherine Langloh Parker, author of *Australian Legendary Tales*). As a rule, though, Stow was never terribly impressed by his forebears who, he said, 'did the practical, worthy things',



But what did excite me...was the idea that my family had been colonists since the reign of James I, and they had gone on being colonists, not only in Virginia, but in St. Kitts, and Western Australia, South Australia...I liked the idea of that adventurousness...about sort of setting out into the blue to found the colony in Western Australia and South Australia—it just is absolutely amazing.<sup>3</sup>

It is the sheer audacity, the courage, that so captured Stow's imagination; the willingness of these adventurous ancestors to leave the secure certainty of Suffolk and Essex to travel to the other end of the world, to the unknown.

Yet, Stow's pride in and celebration of his colonial ancestry is held in constant tension with his sorrow regarding the historical victims of European settlement and his affinity with indigenous people. Explaining his youthful attraction to the Jindyworobaks' desire to embrace 'the original possessors of the soil' and 'forge a new Australian identity and sensibility which would be a product of the land itself', Stow wrote in 'Settling In':

My own picture of the Aborigines could be described as cloven. I lived in a district where White settlement began in 1850. Among the settlers who dispossessed the Aborigines were my great-grandfather and his wife's brother, whose descendants still own those two stations, with their remnants of rock-shelter paintings and stone circles. (9)

Stow's first novel, written when he was only twenty, was called *A Haunted Land*, and the sense in both this book and even more so in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, is that any wealth or enjoyment his family has derived from these properties was ghosted by the violence of Aboriginal dispossession.

Stow's sensitivity to his ancestors' dispossession of Aborigines was part of his broader interest in indigenous cultures which, in turn, led to his own first-hand involvement in a colonial-type enterprise.

In 1957—the year in which his second novel and first volume of poetry were both published—Stow, still aged only 21, came to an arrangement with Bill Jamison, the newly appointed Superintendent of the Forrest River Anglican Mission in the north Kimberley. According to the Mission's records, Stow told Jamison of his desire to do some anthropological fieldwork and asked if he might work for the Mission while pursuing his interest in Aboriginal culture.<sup>4</sup> The Superintendent agreed and for three months, from April to July, Stow paid one pound a week to live in a mud and grass hut. Working as a volunteer in the Mission store, he spent his spare time talking with Oombulgurri people and exploring the stunning Kimberley landscape, often going on long walks and camping out by himself. Inspired by these experiences, in September of that year he began writing *To the Islands*, which, when published in 1958, won both the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal and the Miles Franklin Award.

*To the Islands* tells the story of Heriot, a sixty-seven year old mission superintendent's existential crisis. Renouncing his faith and declaring himself 'a wicked man who wants to be dead' and who 'hates everyone', Heriot concludes that his life of philanthropic work has been a sham, that in fact he 'was a misanthrope all the time' (72). Amid the confusion of a violent storm, Heriot throws a rock at Rex, a rebellious young Aborigine whom he blames for the death of his Aboriginal god-daughter, Esther. Thinking he has murdered Rex, and consumed with remorse and self-loathing, Heriot flees into the harsh country beyond the Mission in search of the islands; the Aboriginal resting place for the spirits of the dead. When another young Aboriginal man, Justin, successfully tracks Heriot down, he saves him from despair and certain starvation and guides him on a journey towards wholeness and reconciliation. Along the way, they meet a number of other lost souls wandering in the wilderness, one of which is Rusty, a man who once murdered his business partner and is now, like a guilt-ridden Godot, waiting for something to happen to him, for the gods to take their revenge. Having listened to Rusty's story, Heriot tells him of the things he once knew, but until now had forgotten.

About crimes. About being born out of crimes. It was because of murders that I was ever born in this country. It was because of murders my first amoebic ancestor ever survived to be my ancestor. Every day in my life murders are done to protect me... Oh, God...if there was a God this filthy Australian, British, human blood would have been dried up in me with a thunderbolt when I was born. (1958: 156)

Later, talking with another of these lost souls, Sam, the hermit, Heriot describes his life as being marked by three expiations. The first being his birth as a human which drove him to charity; the second, the massacre, done by his race at Onmalmeri, which compelled him to work at the Mission; and the third, his hatred, which resulted in his violence towards Rex and which has rendered him lost (178–9). The story of the massacre at Onmalmeri provides an historical context and narrative parallel for Heriot's own act of violence.<sup>5</sup> A footnote appears at that point in the text informing the reader that, 'This narrative was taken down verbatim from an account by Daniel Evans of a notorious massacre' (Fn. 54). Daniel Evans was Stow's closest Aboriginal friend during his time at Forrest River. He would often drop round to Stow's hut in the evenings and have a wongi, usually about aspects of Aboriginal culture. On one such night, Daniel related the story of the Umbali massacre. '[T]he next night', Stow explained to me, 'I got him to come back and tell it again, slowly, while I took it down on the typewriter.'<sup>6</sup>

In 1928, a white stockman called Mr Hay was riding the boundary of Nulla Nulla Station when he discovered a couple of old Aboriginal women collecting *gadja* (or lily-roots) from a billabong. Seeking to punish them for this supposed trespass, he flogged and beat the husband of one of the women who had been sleeping under a nearby tree. His desire for retribution still unsated, he then broke all of the old man's spears. Despite being bloodied from the beating, the Aboriginal man managed to pick up his broken shovel spear and hurl it at Hay, who was about to ride off on his horse. The spear lodged in the white

man's lung. The horse galloped away, but after a short distance Hay fell from its back, dead. Once Hay's body was discovered by his fellow stockmen, they, along with policemen from Turkey Creek, set off in search of his killer. With their investigations proving futile, their desire for justice became a blood lust for revenge, resulting in them massacring men, women and children up and down the Durack and Gulgudmeri rivers. Daniel Evans told Stow:

At Umbali there was people camping near the river. They shot the old people in the camp and threw them in the water. They got the young people on a chain, they got the men separate, shot the men only. While they was on the chain the policemen told the police boys to make a big bonfire. They threw the bodies in the flame of fire so no one would see what remained of the bodies; they were burned to bits. They took the women on a chain to a separate grave, then the police boys made a big bonfire before the shooting was. When they saw the big flame of fire getting up, then they started shooting the women.<sup>7</sup>

Stow published the unamended transcript of Evans's oral history in *The Bulletin* in 1961. In the note accompanying this article, Stow wrote, 'Daniel's account of this tragedy seems to me most valuable, not only as a very concise and impartial statement of what his people have suffered at our hands, but also as an example of the legend-maker in action.'<sup>8</sup>

In the Preface of the revised, 1982 edition of *To the Islands*, Stow explains that he in part wrote the novel as 'propaganda on behalf of Christian mission-stations for Aborigines, in particular for one Mission on which I had worked for a short time, and which seemed in danger of closing down'.<sup>9</sup> In the retrospective light of the *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997), which alerted us all to the tragic consequences of the policy of forced removal of so-called 'half-caste' Aboriginal children from their families, this seems an ignoble cause for which to fight. And in that Preface, Stow concedes that in the

early days some of the missions ‘deserved their low opinion’. He goes on to say, though, that by 1957, ‘the year in which the novel is set, it seemed to me that at least one of them was performing a valuable service to the Aboriginal community which it housed and employed, and which, indeed, it could be said to have created’.<sup>10</sup>

Reading *To the Islands* now, over fifty years after it was written, what is most interesting is not the way certain aspects of it have dated, but how the spirit of it has become so contemporary; the way Heriot’s desire for forgiveness and reconciliation pre-empts current debates. Perhaps now, more than at the time of its publication, it has the capacity to expand our sympathetic imagination. By the book’s end, the old colonial power relationship between Heriot and Justin has been totally inverted, with Heriot having become a dependent, frightened figure, and Justin his protector. Still wracked with guilt about Rex, Heriot tells Justin to explain to everyone at the Mission that he acted out of love, not hate.

‘It’s my only defence. It’s the world’s only defence, that we hurt out of love, not out of hate.’

‘Yes, brother.’

‘It’s a feeble defence,’ said Heriot, with sadness, ‘and a poor reconciliation. But we have nothing else.’ (198)

To acknowledge the fact that some people who implemented policies like the forced removal of Aboriginal children were acting, if not out of love, then with good intentions, in no way lessens or excuses the hurt they inflicted on their victims. And it certainly should not obscure the fact that the intentions and actions of many others who implemented these policies were totally dishonourable. Even on those rare occasions when non-indigenous people have wanted to help, their arrogance and/or ignorance has often only caused more injury and pain.<sup>11</sup> This gap between intentions and outcomes is itself reflected in *To the Islands*. For if the text is read as propaganda in defence of the Aboriginal missions, then it too is a ‘feeble defence’.

The story of Heriot's journey away from the Christian Mission and towards the indigenous cosmology of the islands questions the role of the Mission too deeply to be counter-balanced by any of the text's surface affirmations of mission life. In this way, *To the Islands* can be seen as an expression of Stow's complex response to the legacy of colonialism; one which at times celebrates the adventurousness and good intentions of some colonists, but also laments the dispossession and oppression of those colonised and suggests that for reconciliation to occur the colonisers must embrace indigenous ways of being.

In 1965, while travelling through the United States on a Harkness Fellowship, Stow rented a shack on a small ranch in New Mexico and, in seven weeks, wrote *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*.<sup>12</sup> While taken with the suggestion of fellow Western Australian author, Tom Hungerford, that he write an autobiography about his childhood,<sup>13</sup> Stow had, to that point, not done so because he had been unable to discern a storyline in his boyhood experiences that would sustain either a childhood memoir or an autobiographical novel. Speaking to me in 1999, he said:

I had to import, to give the thing a plot. I had to import experiences from another time in my life when I was very attached to an ex-POW, which didn't happen at the same time, but happened later... [I]t occurred to me when I was in the States. Actually I was driving through Alabama and it suddenly clicked. I thought, 'That's how to do it!' And that's the way I did do it.<sup>14</sup>

What he did was borrow the war-time experiences of his friend Russell Braddon, the author of *The Naked Island*, and merge his emotional attachment to him as a young adult with the sense of awe that, as a boy, he had felt towards his shy and rather remote second cousin, Eric Sewell. The creation of this composite character provided the narrative with both an emotional centre and a plot element that

juxtaposed the autobiographical character, Rob's gradual discovery of self within the warm, insular circle of the Maplestead clan with that of the Braddon/Sewell character, Rick's experiences of the horrors of life as a POW in Changi. So, when in 1974 Stow declared that 'there is nothing in it [*Merry-Go-Round*] that didn't happen in life',<sup>15</sup> he was talking loosely. He was, he said to me, 'being fairly flippant'.<sup>16</sup> What he meant by this statement was that nearly all the episodes and emotions in the novel are representations of remembered events and experiences. However, the book remains a novel rather than an autobiography because the chronology of these events and the relationships they have been given to each other is, in many instances, entirely fictional. Studying autobiographical novels for biographical insights always involves a certain amount of complicated algebra, but here at least the formula is reasonably clear cut: the events and emotions experienced by the fictional Rob were also experienced by Randolph Stow, though not necessarily between the ages of six and thirteen.

Unusually for a novel, even an autobiographical one, *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* begins with a family tree. As with the text that follows, it is only superficially fictionalised; the family and place names have been changed,<sup>17</sup> but the characters' familial relationships accurately reflect those of Stow and his maternal forebears. From the outset then, the reader is alerted to the fact that the small boy they are about to read of is an individual member of a much larger collective. This tension between individualism and collectivity runs throughout the book in parallel with its other great theme, the paradox of our experience of time as being both circular and linear. Rob's life is linear to the degree that he is an individual, that he was born at a particular time and date, that he lived out and was shaped by certain experiences, and that, in keeping with the book's realism, he fully expects to die. Early in the book, Rob (like Stow, who in 1999 still vividly remembered the moment),<sup>18</sup> has a revelation about the linear aspect of time and its unsettling, unavoidable repercussions for the individual life.

He was thinking about time and change, of how, one morning when he must have been quite small, he had discovered time, lying in the grass with his eyes closed against the sun. He was counting to himself. He counted up to sixty, and thought: That is a minute. Then he thought: It will never be that minute again. It will never be today again. Never.

He would not, in all his life, make another discovery so shattering.

He thought now: I am six years and two weeks old. I will never be that old again. (14)

This realisation is echoed towards the book's end when, riding a horse, Rob comes across a dead fox.

For the first time in his life he knew that he was young, and knew, with agreeable sadness, that he would not be young for long.

Time and death could stain the bright day, and the leaf-brown foxes that traced green paths in the dew could die poisoned and in agony among the flowers. (269)

Counterbalancing this perspective, Rob's life is also portrayed as a continuation of a recurring pattern of birth and death, a pattern that has no known beginning and no foreseeable end. This of course ties in with the novel's central motif, the merry-go-round, but is made even more explicit through Rob's fascination with blood. Rob's world, like that of Stow's as a child, is one of relatedness; nearly everyone he knows is an aunt or uncle, or a cousin once or twice removed. With the possible exception of Rick, Rob's favourite relative is his Aunt Kay, who was modelled on Stow's great aunt, Sutherland Macdonald, or 'Arp', as she was known to the children of the Sewell clan. Along with the moving poem, 'For One Dying', the depiction of Arp in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* is meant as a tribute to the relative who, above all others, lavished time and attention on the young Stow and encouraged his interests and talents. She was, he told me, 'my



teacher in every way—reading, writing, music, anything...she taught me.<sup>19</sup> Despite the seemingly unique closeness of Stow's relationship with Arp, when he introduces the reader to Aunt Kay, he has her misremembering Rob's name.

Aunt Kay was always getting his name wrong, and always referring to his grandmother as 'your mother'. She lived a good deal in the past, and her past was full of little boys...Often she could go on for a long time getting his name wrong, fumbling her way through three generations. (20)

This passage goes on to talk of Aunt Kay's Scottish heritage, the Gaelic names of her brother and cousin, Iain Mor and Iain Vicky, the way her father had gone to school to learn to speak English, and how Rob is enchanted by this direct connection with places where there is snow. It ends with: 'He kept the names in his memory as a sort of password to the fatherland, his blood's speech' (20). Later, but again with the aid of Aunt Kay, Rob learns that his blood carries more than the mysterious language of his Scottish forebears. It also animates physical reminders—facial features, gestures—and temperamental traits that have been passed down through the generations.

Blood. It seemed that all through his life there had been a chorus about blood. 'Couldn't you pick that one for Charles Maplestead's grandson?—He's his father's son—If only Dr Coram had known Rob—When you said that you looked *exactly* like our brother Jack.' (105)

With form mimicking content, this sentiment recurs a number of times in the text, most notably in one of the final scenes between Rob and Rick. Here the tension between the mortality of the individual and the continuation of the clan is heightened to poignant effect. When Rick tells Rob he is going deaf in one ear, Rob protests on the grounds that deafness is an old person's condition and that his beloved cousin

is still young. Rick, though, explains that the deafness was caused by the beatings he received from Japanese prison guards.

The boy got up and stood in front of him and stared intently into Rick's blue eyes with his own blue eyes, which were the same eyes, coming from their great-grandfather. 'Aw, Rick,' he said, 'you're not getting old are you?' (280)

Within the circle of Rob's extended family, the future is predicted by the past; the blood encodes the limits of what is individually possible. Uninterested in repeating the dominant pattern of lawyers and pastoralists in his family's history, Rob is always on the lookout for a more romantic vein in his bloodline, and variously discovers that Aunt Kay's father fought on the Rebel side at the Eureka Stockade (105), that his great-great-grandfather knew Lord Byron in Greece (102) and that even the most respectable branch of the family tree managed to produce a distant uncle who had hunted Ned Kelly and another who fought the last formal duel in Australia; a comic event which ended before it began, with Rob's relative literally shooting himself in the foot (106). These remote connections with poets and rebels fired Rob's and his creator's boyhood imaginations; the thinking being that if a distant relative had lived a romantic life then that possibility lay dormant in the blood, mixed in somewhere with the less thrilling fates of jurists and farmers.

For the young Stow, blood not only determined the possibilities of what he might become, it also defined and defended him against what he was not, what he must never be. The broader social currents of class and race coursed through his family's veins. In *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, class difference becomes a source of increasing tension between Rob and his working class mate, Mike. As they grow older, Rob's Pommy accent and his talk of family properties irritates Mike, to the point where it threatens not only their relationship but the very fabric of Rob's certain universe. 'His world was not one world after all, and might fall apart over an issue as simple as the way to

say Mrs Grant's name' (224). These tensions were, Stow confirmed, part of his growing up. His mother, he said, was genuinely distressed by the prospect that she might one day be forced to meet the mother of Mike's real-life model.<sup>20</sup> A similar attitude is revealed in Rob's grandmother, when Rob, still pondering the mysteries of blood, asks her if he has any 'nigger blood' in him.

'Of course not,' his grandmother said, shocked.

'Have I got any convict blood?'

'Certainly not,' said his grandmother. (106)

In this instance, Rob is disappointed by such absences, because they rob him of the possibility of being 'related to just about everyone in Australia' (106). However, in an earlier scene, when his mate, Kevin, teasingly suggests he has 'nigger blood' (99), Rob takes offense and pushes his friend in defence of the purity of his blood. As the repellent language suggests, Geraldton in the 1940s was a racist town. In *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, Stow portrays himself as both a product of that environment, but also as someone who, despite his upbringing, developed an affinity with and sympathy for the descendants of those his forebears dispossessed. This bifocal perspective is betrayed in the language Rob uses when he naively interrupts the racist talk around the drover's campfire, "I like them," the boy said. "There's some nice boong kids at school" (186). Talking to me in 1999, Stow attributed much of his early sensitivity to the issue of Aboriginal dispossession to his experience of mixing with indigenous children at his school.

I think it came from primary school, actually. I knew some of them and I liked them. I found them interesting. Generally they were older than the rest of us...and a bit more interesting...I used to rather admire them. Because they were 'cool', I suppose you'd say these days. We didn't have that word in those days. I just liked them.<sup>21</sup>

An earlier, less mundane, more epiphanic experience occurred when, as a six year old, Stow's mother and some of her cousins took him to the Hand Cave on the Sewell family property. Envisaged as a bit of a lark, as a nostalgic trip to one of the scenes from their own childhood, the women could not have imagined the impact the cave would have on young Mick (as Stow was known). The description of Rob studying the stencilled hands on the cave wall in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* is as Stow recalls it.

He felt the cold rock under his hand, where a dead boy's hand had once rested. Time and change had removed this child from his country, and his world was not one world, but had in it camps of the dispossessed. Above the one monument of the dead black people, the sheoaks sounded cold, sounded colder than rock. (66)

Rob's discovery of this and another cave bearing the ancient silhouettes of Aboriginal hands (230), along with the recurring image of an old stone shearing shed with 'slits in the walls for rifles' (28, 32, 283), projects the simple joys and dramas of his rural childhood onto the disquieting backdrop of colonial invasion.<sup>22</sup> Hence the boy's conviction, that despite Australia's youthfulness the country feels old, that the land itself is haunted.<sup>23</sup>

At the very end of *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, an adolescent Rob is devastated by Rick's announcement that he is leaving Australia for good, that he has 'outgrown' his young cousin's love and does not want a family (281). The book's final scene once again juxtaposes circular time with linear time, the continuity of old colonial families with the finitude of modern individuals.

By the fresh green patch in the dam paddock, which was a rose-tree, dead Maplesteds lay. And on the rise beyond was the old stone shearing shed, with slits in the walls for rifles, where dead Mapletsteds, led by John Maplestead with the spear-scar on his hand, had withheld or expected to withhold dead aborigines [sic].

And beside the shearing shed were the grey timbers of the stable-yard, where a blue patch, which was Rick, was now unsaddling.

He stared at the blue patch of Rick, feeling bitter, uncriable tears. Rick was going, although the boy loved him, and he had taken back the lines that he had written in the boy's book at the end of the war. [A quotation from John Donne's 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning': 'Thy firmness makes my circle just/And makes me end, where I begun'.] The world the boy had believed in did not, after all, exist. The world and the clan and Australia had been a myth of his mind, and he had been, all the time, an individual. (283)

Given Stow's long, self-imposed exile from Australia,<sup>24</sup> it is tempting to interpret these sentiments autobiographically, to assume that he, like Rick (and by association, Rob), had become disillusioned with Australia's 'arrogant mediocrity' (281) and had severed ties with a family he wished to disavow. This, though, would be a mistake. In leaving Australia for London in 1966, then in 1969 settling in East Bergholt, Suffolk, and later in Harwich, Essex, Stow left the haunted land of his immediate family and returned to the ancestral land of his forebears. In terms of the linear trajectory of his individual life, this represented a geographical break from the clan he had so lovingly portrayed in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*.<sup>25</sup> But in a broader view of his family's history, this move can also be seen as a circling back, a return. In effect, Stow was repeating the older family pattern of leaving kith and kin to venture forth, to migrate, but in doing so, he inverted the colonial impulse.

To what degree this move represented some kind of personal resolution of the tensions between settler and indigenous cultures that Stow experienced and later expressed in *To the Islands* and *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* is a matter of conjecture. What is certain though is that one of the central themes in my biography of Stow will be the tension between his sense of belonging to and his abiding interest in a family with a long and troubled colonial history, and

his recurring experience of feeling like a bystander. In this way, his highly singular life will be seen to be in part a response to, but also a variation of, the family history that so captured and worried his imagination.

## Notes

- 1 Randolph Stow, personal correspondence with the author, 9 March, 1999.
- 2 This information regarding Stow's family history is drawn from interviews conducted with Stow and members of his extended family; John Beston's article, 'Family Background & Literary Career of Randolph Stow', *The Literary Half-Yearly*, vol. XVI, no. 2, July 1975; and Randolph Stow's own article, 'Settling In—Reflections on a Colonial Record', *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2001.
- 3 Randolph Stow, interview by the author, 16 November 1999.
- 4 Forrest River Mission Records, Battye Library, MN545. Most of this information derives from a letter from Jamison to the Secretary of the Mission's Board, 16 April 1957, Item No. 2389A/54.
- 5 This point is underlined when Helen, the Mission nurse says, 'I don't believe in heaven and hell, but I believe in sin, and sins that aren't wiped out on the earth stay on the earth forever echoing and echoing among the people left behind. We're trying to wipe out the sin of the white men who massacred these people's relations, but we can't ever do it, because we're not the same white men. And Mr. Heriot has to come back, he's the only one who can wipe out his hatred of Rex' (1958, 90).
- 6 Randolph Stow, interview by the author, Harwich, 1999.
- 7 'The Umbali Massacre', as told to Randolph Stow by Daniel Evans, *The Bulletin*, Feb. 15, 1961.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 45. For further discussion of the historiographical debate about the Umbali (Oombulgurri) massacre and Stow's role in documenting it, see Klaus Neumann's article, 'Remembering Victims and Perpetrators' *UTS Review*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1998, pp. 1–17.
- 9 Preface to the revised edition of *To the Islands*, Minerva Paperbacks, London: 1991, p. vii. (Revised edition first published by Secker & Warburg, 1982.)
- 10 *ibid.*, p. vii.
- 11 Of course, another more cynical and complex reading of Heriot's plea is that it is, in fact, disingenuous, given that he has earlier declared himself a misanthrope masquerading as a philanthropist (72). If this were so, the exchange with Stephen would then become a classic death-bed scene, with Heriot desperately seeking personal redemption rather than any existential and/or cross-cultural reconciliation. The contradictory

evidence regarding Heriot's motivation is compounded by Helen, who declares that, 'If he [Heriot] tried to kill Rex, it wouldn't have been because he hated him, it would have been because he thought the mission was in danger from him', and then later in the same conversation with Nixon and Gunn says that Heriot is 'the only one who can wipe out his hatred of Rex' (1958, 90). The only coherent interpretation that can be made of this is that although Heriot hated Rex, his violence towards him was not motivated by this hatred. Despite this evidence and given the final scene between Stephen and Heriot and the general thrust and spirit of the narrative, this ungenerous reading of Heriot's plea is, I think, ultimately unsustainable.

- 12 Randolph Stow, interview by the author, 19 November 1999.
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 John Beston, 'Mostly Private Letters' in Anthony Hassall (ed.), *Randolph Stow*. pp. 349–355. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- 16 Randolph Stow, interview by the author, 16 November 1999.
- 17 'Maplestead', the family name Stow uses in place of his mother's maiden name, Sewell, was the name of the village in Essex that Stow's great-grandfather, George Sewell, emigrated from in 1834. It was also the name George Sewell gave to the station he established after arriving at the Swan River Colony.
- 18 Randolph Stow, interview by the author, 16 November 1999.
- 19 Randolph Stow, interview by the author, 17 November 1999.
- 20 *ibid.*
- 21 *ibid.*
- 22 In another reference both to blood and Rob's colonial forebears, when Rob's father presents his son with a book about their Virginian ancestors, Stow writes, 'But the book was fascinating, it was pure darkness, and parts of it were not very nice at all. And these were his relations. He had dark blood' (1965, 217).
- 23 See *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, pp. 64, 214, 230.
- 24 Stow's last visit to Australia was in 1974.
- 25 This geographical break did not reflect an emotional rupture in Stow's relationships with his family and old Australian friends, many of whom he kept in contact with and welcomed when they visited him in England.

## Randolph Stow in Harwich

### Sam Dutton

I knew Randolph Stow as Mick—a family friend who sent us a Christmas card each year and wrote ‘The Ghost at Anlaby’ about the house where I grew up. My parents got to know Mick in Adelaide in the 1950s and, as I understand it, helped him out a few times over the years. I met Mick when I was a kid, loved his book *Midnite*, and visited him when I moved to London in the 1980s. I still remember the striking impression he made in person and in photos: a handsome man with a strong face and a black jacket. He never said more than he had to, despite his great turn of phrase and a wonderfully mellifluous speaking voice.

In 1994 Mick kindly agreed to do an interview with me to talk about his life and work. I caught the train to Harwich and spent most of the day with him in the pub and at his house. He did his best to help: gently reminding me to pace myself in the pub and warning that others had tried to interview him, from various angles, without much success. I didn’t manage to wrinkle much out of Mick that day, but he was amiable and—occasionally—quite candid.

Here are the results of that 1994 interview.



By the age of 23, Randolph Stow had already published a book of poetry and three novels, including *To the Islands*, which prompted the critic Francis King to compare him with Patrick White and Thomas Keneally as one of a trio of Australian novelists who make most of their English counterparts seem trivial and anaemic. Critics talk about Patrick White's influence on Randolph Stow, but it's worth remembering that Stow's first novel *A Haunted Land* was published in 1956, a year before *Voss*.

At 58, Stow lives alone with his cat in a tiny two-up/two-down terrace house in Harwich, Essex, and he hasn't written a book for ten years.

Four times each day, Hook of Holland ferries pass by the end of this street, but there's not much else to be seen. Harwich is a port town, historic but hardly picturesque. Stow's house looks like a seaside B&B: knick-knacks, buttoned cushions, plastic flowers, velour armchairs, the brass of the front door perfectly polished. When I visited, his cat Billy kept trying to sit on my lap. 'Great icebreaker,' says Stow. When I ask if he's thought of moving to a bigger house, Stow explains he doesn't need to, his tastes are modest, and—like someone confiding that they have a private income—this is why he doesn't much need to write for money. 'There used to be a family of 11 next door, so it's enough for one old bachelor.'

Looking around Stow's house, you quickly notice the particularity of the few things he has on display: an old autoharp, Sidney Nolan prints, a strange looking bottle of Scottish bitters, and, above pictures of Billy the cat, an old photograph of 'HM King Zog of Albania' beside a thermometer labelled 'subtract 4°'. And then there are the books—history, music, anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, birds and insects—alongside innumerable dictionaries and novels, poetry and plays in several languages.

Harwich at first can look grey and desolate—and then you see the open sweep of the beach, with swans and other water birds nesting alongside the majestic harbour and remnants of the twelfth-century walled town. This is a long way from tourist England—on a branch

line of a branch line, through marshes and across an estuary, on the edge of the North Sea—and Stow's self-confinement here is all the more extraordinary when you consider his origins. He grew up in and around Geraldton, about 400 miles up the Western Australian coast from Perth, in the narrow strip of arable land between the ocean and what a local once described to me as the Great Australian Fuck All.

In Geraldton, Stow reckons, 'the Depression lasted until about 1950; it was so *bleak*.' Talking about his childhood, it begins to make sense that he wound up in Essex. Both sets of grandparents came from farms nearby; they had known each other vaguely before Stow's parents met in Australia. In Western Australia, the Stows were 'very close, very clannish...but we had a lot of English visitors and, coloured by growing up in the war, a devotion to king and queen and *respect* for Mr Churchill. It was like being transplanted British, like Australia was a distant country. Everything about Britain was normal.'

Evidently Stow had a literate upbringing. 'My father didn't talk about anything whatever,' he says. 'There was a bit of a problem with his vocal chords, but that was later.' He did, however, have ambitions for his son's reading, expecting him to digest Chapman's Homer at the age of eight, and a collected Balzac when he was 11. Stow describes himself as 'a word man right from the start'. Taught to read at three or four, his love of fiction was dominated by the Andrew Lang fairy tale collections and later, Scottish and Border ballads. (There was also, he says, a book of French folk tales which, in reference to its peculiar cover illustration, the family referred to as *The Lady with the Pants on Her Head*.)

Having completed his schooling in Perth, Stow studied Law there ('a very rural experience') against the advice of this father, himself sick of working as a country lawyer. But within a month, Stow had given up Law, switched to English and French—and finished a novel. Very taken with Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* and also, says Stow, in an attempt to appease his father, he then wrote *A Haunted Land*, which was published in 1956. Another novel and a book of poetry were published the following year.

In 1958, not long after Stow's twenty-second birthday, *To the Islands* was published. In many ways it broke new ground for Australian fiction—an allegory of an old man's vain attempt at self-reconciliation, which simultaneously documents the deracination of Aboriginal culture. Stow wrote the book in Adelaide, after several months working as a storeman at an Anglican mission in the North Kimberley region of Western Australia. 'I was breaking my heart and neck to go back there,' he says, 'I could hardly believe I could live anywhere else.' But by then Stow had begun working at the University of Adelaide, giving tutorials which he describes as 'filled with elderly nuns. They terrified me, everyone terrified me then.' Stow continued to teach, at the university in Perth and later in Leeds, and evidently hated every minute of it. 'I like to be taught,' he says.

In 1959 he spent several months working for the Australian government as an anthropologist and cadet patrol officer on the Trobriand Islands—travelling from village to village with a pet cat and cockatoo—an experience which left him with material for his novel *The Visitants*—and a bad case of malaria. Recovering in London, Stow kept writing, between working 'as Cynthia Nolan's gardener—they thought it would be good for me', and taking advantage of Soho, 'where I'd let literary types buy me lunch.' In 1963, *Tourmaline* was published, which Stow describes as his 'most intensely imagined' novel. The story came from a dream of a poem he had, back in Geraldton, after an afternoon of drinking with school friends. Deposited unconscious on his parents' front lawn, Stow eventually woke up to discover that his father had mown neatly around him. 'It was about the only joke we ever shared.'

After *Tourmaline*, Stow spent eighteen months driving around America, and wrote his most popular book, *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea*, in a rented house with an apple and peach orchard beside the Animas River in New Mexico. *Midnite*—a very hip and funny book for children about a bushranger whose henchmen are a cat and a cockatoo—was written at his mother's house in 1968, and in the

following year Stow finished a libretto for Peter Maxwell Davies and published another book of poetry.

Then, as he describes it, something went wrong. Suffering from difficulty sleeping after a chronic bout of gastritis, Stow consulted a doctor who prescribed him, 'with a glint in his eye', the sedative Mandrax. Stow says he found himself dependent almost immediately. He became a registered addict, took the drug night and day and, when he travelled, had a friend collect his prescription and post the tablets to him sticky-taped to a card in an envelope. In 1974, having been 'asleep for four years', Stow found himself on his own at a friend's house in Provence, where he was unable to get his prescription. Four years of undreamed dreams flooded his mind and for more than a week he suffered a series of hellish visions. He subsequently returned to Suffolk, lived alone in a small cottage in East Bergholt, and published nothing until *The Visitants* in 1979, which won the prestigious Patrick White Award and enabled him to move to Harwich.

Stow shrugs his shoulders at the question of what he wants to write next, saying that 'since I was about 20 I've had a shopping list of things to do.' Increasingly interested in Gaelic poetry, he wants to go back to strict verse forms, and on his desk has a diagram of metres and rhyme schemes, but nothing else. 'I haven't found the words yet,' he says calmly. The difficulty of his job does not appear to bother him.

Stow's characteristic skill at combining symbolism and documentary gives the best of his work an easily visualised, film-like quality. Growing up in Geraldton, he says, 'Films were like the only culture, though I wasn't allowed to go to a film at night unless it was a "classic".' Ironically, though none of his novels has been filmed, a regular source of income has been payments for film options on his novels.

Contemporary readers weaned on the kind of fiction where the presence of the author leaps out at you from the first sentence may be puzzled by Stow's transparent narrative techniques, in which the relationship between narrators and characters is never explicit, and

the author hardly shows up at all. When I complimented him on this, he said it was merely ‘the spirit of the times’ and gave me appropriate advice from Flaubert:

*A writer should not appear in a novel any more than God appears in Creation;*

And Stendhal:

*A novel should be like a mirror moving along a road.*

But Stow is no linguistic snob—the only writing that seems to rile him is the middle-brow secondary industry that feeds off real writing. Apart from the daily paper and *The Times Literary Supplement*—which he says he gets mainly for the listings—Stow doesn’t read ‘literary’ journalism at all. ‘It’s all so boring. I don’t understand why anyone reads it.’

What Stow clearly enjoys, when he’s not at home reading books, is the language of daily life. He likes his privacy and his habits, but he’s never been a stay-at-home. Stow has a large, loyal and impressive circle of friends, and visiting him in Harwich, you can’t help but notice how the whole town seems to know him by name. Everywhere people greet him—respectfully inflating his nickname Mick to Michael—and, as we enter the pub, his pint of IPA is already being pulled. (‘I’m working,’ he confides to the publican, by way of apology for not staying.)

Stow is a careful speaker, who appears to live in mortal danger of *faux pas* and sometimes doesn’t speak at all. But at the same time he gives the impression of five decades of hard life and difficult reading, ready to burst out at any moment. Stow has a prodigious memory and recites verse and prose whenever necessary. He also has an endearing conversational habit of locating people and events culturally or historically, as if to stress that his own part in his life is unimportant: his London landlord appeared, libellously, in *Ulysses*; Constable

was fond of the village where he lived in Suffolk; Roy Orbison once bought a house there—and so on. (Reputedly, both Stow and the poet John Bray claimed Pocahontas as an ancestor.)

The people of Harwich clearly acknowledge Stow as an asset to the town. Youthful, tough-faced—friendly enough, but you wouldn't want to cross him—the kind of man who might have strolled into one of his fictional localities and saved it from obscurity. The expatriate label irritates him: Stow points out that his ancestors have been moving to and fro for centuries.

Would he ever move back to Australia? 'Not while my cat's alive!'

Randolph Stow

1935–2010

**Bruce Bennett**

A couple of years ago literary scholar Tony Hassall described Randolph Stow as the ‘Vanishing Wunderkind’ of Australian literature.<sup>1</sup> A writer who left Australia for Britain and international travels in 1960 when he was 25, Stow lived in England more or less continuously from the age of 34—a remarkably opposite trajectory to that of Patrick White, with whom he shared many similarities.

Stow’s autobiographical novel, *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* (1964), is a classic of Australian literature, as is *To the Islands* (1958), written when he was only 23. His poetry, especially *A Counterfeit Silence* (1969) has been highly praised.

Randolph Stow, known to family and friends as Mick, was born in Geraldton, Western Australia, on November 28, 1935. His infancy and childhood were spent in regional Australia. He attended primary and secondary schools in Geraldton before moving to Guildford Grammar School in Perth for his senior high school years and the University of Western Australia where he studied Law (his father was a solicitor) before switching to Arts. By the time he graduated with a BA majoring in French and English, in 1956, Stow was the author of a novel *A Haunted Land*, published in London, which

was followed by *The Bystander* and a first book of poems *Act One* in 1957.<sup>2</sup>

In the late 1950s Stow took a succession of short-term jobs, mixing university tutoring at Adelaide and the study of anthropology and linguistics at the University of Sydney with jobs in Australia's north-west—where he was a storeman at the Anglican mission to the Umbalgari people at Forrest River. In 1958, as a youthful 23-year-old, Stow had his third novel *To the Islands* published in London and the United States. He was government anthropologist and later a cadet patrol officer in the Trobriand islands, where he contracted malaria and suffered a serious breakdown and depression, as does his protagonist in *Visitants* (1979), his first novel completed in England, which is considered by some critics to be his finest work.

Stow's period of expatriation commenced in 1960 when he travelled to England and signed the contract with Macdonalds for the publication of a second book of poems, *Outrider*. But he kept moving, with winter in the Scottish Highlands in 1962–3 and the summer of 1963 in Malta. He had not yet shaken Australian soil from his feet as he returned for a temporary lectureship at the University of Western Australia in 1963–4 and to Perth in April–May 1966 where he wrote *Midnite*, his much loved children's book for adults.

During a Harkness Fellowship to the US in 1964, Stow visited 46 states and wrote *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* in a snowed-up orchard in Aztec, New Mexico. By the mid-1960s, the whirling dervish may have slowed a little. In May 1969, at the age of 34, he began to 'settle' in England at East Bergholt in Suffolk—in the Suffolk/Essex area from which both sides of his family were descended. In 1981, he moved to the port town of Harwich in Essex, where he lived until his death in 2010.

Stow received the Patrick White award in 1979, an award that enabled the then middle-aged Australian to buy the first house he had owned, near the docks in Old Harwich. White had sympathy and some understanding of Stow. But he could also be critical: *To the Islands* was 'magnificently done' but *Tourmaline* had 'Come to



grief in a lush labyrinth of poetic prose' (*Letters* 304). What seems to fascinate White is the elusive, will o' the wisp wanderer in Stow, the man who had mysteriously by the 1970s retired to the 'dank' English countryside of Suffolk.

More provocatively, White wrote to Stow in 1980 that his own self-portrait *Flaws in the Glass* would 'show those censorious heteros that some homosexuals can beat them at their own game'.<sup>3</sup> Despite such confidences—aimed perhaps at winning some confidences in return—White seems to have remained baffled by Stow<sup>4</sup>—an admission shared by other observers who content themselves with describing him as a 'loner'.

When Randolph Stow was asked to write his short essay 'Raw Material' for *Westerly* in 1961, he was in England and aware of a general British ignorance about Australia and Australians. This was compounded in Australia itself. What could the creative writer offer? Stow invoked the modernist Australian art of his time in the work of Drysdale, Nolan and Tucker as possible models. Such artists could evoke:

The feeling, the sense, what a Spaniard would call the *sentimentio* of Australia: the external forms filtered back through the conscious and unconscious mind; that is what these artists convey, and what I would hope to convey if I were capable of conveying all I can conceive.<sup>5</sup>

Instead of social realism, Stow sought 'the concept of a literature based on figures in a landscape, more naked and disturbing than a Border ballad or a Spanish *romance*, in which eternal things are observed with, always, the eyes of the newborn'.<sup>6</sup> This literary sophistication in search of the child's-eye view reveals the romantic in Stow and why he appealed to fellow romantics in Australia such as Dorothy Hewett.

At his death, aged 74, Randolph Stow was still living in Kings Head Street, Old Harwich, where I interviewed him in 1981.<sup>7</sup> His first regional English novel, *The Girl Green as Elderflower* had been published in 1980. A second 'English' novel, *The Suburbs of Hell* (1984) is set in a place that resembles Harwich but draws upon a series of murders in Perth, Western Australia, in the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> I was intrigued by the notion of this native West Australian who was formative in the creation of a local literature in his home state transplanting his roots to the English countryside. Stow replied to my question about the relationship of literature and place: 'At the age of 19, when I wrote *A Haunted Land*, I had about 15 years of memories of Geraldton to draw on and I now have 21 years of memories of Suffolk'.<sup>9</sup> That was in 1981. When he died in 2010, Stow had some half-century of memories of this region of England to supplement his still vivid memories of Western Australia.

Stow's heterodox religious outlook, which combined Christianity and Taoism became significant at different phases of his life and writing; and it is easy to imagine the intensity of his struggles for meaning and belief as he attempted to recuperate in England from the traumas of malaria, a breakdown and the sense that he was going mad. Unlike fellow expatriate Peter Porter, Stow did not discover a writing community in Britain that would nourish his talents and extend his audience. A solitary artist, he did not seek such communities. But Australians can be proud of this artist with words who evoked such memorable figures and landscapes of his homeland and of the ancestral region of England to which he returned.

\*An earlier version of this obituary appeared in *The Canberra Times*, June 10, 2010.

## Notes

- 1 Tony Hassall, 'Vanishing Wunderkind: The Great Oeuvre of the Enigmatic Stow', *Australian Book Review*, September 2009, pp 29–31.

- 2 Anthony J. Hassall, *Strange Country: A Study of Randolph Stow*.  
St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1986.
- 3 *Patrick White Letters*, ed. David Marr. Sydney: Random House Australia,  
1996, p. 535.
- 4 Marr, p. 643.
- 5 Randolph Stow, 'Raw Material', *Westerly*, no. 2, 1961, pp 3–5; p. 4.
- 6 Stow, p. 5.
- 7 See Bruce Bennett, 'Discussions with Randolph Stow', in *Westerly* 26: 4,  
1981, pp 53–61.
- 8 These were the murders of Eric Edgar Cooke, the last person hanged  
in Fremantle Gaol, on 24 October 1964. Stow was interested in the  
atmosphere of fear, suspicion and dread that infected the community  
during these years.
- 9 Bennett, p. 54.

Ave atque vale, Maxi

**Andrew Taylor**

This is not a sentimental poem  
he writes defiantly at the top  
of a blank page

this is not a sentimental poem  
merely a memorial to a cat  
who died when he was away.

He returns to an empty house  
opens the back door  
to a shadow that seems so ready to respond

to his ridiculous urge  
to call into the dark air  
'Maxi, Maxi, come here, I'm back!'

For Beate, on her 60th birthday

**Andrew Taylor**

Sixty isn't a magic number  
simply what happens between  
fifty-nine and sixty-one.  
The earth rotates regardless  
in its drift across the universe  
the weather pays no particular respect  
to the 30th June 2008—  
the seasons nod to the months  
but not to the year. Maybe trees  
feel the strength of their age  
as they become sixty—  
the suppleness of their branches  
the sureness of how they stand.  
Maybe trees are a possible image  
of you my darling as you grow  
lovelier every year except  
trees clutch to one place and you  
move like a bird observant and often alone  
over continents over centuries  
yet always it seems at home.

## The Roses

Sophie Sunderland

I lie on the couch. It is brown, and feels like a mixture of suede and velvet. It's a fluffy couch in that sense; it bristles and caresses my skin. I am almost naked because even though I am wearing clothes, I can feel the strong, supple fibres. I am plainly dressed. Jeans, tee-shirt, simple shoes that won't rub my ankles. She sits behind me on a chair. It cannot be as comfortable as my chaise-longue repose. Perhaps, when it comes down to it, that is the key thing that separates us. I don't feel like a patient here—well, not for the last six years at least—but the couch tells us that I'm the one who needs to relax. It is conducive. An instrument to solicit something from me, as if I may not volunteer it alone.

'I had a dream last night. I don't want to talk about it though.' A long silence. 'It's embarrassing.'

Silence. She is often silent for long periods.

The couch bristles into the backs of my legs. I rest into the pillows. Will she speak? I look out the window in front. At the top of the window are fronds of Jacaranda trees swaying in the distance. The sky is brilliant, blue. It is harder to be morose in the summertime. I don't mean that the moroseness subsides. I mean, the world is

floral, happy, the sky is clear, everyone laughs and springs out of bed and heads for the beach. People feel inspired to take the long way home and catch a glimpse of the ocean. Kids are allowed to stay up a little longer because the sun hangs around, postponing its coin-drop beyond the horizon. The new day greets them with open eyes, but all I see is the empty socket.

‘You were in it...Umm, okay. Well, it started out okay. I was in a therapist’s office; not yours. But in the same rooms as here. Someone else’s office. I was with a therapist, and I was lying on a massage table; one of those ones like in a chiropractor’s office, not very comfortable. I think it was vinyl. It was green. Anyway, I lay there, and a boy in the room told the therapist he was gay. She was rude to him. So rude he left. And then, it was me and her. She was blonde, with ringlets. I was afraid of her, and she laughed. She said she’s homophobic, and can’t help it. Her laugh was conspiratorial. She wanted me to laugh. I wanted to comply. But I didn’t want to tell her anything about me.’

Is she there? I can’t hear even the faintest of breath, or changing her position in the chair. She is absent, except, I know she is fully there, primed like a lion, watching, listening, perceiving, making discerning judgments. What attracts her?

‘And then, I was in your office. Lying right here. Now I speak about it, the dream feels very vivid. I was here, and, the couch started to turn toward you as I spoke. You were speaking too, quite a lot actually. You were chatting about the other therapist, saying she’s not that good. I was grateful you thought that. I felt safe again, except that the couch was turning as you spoke, propelling me toward you. I knew the moment would come when I would see you. I wanted to relax back into the quiet of not seeing you, of not knowing your chat. I wanted my normal therapy session. I hated that you were talking to me so.’

‘And perhaps you wanted the couch to turn around, to see me?’

‘Well, I must have on some level. Yes. Yes, I did. But I knew it was coming at a great cost.’

‘Yes.’ She agreed.

The room is a different quality of quiet now. I dare to relax further into the couch. It gives a little, as if it knows that now is the time. I feel my shoulder blades arc back towards one another in the pillows. The pillows are crimson, and always stacked neat and high on the end of the couch as if no one has ever seen fit to use them. Each time I come it's a new arrangement and settling in. I enjoy the crease and crush that feels like never-before.

'You haven't talked much about your feelings about the long break yet. It's coming in two weeks. Ten days, actually. I'm wondering where you are with that.'

'Yes, I know. I can't think about it. It's the long break. It makes me wish I lived in America. New York. Their summer is July–August so when all the therapists are on leave people can choose not to see their family. Ours falls smack bang in the middle of Christmas and New Year. The most depressing time of the year.'

I want to add, 'And you're probably having a great time with your super-perfect therapy-processed family where everyone and everything's integrated and talked about and thought about and set in place and cured and healthy. I bet your family has a great time making safe 'we're all messed up coz Mum's a therapist' jokes that carry no weight because we all know there's a sure foundation of love that binds the family together and helps them find new, appropriate attachments in the outside world that don't closely resemble each other but have enough resonances of Mum and Dad to signify health, not a complex.' She can't see the keen smile spread my lips apart as I take in the power of restraint.

'I wonder if the dream is telling us something here. You know, the dream dreams you, when you're ready to have it.' Her voice is light and nimble over these stones of words. My stomach sinks like she is dropping them in, one on top of the other, from height.

'I don't think I want to talk about how I feel about you. I don't want to open something up before you go. Especially with Christmas coming. I can't face my family like that. They'll have me for dinner.'

Nothing.



I stiffen. The cushions have their way, re-inflating in preparation to hoick me up and off out the door. The shaft of sun that has been playing through the window across my feet dissolves. With it, the air seems to cool.

‘You have full choice.’

Silence. Mine, this time. I breathe lightly, with a sense of daring.

Her voice nudges the space between us. ‘I am curious about what you said last week, about the roses. Do you remember what words you used? I’m afraid I don’t have the words right in my mind.’

‘I said it was as if they were reaching into me, and blooming right out of me. I couldn’t bear it.’

‘Yes, that’s right. Reaching into you.’

I pull a tissue from the large box that always waits patiently, its square head, parting mouth and paper tongue ready by the couch. It’s like a puppy, always ready to lick my wounds for free. Streams amble down my cheeks. I mop with a folded tissue, and go to speak. In a moment. It’s as if there’s a paw on my throat.

‘Yes, I feel like you reach into me. It terrifies me.’ It’s the small voice. I love when I have the small voice. It is hushed as a ballerina’s step. Hushed, and appointed through pain. ‘I don’t want you to go.’

‘I wonder what it is that is blooming in you, before I go, and take the long break; what it is that you find so terrifying.’ I take a deep, but muddled breath. My mind flashes the crimson bluster of a full bloom, petals glistening like newly polished appleskin. It is hard to fully expand my chest. I rasp for air in the wheezy way of criers.

‘Well, the roses were just so beautiful.’ Again, the breathy, hush voice. I know I am touching something valuable here. My hands are clammy, and moisten the tissue in my firm grip. My skin warms the fibres of the couch. Each bristle feels like the minute, hovering lick of panting puppy tongues. The first time we heard this voice was when I realised something important. I can’t remember what it was now, but I remember driving up the hill toward the highway afterwards. I turned the radio off and whispered, trying to hit the note again. I wanted to feel the rush and quiet of the hushed voice.

It is warm, and sure, and made of layers. It has a direct call on my tears.

‘They are so abundant. As I drive, every house, shop, park is a rose garden. Red, pink, apricot, yellow. I think it’s because we had so much rain last month. They’ve all come out. I find it aching, too much.’

‘Have you ever felt this way about roses before?’

‘No.’ I wheeze. ‘I don’t understand it.’

I pause, but not for long because the words want their way. ‘They remind me of how I feel about coming here. I don’t want to leave but I urge to leave. I feel the growth that I’ve done here. I know it won’t abate. Or I hope it won’t. I don’t think it will anyway.’

‘Perhaps the roses, and the dream, are taking you here, to thoughtfulness about what this room, this couch, this therapist mean to you. Especially about the break.’

‘I hate having to think about the break. I’d rather it wasn’t happening. I hate how it makes me feel. It makes me feel like a child.’

‘I think you fear that you will cut yourself off during the break. From what we do here.’ She shifts in her chair. I hear a shoe tap the ground as she crosses her knees, or stretches her legs.

When I get outside, the sun has shifted slightly and cast some new shadows across the front steps. I go down, feeling the weight sit back into my shoes and stack down on my ankles. My tee-shirt clings to my back, still clammy. The sky is bright and the air spirited as the warmest handshake. I cast my eyes down. A small skink is on the bottom step, grey and dead. I use the canvas sole of my shoe to skate it lightly onto the brickwork below, then nudge it, softly, gently into the flowerbed beneath the violas. They are pink as parasols.

There’s always the temptation to have a cup of coffee after a therapy session. It does the opposite of calming my nerves. I want to be ‘up’. Actually, I want to be out of my mind. I pass the cafe on the corner street, glancing in at the barista steaming milk at full screech. I wish she would raise her head, touch her beret and whisper espresso

so that I'm simply compelled to front the counter and place an order. But I move on past the electrical shop, the kids' vintage clothing store and then the real estate agent, and across the road to my car. I always get a park near one of the weeping bottlebrush trees that offer just a little shade and a shower of red bristles on the windscreen. I pull out, avoiding the lunchtime traffic that swerves in and out of the specially marked bays for the deli and sandwich store. A couple of tradespeople in orange vests and blue Stubby shorts emerge from the glass doors, carrying pints of Coffee Chill. They look my age, but with red-hot tans and crow feet where I have crinkles. My head is foggy. I take the beach road.

*I don't have my bathers. There are people around. I can just go for a wade up to my knees.* I swing into a park at Leighton, right opposite the metal footbridge that spans the railroad without so much as a sigh. I have only walked over the footbridge twice in my life. Once, to get a better view of the yachts in the America's Cup. The second, with a boyfriend in a restrained dash to get to the sand in time for sunset. Those dates must be fifteen years apart, but both times I loped along the wooden slats and skated my hand on the metal railing with the easy, earnest show of familiarity reserved for local icons.

The six o'clock sand is cool and fine beneath my feet. I walk lightly over the small dune and down onto the beach. There is no one here. Footprints and weed, but no bodies. The ocean is blue, and offers its reassuring sound. The waves politely fall and recuperate, no churn of sand, no foamy or impossible breakers. I don't stride ahead to dip my toe in. I know the tepid warmth, the salt, the keen thriving moisture of the air above. Before I can think my jeans are off and I'm striding into the turquoise mass, tee-shirt lifting with the height of the tide, and my head is clean under. I flip on my back like a seal, close my eyes, and sternly discipline mental facsimiles of *Jaws* into crackly, unlikely special effects.

Cool, cool water.

'Cool, cool water.' I look up, wondering if I should be mortified. She laughs and splashes me with a friendly wink.

I grin, and sit up, find my feet on the ocean floor, kick a weed from my ankle in case it slinks around and reveals itself as an invertebrate.

‘Hi.’ I’m a little sheepish. I’m obviously in my clothes. She wears a Speedo bikini, burgundy and sensible, revealing a wrinkled stomach. C-section. Her hair is mid-brown curls with flecks of grey, cascading to her shoulders. There’s a curvature to her shoulders that suggests weak-mindedness, or perhaps resignation.

‘Not many people here today.’

‘No.’ I reply.

I go to say Do you come here often.

‘I can’t find my dog.’

‘Oh?’

‘Gorgeous golden labrador. She’s six months. I’ve been walking up and down since three o’clock. She must’ve got out the front gate and come down. Don’t s’pose you’ve seen her. I’m waiting for my bloody husband. He’ll get her. She’s done this before. Soon as she hears his voice she’ll emerge out of the dunes or whatever she’s got herself into. Bloody snakes up there though.’

I wonder why she is in the water and not the dunes. Perhaps she wants the reassurance of being near someone. Me. We turn and share a glance at the dunes that persist terribly, insistently, up and down the coastline. They’re interminable, and line the length of the continent with potholes of quick reptiles, sunning goannas that have tiny teeth, scratchy saltbushes and shrubbery, dugites that hate dogs, sand that bites at your heels. I remember being embarrassed by a pang of envy once that was so strong it rated murderous; all because a friend’s boyfriend let her ride on his back as he locomoted up the dunes to the car under the sizzling midday sky. Her feet dangled teasingly from the loops of his arms, high above the treachery of the solar-charged sand. I threw my towel down and stood on it for relief.

‘What’s his name?’

‘It’s a her. Sally.’

‘Oh.’ Not the greatest name for a dog. Sal. Sally. Sal-leeeeeee.

I wonder why I didn't see the woman before. There is not even a towel on the shore. She surfaced from beneath a rock, perhaps. Searching down there for a furry bundle trapped in the reef.

'So I'm waiting for my man.' She snorts, and sprinkles water from hands cupped high in the air.

I return to my back and scull my hands back and forth. The symmetrical movements are sure and steady, keeping the velocity of inertia. I strengthen my in-and-out movements, feel the power of my triceps stretching and engaging, allowing my space to enlarge, my ripples to bear an influence on the slight movements of the water. I know the dog is dead. I haven't the heart to say so.

I can guess what happened. Some kid left a tray of Chinese food—fish, sweet and sour, or maybe lemon—on top of one of the posts that line the dune path. Maybe it was a day or two ago. They couldn't finish their tea so left it perched, a generous offering, on the wooden pillar, hoping someone would delight on the boon and finish it up. An adult passes by on her way back to the car and knocks the plastic tray with her towel. She sees the contents spill on the sappy-grey long grass that reaches across the path. She pauses, registers, then tosses the towel back over her shoulder and continues, calf muscles gliding up and down her legs as if gulping for air. Then the searing sun, the smell. Sniffs. Labrador vs crow. Ants. Puppy eats the stash. Chews grass. Desperately, bush to bush, chewing, sweating, spewing. Coughs and hacks, fumbling paws, eyes black and done-for. Sally finds a crevice or shady bit. The stench of short life calls the flies.

I look at the woman. She's older than she seemed at first. She shades her hand against her loosely curled fringe, and looks up toward the carpark. She could be an aerobics instructor, perhaps. In a community gymnasium, nothing professional. I look at the water rippling around my arms.

'I believe in mermaids. I wish I were one.' I thought it would help her if I said this. I thought it would help her focus on mythic proportions; prepare her for the carcass with a mind for the metaphysics of new life and debris.

She looks at me, unsmiling. I look back, agog, wanting to cough. I have used the hush voice. The question of her response scoops the air away from me, sends it rushing to her searching eyes. I hope for a whisper, or a tear.

We stand opposed, sculling our hands gently back and forth about our waists. My shirt sticks to my skin and I feel the promise of calm. The ocean surges quietly, registering only as a cool creep in the curves of our waists. It is as if we are held in the tame, finite grace of a giant vase. The sunset unfurls above us, brilliant and majestic as roses.

Light and dark lie together

**Annamaria Weldon**

If it were winter, at so early an hour  
this chalky strand shining the river's bend  
would be a charcoal crescent, banked

by brooding sedge and silver reeds. Mirror shallows  
polished as old photo-plates remembering  
vapour and light: first images

of sailing with you past Alfred Cove are vivid  
as the last, every solar year between  
untarnished as our wedding rings.

But darkness, growing out of sight, stalking your blaze  
at last foreshadowed an eclipse to come.  
Land-bound, drawn to the water's edge

we walked here, watched your breath take shape in winter air  
as though it were a gift you might bequeath  
and I could keep. Imagine that.

In this place, memories rise like mist, dawn's tattered  
and bleached prayer flags, their mantras known by heart.  
As though answering a koan

two pelicans slide down cloudless sky, languorous  
gliders, synchronised. Paper cut-outs linked  
at hinged wing-tips in dip and rise.

Transient brilliance limned by the reflecting river.  
Water-writing where, in vitreous blue  
lines, light and dark lie together.



Flying late light

**Annamaria Weldon**

Avocets drift on Lake Clifton  
sharp upturned bills feather cushioned  
on breasts, at rest red necks  
curved. A mild flotilla

though in the air this flock's fluent  
geometries of natural order  
pattern a wild beauty  
deliriously alive

flying late light they wheel and spin  
like translucent porcelain, gilt rimmed  
their glazes just fired  
in the West's blazing kiln.

library of the nautilus

**Meredi Ortega**

this is my favourite place to sit,  
in a maroon wave of leather with  
                                  the hard, heavy universe overhead  
no books on economics here  
i smoke seaweed cigars with the bones  
of a raja by my side, oh i know  
you will say this is self-indulgent  
                                  twelve thousand morocco bindings  
with gilt dentelles, edges, gills, moire silk doublures  
on waxy shelves of rosewood under whinstone and sea  
                                  but it is more a guilty pleasure  
as though i were part of this watery biblioclasm, this dry,  
                                  dry drowning of words  
after all, this was his greatest crime  
i read and re-read hugo and sand, he prefers  
natural history and science  
                                  so you see, i punish him in small ways

vermicelli

**Meredi Ortega**

i stir and think of erasmus and his animalcules  
how they moved through brass and glass,  
                    moth flurries in a jar of rice  
eels brought to boil  
                    in a rolling surging utterance  
flowers making couplets in the nuptial bed  
sex with the governess  
                    the laws of order gone,  
gone, lightning in summer, mont blanc the sublime  
                    of all the monsters born from this pot  
i take a strand between my teeth,  
think of a poet's heart fished from the fire  
and how it was put in a drawer like some dead thing

## Gratitude

Amanda Curtin

*Grief bakes in us, it bakes until one day the blade pushes in and comes out clean.*

*Anne Michaels, The Winter Vault*

She was just another Sadling at first, gaunt and small at the side of the road.

He and the journalist pulled up in the four-wheel drive, a rude intrusion of Doc Martens swivelling on gravel, the whumf of car doors, insouciant greetings, introductions. He left the two of them talking in low tones while he collected the camera case from the back of the vehicle and began setting up, framing, re-composing another portrait of Grieving Mother for tomorrow's edition.

It was a barren stretch of road, nothing much but bush between the school bus stop and the nearest crossroad. Hills suburbs. Who'd live here? If you want rural, go live in the country, there's plenty of it.

He sneezed. Apologised. Sneezed again. *Pollen*, he muttered from behind his handkerchief. All that wattle, the brilliant gold of it, startling against so much scrubby grey. Neither of them glanced

his way, and he heard familiar words stuttering brokenly from the woman: *a good boy ... never did anyone any harm ...*

She shaded her face with one hand, as though the weak spring sunlight was intolerable, needed to be fended off. In the other, she held a framed talisman to her chest. He knew it would be the precious image that was her boy, the light of him, the closest thing to memory.

Those were the three elements he would work with: the mother's face, the photograph of the boy, and the small white wooden cross behind her, marking the place where a car had, for some reason, swerved, skidded on the gravel and run him down. Could have been caused by a moment's carelessness, a glance down at a mobile phone. Or by a balding tyre. Or a rabbit. No one knew. The driver hadn't stopped.

The woman was still talking but the journalist's eyes had begun to shift, restless. A jerk of the chin. *Ready?*

He nodded. Ready.

*Thank you*, the journalist said, shaking the woman's hand, *so sorry for your loss*, and he strode back to the car, tapping at his phone.

His turn now. He guided the woman gently, a hand on one shoulder, positioning her so that the cross was in the centre foreground. *Turn the photo round to face me, that's right, good. Relax your shoulders a bit, just let it rest on your hands.* He indicated with his own, just below waist level, but knew that whatever he said would be futile; she would hold the photograph the way they all did, like an offering, a plea.

Pale hair blew in threads about her face. She removed the enormous sunglasses, and there it was, the Sadling look.

Was it the lens, what it represented—a window to the world—or some perceived inadequacy of empathy in him, or just the nature of sudden inexplicable bereavement that produced this expression every time? A need to impress on anyone who would look the gravity, the sheer bloody catastrophe of it; the magnitude of this loss among all others, its uniqueness in the history of the world's sorrowing. His camera bore cruel witness to the antithesis, the truth that there is

nothing unique about loss, that in spite of the particular contours of each tragedy, one person's grief looks much like another's.

It was the fifth this week.

First, the woman whose husband was thought to have been washed into the sea while fishing, who was desperate, she said, to warn people of the dangers of the southern coastline.

Then the parents whose daughter overdosed on E at a high school ball after-party and wanted to remind other parents that *supervised* did not, could not, mean *vigilance*.

The man with the missing son.

The woman whose brother-in-law murdered her sister.

Did readers of the newspaper flick past these faces, scarcely giving them a glance, or were they, too, alert to the similarity of expression and wonder whether something new, something viral, had begun to infect the marrow of the world, to cause so many stricken looks, uncomfortable reminders that life could be snatched away in the time it took to cast a line to the wind, to say ok because everyone says ok, to yell goodbye and slam the door behind you; that the unthinkable could happen to anyone and nobody was truly safe?

Those left behind were a tribe of their own, fated to walk the earth with difficult baggage, knowledge that the rest of us fear and do not aspire ever to have. He called them The Sadlings. No disrespect intended—it was a private naming and he would never say it aloud, certainly not to the journalists he worked with whose brisk disregard was part of their training. Couldn't blame them for that.

It was the tribe's blend of vulnerability and outrage that got to him, that look he saw in the camera's lens and heard in his head like a scream.

She flinched each time he clicked, the blade going in deeper, the camera probing for the limits of her pain. Oh, the *camera*. Right. Not him. Nice piece of exoneration there.

As he previewed the shots, he wondered what the camera gave in return for all it stole. An acknowledgment of grief—was that all there was to it?

*C'mon, mate! You right? I've got somewhere else to be.*

He looked up from the viewfinder. The journalist was levering himself into the passenger seat, phone still in his hand.

*Yeah, be with you in a minute.*

The woman was already half a block away, her back to him, walking.

*Hope you got a decent pic, the journalist said glumly.*

*Yeah. Well, the usual. Why?*

*Couldn't get a message out of her. She's off her head about the kid, of course, but that's about it. Doesn't have a beef with the way the cops are handling it. Isn't pointing the finger at the bus driver for being early. Still, I might follow that up, could be an angle there...He scribbled a note in his book. She's just, you know...*

*Grieving Mother?*

*Yeah. Where's the story in that?*

A week later, on his way to a job, he drove past the place where the boy was run down and noticed there were flowers laid on the little wooden cross, a wreath of something yellow. Plastic? He couldn't tell.

Making a small detour, he passed again a few days later, slowed the four-wheel drive, pulled over. In the rear-vision mirror, he could see there were more flowers, and something else. He got out.

Three wreaths now encircled the cross, flanked by two pots of seedlings. Petunias, just about the only plant he could identify by name. The pots were pretty dry. Hmm. He went back to the car to get a bottle of spring water.

A name had been printed on the cross in big dark letters: HENRY CARLSON. No date.

Two days later, he went out of his way to drive past the cross and found the pots had been planted out—and there were six seedlings now. He pressed his fingers into the earth. Damp enough. Some were even beginning to show dark-veined petals, pink and wrinkled. But

the weather was warming now, and these gravelly soils were not good at holding water.

The next day he had to drive right past twice without stopping because an elderly couple were standing there, looking at the cross. It pulled him up, made him think. He didn't want to have to explain himself, to be caught watering petunias on the side of a road in a suburb miles from where he lived. It seemed, well, obsessive. Still, on the next pass, the couple had gone and he pulled over. Had to.

Ah, that was new, that was what they'd been looking at: a photograph taped to the cross, laminated to make it weatherproof. The boy, about seven or eight, grinned as though he was used to it, not a child who needed to be told to say *cheese*. It was the same image clutched in his mother's hands in the photograph he'd taken of her grief.

*Hello again, Henry Carlson.*

Henry Carlson had nothing to say.

He walked back to the car and slumped over the steering wheel. There is nothing sadder than a smile on the face of a child who will never smile again.

Before long there were toys. A Batmobile the size of a matchbox car; a Luke Skywalker light sabre. A perfectly good book, *Captain Clawbeak and the Ghostly Galleon*. Ridiculous. One spring shower and it would be pulp.

He watered the petunias, pink and blossoming, and wondered who was leaving these gifts. A strange thought passed his mind: should he do the same? It felt foolish even to think of it; even more so to admit that he wanted to. What had got into him? He hadn't known the boy; had only met his mother once, and not under happy circumstances. What would Henry Carlson's mother think?

The least he could do was keep the book dry. He returned later with a thick plastic bag, the kind he used to use for proof sheets and prints before everything went digital. Perfect.

The day after, he had to fly to Brisbane for a series of shoots on the set of a film partly financed by his employers. It was a week before he returned to the place he now knew as Henry's.



But it was no longer just a lonely cross surrounded by petunias and an odd assortment of children's possessions. It looked like a campsite. A fold-up chair, a card table, a blanket on the ground. And Henry Carlson's mother, knitting.

Whenever he had time between assignments, he stopped by Henry's with some small offering for the woman in the fold-up chair: a cappuccino, a copy of the *West*. Often, other people were there—regulars who lived nearby, who paused for a chat on their walks. He even visited on a Sunday and found the people in the big house opposite the crossroad had brought chairs of their own and a hamper of sandwiches. Their daughter had been in the same class as Henry. *Crying shame. Beautiful little kid.*

Just as he was leaving, a stranger parked her car and came over to ask what was going on. Something to do with native forests? A protest?

Henry Carlson's mother looked at her blankly. *Yes*, she said, finally. *A protest. My son is dead.*

In time, Henry Carlson's mother started talking about her boy. It made her sadness bloom, hot and scarlet, but she told him there was more than one kind of sadness and the silent, absent kind had done its best to kill her.

Henry Carlson had loved muffins—caramel, chocolate chip, but not blueberry because it felt icky on his teeth. Henry Carlson had been growing petunias from seedlings with his class at school, learning about water and fertiliser and how much to use and how too much was a waste, and he'd wanted to plant some at home but his mother hadn't got around to going to the nursery. Henry Carlson had been a pirate all last holidays and had wanted a parrot for his birthday.

*Sometimes I make the cross disappear*, she said, pouring tea from a thermos. *And the toys. Everything. He's just at school, not so very far away.* She looked up. *Is that weird, is there something wrong with me?*

He didn't know. *Does it help?*

*No. Sometimes.*

*Being here—does that help?*

She shrugged.

He wanted to know why she came but didn't like to ask, because Henry Carlson's mother was wearing an eye-patch that day and her hand shook as she offered the thermos again.

Weeks went by and one of the neighbours erected a canvas umbrella, shade for her pallid skin. On a Friday night, a group of locals got together and brought sausages, buns and a Primus stove. *Got a generator on the boat*, he overheard one man say. *Can fix you up with a fan, right as rain*. The pile of toys grew—thirty of them, forty—most left anonymously after dark when Henry Carlson's mother went home to rest, dreamless, if not to sleep. He still had an urge to leave one himself, for reasons he couldn't explain, especially as he knew that Henry Carlson's mother had begun to worry about them, picking them up, examining them, fretting because Henry Carlson had *never* liked the Wiggles and his loyalties concerning the Batman–Spiderman divide had been very clear.

One morning he arrived with hot chocolate and a brownie and found the Shire Ranger trying to move her on. There had been complaints. Reports of cooking. By-laws had to be observed. Shire property. When the Ranger started on about road safety issues, he stared at the man, waiting for some recognition of irony that was not forthcoming. But when the word *vagrancy* was mentioned, he felt compelled to intervene, since by now Henry Carlson's mother had closed her eyes, had left to pick up her boy from school, not so very far away.

*She isn't homeless*, he hissed.

*It's a matter of perception.*

*Perception? Try facts. She has a house two blocks away. She's a ratepayer, mate; she pays your wages.*

The Ranger gestured widely with both arms. *And all these books and stuffed animals and whatnot. A fire hazard, at the very least, what with summer approaching. A disaster waiting to happen.*

*You don't know what disaster means, mate.*

*Please...* Henry Carlson's mother raised her palm, a signal for stop, but her eyes remained closed and he didn't know which of them she was pleading with.

The Ranger was insistent, said he'd return at the end of the week with the paperwork to *expedite the matter*. His voice dropped as he said goodbye.

*The shire is not unsympathetic to your terrible loss, Mrs Carlson. I'm sorry. Really. We're all sorry.*

Sorry. Right.

He went back to Henry's place the next day with a plan. Camera in hand, he was already composing: the cross in its little flower garden, the pile of tributes, the photograph. Henry Carlson's mother knitting as she talked about her boy, weeded the petunias. He'd get that lovely family from up the road back, smiles of support from the locals.

*The paper'll be on to this in a flash. They'll send Jack to interview the neighbours. Doubt the Ranger'll want to go on the record but someone from the shire will bloody well have to.*

But Henry Carlson's mother had lifted a big school bag onto the chair and was packing away the thermos, folding the blanket.

*What're you doing?*

*He isn't here.*

He paused, unsure, then played along. *At school again, eh?*

*No. But he isn't here, is he?*

She began to sway and he caught her awkwardly by the elbows, afraid she would crumple, might simply fold into nothing.

*Sit*, he said, *please*, and he retrieved the thermos from the school bag and poured strong black tea into the lid.

*When they began leaving things for him, I thought yes, of course. He's here. Of course...Why else would they do it?*

*I don't know.* He looked at the parrot on top of the mound of toys, brilliant in its lime and yellow plumage. *Maybe...to pretend it didn't happen...I don't know. Maybe for you—thought they were helping...*

She shivered, rubbed a hand across her eyes.

*Maybe because grief is too hard to look at...*

For a moment, she was still. And then she nodded briefly. *Will you take a photo before I leave?*

He would print the photo and send it to her, Henry Carlson's mother kneeling beside the white cross, surrounded by toys and flowers. It was unposed and taken hastily, a point-and-shoot; he hadn't wanted to see the Sadling look again. But when he downloaded the file, he clicked on the shot to enlarge it.

The face that filled the screen, grave and clear, spoke to him, without screaming, about her grief. Henry Carlson's mother told him she'd had a boy who was a pirate, who had an interest in petunias and liked *Star Wars* and was picky about his muffins, and she'd loved him for seven years and loved him still, and he was everywhere now.

Ward K

**Paula Jones**

I imagined more noise inside as people talk whispers,  
strain their conversations through slightly clenched teeth.  
Sometimes someone dreams like a dog in the night,  
startled, wet-nosed, limbs running to involuntary escape.

Upstairs is Communicable Diseases. It has the only public toilet,  
up the wide cement staircase and through the heavy, closed doors.  
It is laughable in this sterile place, but I drag my sleeves over my hands  
when I push open the door, only to find I cannot bring myself to pee here.

Is paranoia catching?

In Ward K cigarettes are currency and the courtyard is the casino where  
bets are made in long, trailing lines, one after one after another.  
Brown seed cigarette butts scatter about our flat feet; toxic confetti.  
The only fanfare is the smoke thick and heavy as delirium.

Medication is a must, it is the daily bread; the sacrament.  
No-one resists the temptation. It is the only clear window out.  
You are porcelain here. Your veins pulse blue and violet  
in your new web-skin. There is a seething undercurrent.

It is surprising how red blood becomes when it touches air.  
You tell me it looks black and it smells menstrual.  
Nurses flap like night moths along the bright-lit corridors,  
their flat shoes exhaling stale air like a child's wheezy toy.

You talk about *Getting Better* like it is a destination,  
a holiday for when you have the time, or the money.  
But we both know it is an unhealed scar, a ridge of skin  
where the blood has boiled and cooled underneath.

When we were children the dog house was our castle  
and the quiet dog the only dragon we had to slay.  
In your half-smile I see a girl, the tinsel jangle of bracelets  
and the scent of patchouli beneath the choke of smoke.

# The Blue Sock

**Dick Alderson**

Last night,  
the cat calling  
sonorous, mouth-ful:

in the morning sun  
a blue sock  
on grey pavers  
near the rain-washed  
red bin

how can one depend  
on such a cat?

## Just a Few Simple Questions

Deborah Hunn

And then I'd say: 'Well, you know these days the thing I really resent Liz is that my life is no longer my own.' Anyway, I suppose that's the sort of thing people would assume I'd say if anyone ever asked me that particular question—'How do you deal with your celebrity?' Which, let's face it, is not bloody likely, now is it?!

Hang on a minute, I know I've gone off the question—I'm not thick you know—I'll get there, but as these kids never listen to me—*Yes you Damian! And don't eavesdrop on me when I'm on the phone! Funny how you can get the wax out when you want to!* Hmm, anyway, it's the least you can do mate, given the amount of time this has taken up. Just a few simple questions my arse!

Anyway, I mean, if I was ever on one of those interviews, like, maybe with Mike Munro—he's stacked on the weight these days though, hasn't he? Looks like a full on beer, pie and chips man to me, no working out at the Gym on that front—or even that Peter Overton bloke, or Liz Hayes—better maybe Liz Hayes (more sympathetic, although she's getting a touch of the Jana-itis these days—or maybe you're too young to remember old Non-Event?). Harvey? Yeah right. Sour lemony kind of bastard, isn't he? Like



he's sucked on a bad home brew—and it's the most excitement he's had in years. And fatty Munroe—yeah I know he's with the other lot now—still, he'd carry it off like it was a police interrogation, or worse, a playground interview with a retard. Then he'd make all sorts of sarky comments in the voice over, while the camera panned back to show me lounging around my palatial heart shaped swimming pool, sipping martinis in my four thousand dollar designer swimsuit, or whatever. Can you imagine the letters they'd get, trashing me? 'Pretentious bloody tart!' Which is precisely what they would have wanted of course, the *Today Tonight* and *Sixty Minutes* lot, or whatever the crap's called now—I'd have lived up to type then, wouldn't I? Oh yeah, I know it's types you're all looking for. Yeah—you too mate. *Damian, get out of the fridge will you! No you can't. Tea'll be on the table in a minute—in a minute. On the table. Well you can do what you like at your father's—if he's prepared to put up with it—but here we eat at the table.* What? Oh yes? So you say. No types. No preconceived notions to this little confab? Sure. Dial this suburb at random did you love? Thought you might get Penny-Bloody-Wong then?

Fair enough—you've got your allocated areas, not your choice. Anyway—it's often as much the fault of the nitwits who go on these shows—I'll give you that—I mean, it's the tall poppy thing isn't it? Anyone with half a brain knows the interviewers are only out to make you look like a dickhead, so I say why act like a dick and give them a head start?

Sorry? Was that a ha bloody ha I heard mate? Floored ya with my earthy homespun suburban humour did I? *No! No—Lisa—leave the puppy alone. No he does not like it. Does he look like he likes it? Would you like it if someone did that to you?* No, I don't trust the Australian media if that's what you're getting at mate. What? Well you're asking the questions aren't you? Anyway, what sort of survey is this again? It's near tea you know. You've got all my vitals, surely that will do?

All right then...a few more.

Hmm. Overseas media? Listen love, I don't trust any of them. Not a one. *DAMIAN!!!*

Do I like to watch Oprah? Oh Praaa? Oh Pulhease! Still I can see her doing the interview with me—after I'd won the Oscar. It would be, like, done in armchairs—with a large indoor plant at the side, tasteful, of course, not obviously a rubbery fake, behind us, maybe to the left, and a sort of rich-coloured feel to the room, and the chairs would be that nubbly material, and striped, maybe a dark blue and that kind of restrained pinky shade they use for covering sofas and chairs that have names like 'Regis' or 'Windsor' when you see them advertised in a sale catalogue for some furniture warehouse that's having its absolute clearance sale, 'everything must go', for about the third time in six months, or whatever. And there would be a jug on the coffee table, made probably of Bohemia crystal—like the tennis players always used to get, although I don't think they do that anymore, Christ knows the cheque is more than enough—and two glasses, and the jug which would be always about two thirds full of water, no matter how many sips we took—although Oh Praa never sips much. I suppose they fill the jug up in the ad break, just in case anyone thinks the show isn't real. You know—intimate—because if you have too many people scurrying around in the wings with clipboards and water jugs, tripping over wires and all that paraphernalia with their high heels while the camera's rolling then the illusion is shattered don't you think? No one believes it and no one can relax and it all gets a bit suss, like the whole thing's been you know, fixed—kind of, like they've met at the bar beforehand and she's said—'well look I'll ask you this, and then you can say that—or else you can say'... whatever. So you can't really have some clipboard person come on and refresh the water jug while the show's on air. The reality just doesn't hold up. I mean, most people know it's all crap anyway, at some level—but they want to believe it.

Well, despite what your lot think I actually don't give a pig's bum about some of the celebrities. Personally I didn't believe a word Tom said about Nicole back in the day, when he was on *Oh Praa* while

they were married, lots of luvvy dovey nonsense about ‘Nic’ this and that, but it was obviously all a set up. Then he came back and did the stupid fucking couch jump! Jesus! And remember the time they had the gay man in the audience, with all those women, asking Tom some leading question? Cheeky bugger—and it does make you wonder. They claimed they never had kids coz he was firing blanks...still, I’ll bet Nicole could tell a few stories if her lips weren’t sealed by that million-dollar kiss off. Of course, the Holmes girl popped out Suri—but Jesus you only need a test tube and a big wad of hush money really. Course there was Penelope Cruz for two seconds too, but it all seems a little too pat really doesn’t it? And she was in an Almodovar movie after all, which is a dead give away if you ask me. And that Woody Allen film pashing Scarlett Johansson.

Oh yeah—that’s right. Fancy that? I know all about Alomodovar. Ha ha ha—it’s a joke...Well whadaya know? I thought someone like you would get that. That’s all right sweetheart, rest easy—an ex of mine brought home *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down* coz he thought it was gonna be raunchy. Course it was, but I don’t think he got it. He can’t read subtitles—like most of the population—in fact I don’t think he could read, full stop! Actually they need subbies for *Op Raaa* too—half the time I don’t know what the fuck she’s talking about, even though she shouts right into the camera like a retarded foghorn on testosterone. *Lisa!!! Damian could you put the puppy in the laundry love. In the laundry! Now!*

How often do I watch it? Oh you know when I’m here—days I’m not working—and I feel like veging out, like you do—well like most normal people do, but probably not you I imagine—no just kidding—and there’s nothing else on. I don’t really keep count; anyway sometimes they have specials on during the evening, so you shouldn’t assume I’m talking about the daytime version of it should you? Mmm—well all right, but don’t make assumptions about your demographic. Oh yes, I know the terminology all right lovey— I didn’t come down in the last shower you know. I mean its not bloody Beirut or Bangladesh out here buster. Some of us can actually do the

three RRRs, despite what they tell people on *Four bloody Corners*. Anyway, how much do you bloody watch Oh Praa then? Come clean. I'd bet you'd just love to be on it yourself—write a book or something and have it on Oh Praa's book club—course you would love, even if you'd deny it.

Look, have you done this survey yourself? How'd they recruit you? Bet it wasn't Job Start or whatever. What did you say you were again? *Oh for God's sake Lisa, you're old enough to do that for yourself now. Damian—help your sister. No I can't do it. What's that? Just you watch it there matey—I'm sure the puppy could go a few sausages.* What? Attack of the ankle-biters—didn't catch that. Come again? Oh, graduate researcher for the Department? Earning your kneepads is what Monica called it—now there's an example of where a college education can get you. Sometimes a cigar is just a fucking dildo! A dildo for fucking a dill!!! Still, poor little bitch—who cares now? Or ever cared—just dirty joke fodder...

What? Come again?...as the intern said to the President. Oh 'in conjunction with your Master's thesis.' Well there ya go. Isn't the term Master's a bit sexist these days? I'd quite like to be a Mistress myself. Mistress of the House—ha ha ha. What? Yeah—fucking hilarious mate. Anyway, I've got to get this tea going, so let's get cracking or I'll have to pull the plug.

Well, okay. I think why those kinds of shows appeal to people is because it's just like having some famous face in your own living room having a chat—'up close and personal'—that's how you're supposed to put it in the jargon isn't it—'up close and personal'. Course you know how to phrase it so much better than I do—'up close and personal'—just like in your living room and you can ask them anything you want. Is that the sort of answer you were looking for? Course you were. Well maybe not anything, but then the people like Ooh Prah and even Liz Hayes and whoever else—Mike Walsh—*Damian don't hit your sister, let her watch what she wants, YOU'VE HAD YOUR TURN, let her watch what she wants, LET HER BLOODY WATCH WHAT SHE WANTS!!!*

Anyway, Mike Walsh—I used to watch him with my mum when I was slacking off from school in the days way back when... golly that was a long time ago, you never hear of him nowadays do you? He was another one apparently, like Tom (...Yeah...course he is...) although all Mum's lot thought he was lovely, not that they would have known, poor loves—before the Internet or even maybe the Video—no I think the Video was invented then for sure, because now I come to think of it Mum use to tape stuff.

Come again?

Oh look, I know that there will be some four eyed nerd quoted in the paper or on the ABC saying that it warps your ovaries and gives you passive something or other of the anal cavity. Pleasure perhaps! That would be a sin wouldn't it? Buggered if you don't get a bit of passive pleasure from watching something perfectly harmless—innocuous indeed—and buggered if you do!

What love? Innocuous. Yes indeedy—let me spell it for you—I N N O C U O U S.

Well, whad-aya-know—I know the word innocuous. And no, I don't think it's a jab you get before going to Bali. Because for starters they don't give you jabs anymore, now do they? See? Except for the pig-bug and you should get that anyway, seeing the number of swine there are around. Mind you that's not to say they shouldn't give you every needle in the book with the Bali Belly you hear of some bringing back. Absolute pukorama, not to mention what happens at the other end of the speculum...

Speculum love: S P E C U L U M. Yes that's right darling—speculum—tell your bosses at the Ministry they'll find it useful if ever you tell them where to stick it!

Hahaha—yeah hilarious aren't I? Bewdy bottler. Tickety Boo. No wucking furries. Regular character. Is that the sort of thing you want then is it my love? Bit of the old local lingo? Bit of authentic colour from the natives out in the burbs? Bit of bogunvilia? Is that it sport? Perhaps you'd just like me to come in and write your little survey form out for you? In my big deformed scribble, if you can spare me

a crayon. Cut out the middleman, so to speak. Viewing habits of the yobbos, the plebs, the great bloody unwashed!

No—just kidding. Roll on the questions.

What's that? Speak up? What job would I fancy if I didn't have my present one? Oh well, of course, you know my current situations in retail and domestic management are just so amiable I can't imagine life without them. *What? Hang on a minute Lisa, I'll be there in a second!* I really need to get on with the tea. Some one to help me? Oh sure, the kids just love watching Jamie Oliver and they are sooo anxious to try out the newest recipes—so easy you can whip 'em up with just a four star kitchen and a sizeable wad of bank notes in your pocket. Actually most Poms I know prefer baked beans or chips for a quick tea, but you never see them throwing that together do you? Oh yes, 'Lady Marjorie, now I'll show you how to open a tin of Heinz, luvvly jubbly.' Little ponce—cute bum—still he's getting more and more up himself, you watch. Easy recipes! Yes I can just see my kids getting into that...Masterchef?...Get a life will you?!

What?...*Damian will you turn the fucking television down!...no* I don't want to move onto the section about my views on children's television you opportunistic little prat...*no Damian I'm not talking to you this time, I'm talking to the delightful young man on the phone who's wasting my time and stopping you getting your tea!* What's that son: I seem a little agitated. Perhaps I'd like to go now? Well perhaps I might; however, we'll just finish the next few like you suggested, coz, although I am in a dreadful hurry, I'm starting to find it a bit therapeutic.

Now. Career alternatives? Hmmm. Were I ever to consider another appointment I think I'd like to be, now let me see? What would I like to be? What about Princess Diana? Oh no that's right she khaked it didn't she? Princess Mary then? She's still clinging on, poor suffering pet. Perhaps I should consult the latest edition of the *Woman's Weekly* for role models?...What? Speak up love, no need to be nervous. Do I buy it on a regular basis? Do I what! But only for the articles of course. Listen—I am Australian Woman hear me roar in numbers too big

to ignore. Actually Helen Reddy was in one I read ages ago—living on that Norfolk Island. Now there's a blast from the past...mind you she's another one that looks like she's stacked on the weight a bit—although she's nothing like that other fat old bird that lived there. The writer, what's her name?...you know, there was a big fuss about it and they made a mini-series, although personally I read some of it and it bored me shitless—you know—a blockbuster, something like *War and Peace* or *Gone With The Wind*? Richard Chamberlain was in it. He's another one, come to think of it...Julia Gillard? Big Ranga? Of course! Can't wait to set my sights on being PM and getting my special cover makeover—blow dry freebie from Tim and all. Mr Rabbit? Nah—sorry mate. Don't do politics ...or politicians. I've got two little shits too many in my life as it is—and they're a bit too quiet for comfort right now...

What is the highest level of formal education I obtained? Well Chuckles, what was yours? Answer me that? I mean, really, who the fuck are you to be ringing me up in the privacy of my own home—at nearly dinner time—and asking me all these bloody intrusive questions? What is it that you actually want from me? A few quotable quotes? *The Thorn Birds*. That's the book—and I am perfectly well aware that it's not *War and Peace*—although once Hollywood managed to fart around with Tolstio they were pretty much interchangeable. That's right—Leo Tolstio. Well there you go. Yes indeedy me old mucker, I know who wrote *War and Peace* and I don't think it was Helen Fucking Mirren. Or Jackie Collins or Harold Robbins or Posh Bloody Spice. Amazing!!! Just when you thought it was safe to go back to the local library, or invest in a modicum of culture at the book club, or the foreign ffillum festival, what do you know, you might find a prole like me browsing around.

Ah—coming to the end of our shift are we? Half your luck love. Now that I come to think of it, your job doesn't sound too bad. Perhaps I could do that. Ringing up and harassing ordinary busy people at inconvenient times with fuck-witted questions about a lot of crap no one except you lot actually takes seriously...*SHUT UP DAMIAN!!!!...*

Then reporting back to some overpaid wanker in charge. You're worse than Big Bloody Brother you lot.

Yeah, well of course, you are very lucky mate; of course you understand the frustration of people like me. Very generous of you. Very understanding—magnanimous even. Yeah—I could do your job and you could put a cork in it, come round here, and take over mine.

What's that? Oh—well ta-ta mate. Delightful to talk to you too. We must do it again someday. Maybe after I've finished me Pee Hayche Dee!!!

Little Bugger! *No, not you Damian!* He rung off.



# Elijah and the Ravens

Andrew Lansdown

*And the word of the LORD came to Elijah, 'Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.'*

*The Holy Bible, 1 Kings 16:2–5*

**i**

## **They Came from the West**

I followed the brook upstream into the hills  
and found the cave where I used to play  
when I was a boy and didn't know  
the world was a lost and lonely place—  
a place where holiness is hard as iron  
and the will is soft as wood.  
And forgetting myself I remembered  
when my mother and father were alive  
and I was loved and lived without care.  
Oh Lord, grant me a glimpse of your glory!  
Falling sheer down a sheet of stone, the stream  
collected in a pool before the cave  
then ran on, wrinkling around rocks,  
meandering in its shallow bed. A white heron  
thrust its spear into the pool. The wind  
ruffled its feathers and feathered the water.  
I climbed the ravine and awaited the ravens.

They came from the west, swirling  
like ash—black cinders in a blue sky.  
I scrabbled back to the cave and the birds  
alighted with a flurry at my feet,  
left the food and stepped with dignity back.  
They cocked their heads like misshapen dogs  
as I lifted the first morsel to my mouth.  
As if to disprove their plumage, their eyes  
were white—the iris like a sandstone rim around  
the black shaft of the pupil that plunges  
to the bottom of the brain. I submitted  
to their quizzical glances. Satisfied  
they strolled to the stream like sheiks:  
Bedouins in black robes, hands behind backs.  
First one, then another, thrust its beak  
into the running water, tipped its head back  
to let the liquid trickle down its throat  
where its larynx wobbled as it swallowed.  
It gave me pleasure to watch them drink,  
guzzling the water into their gizzards.  
Surely the Law is right: God made everything  
good. It was not until they had gone  
and I had eaten that I began to wonder:  
Who baked the bread the ravens brought?  
Who slaughtered the lamb for the meat?

ii

**The Raven**

The raven is a black and craven bird,  
a bird by the Law unclean.  
Its carrion cry on the wind is heard—  
the raven, that black and craven bird.

Yet it is the one the Lord by His word  
 has sent for my keep and keen.  
 Oh, the raven's a black and craven bird,  
 a bird by the Law unclean!

iii

### **My Sweet Blackbirds**

Aaah, we likes them. They has wings  
 like us, and feathers, too, them seraphim, them seraphs,  
 and they is white as our eyes is white.  
 Aaaw, caaaw, they is lovely, laaaverly, aaah!  
 And they is nice to us, yaaar, nice. Have some,  
 they says, have some. And they gives us meat,  
 lumpses of it. They doesn't toss it  
 likes we is yappy doggies or snorty piggy-pigs.  
 Naaa. They puts it right into our happy beaks,es,  
 puts it in, then pats us like what we likes.  
 Aaaw, nice. And they says, Have some more. Maaaw,  
 caaaw. Not so snappy, they says, but not snippy  
 or snaarky, naaa. Kind of kind, they says it, kind of haaappy.  
 Not so snappy, they says, and they smiles  
 and squiggles us under the chinny-chin-chin,  
 like what we likes. Aaah, we says, naaa, nice.  
 Good ravens, they says, you can't helps it.  
 Can't, caaan't, we says. And they says,  
 Though you be foul, you be fowl without fault.  
 Haaa, funny fellaaas, them seraaaphs.  
 And they says, You was riven and driven from Eden  
 by fault of Adam, poor ravens. Yaaah, poor us,  
 we says. We's spotless, we's all shiny in our blackness.  
 Adam, he's the one. Aaadaaam, naughty,  
 naaasty, kaaa. And they gives us more juicy  
 lumpses, chunkses. Taaar, we says, taaar.

Not so snappy, they says. Manners, they says.  
Never mind, they says, youse knows no better.  
Aaah, we says, we knows lots. We knows  
where the little sheepses is what say baaa, baaa.  
And we knows their eyes is yummy  
when they plops all bloody into the world  
from their mummies. Aaaw, caaaw, maaaaw!  
No more of that, they says, them seraphs.  
Look there, they says, and they points and bows  
and we squiz up—and it's *Him!* Yahweh! Yaaahweh!  
He is sunny-bright, but we sees him without squinting.  
We sees Him. Our eyes fill up with Him  
and our hearts go aaah in our throats, aaah.  
And we hops onto His throne, and He lets us love Him  
like He is our chick, our chickadee, our egg  
squawky daaarling. He chuckles like thunder,  
very big booming, and he pats us and pets us.  
Aaah, we says. Caaaw, laaaverly, aaah.  
And he says, Go, my sweet blackbirds,  
my black smoochies, go feed my prophet.  
Then He says sort of twinkly, Fill your beaks  
and follow my seraphs—they won't fly faaast  
or faaar. Haaa, He's joking us! *Faaast or faaar!*  
Haaa, we cackles, haaa! And we tips and flips  
on our backses and waggles our leggses  
and laughs and laaaughs our pecky beakses off.  
And we caaaw *faaast* and we kaaa *faaar*  
and we laaaugh, Haaa, good one, Yaaahweh!  
And we is so happy we do some faaast flappings  
and swift swooshings around His gleamy throne.  
And He clapses and says, Oh, my sweet blackbirds,  
my dark and stabby ravens, my daaarlings!

## Bullet Proof

Sarah French

Once you know that Sigel's father was killed in a robbery the year before, you read the story differently. It becomes all those walks to the park with your father, and willing your legs long as shadows in order to catch his stride. You remember the beach towel cape and trying to fly the circular route of the Hills Hoist. You remember your father, the way he held himself as if he was always wearing a suit even in shorts and those socks that swallowed his legs to the knee. You remember your father saying a girl should read Lorna Doone. Once you imagine two Jewish teenagers, the itch of their bad skin, the Great Depression, World War II, a future that seemed to have no exits, it would take an alien to save the world. You remember sucking the colour out of a twin pole and coating yourself with baby oil to fry yourself a tan. The hurly burly of the ocean, your father teaching you how to slip cleanly through a wave.

Once you know a radio actor's fading voice made kryptonite a plot device everything looks different. It doesn't matter that you come to these things again with the edge of forty like a paper cut waiting to happen and spending too much time with stationery and stationary. The poster for Superman II can never signify what it did when you were aching for sixteen. Christopher Reeve flying towards the 80s with the Twin Towers like two tall stacks of staples in a skyline behind him. You remember when your father started to stoop as if he was ducking something and the way his feet seemed blu-tacked to the floor. Then all those minor losses of memory—keys, days, promises. Sigel never would have invented kryptonite. You now understand the desire to bullet-proof a father, and how to wish them infallible comes after the shock that they're not.

## Log Ride, Hansaland Germany

**Helen Hagemann**

We enter this watery kingdom,  
the yippee ki-aye of the West with its replica  
log house, smokestack, a log flume  
that sprays into sudden bursts.  
Laughter runs amok as we glide  
along narrow canals, sense the air change as the bow  
opens curved waves, symmetrical wings.  
With each thump and twist, our children shriek  
at possible horizons, strike sparks of water  
that take us to cloud, conifer and ridgeback hill.  
In minutes we are beyond the lattés, souvenirs  
and gingerbread men, pausing over Sierksdorf,  
Lüneburger Heide with neatly clipped  
hedgerows, tulips, the purple hills of Sprötze.  
Beyond, Hamburg is in miniature  
with its shoebox houses, flea-size families.  
At the summit, the log ascends and the world falls away.  
White plumes soak riders on either side  
and in the distance the roller coaster approaches  
concert level, our boy rattling the rail for fun.  
In this moment that passes so quickly,  
like a German summer,  
our children shimmer in tiny droplets  
from an avalanche of foam,  
and when we alight  
another ride is necessary.

Latona

Sue Clennell

I'm not one to complain but  
I was hidden in a burqua of moonlight  
and still he hauled me in with  
a fish net of stars,  
put me in an amber spotlight  
with seeds too ripe        too juicy,  
twinning our embryo.  
Mother told me not to play  
with married men and look,  
here's Hera buzzing me like a blowie.  
I've had my fill of gods, destinies, and  
tin-pot philosophers with their classics.  
It's all right for the kids,  
Apollo can swan around the heavens  
and Artemis looks cool with a bow,  
but I am not the stuff legends make.  
Just a single mum with the reputation  
of a she wolf.  
The one who buys the toilet paper and mouse traps,  
drowns the mouse after.  
I've had to kill my own monsters,  
suffer my children morph  
into their untouchable godheads.  
I know I should be my own woman,  
but sometimes,  
just sometimes,  
I gaze at those pricks of light and  
look for a hole in the net  
to slip back through.

## House of the Red Witch

**Barbara Temperton**

There is a brown line, wider than others, snaking across the corner of Map 51. The brown line is a street, but it has no name. The red witch lives on the left at the western end of the brown line, the last house before the bus bay. Most of her neighbours keep to themselves but complain when her visitors park in their driveways.

To find Esther's place (she has been in many), follow the red witch's pathway to the kitchen door and knock. Do not ring the bell. You'll disturb the dogs. Knock quietly in case the red witch is sleeping. If she's awake, she'll come to you. You won't be able to see her, but you can speak through the screen. The witch is very old, grey-voiced. You'll hear her removing the tangles from her hair, the snapping of teeth from her comb as they snag in the convolutions of her narrative. Don't wait for the last knot to be untied, ask for directions immediately. Use your passwords. Esther's house is nearby.

The red witch will give you a ticket-of-leave, some of her business cards, and the name of the place from which you are to start, the place marked by the cross-roads. She'll caution you against high expectations and clarify the conditions of your ticket-of-leave. It will



entitle you to know only fragments of Esther. Beyond the limit of maps flight is recommended.

From the house of the red witch you must follow the brown line north. Do not be distracted by deviations. Esther's is the third property on the left past a street that has no sign. Exercise caution on entry. There is little traffic along this road but what there is moves very quickly. It is at this point that you should refer to the notes the red witch has written on the back of her business cards.

*Note: Esther takes long walks alone (she says) at midnight. Smokes too much. Cultivates herself with the same care as the man she lives with cultivates chrysanthemums.*

Scrawled on the very bottom of the first card:

*Their verbs don't conjugate so well in the present tense. They did better in the past.*

You will have no trouble in recognising Esther. She will be standing just outside her front door twisting a tea towel in her hands. You may join her if you wish, but she will ignore you. Esther is waiting for Marjory. Marjory, the woman next door, is slowly driving Esther crazy. Marjory is not at home, and the birds have arrived. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of galahs—whites, and pink and greys—the noise overwhelming. You might like to cover your ears with your hands. Marjory feeds the birds and every day more and more come. From every tree in the street: small branches and gum nuts, Cape Lilac berries and Poinciana pods shower into the backyards and doors and windows bang up and down the alley. Suzi Carpenter will be rapidly unpegging nappies from her clothesline and dodging fall-out, the pathways to her's and Esther's Hill's hoists vanishing beneath layers of ravaged vegetation and bird shit.

*Notes on Suzi: Suzi Carpenter grows beautiful tomatoes. Makes beautiful babies. Runs free-range hens. Uses garlic sprays, marigolds, and sawdust to repel snails.*

*Notes on Marjory: Marjory collects cats, has five live ones on her back veranda harvesting native birds. Her house is full of representations that will not foul the carpet.*

Like Esther, you, too, will be waiting for Marjory. As you wait you will become aware that Esther's partner, the gardener, whose name you do not know, is standing just behind the screen door whispering to her. You will politely pretend not to overhear and in truth you will have some difficulty making out his words, but it will become apparent that he is prompting her to go over to Marjory's house. The gardener is upset—outraged, in fact—by the destruction of his newly-budded chrysanthemums.

Marjory's heavily laden station wagon slews chaotically into her driveway. Esther has become very tense and the man more insistent. It will seem that Esther is in two minds. Marjory will be easing her monstrous body out of the station wagon, dragging shopping bags with her.

'More bloody birdseed,' you hear the man say.

Your attention will be diverted from Esther to the man inside the house and you'll wonder if he has really had enough why he doesn't come out. And then suddenly, for it will seem to you that you had no comprehension of her leaving, Esther will be walking towards Marjory who's slowly emerging from her groceries and the car, dragging her skirt from between her thighs. Her eyes, almost buried in the swollen folds of her face, blink in Esther's direction. A five litre bucket of Peter's ice-cream is about to topple from the seat of Marjory's car, with a frozen strawberry desert to follow. Marjory will lean against the car door and you'll notice with some surprise that under her weight the vehicle sags sideways. Bags of lollies, sugar-coated donuts and cakes will spill across the seat and tumble onto the ground.

*Note on Marjory: The time available to you is too short, too valuable, to spend it on observing Marjory.*

Esther is poised as though she is about to take flight though you cannot determine in which direction. Marjory scratches at her hip. Her skirt rides up under the activity of her fingers exposing legs like fence posts, but you are distracted from the sight of her thighs by a packet of biscuits, Cadbury, chocolate-coated, probably peppermint creams, that is about to roll down the slope of the driveway and

toward the road. It will be at this moment, the moment when the ticket-of-leave granted to you by the red witch will begin to approach expiration. This is the moment when the driver of the company bus will change gears.

*Notes on the bus driver: his German Shepherd has eaten three of Suzi Carpenter's broody hens. He used to teach mathematics at a private school in the city. There may be some validity to rumours of a scandal.*

The bus will be travelling too fast because the driver is occupied with algebraic equations. He needs to double-clutch to change down, to slow for the corner.

You'll notice during this suspended moment in time that Esther is still standing where you saw her last, but you'll be approaching the house of the red witch, taking your passwords from your pocket, preparing to open the gate, to take the pathway to the kitchen door. You'll be preparing to negotiate with the woman who answers your knock.

You take your place in the queue, acknowledging, with some surprise, that there are at least six people ahead of you. There's some sort of delay. Those ahead of you are restless. A young woman in a bright dress, the fabric blue with fine red lines slashed through it, is angrily tapping a large pink comb against her thigh. You stand behind another in a faded yellow tracksuit, her hair tied back in a neat pony-tail. She seems slightly familiar; something to do perhaps with the fact that she has a freshly-washed nappy in one hand and several pegs in the other. You can smell the scent of marigolds in her hair. Ahead of her, some two or three places closer to the door, a shopping bag hanging from her hand, is a very large, highly-agitated woman.

'This isn't good enough!' she yells. 'It just damn well isn't good enough...How dare she!'

The woman in the tracksuit leans forward, pats her on the shoulder. 'It's all right, Marjory,' Suzi's voice is reassuring. 'We'll sort it out,

I promise.' She glances at her watch. 'I wish she'd hurry, though, the baby's about to wake up from his nap.'

A nagging feeling, not only recognition, is bothering you. Your stomach rumbles, embarrassingly loud. It's been some time since you've eaten. Everyone turns and looks at you. One man, the second closest to the door, pausing over percentages he is estimating on a pad, his pencil poised in mid-air, wears a particularly aggrieved expression. Marjory's left her place in the queue.

'Have one of these, it'll tide you over.' She offers peppermint creams.

Suzi tugs urgently at her arm. Marjory has left her place in the queue; she must return immediately, she cannot negotiate her position in the text if she is out of line!

But Marjory delays.

'I can't stand to see another body in pain,' she says.

The man standing closest to the door snorts. He is nursing a very large bunch of chrysanthemums. His mouth, you notice, just before he turns away from your line of sight, is rising in a smile, the sort of smile that knows a secret. The queue closes up. Marjory, waddling up and down, can't find her place again. She squeezes in between you and Suzi.

'You don't mind, do you? It is rather urgent.'

She offers you another biscuit. You are not aware of having eaten the first. You shake your head, distracted by the fact that you are now closer to the door and the man with the chrysanthemums has gone. You have not seen anyone leave by the gate.

Marjory removes a wad of well-handled papers from her shopping bag and hands them to you, her smile conspiratorial.

'I'll fix them,' she whispers. 'They can't do this to me!'

As you take the bundle, a loose sheet of paper slides out. You try to grab it, but then the whole bundle falls from your hands. Marjory is angry; she catches a page as it passes her face.

'You'd better get it all back,' she snaps. 'It's taken me hours to get the order right!'

You collect the papers one by one. As the bundle grows, you become aware that they all seem to be referring to Esther. You slow now, read each page as you collect it.

*Note on Esther: Esther has opened a bank account in her own name.*

Next: One of the red witch's business cards, on the back:

*Notes about Esther: A rumour is being circulated that Esther danced under the boom-sprinklers on the town oval at midnight. Esther claims this rumour is false and malicious.*

Marjory hisses at you.

'Hurry up! If they see that, I'm done for!'

But you've already seen the note. *Esther, Tonight, 9pm, the usual place. Barry.*

You turn to Marjory.

'Who's Barry?'

Marjory—a finger to her lips—nods towards the front of the queue. The man with the pencil and pad is scowling at her; he pulls his cap down over his eyes and returns to his equations.

Some of the notes are held together by a dressmaking pin. As you turn to the next page the sharp tip of the pin sinks into your thumb. There is a gasp behind you, Suzi sucks her thumb. The man with the chrysanthemums, having returned to the queue, examines his flowers for thorns. Barry takes a tissue from his inside coat pocket and dabs it at his hand. Marjory ransacks her shopping bag and removes a Band-aid, glares at you.

*Note on Esther: the company bus was parked in Esther's driveway for four hours.*

*The man Esther lives with was not at home.*

*Notes on Marjory: Marjory has been seen looking through Esther's windows at night.*

Marjory is becoming anxious, watching you and rocking from one foot to the other.

*Note on Marjory: Marjory drinks only Earl Grey Tea.*

*Note on Esther: Esther has removed Earl Grey Tea from her shopping list.*

*Notes on Esther and Marjory: Esther and Marjory have not spoken to each other since Marjory had morning tea with the bus driver's wife.*

*Beyond the Limit of Map flight is recommended.*

Below:

*Note on Esther: In summer, late at night, after the street lights are turned off, Esther can be seen running under the sprinklers on the oval. She is never alone.*

Marjory snatches the bundle from your hands and storms back to her place, cursing under her breath. A trail of paper flutters behind her. You recollect the scream of metal upon metal from the bus's gearbox as the driver shifts from fourth to first approaching the corner.

When you return to the place where you'd been standing your companions have gone and the witch's door is closing behind the woman in the blue-red striped dress. There is low rumble of voices coming from the other side of the door. They are matched by a warning growl from the witch's dogs as they appear from around the corner of the house. At the same time, the door opens and Marjory emerges, her angry words directed to the inside of the house.

'Bloody birds of a feather,' she snarls. 'I said I'd do it. I don't have to like it!' She storms back down the pathway.

The larger of the dogs, black, yellow-eyed, bares its teeth and charges, its fellow in its tracks. You desert your post, fall into Marjory's wake, closing the gate behind you just as the hysterical dogs reach it. Marjory, her shopping bag swinging from her hand, is marching resolutely down the road. The road is dusty, pot-holed, you see Marjory stumble at least once. You stand watching until her bulky figure vanishes into the shadows of the overhanging trees. You didn't get to know Esther as well as you'd intended. The episode with Marjory had diverted you, you realise, despite the warnings. The detours have exhausted your patience. Returning you yell at the dogs, kick them into retreat. Placing your hand on the cool brass doorknob, you take a deep breath before you open the door to the house of the red witch.

The red witch had drawn a rough representation of the layout of Esther's place (she has lived in many) on the back of one of her business cards. She'd given you a key. You closed the door behind you, quietly, although you didn't really feel that caution was necessary. You turned south. The carpet was as brown as the line that dissected the corner of Map 51. A crocheted rug is thrown over on the couch. On the floor, pairs of men's runners, woman's scuffs. A wooden rocking chair. On top of a table: two vases of white chrysanthemums, a sewing machine its light on, fabric—blue with a fine red stripe running through it—trapped beneath the presser foot, and an open container of pins, scissors, tailor's chalk...crumpled paper patterns discarded.

You did touch some of Esther's things, know that you held them and tested their surfaces with the tips of your fingers.

The passageway stretched before you, dark, cool. The first door on your right, the bathroom: on the floor discarded clothing and wet towels, a large-toothed pink comb. You recalled the red witch's assurances. The house would be empty, she'd said.

You heard nothing but the sound of your own breathing. Two doors on the left revealed empty rooms. The third as framed by bright light: before you entered fully you recall seeing a dressing table with a large mirror, blankets in a heap on the floor at the end of the double bed. Even before you saw movement, you sensed them. The man was naked, lying on his side, facing away from you: the woman hidden behind him, her hand tracing a tantalising line down the familiar track of his body, cupped over his waist, his hip, his thigh. You thought that shock had welded your feet to the floor. The man's hand resting against the side of her face he moves to kiss her as she rises.

'Did you hear something?' she asks, and looks toward the door. She sees you and it seems that you can see your own reflection in her eyes.

The man, a stranger to you, turns.

You ran out of Esther's place (she has been in many); conscious all the time of heavy footfalls behind you. You increased your speed as you reached the road. Two blocks away, you passed Marjory's station

wagon, and three blocks after that the company bus sped past, the driver's face a blur.

The house of the red witch wasn't too far away. Breathless, you slow, walk toward it, avoiding the pot holes, fumbling in your pocket for your ticket-of-leave. You find it with one of the witch's business cards. The ticket still has fifteen minutes till expiry.

*Note on business card: refer to ticket-of-leave.*

*Note on ticket-of-leave: Early conclusion must be reported in person to the issuer. Failure to comply will result in immediate forfeiture of all exit capabilities.*

The red witch is refusing to answer your knocking on her door. The dogs have barked to the point of exhaustion and now they've left you. You have your passwords ready.

The red witch cannot come. She is immobilised in her kitchen, on her stool, the telephone dangling on its cord, dial tone buzzing. She cannot speak to anyone at the moment. She has just received a call from Esther: her next door neighbour, Marjory, has just been run over by the company bus.

There is a brown line, wider than others, snaking across the corner of Map 51. The brown line is a street, but it has no name. The red witch lives on the left at the western end of the brown line, the last house before the bus bay. Most of her neighbours keep to themselves but complain when her visitors park in their driveways.



## Our Mothers

**Maree Dawes**

When we gather them in our arms  
we must be gentle, they are so light now  
clothing disguises lack of substance and tone  
sun splattered arms  
which once held three children in one lap  
are not enough to enfold  
life        memories        love

what does this soft white hair  
know of beehives  
perms and razor cuts?

there is no memory  
for the way of walking  
you would think with age  
steps would grow ponderous  
not fast short steps  
half stumbling in a fall

if she paused in her living room  
I could hardly see her  
still life

I remember her in their apartment  
saying she felt too small in the double bed  
too small in her bed, too light in our arms  
such a tiny frame to hold onto her past

she lived with her treasures  
went quickly  
her heart, they said  
and the feeling  
her body could not hold  
the weight of memories  
another day.

# Sun in an Empty Room

(Edward Hopper, 1963)

**Shane McCauley**

To wonder at absence.  
Reduce to essentials  
so that sun is all  
with/without a beholder.

Maybe a mouse somewhere.  
In old age finding yourself  
one with a luminous  
sun-filled room  
simply light

and a variety of shadows  
that anyone might recall  
looking back  
from great distance

from time's long hall  
and seeing  
yes this room painted  
exactly  
as it is here

emptiness so achingly full  
of light.

## Geometry of Echoes\*

Rachel Robertson

*And always, in our daydreams, the house is a large cradle.*

Gaston Bachelard

Robert and I sit at the kitchen table while Ben plays a computer game in the next room. My right elbow rests near the darkened ring I made years ago when I put down a hot casserole dish to answer the phone. Further round is a chip in the bevelled edge, caused by the side of a ladder Robert was carrying after he retrieved a dead rat from the roof space. There are plenty of texta marks, too, where Ben's scribbles have overshot his paper. The table is now in Robert's new house—or rather, the house he is renting from our friend Janet.

'The house looks quite good now, with furniture and everything,' I say. 'Given it was rented out for a decade I'm surprised it's in such reasonable shape.'

'There's a few dodgy lights and so on. But it's okay.'

\* The names of all individuals in this essay have been changed for privacy reasons.

In the pause that follows, we hear a character from Ben's computer game singing in an American accent.

'I'd forgotten the colourful paintwork here,' I say. 'Cheerful, isn't it? Especially the lounge room with the blue and gold.'

'I like it,' says Robert. 'Remember when we danced in that room? When was it?'

'Thirteen years ago.' It was when we first met.

'Thirteen years! Gone, just like that!' says Robert, waving his arm over the table. We sit in silence for a while and I imagine the story of our marriage and separation laid between us on the table, taking very little space, leaving only cracks and marks behind. And Ben, of course.

'He's been alright then?' asks Robert, jerking his head towards Ben.

'He's been fine. Just as usual, really.'

Robert nods. 'He's a tough kid.'

When we first told Ben that we were separating, we didn't even use that word. I just said that mum and dad had decided we would each have our own house and that dad would be moving into his new house in a few days.

'Will I live alone until new year's day?' asked Ben.

We reassured him that he would always be with one of us. Then he wanted to know all about dad's new house and go to visit it. I'd prefaced this conversation by saying to Ben that we had to tell him something that might shock and upset him, but he hadn't seemed shocked or upset.

'It isn't real yet,' I said afterwards.

'He's hiding his feelings,' replied Robert.

The next morning, Ben came into my bed and said, 'I'm too sad to go to school today. All I can think about is this two house business.'

'I understand,' I said. 'It's very hard, this sort of change. But don't worry, mum and dad will still be with you lots.'

'I'm too sad to go to school,' Ben insisted.

'I'm sorry but you still have to go to school, Ben.'

‘What if I’m naughty because all I can think about is this two house business?’

‘I’ll talk to the teachers. It’ll be okay.’ I thought he would argue more, but he obviously knew he wouldn’t be able to skip school so he dropped the idea and went to watch a video. I noticed he chose a cartoon version of Hansel and Gretel.

As we walked to school, Ben asked me, ‘Do you have anything to tell me today that will shock me?’

‘No, Ben,’ I said, ‘I won’t be shocking you today.’

Ben was at school the day Robert moved out. When I collected him from school, I reminded him that dad had moved out and that he had taken a lot of furniture.

‘Has the sofa gone?’ asked Ben. He’s always loved jumping on that sofa.

‘Yes, I’m sorry darling. Dad’s taken that to his new house.’

‘Oh, good,’ said Ben, ‘now I can play in the space behind it.’

Today is Ben’s first overnight stay at Robert’s house. I told him he could take with him anything he wanted, so we came loaded with three bags of Thomas the Tank Engine toys. For the last six months, they’ve been his favourite toys. When I think about it, a train set seems like the perfect transitional object. As soon as we arrived at Robert’s house, Ben put the Thomas engines in his bedroom, then ran into the garden to play in a jungle of nasturtiums and weeds, before going to use the computer.

‘I think he’ll like it here,’ I say.

‘Yes, he will,’ agrees Robert.

We’ve started agreeing a lot.

‘I’ll leave you to it, then,’ I suggest. Robert nods, so I say goodbye to Ben and drive home. For the first time, I walk into an empty house, knowing that Ben will be spending two nights with Robert. Its 5.15pm on a Friday night and I can do whatever I like until Sunday morning. I sit in the lounge room (which now has only one chair in it) and stare at the wall. Invisible waves of pressure strike me. I didn’t expect this. I thought I would feel relief now that Robert had finally moved out

and we could move on from the failed negative space between us. I thought I would be glad to have some solitary time, free from the demands of husband and child. Instead, I am in pain. I desperately want Ben back here with me. My body feels hollow and fleshless. I try to make sense of this. I remind myself that I want Ben to spend time with Robert; it's a good thing. But it feels wrong. Eight years old is too young for a boy to leave home. The grief I feel is the primitive feeling of a mother animal when her cub is torn from her body.

Darkness opens in front of me as I realise the enormity of what I have done. I have taken away Ben's home.

What *is* home? Is it the place we live, the body of our mother, a myth? Is it, as Edward Relph says, 'the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community, the dwelling-place of being'? If it is this 'irreplaceable centre of significance', how can we help our children feel at home in their world? Does a parent have to belong first in order to help her child belong?

Although I use the term home to describe the house I live in, I use it only in the most everyday sense. 'I'm off home now', I say when I leave work, or 'I've got a copy at home', about a book someone wants to borrow. I never think of my house as Home (with a capital), just the place I live. And although Perth has been my place of residence for the past twenty-one years, I don't feel a huge sense of attachment to it. I like living here, appreciate its beauty and benefits, like being near family and friends and having a good quality of life on a lowish income, but I don't feel a strong connection to the place or the landscape. I've always thought of myself as someone, not exactly homeless, but without a homeland, as if I'm missing the bit of self that other people have that binds them closely and deeply to a geographical place.

Home in the sense of a structure or geographical place is familiar to me. Home as a complex, deeply resonant psychic space that connects to geography—that sense of home has always been puzzling to me. Puzzling in the sense that I never really felt 'at home' in one place

more than any other, though at the same time I recognise that I feel a type of homesickness every autumn. Can you be nostalgic only for a season of your childhood and not for the place or time itself? Is that nostalgia evidence of connection to a home?

When Simone Weil declares that 'To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul' I half-agree, half-rebel. I imagine it must be powerful to have a strong sense of roots, a felt connection to and continuity with a family or community in time and place. But then isn't this notion of roots, of a home and homeland, responsible for causing a great deal of conflict and distress around the world? On the other hand, the more mobile our society is, the more the idea of home as a source of identity seems resonant. The greater the exile, the more significant becomes the notion of return.

I've come here before, in my dreams. I've walked along the final block of this cul de sac, past our special tree (gone now, or at least I don't recognise it), and stood staring up at the house. Heavy and dark, its shadow falling across me, cooling the air. In my dreams, I have seen the blackberries growing wild along the low front fence, the forget-me-nots lining the path to the front door. I have held up my hand, as if to knock on the wood, and waited. But in my dreams I don't enter the house. I turn from it—or perhaps the house turns from me.

I've come here before in waking life, too. We moved in soon after I turned two, left when I was ten to emigrate to Australia. That's old enough to have clear memories, but in fact they aren't clear, they are cloudy, incoherent, shapeless visions of a time that must have happened to someone else. Returning, for the first time in thirty-five years, I wondered how much I would remember about this house and small English village.

Earlier this afternoon, glimpses of barns, red brick houses and silver trunked trees leapt through the bus windows like arrows. I couldn't say I recognised this place, but it moved me, some sort of pain was entering me. After twenty minutes, the driver nodded to me—this was Keele



Village. I stood. The bus door opened. And I stepped out into the smell of my childhood. A powerful odour of woodland plants, mud, cow dung and damp air swept into my body and tossed me back in time, so that I stood by the roadside once more a child. There was the field where we fed the horses. There was the village church. There was the Village Green. And there, at the edge of the Green was a pedestrian crossing, the black and white striped poles topped by orange spheres, like large lollipops. One of the lights wasn't working. As I looked at the zebra crossing, with its lopsided flashing, it was as if nothing had changed. The very same lights—one working, one broken—had been waiting all these decades for me to return and cross the road once more.

Would I know the way to our old house from here? I wasn't sure. I had a map in my rucksack, but I decided to give my feet the chance to find their own way. And they did, taking me along Station Road and then left at The Oaks and up a path to Church Plantation, the name of our road. So that I am standing here at the corner near number 5, ready to walk down the final section of Church Plantation to our house, number 1.

Everything is new. Everything is familiar. It is as though I have never been here and yet have always been standing here by the row of silver birches on Church Plantation, about to enter my own childhood. I walk towards the front door. The blackberries and forget-me-nots are gone. The front garden is now a neat grassy area, with none of the wildness I remember (if it *is* memory, and not dreams or imagination). The door, too, has changed. It is no longer the heavy ornate black and gold door of my memory but modern and painted green, with a gold stick-on number one and a buzzer instead of the lion's head knocker. The bricks around it are the same, though, creating a strange decorative entrance. My hand shakes as I ring the bell.

The door is opened by a teenage boy with white hair.

'Hi,' I say. 'My name is Grace. I used to live here forty years ago and I was wondering if you would mind if I took a few pictures of the house and garden, maybe had a look inside the house. I'm sorry if I've come at a bad time.'

‘s okay. I’m sick today, that’s why I’m home.’

‘I’m sorry if I got you up.’

‘You can come in,’ he says and wanders back into the house, leaving the door open. I follow him in.

‘It’s changed a lot in forty years,’ I say, ‘not surprising.’ The young man doesn’t answer, just leans against a doorframe, looking disinterested but not annoyed. I look around the ground floor. The walls have been painted, the floors carpeted, the windows replaced. There is a modern kitchen and laundry—no sign of the old scullery—and the wall between the dining room and living room has been knocked down, creating a larger, differently shaped space. The three French doors have been removed and an extension like a sunroom has been added, incorporating some of what used to be the back garden. My mother’s study has been turned into a home gym. I can see from all the clothes and gear around that several teenagers live in this house, as well as their parents. There is the stuff of modern life everywhere, making the house seem quite unlike the hollow echoing place of my childhood. Between the kitchen and the study/gym, I see three stone steps down to the cloakroom. This I remember. I stop and take a surreptitious photograph of my feet on the top step. Once down the steps, to the left there is still a toilet (though not the same toilet) and to the right a space for hanging coats and a washbasin. This room is immediately recognisable: in thirty-five years it has hardly changed.

Several weeks later, when I show my family the photographs of our old house, they laugh at this one of my blue-shoed feet and three cream stone steps.

‘What on earth did you take that for?’ asks one sister.

‘Oh, the downstairs bathroom,’ says another, ‘the steps used to be red tile, didn’t they?’ My mother says, ‘I remember when you were two, you used to sit on those steps and cry when I went to the toilet. You didn’t even like being that distance from me.’ And my youngest sister says, ‘Ah. That room, where we could go for privacy,’ in tones that suggest that for her, too, that room was powerful.

It's true I went there sometimes just for privacy—a bathroom is a good place to be alone in a family of seven where bedrooms are shared. But entering the room was always a chilling experience. It was cold in there with the stone (or was it red tiled?) floor and no central heating or sunshine. And it smelt slightly dank and musty from the coats and boots in the corner. It was the last sort of room you would ever imagine wanting to retreat to, and yet I did. It was in this room as a young child, sitting on the toilet, running my fingers along the mortar lines between the cream tiles on the wall, that I dreamed of adventure, of magical creatures, of finding a passage to a world like C. S. Lewis' Narnia. I was always sure that this room, this cold, unforgiving nothing-place, would be the site of transformation.

Even then, I had some notion that you had to pass through the chilly dark places in order to enter the world of colour, the world I saw in books and wanted to have for myself, the mythic world of idyllic childhood.

If home, like childhood, is part myth, then it is surely a double-edged myth. There is the idea of home as nurturing and protective and there is the idea of home as a place of confinement and darkness. 'For our house is our corner of the world' says Gaston Bachelard. The house of our childhood is inscribed in us, he says, in 'a passionate liaison of our bodies, who do not forget, with an unforgettable house'. The body of images that constitute our original house give us an illusion of stability, a place of refuge, a concentration of intimacy. Surely this notion of intimacy and refuge is dependent on a nurturing mother or carer? Is it not the interplay of the house and the mother's nurture that creates a home?

And what about the dark side of home, the house as a huge echoing place of empty shadows and impenetrable secrets? This, I think, has been many people's experience of home. How does this affect our experiences of belonging?

For women, perhaps, there is another dimension to the myth of a home. As children they may have witnessed their own mother's responsibility for caring for house and family and understood, at some level, the burden this responsibility entails. In my teenage and young adult years I was sure that having children would enslave me. Later, I began to think that my generation could have children but still be autonomous and liberated. It wasn't until I had Ben that I realised the complexities of the relationship between mothering and autonomy. It took experience, also, to teach me that the act of caring for another is a gift to oneself as much as to the other.

Ben appears to be taking our separation in his stride, but still I worry about him. He seems to get upset or irritated more easily than usual.

'Ben,' I ask him before school, 'are you worried or upset about anything to do with having two houses? Or do you feel that two houses is too much work?'

'No,' he replies, looking puzzled.

'Would you tell Dad or me if you were confused about things or if two houses were too tricky?' I ask.

'No.'

'Oh,' I say. 'Well, I'll rephrase that. Ben, I'd really like you to talk to me or Dad or someone else if you ever felt worried about anything. Could you do that?'

'Okay,' he says, as he wanders into his bedroom, clearly not interested in the conversation.

After a short while, Ben comes back into the kitchen. 'Mum, I want to ask you something important.'

'Sure,' I say, thinking he is going to talk about how he feels after all.

'If Percy and Thomas had a race, who do you think would win?'

'Oh,' I say, 'who do you think would win?'

'I think Thomas would.'

'I expect you're right Ben.'

Later, when I pick Ben up from school, his teacher tells me he was sent to the school office for swearing. She's very apologetic about it.

'We know he doesn't mean it, but we have to send him to the office,' she says.

'Oh, I agree.'

'Poor Ben, he was shaking and white-faced when he got to the office and so the Deputy was very gentle with him.'

Afterwards I say to Ben, 'Do you know why you swore at school?'

'No.'

'Maybe you were angry. Ben, if you get angry with someone, maybe with Mum or Dad, that's okay. But swearing is not okay. Ben, are you listening?'

'Yes,' he says. 'Mum, what's an angry face look like?'

I show Ben an angry face. Then he goes to get a big sheet of paper and starts drawing faces. At the top of the page he writes, 'What are you feeling today?'. Each face has a different expression and the name of the feeling underneath. After he has drawn forty feelings, he brings the paper to me and shows me each face, asking me if he has ever felt that way. As well as the usual happy, sad, angry feelings, he has included dismal, smug, ambivalent and provocative.

'Have I ever felt provocative?' he asks.

'I would say so, yes.'

He's also included some made up feelings.

'What's "statey" mean, Ben?'

'You know, when you say to me, "Don't get into a state Ben".'

'Oh, I see. And what about "mongrateful"?'

'That's very grateful and happy. Have I ever felt mongrateful?'

'Maybe.'

'When did I feel mongrateful?'

'Well, when do you think?'

'I don't know.'

'Well,' I suggest, 'what about on your birthday when you got presents?'

‘Yes. Now I’m going to make another face chart to take to Dad’s house.’

Over the next few weeks, Ben spends a lot of time making face charts, standing in front of the mirror making faces and talking about the different faces we make with different feelings. I think it’s his way of telling us he is experiencing powerful emotions without having to express the emotions themselves or understand where they come from. Often, it seems impossible for Ben to talk about or understand emotional things directly, but at some level he grasps what’s going on.

Ben loves to give me multiple choice and true or false questions. One day, slipped in between two true or false questions about school is an interesting multiple choice question about Frog (Ben), Toad (me) and Mole (Robert).

‘Mum. Here’s your next question. Toad, Frog and Mole all lived together. But then, Mole moved out, leaving Frog and Toad alone. Did Mole move out because:

- a) Frog was sick
- b) Mole wanted to go to the moon
- c) Mole was tired of Toad nagging him about fixing up the house,  
or
- d) Mole wanted a house of his own?’

‘Oh, let me see,’ I say, trying not to laugh over option c. ‘I think, is it d?’

‘Yes, correct.’

I love this question so much I ring up Olivia and tell her about it. She laughs too.

‘He’s so clever,’ she says.

‘I never nagged!’ I protest, half-serious.

‘But I love the moon thing because of Robert and his astronomy,’ says Olivia.

‘I know. And the way he hints that Robert might have left because he was “sick”. Sort of like children who blame themselves for their parents separating.’

‘Do you think he feels that? Feels that it’s his fault or to do with him? Because he’s autistic?’

‘No. And we’ve told him it isn’t. But at some deeper, unconscious level, he might feel that.’

‘He seems happy, though, doesn’t he?’ says Olivia.

‘Yes, I think he’s okay.’

I’m always reassuring people that Ben is happy. Few adults can handle the thought of an unhappy child, even though our own memories should tell us that children are often sad.

‘Do you mind if I just walk up the stairs?’ I ask the young man who now lives in the house that was once my own. ‘Then I’ll leave you in peace.’

‘Yeah, okay.’

I walk to the top of the stairs, carpeted all the way to the edge now with proper underlay and glue, not the old way of half carpeting with tacks, leaving an edge of wood either side that had to be swept. I catch a glimpse of the bedroom doors. Only one door is open and I don’t feel that I can look into any of the rooms, even though I’d like to see the bedroom I once shared with Pauline and Olivia. I know it will be changed: they will have recarpeted and repainted there as well, and because it is above the new sunroom I know there will no longer be climbing roses by the windows. I walk back down the stairs and to the front door.

‘Thank you very much for letting me look around,’ I say. ‘Do you mind if I walk in the garden for a moment and take a few photos?’

‘Nup, go ahead,’ he replies, obviously glad to see the back of me, but still remaining polite. As I walk back to the front door, I catch a glimpse of a small area of wooden floor where the carpet has been taken up, perhaps because it was damaged or because a cupboard was once there. I recognise it immediately. It is the elaborate golden-coloured parquet floor we walked on every day. This floor, more than anything, shows the passing of time. It is scoured and damaged, a

dull mustard colour, the wood shrunken so that the joins between each shape are filled with dirt. Because I am on my way out and thanking the young man, I see this, but don't really focus on it. Only later do I realise the impact it makes on me. Only later does this square of damaged parquet enter my dreams, throbbing like a living creature, calling me in the darkness.

I walk around the house to the back garden, and see that it, too, has changed. The grey stone wall, the garden beds, the funny stone post that held up one end of the washing line, the thirty-two cherry trees and the baby oak tree I grew from an acorn—all of these have vanished. Instead, there is a lawn and a few shrubs, a sensible, low maintenance garden. It doesn't matter, though. Our real garden was the woods, the patch of trees and woodland plants that stretch from the boundary of our house to Keele Road on one side and the Village Green and Station Road on the other.

Before I go into the woods, I have one more place to visit. I walk down the path from our house to the 'hole in the wall', a place I would never go alone as a child, a place of fear. The hole in the wall is a break in the brick wall that runs one side of Keele Road. To get to school, we would walk down to the hole in the wall, cross the road and then walk along the footpath until we reached the school. Once Olivia started school as well, my mother would simply walk us to the hole in the wall, help us cross the road and then leave Olivia and me to walk together to school. It was understood that we would hold hands and that Olivia would walk on the roadside of the footpath because of my fear of traffic noise. In my memory, huge trucks would hurtle past us, throwing up a wave of dust and leaves, their roar amplified by the echoing wall. I'm smiling now as I stand in the hole in the wall, waiting for a truck. It doesn't seem like a very busy road now, but eventually, a few cars drive past. I don't find them any noisier than cars on any other road.

Now is my time to visit the woods. This is what I have most wanted to do and I'm nervous that it won't live up to my expectations. I walk slowly, softly, along the muddy path into the woods, moving



out of the sun and into dappled shade. I take ten, then another ten steps and I am here. The pale green light, the soft-edged shadows, the bird calls, the smell of rotting leaves and damp earth, the feathered touch of bracken on my ankles, the humid, slightly warm air—all of this enters my body and finds a deep and powerful echo. I find myself profoundly moved and can only stand here, drinking in every sensation. For the first time in my life, I feel I have discovered the landscape of home.

I walk in the woods for an hour. I see birds and a squirrel, no people. I see yellow and pink and blue flowers, stinging nettles and dock leaves, bushes with perfect places for a child to hide, moss and fungi on the roots of trees, the old brick hut that was the centre of our childhood games, the path to the Village Green that Pauline used when she took Olivia and me to feed the horses. As I see and smell and touch, words seem to float up through me. Long forgotten words that belong to this place. Tree words: sycamore, maple, larch, beech and hawthorn. Plant words: buttercup, horsetail, celandine, dandelion, willowherb and wood sorrel. Bird names come to me as if called up by the sound of their songs: woodpecker, robin, house martin, wren, swallow, jackdaw, starling. I remember now the hedgehog we once left milk out for, the kingfishers we watched by the lakes, the white swans and their hisses, frog sounds on summer nights.

From the edge of the woods, I can look over our garden and see the back of our house. Our bedroom windows catch the afternoon light, like square torches signalling to me. I remember the inside of our bedroom with its three single beds in a row, Pauline's *escritoire* and my mother's dollhouse. Already, the inside of the house as it is now has slipped from my mind. Instead I see images from the house of my childhood, long held memories and also newly discovered ones, as if my body had stored them all these years and released them only when I entered the woods.

Eventually, I leave the woods and walk across the Village Green, recognising a horse chestnut tree we used to collect conkers from,

passing the single flashing beacon at the pedestrian crossing and ending up back at the bus stop.

It seems that I do have a sense of home after all. I just needed to revisit my childhood landscape to find it.

Like Bachelard, I found that ‘We do not have to be long in the woods to experience the...impression of “going deeper and deeper” into a limitless world’. We may interpret the image of the forest to represent not just limitlessness but also the mysterious unknown, the unconscious. Here was where my child self did her playing and dreaming, the precursors I suppose to the adult writing. This small patch of woods seemed vast to me then. As an adult, in another way, it is still vast, or rather deep. If the house is what Bachelard calls a ‘geometry of echoes’, then the woods, too, have their own echo, like a deep-sea radar.

‘Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are “housed”’ says Bachelard. We never leave behind our first intimate space, our large cradle of the house. We carry it with us to every other house we live in and every new space we encounter. It lives on in the imaginal and in our night dreams.

As Mary Pershall describes it: ‘Home has become for me, as I suspect it does for most migrants who stay away long enough, a kind of myth. I can still have the myth, shimmering inside my head, while I get on with life in my current home.’

‘What are you doing, Mum?’ asks Ben.

‘I’m sorting through photos.’ Its six months since I visited Keele and eighteen months since Robert and I separated. Ben goes back and forth quite happily every week. Ben and I still live in the same house. I wanted to move, but I didn’t think it would be fair on Ben. He loves the garden here: the fish pond and waterfall, the grape vines, the fig tree, the secret passage behind the jasmine, the two eucalyptus

trees standing taller than he can see, even the overgrown vegetable patch and waist-high weeds please him. He's almost the age I was when I left England. I want him to grow up with a sense of place, of belonging. To know what home means.

'Why are you sorting photos?' he asks.

'I'm choosing one of you to print on a mug for Dad for Christmas. As a present. What do you think? D'you think it's a good idea?'

'Yes.' After a pause, Ben says, 'Mum, families should have Christmas together. So I think you and me and Dad should have Christmas breakfast together.'

'That's a lovely idea, Ben. I'm sure we can do that.' I'm happy that he knows we're still a family, even though we live separately. 'Now, do you want to help choose a photo of yourself?'

'No thank you.'

'Oh! Okay. Well, do you want to look at these photos of Keele? You know, the house I lived in when I was a kid.' I'm going to choose twelve photos to put on a calendar for my siblings.

'Yes,' says Ben, shuffling onto my lap. I cradle his back and rest my chin on the top of his head.

'Your house was bigger than mine,' he says.

'Yes, you're right. It was a big house. The garden was about the same size as ours here, though.'

'Did you have a trampoline?' he asks.

'No, we didn't.'

'Did you have a pond?'

'Not in our garden, no.'

'Did you have a scooter?'

'No. I'm not even sure they made scooters in those days.'

'What did you play then?' asks Ben.

'Oh, we played in the woods. See these photos of the woods? That was our paradise.'

'What does paradise mean?'

'Oh. A paradise is a wonderful place. Somewhere really special.' Ben thinks about this for a while.

‘Mum, this is my paradise,’ he says, waving his right hand, so that I’m not sure if he means the two of us, our house, the garden or just the world as he knows it, this moment, this place.

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Blue Ink

Daniel Stavely

I remember your hand  
tattooed  
with blue ink

that seeped into  
the fine lines  
of your skin

and lingered  
after the reminder  
had been served.

I remember your hand  
tattooed  
with the words

of grown ups—  
*meeting*  
*service*  
*reports*

fading slowly  
over the weekend  
to a clean page.

I remember your hand  
the prominent veins  
just below the skin

a palimpsest  
of blue ink.

## A Drink at The Retro

### Georgia Richter

The girl from England wasn't like us. Her legs were long but her ankles were thick. As if to draw attention to them, she wore ankle socks. She had no chin, but her eyes were *as blue as cornflowers*. I noted this with satisfaction; I had read enough books to know what the English were like. I was transfixed by the ferocious burst of sunburn across her nose. Her blonde hair had dark roots.

'Too much dyeing,' we whispered. At fourteen, we were into glossy hair with gelled up fringes. We only ever bleached with lemon juice. Our white school socks were pulled up tight below the knee.

'She's a bit freaky,' my friends said, but I didn't mind. She invited me to a pool party in the basement of her apartment. She told me there would be boys.

Laura was the only girl I knew who lived in a block of flats. When I went to Laura's, she met me in the downstairs lobby, and took me to meet her parents. They were on the seventh floor. Her mother stood at the counter in the little kitchen. There were bottles of wine on the counter, and a bowl of nuts. Her father sat in the only armchair. His eyes were half-closed.

‘Mum and Dad, this is Erica,’ Laura said. ‘Erica, this is Constance and Brian.’

‘Oh—it’s *Connie!*’ said her mother. She wore an iridescent dress scooped low in the front. Her breasts were large and on the scooped halves I saw that the sun had bitten her too.

Her father had loosed his tie. He was one of those men who acknowledges baldness early and shaves his head instead. ‘Nice to meet you,’ he said, with lidded eyes. He took a handful of nuts, and chewed.

‘We’ll be in the pool,’ Laura said.

‘Be careful won’t you,’ Connie said, without much enthusiasm. Her father yawned.

‘What did you say your father’s name was?’ I asked on the way down in the lift. ‘Was it “Brain”?’

‘*Brian,*’ said Laura.

I thought: the Body and the Brain.

‘He travels a lot,’ she added. ‘Mum doesn’t like to be left alone.’

The pool was in the basement. Three boys came along that Laura knew. She let them in at some pre-arranged time. I wondered how she’d got to know them. She’d only arrived weeks before.

The boys brought beer. Laura took a bottle of gin from a bag.

‘Come on,’ she said, unscrewing the cap. ‘Let’s have fun.’

I tried to make my drink last. I disliked the way the alcohol ran into my veins and removed me from myself. I thought if I drank too much I might not be able to hold it all together.

One of the boys told me his name was Jo. He said he was Portuguese and he went to the local high school.

‘My parents run a restaurant,’ he said. ‘I can take as much beer from the fridge as I like.’

‘Do they know about that?’ I asked.

Jo laughed. ‘If they ask me, I’ll tell them it was my sister. If she complains, I’ll tell them she’s a lesbian.’



‘Is she?’

‘Probably,’ said Jo. ‘She isn’t interested in boys.’

I did not know what to say to this, so I didn’t say anything.

Laura turned off the lights. The water was blue and the underwater pool lights were orange. I took off my towel and jumped in the pool. Jo pulled off his t-shirt and put his beer down on the edge. He dived in too. When he surfaced, he swam up close to me.

We were fourteen and drinking without adult supervision in a basement swimming pool. My mother would have called it a recipe for disaster but she wasn’t there.

Jo took a mouthful of beer from his bottle on the edge of the pool. We were in the shallow end. He put his hands low down on my hips. They were warm in the cool water.

‘I’m drunk,’ he said.

‘Me too,’ I lied.

He kissed me. I kissed him back. My first kiss was left behind in more kisses. I closed my eyes. I had nothing to compare it with, but he was a good kisser. We kissed for a long time with our eyes shut and scarcely the water between us.

When I opened my eyes I saw Brian standing above me. His tie was still loose, but his eyes weren’t half-lidded.

He said, ‘It is time for you to go upstairs and get dressed. Your mother will be here soon.’ He said to the boys, ‘Good evening, gentlemen.’ He sounded like a proper Englishman.

On a different night Laura rang me to say that her mother had a knife. She said, ‘She’s going to kill Daddy when he comes home.’

She was crying and hard to understand.

‘Where is your mum?’

‘In the kitchen.’

‘Where are you?’

‘I’ve locked myself in my room. I have to wait for her to go to sleep.’

‘Why will she go to sleep?’

‘She’s drunk. She always goes to sleep.’ Laura whimpered into the phone. ‘You have to help me!’

But I couldn’t think of what to do. ‘I’m going to put Mum on,’ I said. ‘If that’s okay with you.’

Laura cried harder. I don’t know if she heard me. I went to get Mum. Then I sat in the lounge and read a book called *The Ogre Downstairs*, but I couldn’t concentrate. I felt cross with Laura. I didn’t know anyone who did things like that. Why had she rung me?

In our kitchen, Mum spoke to Laura, and then to Connie, and even got her to put the knife away.

She came into the lounge after she hung up.

‘Why didn’t she call the police?’ I said.

‘Brian was away on business,’ Mum said.

‘So there wouldn’t have been a murder, because he wasn’t there.’

‘No,’ said Mum.

‘Why didn’t *we* call the police?’

‘It may not have helped,’ my mother said. ‘She’ll feel sorry in the morning.’ But she looked perplexed, as if the answer didn’t seem quite right to her.

It was past my bedtime. I felt cross with Connie too. ‘They don’t look like the sort of people who would do that kind of thing,’ I said.

‘Poor Connie,’ my mother said. ‘It must be lonely for her while he travels.’ My father had been gone so long she could make statements like that without any irony. ‘It’s not the first time, I gather,’ she said. ‘The poor kid. You should look out for her.’

What about the poor Brain? I thought. He’s the one she wanted to kill.

Jo got my number from Laura. He took me to Victoria Street, to the restaurant his parents owned. We went on a Monday morning. The restaurant was on a corner, with big windows facing both ways. Jo showed me the kitchen. Someone had been polishing the silver. It

was all laid out on a table: forks, spoons, butter knives, steak knives. Hanging over the big stainless steel benches were rows of delicate-looking hatchets, and cooking knives, their blades all facing the same way.

‘Do you want a drink?’ Jo said. He pointed to the big fridge.

‘No,’ I said. I wasn’t sure if he meant lemonade or beer.

We walked upstairs. Jo lay on top of me on the carpet. The chairs were stacked up on the tables. We heard the cleaning lady come in. She switched on a vacuum cleaner downstairs. The place was so quiet I feared what she would hear when she shut off the power.

‘My sister is a lesbian,’ Jo said, kissing me.

‘I know,’ I said.

‘How?’ He sounded surprised.

‘You told me at the party.’

‘I must have been drunk,’ he said.

‘Me too,’ I said. ‘But I still remember.’

Jo slid his hand into the waist of my jeans. ‘Do you want to have sex?’

I listened to the sound of the vacuum cleaner below.

‘No,’ I said.

‘Go on,’ said Jo. ‘It would be fun.’

‘It’s too early,’ I said. In a few minutes, I realised, I would end my first relationship. But first I lay there while he kissed me and wondered if by too early he would think I meant Monday morning in a restaurant with a cleaning lady, or being fourteen years old.

My mother invited Laura’s family to dinner. ‘It’s the least we can do,’ she said.

When I heard their car, I went downstairs to open the door. Through the glass, I watched them come walking through the drippy winter garden. Laura stood in front, scowling. Connie was dressed in bold floral, showing flesh, as if it was always summertime in Australia. Brian wore an iron grey sweater, dark pants. His face was less tanned

than I remembered. But actually, despite her dress, they both seemed paler versions of themselves.

I did not want to look as if I knew all about them. I arranged my face. I threw open the door. 'Hi!' I said.

Laura's parents jumped, and nearly clung to each other in the weak light.

'Mum's in the kitchen,' I said, and pointed through.

'Come on,' said Laura. 'Let's go to your room.'

Upstairs, Laura flicked through my CD collection. 'Where's *your* father?' she said.

'Oh, he's *resumed* a life *elsewhere*,' I said. I thought this was a nice, English answer: it showed all restraint, no grief.

'It's such a bore,' Laura said.

'What is?'

'They're always like this after a fight.'

'Like what?'

She said, 'I don't know what is worse.'

'Your parents don't seem very...alike,' I said.

'He met her in a vulnerable moment,' said Laura, and then laughed in an odd, English kind of way, so I laughed too.

I went to another of Laura's basement parties. Jo was there. He went in the swimming pool again. He was talking and laughing with Laura. I was glad I had ended it with him, seeing how easily his affections were transferred. I wondered what other boys she knew.

When we were fifteen, Laura went back to England with her parents. They sent her off to finishing school. At school we giggled and said, 'What? She couldn't be finished here?' I thought of writing to her, but I didn't know what to say.

When I was twenty-seven, Brian came to Australia on a visit. He rang me and asked me out for a drink. He said he had promised Laura he'd do it.

I said I would. I'd just dumped my boyfriend. I knew from experience that going out was easier than staying in.

'I'll meet you in Victoria Street,' he said. 'There's a bar I know.'

'Okay,' I said. I hadn't been to Victoria Street for years.

It was called The Retro. It was on a corner. I could have sworn it was in the same place as Jo's parents' restaurant.

'Have you been here before?' I said. 'I don't remember this being a bar.'

'I travel a lot,' said Brian. 'I like a few familiar haunts.'

We went upstairs and it didn't look the same. But then, they can change a place in subtle ways.

It was early, and there was a decent crowd.

'Is this all right?' Brian said, finding a spot by the window.

'Pardon?'

'Is this okay?'

The music wasn't loud but the patrons were enthusiastic even though it was still late afternoon.

Brian got me a light beer. The drink he chose was a clear spirit.

'Cheers,' he said, and raised his glass.

He hadn't aged. I felt as if I had caught up to him. His head was still shaved, but he wasn't carrying more flesh. He wasn't an unhandsome man. His eyes were cornflower blue.

'So,' he said. He smiled at me.

'How is Laura?' I said.

'Wonderful.' Brian reached into his jacket and brought out his wallet. He flipped it open to show me the grandchildren. He said, 'She always wanted a happy family.'

'I'm sorry?' I said, leaning in.

He spoke a little louder. 'She always wanted a family, you know.'

'No,' I said. 'I didn't know that.'

‘She said you were her best friend here in Australia,’ he said, frowning a little at my response.

‘Oh,’ I said. I never would have called her *my* best friend. The suggestion troubled me. ‘How is Connie?’

‘Connie thinks I travel too much. But that’s me, isn’t it?’ He took a mouthful of the spirit.

But it seemed that Brian did not particularly want to talk about Laura, or his wife. He wanted to know about me: what I had studied, where I was working. I wondered if he had invited me here to give me career advice, or to make me a job offer. I tried to remember if I had ever known what it was he did.

I felt irritated by his questioning, trying to hear him over the noise in the bar. Was he doing it for Laura? Comparing notes from afar? The only things he didn’t ask about were all the things I remembered.

‘Drink?’ he said.

‘No,’ I said.

He went to get another. I watched him walk to the bar.

‘Are you seeing anyone at the moment?’ he asked, when he came back.

‘No,’ I said.

‘There’s still plenty of time.’ He frowned again and raised his glass. ‘Cheers,’ he said. ‘Here’s to not throwing it all away.’

Had I heard him right, over the crescendo of happier reunions?

*I’m not the one with the unhappy family!* I wanted to say. Why hadn’t they moved on to greener pastures? Why did they still have each other?

I was twenty-seven, without a man. I was in a bar with someone old enough to be my father. I looked at Brian’s wallet full of photos and felt as if I had done nothing in the intervening years but participate in a series of unsatisfactory events, somehow missing the moment when it should have fallen perfectly into place.

We looked at each other.

‘I had better get home,’ I said.

‘Of course.’ Brian finished his second drink swiftly.

‘Give my regards to Laura,’ I said.

‘I will.’ Brian took his wallet and put it in his jacket. ‘There’s plenty of time,’ he repeated, or may have, in the happy crowd.

Outside the sky was deepening into evening blue. The street lights were orange. Laura’s father rose to his feet before I did and stood a moment, looking down at me. Then I stood too. He followed me down the stairs, his hand almost, not quite, touching the small of my back.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**DICK ALDERSON** was born in Perth and has been writing poetry since 1994. His poems have been published in anthologies and journals including *Westerly*, *Indigo* and *Blue Dog*, *The Weighing of the Heart* anthology, *Empowa* and *Marginata*.

**ROGER AVERILL** is a writer, editor and independent scholar. He has published a travel memoir, *Boy He Cry: An Island Odyssey* (2009), and a novel, *Keeping Faith* (2010). As a result of his recent State Library of Victoria Creative Fellowship, he is currently working on a memoir of Werner Pelz, and is also engaged in a long-standing project to write the authorised biography of Randolph Stow.

**BRUCE BENNETT** is Professor of English at University College, University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra. His major publications include *Spirit of Exile: Peter Porter and his Poetry* (1991), *An Australian Comapss: Essays on Place and Direction in Australian Literature* (1991) and *Australian Short Fiction: A History* (2002).

**PETER BIBBY** has written poems, plays and short stories over a long period. His work has been published in magazines, the press and anthologies and performed on radio, television and stage. He worked as an editor with Magabala Books for ten years.

**GABRIELLE CAREY** teaches writing at the University of Technology, Sydney. She is currently working on a book about Randolph Stow and the Swan Colony families.



**JOSEPHINE CLARKE** lives and writes in Fremantle. Her short stories and poetry have been published in *Indigo*, *Blue Giraffe*, *Thirst*, *Creatrix* and *Eureka Street*.

**SUE CLENELL** has a degree in Journalism and her poems have been widely published. She was runner-up in the Josephine Ilrick Poetry Prize 2006, and commended in 2007. She has just released a poetry CD called *The Van Gogh Café*.

**REG CRIBB** has performed for stage, film and television. He is also an accomplished singer/songwriter and musician. His first play *Night of the Sea Monkey* was performed at the Old Fitzroy in 1999. Since then his plays have won many awards. Reg also writes for film, and is currently a member of Sydney Theatre Company's Blueprints Assembly of Writers.

**AMANDA CURTIN** writes fiction and is a freelance book editor. Her first novel, *The Sinkings*, was published in 2008 and she is currently working on her second.

**MAREE DAWES's** first volume of poetry, *Women of the Minotaur* (2009) has been reprinted and produced as a full-length program for Radio National's *Poetics*. She was an invited guest of the 2009 Singapore Writers' Festival and is an active member of the Albany writing community.

**JENNY DE GARIS** runs creative workshops in the Blackwood Valley, Southwest WA, where she now lives. Her first book was *Dance of Light* (2007). She is now working on a *Book of Walks*, excerpts from which may be found in ECU's on-line journal *Landscapes*.

**SAM DUTTON** was born in South Australia, went to university in Sydney and now lives in London. He is a developer for BBC Research & Development.

**TIM EDWARDS** is a Perth poet who has published in a variety of journals including *Quadrant*, *Eureka Street*, *Island*, *Heat* and *Indigo*, as well as *The Australian* newspaper.

**SARAH FRENCH** was born in Perth in 1969. Her poetry and prose have been published in *Cordite*, *Meanjin* and *Blue Dog*. Her first poetry

collection *Songs Orphans Sing* was commended in the Anne Elder National Poetry Prize.

**KEVIN GILLAM** is a West Australian poet with two books of poems published, *Other Gravities* (2003) and *Permitted to Fall* (2007), both by Sunline Press. He has a forthcoming volume with Fremantle Press in 2011.

**VIVIENNE GLANCE**'s poetry has appeared in print journals, online, and as performance works and poems. *The Softness of Water*, Sunline Press (2009), is her first poetry collection. She is currently undertaking a PhD in Creative Writing at University of Western Australia.

**HELEN HAGERMANN** has poetry published in Australian literary magazines and anthologies. In 2009, her first collection *Evangelyste & other poems* was published by the Australian Poetry Centre (Melbourne) in their New Poets Series.

**TONY HASSALL** is Emeritus Professor of English Literature at James Cook University, and an Honorary Research Consultant at the University of Queensland. His *Strange Country: A Study of Randolph Stow* (1986) and *Randolph Stow: Visitants, episodes from other novels, poems, stories, interviews, and essays* (1990) are published by University of Queensland Press.

**DAVID HUTCHINSON** lives in Fremantle. He is an Inaugural Honorary Fellow of the National Museum of Australia. Publications include a text on sound waves, a guide to Fremantle, a book about the Benedictines of New Norcia, a novel, *Many Years a Thief*, articles, essays, poetry and short fiction—his own translations from Modern Greek—and botanical illustrations.

**DEBORAH HUNN** is a Lecturer in the Department of Communication and Cultural Studies at Curtin University. Her publications include short stories and critical essays.

**JANET JACKSON**, poet of page, screen and microphone, published her first book, *Coracle*, in 2009. Her poems have been published in many print and online journals and media.

**PAULA JONES** is a teacher and writer living in the Perth hills. She spent ten years living in Japan, Vietnam and Singapore. She currently coordinates the Young Writers Program at the Katherine Susannah Prichard Writers Centre where she is the chairperson.

**JO JONES** has undertaken PhD studies at Curtin University of Technology. She has studied Australian historical novels published during the History Wars (since 1988).

**HELENA KADMOS** is a writer and teacher. *Moving On* is part of a Masters thesis on the mother's story in narrative literature, recently completed at Murdoch University.

**DANIJELA KAMBASKOVIC-SAWERS** is Assistant Professor, Shakespeare and Renaissance Studies at the University of Western Australia, and winner of the 2008 ACT David Campbell Memorial Poetry Prize. Her poems and prose have appeared in Australian periodicals as well as in the UK and across the cultural space of the former Yugoslavia.

**GRAHAM KERSHAW** has published short fiction and novels. After a recent residency in Ravensthorpe with a group of Denmark artists called *East of Us* he started writing poetry. He has previously published poetry in *Indigo*.

**MALLERY KOONS** graduated from Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania in 2007 with degrees in Writing and French and a minor in Philosophy. She now lives in Fremantle, WA.

**ANDREW LANSDOWN**'s most recent poetry collections are *Consolations: 48 tanka* (Piacro Press); *Little Matters: 89 haiku and senryu* (Picaro Press); and *Birds in Mind: Australian Nature Poems* (Wombat Books). His website is: [andrewlansdown.com](http://andrewlansdown.com).

**ROLAND LEACH** is a West Australian poet and the proprietor of Sunline Press. He has been an English teacher for many years and has two collections of poetry published. He is a past winner of the Newcastle Poetry Prize and the Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize.

**TIM McCABE** is an anthropologist who maintains an active interest in the Noongar language, in placenames and cultural landscapes of the eastern Noongar. His work with the late Noongar elder, Cliff Humphries, formed the basis for the Noongar linguistic report in the Native Title Claim of Bennell verses the State of Western Australia (2006).

**SHANE McCAULEY** is the author of five poetry books. He won the Max Harris Poetry Award in 2008, co-edited the anthology *The Weighing of the Heart* (SunLine Press, 2007) and has had three volumes of poetry published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press: *The Chinese Feast* (1984), *Deep-Sea Diver* (1987) and *The Butterfly Man* (1991). In 1993 he was the recipient of a Senior Writers' Fellowship from the Australia Council.

**SCOTT-PATRICK MITCHELL** lives in Perth and is currently studying his Masters in performance poetry at the WA Academy of Performing Arts. A collection of his work appeared in Fremantle Press's *New Poets* in 2010.

**MERIDI ORTEGA** has been published in various miscellanies including *Indigo*, *Westerly*, and the *Sceince Made Marvellous* chapbooks. She lives in Fremantle, WA.

**MARCELLA POLAIN'S** latest poetry collection, *Therapy like Fish: new and selected poems*, was published in 2008 by John Leonard Press and short-listed for the Judith Wright Prize. Her novel, *The Edge of the World*, was short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. She is currently working on a second novel under an Australia Council grant.

**CAS RAWLINS** divides his time between fathering his two daughters in Fremantle and working stints in remote Australia. He is currently teaching Indigenous kids in Arnhem Land.

**GEORGIA RICHTER** has had short fiction published in *Australian Short Stories*, *Westerly*, *Overland*, *Going Down Swinging* and elsewhere. Since 1990 she has received awards for her short fiction in over 30 competitions around Australia. 'A Drink at the Retro' won the Joe O'Sullivan Literary Award in 2008. She is currently Publisher of Adult Fiction, Creative Non-fiction & Poetry at Fremantle Press.

**RACHEL ROBERTSON** teaches Professional Writing at Curtin University. Her short fiction and essays have been published in *Griffith Review*, *Sitelines*, *Island*, *Life Writing*, *Indigo* and *Best Australian Essays 2008*. She was joint winner of the 2008 *Australian Book Review's* Calibre Award for Outstanding Essay.

**RICHARD ROSSITER** has published a number of critical works on Australian literature and culture. His collection of short stories, *Arrhythmia*, was published in 2009 by UWA Press.

**FLORA SMITH** has been published in journals and anthologies around Australia, including *Westerly*, *Indigo*, *Stylus* and *Famous Reporter*. She takes an active role in serving the Perth poetry community.

**DANIEL STAVELY** is an Arts Graduate from UWA, with a major in Anthropology. He has had work published in *Indigo* and is working towards his first collection of poetry.

**SOPHIE SUNDERLAND** is an Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Social and Cultural Studies at UWA where she researches cultural grief and mental illness narratives.

**ANDREW TAYLOR** is the author of more than sixteen volumes of poetry. His *Collected Poems* appeared with Salt Publishing, UK, in 2005, who also published his new collection, *The Unhaunting*, in 2009.

**BARBARA TEMPERTON** is the editorial advisor (poetry) for *Westerly*, and is Heritage Services Librarian at the Geraldton-Greenough Regional Library. Her poetry publications include 'The Snow Queen takes lunch in the Station Café' in *Shorelines: three poets* (FACP, 1995); *Going Feral* (FACP, 2002) (WA Premier's Book Award 2002), and *Southern Edge* (Fremantle Press, 2009). Before discovering poetry, Barbara (aka Barbara Brandt) wrote short fiction. She is currently revisiting the craft by compiling a collection of her short stories.

**ANNA WELDON** is working on an illustrated landscape journal of the Yalgorup wetlands, with poetry, memoir and photographs from her 2009–2010 residency at the Adaptation Project, Symbiotica UWA. In 2008 Sunline Press published her poetry collection *The Roof Milkers*.

**RICHARD WELLER** is Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Western Australia. He has published widely on contemporary urban design and landscape architecture. He has recently published *Boomtown 2050* with UWA Press, an insightful look at Perth, and the extreme economic and environmental pressures it faces today and in the future.

**FAY ZWICKY** has published eight books of poetry, the most recent of which, *Picnic*, appeared in 2006. She has also edited several anthologies of Australian poetry, published a book of short stories. *Hostages* (1983) and a collection of critical essays. *The Lyre in the Pawnshop* (1986). Her various awards include the NSW Premier's Award for *Kaddish and Other Poems*, (1982) and the WA Premier's Awards (1987,1991,1999). Declared a State Living Treasure in 2004, her long and distinguished career earned her the Patrick White Award (2005) and the Christopher Brennan Award (2006).

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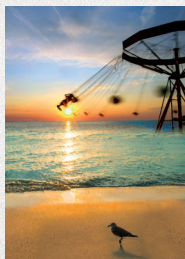


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