

WESTERLY

stories poems reviews articles

Short Stories

Wendy Jenkins — Beverly Farmer —
White — Leigh Allison — Ron Twaddle

An Examination of Western Paperback Novels

Poems by Japanese Women
in Translation

Westerly Index 1978-1980

University of Western Australia Press



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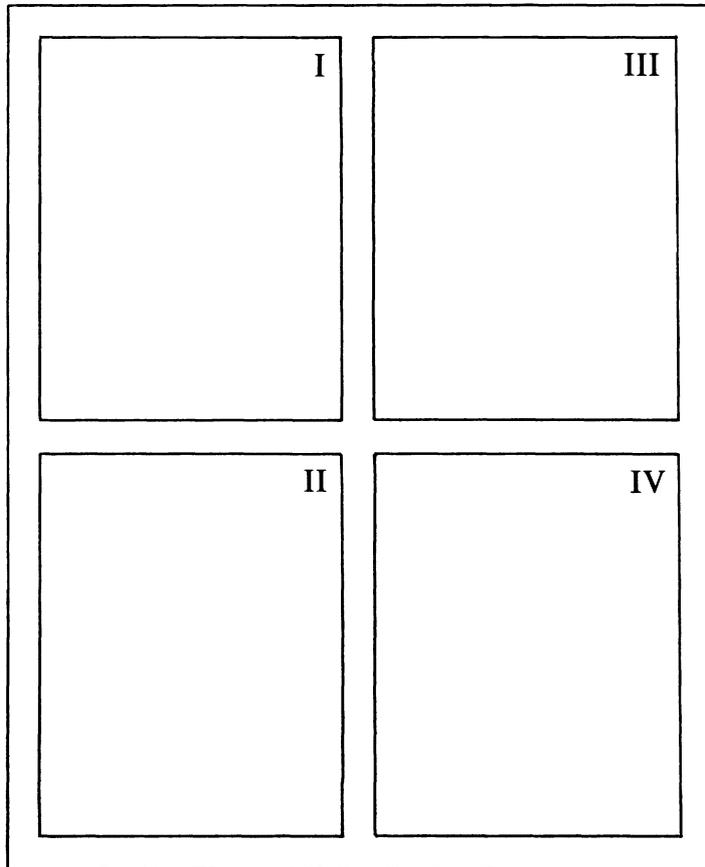
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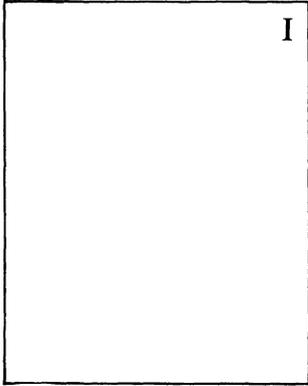
WENDY JENKINS

Three into Four

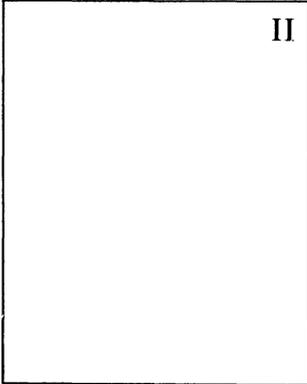


I have tried many times to get it right, to get four perfect yet different shots from the machine. What you see above is the closest I have got. The first time I tried was in a London railway station—I needed some passport photos. Not knowing the habits of the machines and being self-consciously uncertain whether to smile or play it straight, I blew it, obtaining only one good shot. As I held the card in the air, watching it dry, three bleached and vacant faces looked back at me as from a mirror.

The terms were set. My dialogue with the machines had begun.



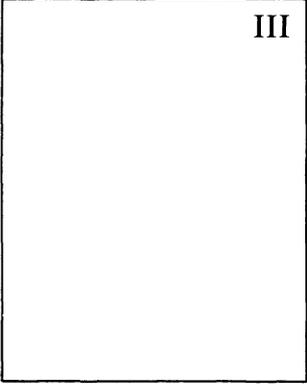
This is how I usually appear in photographs. It is how I look when I know that my photograph is going to be taken. I don't have to think about it. My body naturally assumes this shape. It has the right feeling from the inside. And when I see it reproduced like this, so that I am looking at it from the outside, it also feels right . . . If I kept a photograph album, and if I wrote captions in this photograph album, beneath this picture I would write: *Me as myself*. If someone who knew me well saw the photograph there, they would say: Yes, that's a good one of you. What they would mean is, that looks right, that is typical, that's how you usually are. This is, as you would expect, the first face that the machine and I agreed on. The natural first shot. I do not have to describe it here—it is not a problem. It is not even really a choice. I carry this potential with me like the colour of my eyes.



II

This is the shot that I try for second. You will notice that it is a smile. There is a degree of choice in this, and also something of a problem. When a person with a camera says: *Do something different, can't you smile or something*, they are asking for an intervening process, a performance, a lie against the machine. What they get back from the chemist (stiff grins, defensive teeth) is not your problem. But what is revealed to you privately by the machine after a process of intimate co-operation—this is different. I feel it may even be crucial. I can understand tribal people believing that a camera can reveal their souls . . . This shot has slowly become easier, more routine. I have to think about it less. Over time, the machine has revealed to me certain truths that have helped a great deal. Notable among these is the fact that I am not consistently capable of refinement in the expression of pleasure. Wry and subtle grins require a degree of control and a sophistication of gesture that I do not have. I am not and never will be a sophisticate. Once this was accepted and the shot mapped out (half to full laugh), the nature of the problem changed. It became a question of execution rather than of conception. It freed my energy for the problem of the third shot.

She talks of the second shot being arrived at through the exercise of a degree of choice. Having used up only one possibility in the framing of the first shot, it naturally appears to her that a sea of alternatives remains into which she can dip at will like a bird fishing from a rock. This is a nice image, but a false one. You do not have to look very closely at the first shot to notice that she isn't smiling. In fact, there is little show of emotion at all. Given the terms of the dialogue (four perfect yet different shots), does it not follow that the second shot will be poles apart from the first—that it will be determined not freely, but in opposition to what has gone before? Does it not follow that, given a certain demonstrable penchant for opposites (black jacket on white background, this sentence and this context), and given the culturally determined set that she brings to the exercise (you smile at a camera), that the second shot will, in fact, be a smile and a full one at that? Does it not also follow that the third shot is likely to be some kind of blending, a synthesis of both possibilities?

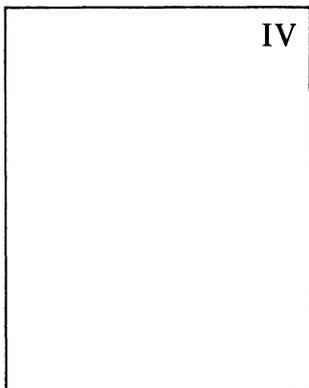


III

The third shot, or I should say, one attempt at it. This is the window that interests me the most. The one my eyes scan first when the card drops into the tray. It is constantly evolving, shifting, being defined. Each session with the machines reveals a little more of what is achievable and what is not, within the limits set by the first two shots. The possibilities are constantly in my mind . . . I can't relax with this shot. It is too important. There is always the chance of the unexpected, the possibility of news, good or bad. My part in the dialogue is not very easy. There is nothing quite like being presented with a black-and-white portrait of your own failure.

This shot is still a long way from 'perfect'. For one thing, it is not really natural. (Note the 'poetic' cast about the eyes, the 'sensitive' fingering of the symbol at the throat.) There is some degree of will at play here. An attempt to impose an image on the machine. She is only partly aware of this, putting the failure of the shot down to a certain tenseness and a need for more information. It is more than that. The shot is forced. She is not, despite what has been said above, truly listening to the machine. She is flirting with the image for its own sake. This is the constant danger—the kiss of death. To love the image or process for its own sake, losing touch with the basic facts that keep it real.

Three is a fascinating number. By definition it is poised equally between two and four, yet in my mind, it is not fixed. I see it sometimes closer to two, sometimes to four. It's in a constant state of tension. A step forward or back could change its nature completely . . . *She has become fascinated with threeness, seeing it everywhere. There were three kids at the corner of the street this morning, a threeness pattern in a friend's new poem, three trees suddenly moved together when a turn in the road changed the perspective. She has started to see threeness in people: He's a three-shot man she tells herself, that woman's a definite two and a bit. Beyond these signs, she senses the larger forms: past-present-future time|my mother-myself-the child I do not have.*



The fourth square. Last frame. There is little I can say about this. Nothing is clear. It's like I'm looking for my image on open water. Sometimes I think I see a hint of something, a direction. Then it is gone completely as if the wind or the sea itself had cancelled it . . . I believe it will come, in its own time, all being well. I believe in the possibility of the fourth. There have been signs, and the image—the metaphor—stays.

She has written down this dream: I am holding three pigeons. They are my birds, acquired one by one, and each accustomed to my touch. Suddenly a strange new bird appears. There are people there and they tell me how to catch it. I am fairly certain that it doesn't need to be caught. The cage is clogged with wire—perhaps the bird has been prevented from entering rather than having resisted. I tear the wire away, cutting my hand. Blood dribbles down my arm. The bird flies into the cage. It has long curling feathers. It is really quite beautiful. The people ask me what I will call the bird. I don't know what to tell them.

Four seems to me to be a finished number, if it's reasonable to describe it that way. I mean it has that feel—absolutely whole and complete like the seasons taken together, or the elements. And it's totally still and balanced, like a box on a table or the perfect chair. If you hold it in your mind for long, you naturally think of a square or rectangle. You are completely familiar with this image—it has framed you over and over since infancy. It can hold you like the walls of your house, while being every door, every window.

As she came down into the Main Gallery he was kneeling on the floor, the paintings for the new exhibition all around him. He was positioning the panels of a triptych onto the fourth element—a grey-backing board. She stopped, watching the pieces come together: three panels, each separate and contained yet moving into the others with strong narrative and conceptual links; four parts, each squared and bounded, yet totally textured into the larger work. She said nothing, held by the image, the stunningly simple, perfect parallel.

DORIS BRETT

Tiger Tamer

He is a fat man,
his moustache fighting
its face for recognition.
The glitter on his coat
designed to impress
shop girls and children,
the rest of us disdaining
its ambition. His tigers
slide in, sit on boxes
before him, terrible
children, school
pupils with eating eyes.

I watch one snarl,
move out of line
and then subside
half puzzled by
compliance. Something
in his eyes asks what
have they given
up and why
this man compels
them to disclaim
centuries of teaching,
leaping through flames.

And I am fleetingly
reminded
of the hard
shocks of your body
and how you left me,
said you'd lose control.
Someday I'll learn
how dangerously
I knew you, grew
to be something
near to yearning,
close to fear. And
meanwhile in my mind
remain the tigers
as they rise
endlessly turning, float
through burning
hoops of fire.

BEVERLEY FARMER

Ismini

Behind its hooded verandah the house was deep in evening shadow. Ismini unlocked the front door, trudged through the green gloom to the kitchen and dumped her schoolbag on the plastic table cloth among long golden slabs of late sun. A striped fly nodded, stroking its hinged legs.

With a wince she unwrapped the two slimy speckled translucent squids and rinsed them under the tap. Their beaks and torn eyes had to be prised out, then the fretted glassy backbones, the inksacs. She cut up the ornate tentacles and the sheaths of their bodies. She made a salad glowing green and red, put it with the *retsina* and the blubbery squid in the refrigerator, poured a glass of milk and sat down to her homework.

One morning on a hot wooden jetty her father had hauled a squid out of the flashing sea. Dripping, its bright mantle fading, it had shuddered and wheezed at her feet, blind in the white sun, as it died.

Oh, what is it, Baba?

Kalamari.

Mummy, Baba's caught a kamalari!

Oh yes, look. A squid.

In English it was a different creature.

'Write a pen-portrait of a person you know well. The subject's appearance, attitudes, way of life, character, should be covered. 250-500 words.'

She scribbled notes. My Grk grandmother. Yiayia Sophia. Will Mrs Brown object if the subject is dead? She won't know. Red eggs for Easter, the lamb on the iron spit, the awful offal soup. The brain broiled in the charred skull. Mother cat, kittens buried alive. Bad luck to kill a cat. Perpetual mourning.

A hard marker, Mrs. Brown had said that Ismini was clever and should have no trouble getting a Studentship to Teachers' College, if that was what she wanted. Mrs Brown had said after class that she might need Ismini to babysit on Saturday if her live-in girl was still ill. Oh yes I'd love to Mrs Brown.

The deep sun was making Ismini's face burn like a brass gong in the window pane, a Greek gold mask, long-eyed, long-lipped. Her breasts lay round and heavy under her uniform. She fingered her warm hair.

Doan be hard on your Yiayia, Ismini *mou*. She give up everythink to come out here, look after us.

We didn't need her, Baba, did we?

We need her, you know that. She been like a mother to you.

She's always picking on me.

She just frighten. She tell your Theia she see your mother in you.

Oh does she? Good!

Baba once said Ismini could cook squid better than Mummy could, even better than Yiayia. These squids were fresh ones from the market especially for his birthday. Out of her pocket money she had bought real Greek *feta* cheese and the *retsina* and a carton of the Greek cigarettes he loved, Assos Filtro, supplied by Poppy's sister, an air hostess. In Greece, Baba said, they didn't celebrate birthdays. Mummy loved birthdays. If Mummy had been Greek and not Australian, who knew if she would have left home like that? Theia Vasso said no Greek woman would. Today there was no letter, no birthday card, in the box. Yet they had been one flesh.

She had run into Mummy the other day by chance in the Mall. She had stopped to chat, her own mother, grinning and tapping her foot on the hot tram-lines, lighting a quick cigarette and blowing out smoke. She was really sorry to have to rush off like this.

I saw Mummy in town today, Baba.

Doan talk to me about that bitch.

'Ismini?' Theia Vasso was shrilling from outside. Ismin sighed. Theia Vasso, not her real aunt but Baba's second cousin, lived next door and felt responsible. The doors slammed. She strutted in, kissed Ismini and sank on to her usual chair.

'Ach! All alone, you poor gel, what you doan come an watch television with the kids, eh?'

'I haven't even started my homework, Theia.'

Ismini poured her the daily, the ritual dose of sweet vermouth; caught a coil of her orange-peel preserve glowing and porous in the jar of heavy syrup and set it still in the spoon on a glass dish; poured iced water; mixed coffee for two in the red *briki*. It frothed and sputtered in the gas flame. She bit her lip.

'It boil out? Is nothink. *Yeia mas.*' Theia Vasso ate and drank and licked her lips. 'I tell you, your Baba, he a very lucky, he hev a daughter like you look after him. A good little Greek housewife.'

'I'm not really Greek.'

'What you tokking about? You Greek.'

Theia Vasso lit a cigarette and turned the coffee cups upside-down to read the future in the grounds. Yet Theia Vasso was *moderna*: she encased her flab in pantsuits, she dyed her hair red, she smoked cigarettes.

The telephone rang.

'Hullo?'

Theia Vasso was intent.

'Ismini? Hullo, love, it's me. Look, somethink's come up, I be home late. Sorry, eh? You doan mind, do you, love?'

'Well, how late will you be?'

'Dunno for sure. Doan wait up.'

'You won't be home for dinner?'

'Doan worry, I grab a *souvlaki*.'

'Baba, I got *kalamaria*!'

'Tomorrow. We hev them tomorrow. Sorry, love, I gotta go, I double-parked. Make sure you lock up, all right?'

'All right. *Yeia sou.*'

'*Yeia.*'

She slammed the phone down. Happy birthday, Baba.

'He hev gel fren.' Theia Vasso giggled, inspecting the brown ripples in Ismini's cup. 'You hev to expect. A taxi-driver meetink lotsa people. He still a quite yunk men, you know that.'

'So what if he has?'

'He never tell you, *kale*, he be shame.'

'Why should he be?'

'Mama? Eh, Mama?' Theia Vasso's scrawny youngest was shrilling out over the grey fence. She rose sighing, her duty done at least, stubbed out her cigarette, planted more rubber kisses.

'Without me they carn do nothink. Sorry, I betta go. You come an hev dinner, eh? Why you wanna stay here all alone? No good for you.'

'Too much to do, Theia.'

Ismi rinsed the dishes. The sun had left the window in a bronze haze. She switched the sallow light on and sat down under it to write.

MY GREEK GRANDMOTHER

My Greek grandmother, Yiayia Sophia, was swathed in her widow's mourning clothes and headscarf until she died. Her mouth was folded over her toothless gums, her skin yellow and creased, her grey hair worn in two long pigtailed even in bed. A wick floating in oil on water kept a flame spluttering all night in front of the ikon in her room.

She knew all the prayers. All through Lent she fasted until she could hardly stand, her candle shaking, outside the church at the Easter midnight service. There were fireworks hanging and flaring, and we all cracked our red eggs and ate them and nursed our candle flames all the way home for luck. Then we had to eat her *mayieritsa*.

I remember her hoarding our hens' eggs for days beforehand and hard-boiling them on Holy Thursday in red dye. We polished them, still warm, with cloths dipped in golden oil. She baked plaited *tsoureki* loaves. She made the *mayieritsa*, the traditional soup of lamb offal, flushing out the lungs and entrails with the garden hose, screeching at the avid hens, stirring it all in the pot with onions and herbs like a witch her cauldron.

The lamb itself my father had skinned and impaled on an iron rod. Its red eye-sockets, its grinning teeth with the spit thrust out like an iron tongue. All Easter Sunday morning it was twisted and basted over the trench of coals, speckled with charred herbs, while it turned dark brown and neighbours and relatives danced to the record player on the back lawn. When they split the skull for my grandmother, she offered me a forkful of the brains.

'Eat it, silly,' she cackled. 'God gave it to us.'

'Ugh, no! I don't want it.'

She shrugged, mumbling the grey jelly.

Our cat had kittens once. A lovely pure black cat, a witch-cat, she lay purring, slit-eyed, as they butted and squeaked at her pink teats. Our cat was necessary, as the hens attracted mice. Kittens weren't. One day the cat was crying and clawing at a damp patch of ground under the tomatoes. I dug up the corpses, their fur and tiny mouths and moonstone eyes all clogged with earth. I accused Yiayia.

'Don't be silly,' was all she said.

She is dead and buried herself now, in foreign earth. I saw her dying, her old mouth agape fighting for breath; and dead in her coffin at last, a yellow mask, and yellow lizard-claws folded. She was always too old to love me. I'm too old to hate her any more.

(430 words)

At the funeral Baba had sobbed on Theia Vasso's shoulder. Mummy hadn't been there. Ismini shuddered. In her old sepia wedding picture nailed up beside the ikon, Viaya had Ismini's face: everyone said so. Ismini had wanted to burn

all the photos, but Baba made her put them back up in the hollow room. There was one of Mummy in Greece, on a plump donkey with her legs sticking stiffly out; Baba was there, and Yiayia, swathed even then, and a crowd of solemn children with shaved heads. Mummy looked happy.

The phone rang. Ismini's lip curled. So he was sorry, was he? Well, better late than never.

'Yes.'

'Hullo? That's you, Ismini, is it? Oh good.'

'Oh! Mrs Brown!'

When she had just finished the essay.

'I was hoping you'll still be free to babysit for us this Saturday. Have I left it too late?'

'Oh yes, I'd love to!'

'Oh good. The thing is, though, we'll be very late home. Will your parents let you stay the night?'

The wood-fire whispering, Ismini thought, flaring gold over the crammed bookshelves and the sofa bed in the bow window.

'Oh yes.'

If Baba says no this time, then I'll leave home.

'You're sure? Oh good. I'll pick you up at seven on Saturday, then. Can you hear the bub bawling his head off? I'd better go. 'Bye, Ismini.'

The first time she stood for ten minutes on their front verandah, too nervous to knock. When she asked Mrs Brown what to do if the baby cried, the eight-year-old scoffed, but the two-year-old patted her knee: I'll help you, Minnie, he said. He always stops for me.

They sat round the fire while she read them little golden books; calling her Minnie Mouse, exploding with giggles, chanting, Meany, Meany, when she said lights out at nine.

I'm eight. I don't have to go to sleep yet.

You do so. Mummy said. He does so have to, Minnie.

Shut up you.

It was a funny name though, a fancy classical name, a whim of her pompous old godfather's, when she should have been called Sophia after Yiayia. His wife had lapped Ismini in rosy withering flesh, pressing lips soft as a cocoon on her wincing cheeks. Once her parents split up, her godparents stopped visiting. Only her name was left of them.

If Baba said no, she couldn't stay the night, then she'd ring Mummy. No, don't be silly. The last time, a man had picked up the phone. Lyn, it's for you, he'd called.

Mummy, it's me. Can you come over just for a while? Baba's gone out. Can you, please?

Darling, no, sweet, you know I can't, I have to get up at five to go to work— I want to talk to you!

Well go ahead, sweet, what's the matter?

Baba says I can't go to Poppy's birthday party.

Oh, lovey, I'm sorry. What a shame.

I'm sixteen! I'm not a child! The whole form's going. He won't let me go anywhere. Please, will you just ring and talk to him?

He wouldn't listen to me. You know that. God, I'm the last person—

I'm sorry. You're otherwise engaged, aren't you?

Ah, Ismini—

She'd cut Mummy off. Mummy hadn't tried to ring back. Baba had been right all along, of course: forget about your Mummy, Ismini *mou*, she doan

want you. Sixteen, Ismini said aloud, is old enough to leave home legally. She wondered if Poppy would like to share a flat.

It was getting late. She trailed down the dark passage to her father's room. Its velvet curtains were the same, like sleek brown fur, and the painted-over fireplace in the wall, and in the wardrobe doors those long hazed mirrors that she and Mummy had always polished together. She had dressed up and posed in the dim mirrors. Baba slept alone now. When nightmares had woken her he had come and carried her in to sleep between their big warm bodies.

Mummy's old forgotten red nightdress lay hidden under sheets in the bottom drawer. Ismini undressed to slip it on: it fitted now. She stroked Red Ruby on her lips and cheeks, and rimmed her long eyes with kohl. She brushed out her hair. In the blurred gold of the mirror a dusty ghost looked back.

Once, black and faceless against a gold half-light from the passage, Mummy had stooped over her, dragged down her pants and crammed a suppository like an iron spit up her bottom. She had had to rush out to the toilet, her bowels surging and snorting. Poppy said sex hurt like that. Poppy was raped.

Room by room Ismini snapped on the lights and checked that all the doors and windows were locked. Yiayia's room of dead faces, the kitchen, laundry, bathroom, the musty sitting room, and her own room last.

She had been lying awake, trying to make sense of their jumbled shouts in the kitchen, when Mummy had come bursting in, sobbing and shuddering, and slammed the door. They clung together in the dark until at last Baba's yells and crashes petered out, daring only to whisper.

I'm leaving. This time I'm leaving.

What's happened?

He's insane. He's capable of anything. God, I hate that man!

But what about me?

I'll have to go into hiding. I'll find somewhere to live where he won't find me. Ring you at school.

I'm coming with you!

No, sweet, you can't. He won't let you go. He'd stop at nothing if I took you. He said so.

Mummy, don't go. Don't, please.

In the chill of daybreak they found him asleep with his head in his blood-stained arms on the kitchen table glittering with smashed glass. Mummy crept past with her suitcase. Ismini draped his jacket over his wet shoulders, switched off the light, and crawled back into bed.

Now Mummy got up before daybreak and stood waiting among furled glittering lamps and skeletons of trees for the first golden tram to trundle up wrapped in fog like a caterpillar in a cocoon.

If I fail HSC, Ismini had remarked the other day, you can get me a job at the hotel with you.

Oh, you'll pass. Still want to be a teacher?

I don't know what I want.

In the kitchen Ismini lit the stump of her Easter candle and switched off the light to watch the little flame flap and tower. She thought of opening the *retsina*. No. Well, why not? She prised the cap off and filled a glass with the acrid yellow wine. Happy birthday, Baba. She drank it in gulps, and ate all the salad, since it wouldn't keep, dipping chunks of bread in the juice, sucking the olive pits. Lovely ripe plums for later.

By candlelight her arms shone golden and sleek, her breasts too, only half hidden in crimson silk.

You're so beautiful, he would say, sitting opposite, and she would smile mockingly over the rim of her glass at this dark tall grave man, a man who had lived, who had known sorrow. His name? What did it matter? He would bend to heap hot kisses on her hands.

Ah! But you're too innocent, my darling.

I'm so tired of innocence. Slowly, significantly.

God! Don't tempt me! And overcome by a wave of passion, crushing her fiercely in his arms, he would carry her limp and golden to her bed.

Ismini took a long swig and held her glass against the swelling tawny flame. Light swung rocking all over her, the kitchen walls, the window panes. The luminous crimson plums sat glowing there. She bit one through its skin and its gold juice spurted.

Darling, she murmured out loud across the table. Oh, my darling.

ANDREW LANSDOWN

Choka: Shells

In the wet, white sand
Rams' horns trumpet their perfect
Symmetry. My son
Fists one in his tiny hand.
We watch the wolf-waves
Bare their sharp teeth, snarl and snap
To protect their kill.
Ah, so much senseless death. Still,
We're delighted that
Farmers among the sea-folk
Have lost the rams of their flock.

DAMIEN WHITE

Meeting the girl next door

The meeting. After dinner Nick said,

Do you want to meet the new neighbour.

Didn't know we had one.

For a couple of weeks Rick and Dusty next door had been looking for someone for their third bedroom.

Yeah, I saw Rick this afternoon. She moved in two days ago. Name's Jennifer.

When Rick made coffee Jennifer held her face down and her mug up, looking out at Nick and me over the top of it. She was plumpish, her moon-face pimpled, and her hair, hanging down to cover the sides of her face, was lank. She barely said a word all evening.

The Sympathy. Rick and Dusty had brought two bottles of DA with them. We were sitting in our living-room.

How's Jennifer fitting in.

They looked at each other.

Well, she seems frightened of us all the time, Rick said.

Frightened.

Yeah. We kid her on a bit and she always takes it too seriously. She ends up not knowing where she stands.

And there's the way she giggles.

And the way she tip-toes around the house.

And the way it takes her about ten minutes to work up to asking us anything.

And the way she looks at you if she thinks you're criticising her.

Jesus, Nick said, it sounds as if you're giving her a hard time.

Again they looked at each other, looked and grinned.

Well, she takes it so seriously it's hard to resist.

The self-revelation. Nick and I were making coffee when Jennifer knocked at the kitchen door. Again she held her mug up to her face, watching us but barely saying a word.

Eventually, glancing first at me, Nick said,

How are you finding it next door.

Oh, she said. Oh, all right.

She finished with a nervous giggle. We waited, but she didn't go on.

Where were you living before, I asked.

Oh, she said, giggling again. Oh, didn't Ricky and Dusty tell you.
We both shrugged, shook our heads.

I was at Ryde, she said. Admitted myself. I was there for about a month before they thought I should leave. And before that I was in one of the colleges. Again the giggle. She bent her head to her coffee. Again we waited, but again she didn't go on.

Why did you put yourself in Ryde.

Oh, she said. Oh, just depression.

None of us said anything. She glanced at both of us before concentrating on her coffee cup. When she made to drink from it though, I could see that she was just going through the motions, that in fact the cup was empty.

Would you like another cup, Jennifer.

Oh, she said. Oh, no thanks. Actually, I'd better be going.
She picked up her bag. At the door she turned back to us.

Do you mind me coming in like this.

Jesus, no, Nick said. Anytime.

Neither of us spoke after she'd gone, not until we could hear her moving around next door.

Ryde, I said. She's still not in great shape, is she.

No. And I don't know that living with Rick and Dusty is the best thing for her either.

The choice. When she knocked Nick and I were about to leave the house.

Oh. Oh, you're going out.

Just to the pub.

She was carrying a couple of textbooks and a folder of lecture notes.

Would you mind if I came in here to work.

No. Too noisy next door is it.

Through the party wall the *Easy Rider* soundtrack carried clearly.

Oh, you know. Rick and Dusty. And there's always music.

Sure, come in anytime. If we're not here the back door's usually open anyway.

Are you sure it's all right.

Sure we're sure.

Nick met Jill at the pub. She came back with us after closing time. Through the kitchen window I could see Jennifer stretched out on the divan with her books open on the floor beside her. She sat up abruptly as I opened the kitchen door, a hesitant smile at her lips.

Would you like coffee, Jennifer, Nick said, his arm around Jill's waist. We're having some.

Oh, she said. Yes. But I'll make it. Let me make it.

We did. And she did. As we drank it we asked her about her course. Arts II. English, History and Psychology. Both Nick and Jill had done the first two. I saw Jennifer watching Jill's hand, resting on Nick's thigh. As they talked I said nothing, but she glanced at me often. I always kept a smile ready for her. And she had that hesitant smile of hers, still fluttering her lips.

The courting. I was alone in the house, reading in the living-room. Again she had her books with her. She settled onto the divan and I went back to my novel. Perhaps ten minutes passed. When I heard that giggle of hers I looked up.

Oh, David, is it all right if I make coffee.

Sure.

Do you want some too.
Well, since you're making it.
With my cup on the arm of my chair I went back to find my place. Another few minutes passed. Another giggle.
Oh, David. Do you know what "tellurian" means.
Referring to the earth, I think.
I fetched a dictionary from my room and sat back in my chair.
When she bent over me to look she upset the dregs of my coffee into my lap. Her hand went to her mouth.
Oh, she said. Oh, I'm sorry, David.
With a cloth from the kitchen she wiped me down.
Do you want another one.
No thanks, had enough already.
Back to my book. Perhaps I had twenty minutes this time before the giggle came.
You don't mind me interrupting you, do you.
No, not at all.
"Anapaestic".
Some sort of metrical scheme, in poetry, I think.
She beat me to the dictionary. Her hand brushed mine as she gave it to me.
Before the next giggle I started yawning loudly.
Think I'll go to bed, I said. Haven't had a good night's sleep for days. But you keep working if you want to.
Oh, no. I must go to bed too.
She left. And I read my book in bed for the next couple of hours.

The course of true love. Again I was reading in the living-room when I heard footsteps at the back of the house. Through the kitchen window I could see Jennifer. She didn't look in herself. Ducking into my room I started to pull my boots on. By then she was knocking and coming in. I met her in the living-room.

Hello, Jennifer. I was just going out. But of course you can stay and work if you want.

Oh, she said, putting her books down and looking back at me over her shoulder.

Rick and Dusty were both at the pub. I got myself a schooner of old with a dash of cloves and joined them.

I thought you blokes'd be home, I said.

Why.

Well, Jennifer's at my place now, working. She says she can't work when you two're around.

I didn't go home till after closing time. Jennifer had gone.

The bedroom scene. Katie met me in the city after school, for a 5.00 o'clock movie. We came back to my place, still having a few hours before she would be expected home. From the street I could see that my bedroom light was on, though I knew I'd turned it off that morning. I hurried ahead of Katie to check.

Jennifer was sitting up in my bed. Her skirt was rucked up to the top of her thighs. Her shirt was unbuttoned, almost to the navel. She wasn't wearing a bra. She looked up at me as I stopped at the door, that fluttering smile of hers at her lips.

Oh, she giggled. Hello.

But then Katie appeared beside me.

Katie, Jennifer. Jennifer, Katie.

Oh, Jennifer said, giggling again. I just thought I'd come in here to work. It's so quiet.

Neither Katie nor I said anything.

I'll go now, she said.

Turning away from us as she tugged her skirt down and did up a button or two she picked up her books and left. She didn't turn around once. I put on the jug for tea.

Well, that's Jennifer, I said. The one that moved in next door.

Yes, Katie said. The one with the giggle. I see what you mean.

By the time we'd finished our tea the bed wasn't warm at all.

The farewell. Dusty brought his schooner to my table in the beer-garden.

Did Jennifer come to say goodbye. She said she was going to.

Goodbye.

Yeah, she's moved out. I think we got a bit much for her. She says she likes her new place. So if you hear of anyone looking for a room . . .

COLLEEN BURKE

Nowhere in particular

Our summer holidays
are haunted by rain shadows.
Tensed against the oncoming
storm we follow the sweep of
white sand towards the
distant headland.

Our small daughter
sits down, and won't budge.
After a long discussion we
sit with her enmeshed in
the fine dark air and lilt
of windshadows,
content as she is, to go
nowhere in particular.

LEIGH ALLISON

Soliloquy

Hyde Park bench holds a drunk, not listening. He gave up, not interested in the lunchtime business lovers. They see in him failure which isn't theirs yet. Always a doubt, they look through sunglasses, wondering why, and look quickly back to answering sunglasses. Jazz hobo, filthy man, tragic clown. Can't be family or friend. A figure without a history.

Could my face change like that? How many sunglasses have I? Childish whims and adult sophistry are dimpling cracks for your sunglasses to see. I falter when your sunglasses ossify sometimes—when your interested expression is sustained too long. You exhaust the fracture points of my sunglasses. Just brittle plastic. Exhale. You don't have to take me in all the time.

Hyde Park bench gets hard. The ground is too moist to sit on and the insects irritate sensitive skin with creeping intent and itching disregard. He's forgotten and can't feel from the meth.

I need to see your face after you've looked at him. We could take off our sunglasses. You could see my face after I've looked at him, and still say my face is all right. I would say yours is.

Lunchtime business lovers eat sandwiches slowly. Linger between each bite and savour the salted salad. And smile slowly in deliberation. This is no place to be animated—except for children.

The park's all right when I look at you. I can only look at him with my sunglasses on. But you haven't taken off your sunglasses. He's picturesque to you. A natural contrast to let you know your place. How can you be so sure?

I can only see my own reflection in your sunglasses. I watch myself for an instant and realize this is what you see. Not to see your face, I am finally a spectator. You've lost your audience. Thought you were always worth watching; but I'm tired of the sunglasses. You let me down to this and it's not all right. I'm not going to say it's all right.

Hyde Park bench is empty.

ROD MORAN

Church-Going.

1. *Farmer's Wife.*

Late light lathers between spire
and shingled steeple; the mauve air
eddies from a mudlark's wings.
A congregation gathers like gusted leaves.

The old bluestone church organizes
the scene around itself: paddocks,
cows, ibis praying at the silver dam,
sheep huddling in their swampy parish;
evening so ordered that a distant eagle
hovers like a crucifix.

Some have not thought of oblivion
since the last family funeral.
In the back row of pews my uncle,
gnarled old farmer with a mallee-root face,
scratches his arse; his wife is devout,
self-doubting, kneels to her own emptiness,
her theology a quiet internal fear.
*(20 years in the bush, my Wilderness,
a withered womb and a husband
who recognizes me only sometimes:
what can God prove He has done for me?).*
In prayers she conjures silent words
against the shadows shrinking
concentric around their love.

2. *Derelicts*

Outside, perched on the gutter,
old men collect like sparrows,
eyes dark and common as two-cent bits—
a pose from an urban fresco,
some stained-glass dream;
quietly they await thin soup, penitent,
a metho-tumult between their ears.
A Giotto could celebrate this pain,
endow their state with celestial cause
in two austere dimensions.
Evening slurs horizontal across the bitumen;
they watch their prayers condense white
on the last shivers of light and die,
swaddled in final editions.

3. *The Fundamentalist.*

The church is Doncaster Gothic.
He is a suburban fundamentalist:
at a family barbeque after the service
recites a litany on the Volvo's performance,
the metaphysics of long term loans
and, O sweet Jesus, interest rates
are down again so buy bullion.
Yes Father I have stopped emotionally
destroying my wife's self-image,
and since our last child died
there is a fence around the pool.
At night he sometimes negotiates
his death with a private God.

COLLEEN BURKE

Twilight Tides

Twilight tides
slide over the bay.
Uneasy boats lie on
the runnelled mudflats.
Seagulls stand in the
mud waiting for the
fish. Their slim
red legs still in the
rising water. Mudpools
collapse in the
mellowing tides. Boats
sway easy on the
darkening waters.

Even the sea burns

The sea glints with
copper shadows
darting hither and
thither. The brassy sun
spins in the smoke filled
sky. Blinded we turn our
eyes away. The hot winds
speed the bushfires on
through the tinder dry
bush. The world is on
fire. Even the sea burns—
copper headed flames dart
around our bare legs.

JEAN KENT

Witch Dance

Time for a mad
witch dance
Enough of this quiet
despair—time for a hairshirt
know where I can get one
cheap? No money for the rich sorts
the grass alcohol heroin(e) love
they're all the same one kick
you think it's real but it only
blurs your eye you don't see
so well the hawk
hovering
where the pitying say 'just frown
lines, dear, with a little makeup
a little
moisturiser
applied religiously
years ago you could have—what?
stopped the hawk? got a husband?
(the right, *husbanding* sort, not the
ordinary kind)
or not seen the mouse
running half dead by the verandah of that house
half alive in the lucerne where I stepped off
the planks Captain Hook in every crack
that black earth in summer hissing
hard Peter Pan crocodiles lucerne
cows in the paddocks blown up on it—out
with the knife—enough of this
—quiet despair
gone down cracks
veins needing
slashing
still the radio
goes on injecting its sweetness
amplifying the vacuum under skin
the pappy love the pale life . . .
You know
it's not that I don't like pastels dreams and the Hope
of soft kid gloves . . . You know it's just not
quite
enough
Is it?

ANNE LLOYD

Multifarious, but always Mulierocentric,
Ways of Looking at Hips

I.

With a history of indecision,
the only pivot point
can be the hips.

II.

I am single-minded
as a lover
insatiably uncountenanced by hips.

III.

The hips are a figment, a springtime
fragment of insurrection.

IV.

A man and a woman
are, by convention, one.
A man and a woman and hips
are, a priori, three.

V.

It is difficult for me to deny
the beauty of last tango,
the inevitability of innuendo.
Draped or naked,
the hips appear naked.

VI.

Oh those with pens and sensitivity,
why must you eulogise a false eternity?
Can you not see the impropriety of hips,
their flippant adulation of mortality?

VII.

I believe only
a restless serenity;
and I know, too,
that the hips won't
stop moving.

VIII.

When the hips skulked behind a corner,
they affirmed my predilection,
thumb in feline mouth.

IX.

Ah, the doorbell is ringing:
the hips must be bringing
a body as sacrificial meat.

X.

We will be dining all afternoon,
and ready as ever to die.

XI.

The hips slither, problematically
untroubled by any blackbird fetishes.

MIRNA RISK

One more showdown one more showdown one more showdown

A structural examination of Western paperback novels¹

Day of the Posse, Ride Out Shooting, Face the Gun, The Big Dinero, Trouble Trail Yonder, Born to Ramble, Trouble Shooters Die Hard, Run from the Buzzards, One More Showdown. These are only a few of the titles of what is probably the most successful series of Western paperbacks to be retailed in Australia, the "Larry and Stretch" series by "Marshall Grover" (Sydney-born Leonard F. Meares). Other authors, including "Marshall Grover" himself, have written series of Westerns centred on the same characters. Among the most notable are the 30-odd novels of the *Sundance* series by Peter McCurtin (published by Horwitz), the two series of sex-and-violence Westerns by George Gilman, *Adam Steele* (approximately 24 novels) and *Edge* (34 novels as of June 1980) and the 25-odd "Big Jim" novels by "Marshall Grover". But none of these characters seems to have been so consistently successful as Larry and Stretch: since 1956, year of publication of their first adventure, nearly 500 titles have appeared in print: approximately 300 as Cougar paperbacks (published by Cleveland Ltd., Sydney) and, since 1965, approximately 171 (as of September, 1980) titles with Horwitz Publications. The books are retailed exclusively through newsagencies and they are widely re-sold and exchanged in second-hand bookshops. Horwitz have been unwilling to release details of sales and figures pertaining to individual years (which would have made it possible to establish a chronological pattern of increasing or decreasing popularity). They have, however, stated that the overall sales figures of the "Larry and Stretch" series for the past 15 years (referring to Australia, the United States, West Germany and all three Scandinavian countries) come between 19 and 20 million copies, with 5,000–6,000 copies per book sold in Australia alone.

Given these very impressive figures, and considering that "Marshall Grover" still keeps producing over a novel a month (18 have appeared in 1979, and 13 between January and the end of September 1980), it seems worthwhile to try to ascertain the reasons for the constant high popularity of the series. Mine is in no way a condescending academic approach, but rather an attempt to test out Gramsci's hypothesis² that in popular literature the ideology interacts with the logic of narrative structures. Since "every structural analysis of a text is always a testing of latent ideological hypotheses"³, I shall try to establish the relationship between the unchanging formula of Larry and Stretch's adventures and any values these adventures may uphold. The following remarks are based on an examination of approximately 250 novels, each between 100 and 130 pages long.

Larry (Lawrence Valentine) and Stretch (Woodville Eustace Emerson, the nickname referring to his height of 6' 6") are two drifters in their late thirties,

who have been wandering through the American West for twenty years since the end of the Civil War. Their physical description (Larry “brawny and handsome in a battered, heavy-jawed way”, Stretch “of the guileless smile, mild blue eyes and jug-handle ears”) is repeated almost verbatim in the opening pages of every single novel, presumably to reassure the readers that the heroes have not changed—or aged physically—since the last shootout. Another *motif* which recurs regularly at the beginning of each story is the insistence of both men that all they want is to “live plumb peaceable” and avoid strife. But within one page of their appearance they inevitably come across some innocent party in distress, and just as inevitably (“Here we go again” is their refrain) they commit themselves to putting things right.

The innocents in distress fall into the traditional categories of the Western *genre*: men framed for murder, passengers of besieged stagecoaches and trains, key witnesses threatened by the villains against whom they want to testify, visiting celebrities (politicians, singers, and, on a couple of occasions, members of foreign royal families) in danger of being kidnapped or assassinated, and — the most frequent case — whole communities threatened by groups of outsiders. Between the outset and the end of the hostilities there is always at least one brawl (in a back alley, or in a barn, but most frequently in a saloon); the adventure is always concluded by a shootout. In both these events Larry and Stretch are always heavily outnumbered, but always come out victorious. In the brawl the two of them are challenged by, and inflict grievous bodily harm to, varying numbers of miners, gamblers, cowpunchers or U.S. soldiers. In the shootout they assist the innocent party in eliminating large numbers of rustlers, bandits, con-men, bank robbers or rebellious Indians. The violence in the description of these encounters is always neutralised by the unflinching use of clichés: heroes “unwind powerful uppercuts” causing their opponents to fall “like poleaxed steers”; in gunfights, “something ugly happens to a villain’s face” before he “pitches to the ground”.

A regular pattern of action can be extrapolated:

- A. Larry and Stretch drift into a community, seeking peace and quiet.
- B. They witness, or hear about, a wrong-doing.
- C. They feel obliged to intervene.
- D. They lead the community and its law enforcement officers to action against the wrong-doers.
- E. They (nearly always unassisted) have a showdown with the leading wrong-doers, which inevitably ends in the death of some of the latter and in the arrest of the survivors; either Larry or Stretch, and occasionally both of them, have been inflicted one or more wounds, never fatal or permanently disabling.
- F. Order having been restored, Larry and Stretch move on.

Within this unchanging and therefore predictable pattern there is no psychological development in either of the two main characters: unflinching, Larry is assertively inquisitive, Stretch resigned to good-naturedly follow his partner in each new dangerous involvement. Any uncertainty, hesitation, doubt or inner conflict must necessarily be excluded because the function of each story is not to pose problems, but to reassure the readers that what is taking place is a fight of good against evil, which will always end with the triumph of good over evil.

But what exactly constitutes *good* in a Larry and Stretch novel? A closer look at the values and attitudes represented by the two main characters and by their reactions to the people and the situations they encounter will help reach some conclusions.

Between fights with lawbreakers Larry and Stretch, not having independent means, must support themselves financially. This they do by taking up casual

employment as ranch hands, horse-breakers or shotgun guards, but only when their funds are low and cannot be increased by gambling. Their hours of relaxation are generally spent eating (in hash-houses) and drinking (in the all-male world of saloons). Neither of them ever has, or seems ever to have had, sex with a woman. When, occasionally, one of the women they befriend falls for either Larry or Stretch and starts talking of marriage, they are very quick to point out that they are "fiddle-footed" and congenitally "not the marryin' kind". Although, as I pointed out above, both men regularly state their aversion to the strife they inevitably encounter in their wanderings, they are just as opposed to any thought of settling down, which would be the logical consequence of any heterosexual involvement on their part. In almost every novel, among the people of the community helped by Larry and Stretch there are at least one young man and one young woman who end up by getting married in the last chapter, in sharp contrast with the two heroes, who benevolently attend the wedding, but soon afterwards ride away side by side. The relationship between Larry and Stretch, however, is only homosexual *implicitly*⁴, but never *explicitly*. They have been together for over twenty years, yet they always share a bedroom, but never a bed, and most of the physical contact between them seems confined to digging slugs out of each other's anatomy. Yet not only is their commitment to each other lifelong and unquestioned, but their relationship is based on a clear pattern of dominance-submission, with Larry ("the cerebral half of the duo", as the author regularly informs us) being both quick-witted and aggressively short-tempered, and Stretch (the gentler, more easy-going half) being generally satisfied with following orders. Stretch's role, however, could never be defined "feminine", because the part assigned to women in each adventure is far more restrictive than Stretch's. Be they schoolmarms, saloon gals, settlers' wives and daughters or even (occasionally) journalists and doctors, women are there to be protected, to assist their befrienders by accepting Larry's leadership, and to display little or no initiative. Women hardly ever take an active part in the fighting, and they are appreciated for their looks and for their cooking skills more than for their courage and intelligence. Should they become too assertive, they are regularly threatened with, and often receive, a spanking — which promptly subdues them.

Politics is as absent as sex. Every community is a self-contained unit, with authority always represented by the (armed) sheriff and only occasionally by the (unarmed) mayor. The only political conflicts that ever arise are caused by the co-operation of the sheriff or of the mayor (sometimes of both) with the villains, and are solved with the physical elimination of these corrupt officials. There is no wider political dimension beyond the self-contained community. On a few occasions, individual politicians (governors and senators) are introduced, but they are unfailingly out of their depth when confronted with rough villains, and need assistance and protection from the community as well as from Larry and Stretch. The same applies to religion: spiritual values are rarely mentioned or taken seriously by anyone, prayer is an activity in which only women indulge while the men get on with the fighting, and individual clergymen are generally seen as worthy of respect, but sadly ineffectual before the misdeeds of the villains. The attitude to education is also ambivalent: education is valued (especially by women) because it gives people social graces, but educated men are generally shown as somewhat helpless and inadequate, unless they steel themselves to take an active part in the battles.

The treatment of minorities is also consistent throughout the series. From the 250-odd novels I have examined, it would seem that Larry and Stretch have spent more than twenty years travelling through the West without ever coming across black men and women (one exception: the coloured crew of one riverboat).

Indians do appear fairly frequently, and are as a rule divided into peaceful, law-abiding Indians (who remain in their reservations) and rebellious Indians (who create havoc and come therefore to grief at the hands of Larry, Stretch and their helpers). Even more frequent are Mexicans, either as groups of villains (trigger-happy bands of marauders) or as settlers (occasionally quietly dignified, more often comic relief). Other ethnic minorities appear sporadically, in the form of whole communities (for instance, one of Chinese and one of Scots) whose attempts to settle in the West are hindered by prejudiced locals. All opposition is eventually defeated, but always by force, and always with help from the two WASP heroes: the outsiders could never have managed on their own.

The only other social group of some consistent relevance in the series is the United States Army, regiments of which at times find themselves fighting the same villains as Larry and Stretch. The discipline and hierarchy of the army are always implicitly opposed to the individual initiatives of the two drifters, and the comparison is never to the advantage of the army, whose effectiveness in wiping out the forces of evil is hampered by the need to follow regulations and approved procedures.

It would seem that the relations and oppositions roughly sketched above could be summed up as follows:

a) men vs. women: men prevail

b) politicians vs. lawbreakers

or

minorities vs. lawbreakers:

lawbreakers would prevail without
the intervention of Larry and
Stretch.

c) religion vs. violence:

or

education vs. violence:

violence prevails.

d) Discipline vs. individual initiative: individual initiative prevails ("they are unorthodox, but they get results" is the rueful lament of many a sheriff or army officer after an encounter with Larry and Stretch).

All the above oppositions are, of course, typical of the Western *films* of the 50s and early 60s, before the heroes started questioning their role, and long before the appearance of the anti-heroes of Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah⁵; the same could be said of the positive values that emerge from the story (a Manichaeic view of the conflict between good and evil; respect for brute force and for skill in combat; aggressive assertiveness; individualistic disregard for social institutions; a patronising approach to women and to minorities). The ideology therefore can be seen as deliberately anachronistic. It is significant that the only recurrent literary reference employed by the author is his definition of his heroes as "knights errant". This connects — for the benefit of a 20th-Century mass readership — the pre-industrial, chivalric values of individual bravery and altruism to the individualistic deeds of two men who live in the not-yet-industrialised world of American West in the 1880s and who in several novels make a point of expressing mistrust for most technological innovations (such as electrical lighting and telephones), seen as dehumanising ("Plumb unhealthy. Unnatural too").⁶

A further aspect needs to be emphasised. Larry and Stretch may be aggressively egalitarian (they make a point of addressing most figures of authority, including visiting royalties, by their first names), but they choose to remain outside society, drifting away after they have helped each innocent or each oppressed group. Their status as outsiders is underlined by their total chastity.

They have exceptional qualities: both are uncommonly tall (Stretch is 6' 6", Larry is 6' 3"); both are incredibly strong and dead shots with handguns or rifles; Larry is very intelligent, wily and a skilful detective. In taking their initiatives, they set themselves above any officially-appointed authority: they mete out punishment to villains, reward deserving characters (with the bounties they themselves have earned), and occasionally decide not to hand over to justice former villains who have reformed. They pay lip-service to the notion that the innocent or the oppressed can or should make their own autonomous decisions, but in practice they take over the leadership at once. These features correspond to those listed by Umberto Eco in his definition of the "charismatic leaders" of popular literature⁷: men who possess powers which average people (and the readers) lack, and who take the law into their own hands instead of encouraging the oppressed to become truly self-sufficient.

Given that any explanation that is based exclusively on the books themselves, without being supported by any statistical surveys, must necessarily be speculative, three hypotheses — by no means mutually exclusive — present themselves to account for the appeal of the series:

1. The novels, within the limits of their simple, iterative structure, are highly entertaining. The action is always fast, and both the main plot and the subplots of every novel are neatly devised. Another constant feature is humour, both situational and verbal. Some situations are obvious slapstick (characters shooting themselves in the foot with their own weapons or creating havoc in brawls), others are neat reversals of logical expectations (Stretch and a reformed thief stealthily putting things back into people's pockets), still others burlesque universally-known literary passages (Larry, by chance in a lady's bedroom, hears her recite the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* in her sleep, and mutters appropriate rejoinders). Humorous effects are also achieved by juxtaposing different registers of spoken English, with the basic assumption that polysyllables of Latin origin are out of touch with everyday reality ("The cuisine is highly commendable" "Howzat again?" "He means we won't choke on the grub").

2. The novels reinforce the self-image of the bulk of the readership, which is Australian, male and working-class (an informal enquiry carried out in five Melbourne newsagencies has confirmed that most Larry and Stretch readers are non-professional men between the ages of 16 and 40). Russel Ward's well-known summary of the 'myth of the typical Australian', product of the "bush ethos", fits Larry and Stretch like a glove:

He is a practical man, rough and ready in his manner and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others . . . Though capable of great exertion in an emergency, he normally feels no impulse to work hard without good cause. He swears hard and consistently, gambles heavily and often, and drinks deeply on occasion . . . He is a "hard case", sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally . . . He is a fiercely independent person who hates officiousness and authority . . . Yet he is very hospitable and, above all, will stick to his mates through thick and thin . . . He tends to be a rolling stone, highly suspect if he should chance to gather much moss.⁸

Furthermore, the male pair-bonding of Larry and Stretch fully reflects another widespread Australian myth, that of "mateship":

A bushman has always a mate to comfort him and argue with him, and work and tramp and drink with him . . . to abuse him to his face and defend his name behind his back . . . And each would take the word of the other against all the world, and each believes that the other is the straightest chap that ever lived . . .⁹

3. The novels provide wish fulfilment. The heroes are likeable, always in control of situations, not tied down by any permanent work commitment, and free from all complications which arise from any (be it hetero- or homo-) sexual

involvement. By the last page all problems are solved, all loose ends tied up, and the heroes' anachronistic individualism is triumphant:

Your qualities — courage and fighting spirit — will never be out of style. As long as America keeps growing — as it must — there'll always be a need for men of your calibre.¹⁰

Some light can thus be thrown on the apparent paradox of hundreds of thousands of people repeatedly buying what is basically *the same* "action" book, *not* because of its exciting action, *but* for its utter predictability. The books are not only an obvious, totally unrealistic form of escapism, but — considered *cumulatively* — they constitute an ideology. The mainstays of this ideology are a reaffirmation of individualistic male values, and the belief that problems can be solved by the intervention of "charismatic leaders", without society as a whole needing to undergo any change. Each single purchase of "a new Larry and Stretch novel" can be seen as an expression of the wish to be reassured that such an ideology is still valid. Larry and Stretch are on the drift again, all's well with the world.

NOTES

1. My sincere thanks to Horwitz Group Books Pty. Ltd. (for releasing some information on sales figures) and to Mike Leonard, of the Language Centre of La Trobe University, (for re-reading the final English draft of this article). Special thanks to Mr L. F. Meares for discussing his work with me.
2. Cf. Antonio Gramsci, Section III ("Letteratura popolare") of *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1975.
3. Umberto Eco, *Il superuomo di massa: retorica e ideologia nel romanzo popolare*, Milan, Bompiani, 1978, p. 28 (my transl.).
4. In the novel *Baxter's Last Laugh*, for instance, the beneficiaries of a will are four couples: three married couples, and Larry and Stretch. In two other adventures—*Ride Out Shooting* and *Lone Star Godfathers*—Larry and Stretch, together, temporarily adopt a baby.
5. Cf. Will Wright, *Six guns and Society: a Structural Study of the Western*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1975.
6. *Run from the Buzzards* (1979), p. 22.
7. U. Eco, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-87.
8. Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, London and Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1958 (Second paperback edition, 1970, pp. 1-2).
9. Henry Lawson, *Best Stories* (ed. by Cecil Mann), Sydney, Angus & Robertson Ltd., 1973, p. 160.
10. *Last Stage to Delarno* (1978), p. 121.

DAVID PRESCOTT

My Daughter's Halcyon Days

I say (sounding like my mother)
go outside and play so I can finish
my tea-in-peace:

her eye is as sharp as a kingfisher's,
her voice fluted light floating
in a bowl of leaves

her hair is as yellow as my sister's hair
when we played hide-and-seek
while dusk was gathering

she doesn't know it's a mid-winter's sun
bouncing on her head, that
she's gentled the winds from the sea

she doesn't see the bay beneath the trees
slide its green tongue over
the last rind of sand:

it is perfectly fitting

MABEL REID

Conversation Piece

Impossible mountains
glacier marked
razor backed
guard a steep cemetery

tall tree trunks
shut out the sun
the wind
keens to the dead.

Silas
who once sang in church
and
samantha his wife
aligned
to the lie of the land
upright advantaged
on the top tier.

Separate on a shelf
slotted into the hillside
Adam
who worked
in the long tunnel of a mine
maria his wife
less at home
in cramped quarters.

Will those latter two
reassemble
more slowly
into substance
than Silas
and samantha

the day
the trumpet
sounds.

JENNY BOULT

and now/
after the sadness

i see that it's spring
put away the dark warmth of winter
and retrieve
the pastel of early sunshine, washing
clothes and fetching them in
& children's laughter.

even insomnia doesn't seem too bad, tonight.

(does pernod help the cast iron vision
of an artist
boadicea did you do it on mead?)

i move like the blue smoke that haunts &
lets me dream.

spring, & i must sort the pinks
from the weeds in the bottom of the wardrobe
buy musk shampoo & listen
to the cats chasing birds in the overgrown garden.

i am not desperate,
and the sun shines in
through my back door, today.

PAUL FAHEY

At wit's end

Slinging gin & cracking jokes,
falling back upon armchairs,
eating words, smoking old cheroots
like herrings red enough to swim
down anyone's brain & lie there
writhing, dreaming of fresh routines,
c'est la vie.

On another hand there are ancients
and children not yet dead who say
if the sky doesn't fall there'll be
larks we haven't dreamt of.

la vie—at wit's end always *C'est*.

Levitation

In bodies of stuff ninety odd percent
water it's odd we don't swim a lot
better: but then, there's the matter
of spirit: funny word—
say it often, like 'quantum',
in vacuo, 'spirit', it rises—
but that's an illusion like 'rabbit'
or 'cat', even there, on the mat.

I have experimented often, just as
you must often have—maybe,
quietly, there on the couch—
watched yourself gracefully swim
just below your self, rising.

but set down/This

Intent upon destruction of hope
Iago waits in the pub.
Not long. His work is easy work,
he does it often and well.

I saw a man who looks like Beckett,
playing Sam again, and again,
even before he's dead!

Poor

Tom.—Mr Eliot I mean,
sternly claiming how happy
others would not let him seem.

Even so, in this, life goes on.
Some cheering up occurs
of course, so a hopeful Iago
can always earn his keep.

JUDITH WOMERSLEY

Duty

You were a good daughter
they told her.
Over every Friday
to do the shopping
pay the bills
deal with the pension
soothe the neighbours.

She smiled,
seeing the gulf
between love and duty
as unfathomable,
inexplicable, vast,
as love itself.

Wanted—brief autobiography

I write
husband—one
children—three
job—teaching.
Thin black words,
dry twigs, bird scratchings,
a sparse triangle
complete yet fleshless
saying everything and nothing
spread like the sun dried bones
of a filleted fish.

R. G. HAY

Self-defence

You phrase your contempt as 'Grasshopper mind!'
but why not say 'Like a hermit crab'?

Some minds grow like gastropods
sifting the limestone experience to fashion
a pattern elaborated all their lives
that keeps them safe.

But some, like the unlucky crustacean,
half armoured and powerful, half unfinished
and vulnerable, cannot build a shell:
they must make do with what they find
left lying about by some molluscan mind
and, if they're going to grow at all,
must always be questing a new, fitter, shell.

RON TWADDLE

The Pilgrimage

“What if I die?” My mind does not readily lend itself to such morbid thoughts but the situation is extreme.

“I’m not afraid,” I tell myself. More as something to say than as a statement of belief. I’m terrified.

“I’m not afraid,” my mind repeats, as if frequent association with these words would take away the fear.

“I’m not afraid. I’m not afraid. I’m not afraid.”

Tick.

“Temperature time,” says a friendly young nurse, all smiles and boobs.

“I’m not afraid,” I tell her. Just to reinforce my own disbelief.

“Oh,” she says, and her smile cracks into a frown.

“Open wide.” Thermometer under tongue. “We look after you.”

I try to tickle her with my wit but my words are swallowed by the thermometer. Temperature up. Blood pressure normal. Scribble on chart. Next please. She does have a nice bum.

“It’s not to disturb the routine of the hospital but I do prefer to have my tablets with meals. It’s not essential, just habit so to speak.” Not him again. The nurses’ nightmare. He does not mind coming to hospital to be healed. As long as his life is not disrupted by it. I’ve been here for twelve hours and he has not stopped complaining. Not enough food. Cup of tea not hot enough, or too hot. I was not here twenty minutes before he descended upon me with his medical history. Pummelling me with it.

“Bowels don’t work. Bladder don’t work. I’ve a bag strapped to the thigh of each leg, for refuse you see. Have to empty them every few hours. Have to do it myself too. Can’t get the bloody nurses to do nothing around here. You know . . .”

Rave on. He was thin and bent, like a paper clip, and wore a green silk dressing gown which occasionally flopped open just so the nurses could catch a glimpse of his physique. None did, but he winked at them anyway. His nose was, in size, above average. In fact, it trembled as he spoke. Either with the excitement of what he was saying or in expectation of what he might say.

Now, at least, he had someone else under his thumb.

(“I’m not afraid.”) Tick.

Lying on the theatre trolley waiting. Near the window. Blue sky and sun shattering the glass with warm light. Hot light. Burning my arms, my legs through the sheet. My face. My eyes burning out. That golden globe hypnotizing, enchanting. Pulling me. Calling me to it. Drawing me out of myself into union with its

brilliant mystical body. Consuming me with incendiary lust. My bones scattered across the desert, wretched, abandoned. My soul caressed by fire. I am the sun. Apollo racing my chariot across the sky, the bearer of life . . .

Darkness.

“There. I’ve moved you out of the sun. You’ll be more comfortable.”

“Thank you nurse.” My voice is cracked and sterile.

White walls. White ceiling. White men in white sheets, their faces blank. And white. The only features are eyes. Eyes black and terrible. They ignore me. As if I were not there. Hundreds of them collecting, multiplying plethora of white demons. One approaches and looks at me with satanic eyes. His hand reaches to his featureless face and he peels it off. Beneath is a beard, and mouth. And nose. He holds my wrist. Not to comfort. But not to threaten either. Somehow dis-attached. As though I were a stone. Maybe I am. Perhaps he is God. He unhands my wrist and it drops. I tell my hand to move but it will not. It lies, so passive. Maybe even dead. My mind continues to send it orders but there is no response. I close my eyes. Perhaps I even cry. Tick.

The old man opposite me in the ward is not well. I wonder if he is dying. His head is cropped closely and I find it difficult to take my eyes off his prickly cactus head. His ears also are prickly with the hairs growing out of them. And his nostrils seem a perfect breeding ground for hairs. His eyebrows are a veritable jungle. Perhaps the rest of his body is trying to compensate for the cropped head.

I laugh at the man. Silently. But not because I think he is funny. No, I laugh because he is so pathetic. I feel so sorry for him that perhaps I might cry. So I laugh. It eases the tension.

I look at him without looking and he knows I am looking. His eyes are deep set in swollen lumps of flesh and the rotund physique of his upper torso contrasts violently with his wasted brittle legs.

“Nu-ursh, Ah wa-ant . . . want a . . . drin-ing, bleeze.” His tongue is swollen terribly.

“Certainly, Mister Alder,” says a young nurse who wears her uniform as though it were her own skin. I watch her leave the ward and walk down the hallway. A pleasure to watch.

I hear a noise from across the room. The old man’s eyes have turned in his head as his head twitches in spasms. I look in horror my eyes frozen to that contorted face. He slowly opens his mouth as if to yawn, and slowly a thick red bile dribbles out over his teeth and onto his chin. I am screaming. I hear no sound yet I scream. I want to turn away. To throw my face into my pillow and sob. But that foul ugly sight will not let me for it has paralysed me. Nurses come running. Shrieks. Bottles, machinery, men, nurses all cluster round the old man. Whispers, shaken heads, groans, serious faces, sheet pulled up over the old man’s face. Wardsmen wheel him off.

All before my very eyes.

“I am not afraid.”

My very eyes. Tick. Tick. Tick.

Now the bed is empty but I still see the old man there, with his shaven head. I no longer even notice the nurses. The event seems to have anaesthetized staff and patients alike. No more cute smiles or coy jokes.

When I was a child I had a kitten, a little black kitten. That I loved. It was so cute and playful. We were very close, my kitten and I. I even taught it tricks which, as we all know, is a very difficult task with cats. But it was not only a pet. It grew into a hunter. Mice, snakes, and small birds all fell victim to the black cat’s stealth. Then, one day, my cat did not come home. Nor the next. Two days later I found him rotting on a vacant lot not far from our house, shot between the

eyes with an air rifle. I buried my cat but I did not cry. At least, not until I thought of what it would be like to die. Then I cried. Just because everything seemed so desolate. So empty. That is what it seemed to me that death was—emptiness and desolation. Likewise now, with the old man.

“What if I die?” I ask myself.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I assure myself. “Incomprehensible. If not impossible.” I feel very empty. Tick.

Yet when my grandmother died it was different. I never thought of her. I cried, like the rest of my family. But not because of my grandmother. For myself, I cried for myself. Grandmother used to give me lots of presents and pay me lots of attention. It did not occur to me that what had happened to my grandmother was the same as what had happened to my cat.

The nurse enters, frowns and pulls the curtains around my bed. Fingers on pulse, eyes on watch. Tick. Thermometer in mouth. Tick.

“Pants down, Mister Squires,” she says in a sugary voice, as if to say, “I’ll see yours but you won’t see mine.” Tick.

I obligingly do as ordered.

“On your side, please.” Tick.

Thermometer out of mouth, read, put aside. Tick.

A large needle in a tray arrives. Tick.

Swab thigh with cold cotton wool. Tick.

Hold needle up to light. Tick.

I swallow hard. Tick.

She inserts the needle, and my eyes close as my jaw clenches. Tick.

“There you are, Mister Squires. You can pull up your pants now.”

“Thank you, nurse,” I mumble, not at all grateful.

“The wardsmen will be along in about half an hour to take you to the operating theatre.” I do not answer.

“If God exists why is there so much suffering in the world.” I smirk with an air of condescension. Because I know no one can answer my question. My superiority oozes over everyone. Like syrup. Then John says, “Suffering has nothing to do with the question of God’s existence.” Dead silence. “That question has to do with his nature. It presupposes his existence.” I hate people who flout their education. Tick.

There were four of us cramped into the front of the ute. Travelling at mercurial speed on the dirt track. The driver was drunk. So were the other two. I was sober. Exhaust fumes poured in through the floor but it was far too cold to open a window so we all just cried, and our eyes stung. I was half crazy with fear. Joe had wandered off the road several times particularly when he laughed which was quite often as Ted was telling us of his sexual exploits as a teenager. At my feet was an esky full of beer.

A sudden explosion, Joe struggling with the wheel, his smile gone. I close my eyes as the headlights reflect off the tree before us.

“What if I die?” Tick.

I remember nothing else.

I am not afraid. Tick.

Two wardsmen, built like gorillas, lift me from my bed to the theatre trolley. Hallway to hallway, up lifts (or down, I am not sure which); ceilings travelling past.

“The only way to travel,” I say to the wardsmen, pleased with my wit.

“An expensive trip,” he says, deflating me completely. Tick.

Rosemary was a violent woman. Her temper was tempestuous and when lost it was difficult to find again. Despite all her faults I loved Rosemary. When she

was in good humour she was so sweet, so lovable. But catch her at the wrong time and she was a taipan, striking to kill not once but time after time. We had lived together for over a year and by then I had felt that I had weathered the worst storms. My commitment to Rosemary grew and we were as close as any two people could be. My meekness mated her fiery aggressiveness. She organized I tagged along. We were content. Well matched.

One day she called in to see me at my office, took one look at my secretary (a regular owl) and really cracked up. Her face was purple and she made quite a scene. Well, to cut a tall story short, she became obsessed with the owl, my secretary, and lived in a state of perpetual jealousy. I tried to reason with her, to explain to her that the owl was not my sort of woman. I tried tears. I tried sulking. But nothing worked.

Then, suddenly, all was well again. She was happy, and there were no traces of jealousy. I just had no idea. Well after a few days I forgot about the whole incident and settled back into my life of married bliss.

One afternoon, a month later, when I arrived home from work, the house was locked, her car was gone, and a note was scribbled on the wall in felt pen. It read:

“Darling,

I cannot forgive you for your secretary. She is nothing but a low-down dirty whore. You’ll never see me again. I’ve run off with another man. Don’t try to find me because you never will. Mother won’t even tell you where I am. We have parted forever.

Love, Rosemary.”

Then, I sat on the bed and cried. Gone forever. So I would be alone. I never tried to find her. I took her on her word. I was heartbroken. Perhaps it even led to my being sick.

I am not afraid. Tick.

Somewhere under the sheets, miles away, lies my body. Numb and unattended. My eyelids weigh a ton believing that it is more natural for them to be closed than open. My breathing is something slow and alien; a learned rusty noise breaking loose from the hidden archives of my body. I am alive. I know I am alive because my head throbs so. But what if I die?

My mother kissed me on the forehead and wiped the tears from my eyes. I looked up at her and she smiled despite her glistening eyes.

“Why has Daddy gone away?” I asked.

She just shook her head, and stifled a tremble.

“Will he be gone long, Mummy?”

“Yes, dear, he’ll be gone forever. He can’t come back. He’s gone to God.”

“Is forever longer than tomorrow?”

“Yes, dear, much longer.”

“Even longer than Christmas?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I’ll miss Daddy. Will you miss him too, Mummy?”

“Yes, yes. I’ll miss him very, very much. I’m all alone now.”

“No, Mummy, you’re not all alone. You still have me. I’ll look after you, Mummy. Don’t worry. And Daddy’s not alone cause he’s with God.” My mother wept solidly for about a week and I was her only comfort. Sometimes I even made her laugh. I loved my mother.

“I’m so afraid of what will happen to us?”

“Don’t Mummy. I’m not afraid. I’ll look after you.”

“You’re my brave little boy, aren’t you?”

“Not so little, Mummy.” But I beamed with joy.

Tick.

The double doors open. Outwards. Towards me. A ghost stands sentinel at each door. I feel my body tighten. Two more approach my trolley.

“Squires?”

I nod.

“Had a needle?”

I close my eyes and nod again. Tick.

I can feel me gliding along the floor, and the breathing. The doors clatter shut. Did I hear them lock?

I force my eyes open. Before me stands God. Pure, Sterile. Smelling of anti-septic. I want to beg his forgiveness, but my tongue turns to lead. The eyes are kind but the rest of his face is torn in agony. My hands freeze. It becomes more and more effort to stay conscious. The cherubim and seraphim glide back and forth on wings of cloud. My heart wants to beat faster but it has not the strength. Wheels of light spin above my head. Wheels within wheels. God leans over me and looks into my eyes. No expression. Just looks. And looks. And looks. From the depths of my stomach a cry begins to erupt. I feel it running up my chest, throat, and into my mouth. On my lips it dies and falls senseless onto my chin, a victim of the antiseptic. The devil is circumcised, or excised. Words mean nothing any more. All is vanity. Outside the heavenly angels sing hallelujahs in six part harmony. The world spins. God spins. I spin. All accept my eyes. I close them but the spinning continues. The journey has begun.

“I am not afraid. I am not afraid. I am not af . . .

“I’m terrified.”

Tick. Tick. Ti . . .

BRUCE DAWE

Sharing

That spring the grass was green
with industrial dividends:
International Combustion Australia
sparkled in the early light, the busy twitter
of Dalgetys in the camphor-laurels
harmonized with the lawn-mower pattering
of Pioneer Mines Limited.

Ah me, I said,
savouring the flavoursome aroma of
Barcoo Sulphates, and slipping a deft arm around
my little joint venture, *Who knows*
what jolly surprises, what early and late
movements this season will bring forth?
(and with that giving
her Dillingham-Murphys a quick squeeze . . .)

Allright, said she, pouring a Kalgoorlie Southern
and handing me her Tomlinson Steel look,
Don't get your alluvials all stirred up,
and the tight note in her voice
put a sharp brake on my interest rate, so that
it was with some relief, then,
that the Clackline Refractories yoo-hooed as per usual
over the side-fence and I made my escape
into the corporate morning, humming
the Offshore Explorers Song from
the Pancontinental Suite as I took my customary
seat in the Kemtron United
(next to good old reliable Peko Wallsend)
and unfolded my New Zealand Forests
at early summer . . .

BRUCE DAWE

The miracle at Milmerran

An Election Parable

Now it came to pass that the Premier, being full of years,
Went up into the mountains and held a press conference,
And reporters came to him there and others who were also lame and blind,
And those who had heretofore missed out on lucrative Government contracts,
And many from the neighbouring towns where there was under-employment,
And when he beheld so great a throng he had compassion on them
As it was an election year and compassion was in considerable demand,
And he began to teach them many things concerning the Kingdom,
And the filling-in of the ballot-paper when the time should come,
And he revealed unto them the mysteries of the Senate ticket with its
thirty-three squares

And especially its automatic Flo-on . . .

But the disciples, hearing this, and taking counsel of the public opinion polls,
Said, "First things first. Right now we need a miracle and bloody quick."
Whereat the Premier, raising up his eyes unto heaven, said, "Then let there be
A consortium in the wilderness, and a 3 billion dollar coal-to-oil
conversion plant."

And straightway he commanded them all to sit down by companies upon
what was left of the grass,
And he spoke at length about the state's electricity grid and many
another wonder.

And when at last the multitude had had their fill and gone away satisfied,
The disciples said again to him, "But what shall we do should these
promises not be fulfilled?"

And the Premier said, "O ye of little faith,
Know ye not the food I give is the food of *dreams*
And of that food there is *always* some left over?"
And those who had doubted marvelled at these words,
And went back each to his electorate, glorifying him,
And declaring, "Surely now we've got it in the bag!"
And the people of Meringandan and Wondai, not to mention Cunnamulla and
the far south-west,
Beholding a new heaven and a new earth, and reckoning not the smoke and
the locusts,

Cried out with one voice like John of Patmos,
"Come, Lord, come!"

DAVID JACOBS

Digging courts

. . . . and the queue for the kiosk
and lunch time rolls was slow
and more than once I thought of
leaving it and the sun was very warm
and the seating area was very crowded
and on my left was a new shrubbery
whose name I could not remember
in Latin or otherwise and its height
came to the level of my chin
and its greenery was thick and
as if consisting of small pieces
of unwanted string put together
to make something exotic and
in front of me a sun tanned woman
was wearing sunglasses and
scribbling arabic into a tiny notebook
and then I was at the kiosk
and I bought a ham and lettuce
roll and tea and the plate, cup
and the saucer were the colour
of surgery and I sat down in the
corner of a bench facing some
courts and I unstuffed my jacketed
paperback and machine noise had
replaced the pluck of lunch time
tennis and fork lift trucks
manoeuvred making several complete

circuits and there was a transformer
with more visible dirt than paint
which sloped between the arrowed
tread of its two wheels and
there were men wearing t shirts
and faded jeans uprooting the
asphalt surface and one had
a drill which hopped like a pogo
stick and he tried to calm it
and then he gave up and took off
his shirt and walked over to a wide
container shaped like a boat
in which the handles of spare
tools aimed over the top like rifles
and he flagged one of them
with his shirt and all this time
his colleagues were busy changing
gear with their spades and
a courting couple, their strides
synchronised, walked by on the path
and watched them do it and
on my right was a display of daffodils
and I thought of Wordsworth
and by this time someone else
had sat down on the opposite
corner of my bench and I had not
opened my book and I went away
and wrote all this down because
it was unexpected and poetry,
to be successful, demands
the unexpected.

DAVID JACOBS

The dying of Tito

Tito is dying and the people of Belgrade hurry along their pavements and cross roads. Cars move normally around the squares and buildings drip dry in sunlight. The city is calm in after rain. Elsewhere the cameras acknowledge war. Naked children stare large eyed as lorry loads of soldiers move away up jungle tracks.

If order *does* exist, some move to a concluding sanity, then holocaust would simplify to skirmish or an act of cleansing. Midnight rooms can realise belief in this, making slight those evenings passed anticipating strokes, paralysis or death, the phone dragged to where the arm can stretch, the front door firmly unlatched.

The night constructs a perfect room, calmly reassembles atmosphere, unites all furniture with shadows, making mysteries of quiet chairs and simple ornaments. The lamplight throws a cone across the wall and curtains gently probe within the slightness of their range. Outside sound hesitates and loses strength.

Tito is dying and I walk through London. Grass greens itself in parks, lamposts stand in sunlit courtyards distanced from cars, stairways climb to darkness behind old fashioned doors and the endless young girls sprawl across the city. A breeze shows me the tips of my tough dark hair. I stand and look around, briefly a wilder person.

CLIFF GILLAM

How It Should Be Weather

How it should be weather,
with the early afternoon sunlight
fingering the fronds of sentinel Norfolks.
Bark and branches;
green against blue.
Fern in the basket
hanging, tilting slightly in the autumn air.
An abrasive sibilance of passing car sorties
amongst the casual calls, bird to suburban bird
in the pine-tops.

The roseate wars of bardic history
lie open in my lap.

Over the garden wall,
under the purple delicacy of the flowering vine,
out of the unpeopled street,
and along the blank asphalt
of the pavement passing my house,
appears the face of ancient Pantalone.
Nose hooking down to upward
curve of jaw.
Wheezing cracked laughter
from a collapsed cavern of mouth.

And by a second breathless cackling
I am surprised.
Under the low garden wall
overhung with the blown roses,
on the leathern stick of Pantalone's arm,
leans a tiny, aged woman.

Thin grey hair sliding across my vision.

Pantalone with his Eve passing laughing
under the crimson flaming flower
of the creeper on the boundary fence.

The sudden moment of their laughter
fading on the air.

I bend my head to my book.

The sunlight reclaims the pines.

Poems by Japanese Women

ASSIGNATION

Here, at the ford which budding willows
Overhang and half-surround,
I, that should be drawing water,
Hang around and hang around.

Look, my heel-marks of impatience
Half-mooned on the patient ground.

Anonymous (5th century)

WANTING

Is that you, for whom I've waited,
You for whom I've pined
With all the fevers of the flesh,
The hungers of the mind?

Only the mindless wind of autumn
Moving the bamboo-blind.

Princess Nukada (c. 645–c. 700)

MISSION TO CHINA

Old legend has it that a doe which mates
with lespedeza drops but a single fawn.

Today my fawn-sole son, my only child,
Sets forth on that long road where every dawn
Will find him pillowed upon grass.

That he may travel
Safe through all peril on his journeyings,
First cleansed with ritual water, I have threaded
This hanging thrave of clean-cut bamboo-rings
And then set out, correctly swathed in cloths
Woven from mulberry-bark, these jars of wine,
These sacred jars, therewith to supplicate
Divine protection for that fawn of mine.

When night-frost crackles on those open fields
Where, bivouaced against the cold it brings,
Our mission huddles, warm around my darling,
O white birds flocked from heaven, fold your wings.

Mother of a mission-member (733)

DREAM WORLD

Since by the time the moon's white pearl
Was full-grown in the sky
You had not come, what could one do
But turn to sleep and try
There to give you all that love
You could not there deny.

Lady Otomo no Sakanoe (c. 730)

IF IT WERE DEATH

If it were death to love,
Dear love, believe you me,
A thousand times a thousand times
I shall have lived to see
My mortal flesh bear witness
To its immortality.

Lady Kasa (c. 740)

HAND

I lift my hand. I stare at it.
This is the hand you pressed
So pledgedfully that time we lay,
Ours only, breast to breast,
And pledged each other love eternal.

Staring at my hand,
I drown in understandings
Which I dare not understand.

Lady Heguri (c. 750)

WHOSE MAN

Whose man, I hear her asking,
Is that tall fellow there
Setting off for frontier-duty?

Would that I could share
The indifference in her easy-spoken
Innocence of care.

Anonymous (8th century)

HONIES

Better you should leave him
While still his passions rage:
While still he swears he loves you,
Disentangle, disengage,
That remembrance may bring honies
To the sourness of old age.

Anonymous (9th century)

RUSH STEMS

I send you this burnt rush-stem:
With it I return
Those gifts, that love, those promises
My beauty once could earn.
Their prime once over, what's the use
Of rush-stems but to burn?

Komachi's Elder Sister (c. 830-)

BLAZE

On a night too dark for meeting,
No moon, not even stars,
I wake, breasts heaving, needing you.

Within its rib-cage bars,
That brazier of the heart, my heart,
Like some meat-offering, chars.

Ono no Komachi (834-880)

BETRAYAL

It does not greatly matter
That I am cast aside,
But one pities a man who goes through life
Knowing that he lied.

Lady Ukon (late 9th century)

THE NATURE OF EXISTENCE

So we exist. What of it?

Are you solaced by the mere
Fact of an existence
Whose character is clear
From the way that morning-glory flowers
Appear and disappear?

Izumi Shikubu (979-c. 1033)

THE HEARTS OF MEN

The hearts of men, like hunting-tunics
Dyed to a light light-blue,
Cannot hold their colour.

It's not that they're untrue
But, of their very nature,
Run as a dye will do.

Lady Sakon (early 11th century)

TRUTHS

That I'd forgive a truthless man,
I'd not have thought it true:
Never, never in a thousand years,
Yet pardon him I do.

Heart, can it be that my true heart
Is turning truthless too?

Fujiwara no Tamako (1101-1145)

UNSUCCESSFUL SUICIDE

There was a time I could not bear
The tattle of the town:
Another time I could not face
His faithlessness and frown:
How shall I live now death itself
Sees fit to turn me down?

Inpu-monin no Taifu (c. 1130-c. 1200)

NO REGRETS

I'd like to think I bear no grudge,
Though who else is to blame
For all those crude unkindnesses
I would not care to name.

One last kind gesture. Do not think
All women think the same.

Lady Kojiju (12th century)

DOLL

When in the water from the well
Clearly my reflection swam,
I, that should not say it, said it:
Golly, what a doll I am.

Anonymous (12th century)

CURSE

May he that lured me into love
Yet shuns my lonely bed
Be turned into a demon
With three horns on his head.

May all men shun his company,
And may his shifty soul
Find in some grey bog-creeping bird
Its fit and fitting hole.

May the cold wedge of winter
Jam every crevice shut,
May wind and snow and iciness
Flick him from rut to rut.

May both his feet freeze off him,
And may his flesh corrode
Into a scrawniness of grass
At the dirt edge of the road.

And may his way of walking
Be shiveringly bare
With the trembling of all rabbits,
The hurt limp of the hare.

Anonymous (12th century)

SUNDOWN

Not strong enough to redden
The tops of the maple-trees,
The evening sun, as it goes down
By darkening degrees,
Appears to wither the mountain-plants
With disintensities.

Lady Eifuku Mon'in (c. 1310)

TEMPLE CATS

Cats make love all over the temple.
Just imagine what long faces
People would pull if men and women
Used the same convenient places.

Kawai Chigetsu-ni (1632–1736)

BUTTERFLY

What dream, what nightmare wry
With human horror, brings
This wretched butterfly
To twitch its sleeping wings?

Kaga no Chiyojo (1703–1775)

DEAD SON

My hunter of blue dragonflies,
How far today
Through the endless wither of the other world
Has he wandered away?

Kaga no Chiyojo (1703–1775)

PRISONERS

Trees are the prisoners of their roots,
Knot-fettered underground:
Birds in the morning, seeming-free,
Flit wilfully around
Yet evening brings them back to nest.

So too with humankind.

Though, on the surface, heart and soul
Seem free and unconfined,
We wake, get up and go to rest
As though to prison bred
In the same parish,
 street,
 house-number;
Even the same bed.

Yosano Akiko (1878–1942)

EVALUATION

I do not see myself
As one the world might see
As worth consideration:
But sometimes, even for me,
The universe becomes too small
For my immensity.

Kujo Takeko (1887–1928)

RUNNING

When, though you did not try to, did not guess
Even that you were running, you out-ran
Some other person, some unwitting one,
You can but travel into loneliness.

There was a night when I out-ran my father
And, while next door he snored the night away
I wept into my pillow until day.

Still the remembrance irks me. Irks? Say rather
I hate myself. I am not more than he,
But I out-ran him. Like a slash or scar,
That moment marked a growth-stage in my life.

Shall I some day give someone, a son's wife,
A niece, a nephew, opportunity
To find themselves the runners that they are?

When we have out-run someone, sure we know:
But when ourselves out-run, who tells us so?

Ibaragi Noriko (1926–)

FIRE EGG

In the bitter cold of winter
When upon your table
I placed a single rose,
It proved to be a fire-egg.

Alas, I am not able
To hold that fire-egg close
Because it grows so angry:
Yet, when I let it be,
It burns the table,
Burns the table silently.

When I looked into the mirror
My kerchief and my lipstick
All began to burn;
So I ran out of that burning house,
Pell-mell, taking nothing else,
Nothing but this spoon in hand,
Never to return.

Shiraishi Kazuko (1931–)

PROPOSAL

If you love me, marry me.

How hurtfully he pleads
With all the heart of one convinced
That all a marriage needs
Is love as deep as his and mine.

Because I love him so
It will be hard to find the words
With which to tell him no.

Sugi Mayumi (1940–)

BOOKS

Shirley Hazzard: *The Transit of Venus*, Mac-Millan, London, 1980, 337 pp., \$19.95.

Like the passage of the planet Venus across the path of the sun, an infrequent cosmic occurrence of great value to astronomers (which allowed the first accurate means of measuring the distance between the earth and the sun, and enabled voyagers to pinpoint their geographical position), Shirley Hazzard's new novel, *The Transit of Venus*, is that rare event in publishing, a major work of fiction. Seven years in the writing, *The Transit of Venus* follows a collection of short stories, *Cliffs of Fall* (1963), three novels, *The Evening of a Holiday* (1966), *People in Glass Houses* (1967), and *The Bay of Noon* (1970) and *Defeat of an Ideal* (1973), a book of critical essays on the United Nations, where Hazzard worked for over a decade. Since 1962, she has devoted herself to her writing.

An expatriate Australian, Shirley Hazzard lives in New York with her husband, writer and scholar Francis Steegmuller, and her novel depicts the movements of two central female characters, Australian sisters Caroline and Grace Bell, and the people whose lives theirs touch and entangle. The transits of the novel are both physical and emotional; moving between houses, between countries, between loves, and between life and death. They are in part as mysteriously ambivalent in meaning as is the legendary conjunction and entrapment of Mars and Venus; in part as overtly fashionable as is the literary theme of the disruption of contemporary life: "That's not travel, that's dislocation" a character declares. These transits are contained and organised by a four-part, sonata-like structure, exquisitely and exactly balanced, rigidly controlled by a God-like narrator, who orders human lives in a disordered universe, establishing movements and counter-movements as irresistible as the knowledge that Venus must, at certain times, move between earth and sun.

The implications of the title of the novel are as subtle and richly manifold as its austere yet vivid prose is suggestive. That the meaning of human lives is clouded yet contingent can be seen as equivalent to the transit of Venus, often obscured to human sight, yet infallible and undeniable. This analogy is established early in the novel. On his voyage to the mythical South Land, Captain James Cook's purpose was to observe, from Tahiti, the transit of Venus. His purpose was thwarted because the astronomical calculations were wrong: "Calculations about Venus often are", but in missing Venus, Cook discovered Australia. Caroline Bell, Caro, is thus "a child of Venus", and as such she attracts and gives love, sometimes miscalculatedly. Multiple references extend from fact and myth, and echo throughout the novel. The order of a passionless life is disrupted when Grace Bell (who is married to Christian Thrale) falls in love with a young doctor, Angus Dance. She becomes "a navigator who seeks land in a horizon deceitful with vapours." Feminine principles of physical beauty and love are inextricably interrelated with the masculine world of politics and war, and the possibility of perfect balance between spirit and flesh, inherent in the novel, is once explicitly and ironically recalled by direct allegorical reference: "And Mars in truth had covered Venus." Again, the difficulty of recognition — Caro's early, unoriginal discovery that "the truth has a life of its own" — reflects the nice distinction of Venus as both morning and evening star, a single object with a dual identity.

Stages of the engrossing passage of the planet, called its "contacts and culmination" provide the titles for the second and fourth parts of the novel. Parts one and three, *The Old World* and *The New World*, involve the human transits of the novel, from England to Australia to America to Europe. Exigencies of the exacting sonata form are perfectly realised; the many variations on the Venus theme reverberate from exposition through development and recapitulation to coda, while the interplay between sections of the structure, between apparent human disorder and actual cosmic order, between indeterminacy and determinacy, creates an ironically ambiguous surface which is exacerbated by the inflexible tone of the all-knowing author. Ted Tice, the young astronomer who loves Caro on sight,

who finally gains her love only to fail in its consummation, intimates Hazzard's fictional justification: "I've thought there may be more collisions of this kind in life than in books. Maybe the element of coincidence is played down in literature because it seems like cheating or can't be made believable. Whereas life itself doesn't have to be fair, or convincing."

This idea asserts the implacable world of the novel, ruled by collision and co-incidence (strongly reminiscent in its unswerving direction of a Hardy novel), and conveyed by the dense prose, crammed as it is with mythological, literary and religious reference. Caro, trapped and deadened by her love for Paul Ivory, is released — "resurrected" she says — by Adam Vail, the man she marries, and finally recognises the truth of love in Ted Tice. Grace Bell marries Christian Thrale, who thinks of her: "She leadeth me beside the still waters." A diplomat in an ironically observed civil service, propping up a dying Empire, Christian is seen by his colleagues as "rising", then "risen". A huge storm (again, the vast landscape with its single, moving human figure: "Only he, kinetic, advanced against circumstances to a single destination" is pure Hardy) through which Ted Tice "waded up into the entrance of the house as if from the sea" begins the novel; elemental life is predicated in the elements of nature. Human disasters and triumphs are connected by water, both literally and metaphorically. Caroline and Grace Bell's parents drown when a Sydney harbour ferry capsizes — "Full fathom five thy father lies": Paul Ivory allows a male lover to drown: the Titanic is recalled: the young doctor whom Grace Bell loves is obsessed by the tragedy of the Tirpitz: Caro and Ted come together in love on the water. Ted Tice's reaction to the news of Caro's marriage is symbolic, he "would go down alone", yet he mocks this grief by mentally captioning the image of a man bowed by disappointment: "He went under." Finally, air and sea are compellingly brought together in the last image of the novel, as Caro's doomed plane makes a sound taking off, "a long hiss of air — like the intake of humanity's breath when a work of ages shrivels in an instant, or the great gasp of hull and ocean as a ship goes down."

Lines and images from Yeat's poetry abound. Christian Thrale has a brief affair with a typist (from "the pool") who is "a gazelle in the room", and his shabby treatment of her is in sharp contrast to the literary recollection she prompts: "The verse ended, 'O that I were young again, and held her in my arms'." Caro and Grace sitting together are "two women, who were both beautiful." Caro, too, is a Dorothea-figure, who "would impose her crude belief — that there could be heroism, excellence — on herself and others, until they, or she, gave in."

This constant, reverberant allusive level, subdued or pointed, is enhanced by Hazzard's habit of dating individual life by cataclysmic historical events, a habit which trivialises individual human destiny, while lending it a curious gravity. It is in her role as omnipotent author, though, that she achieves great narrative power, and the novel has an enormous, retrospective resonance. Hints and foreshadowings, of which the first and gravest ("In fact, Edmund Tice would take his own life before attaining the peak of his achievement. But that would occur in a northern city, and not for many years") extends beyond the time and space of the novel, and is a final consequence of an obscure suggestion that the plane carrying Caro to a rendezvous with Tice will crash, add to this power. As in Greek drama, the deaths and accidents, even the acts of sexual congress — all the culminations of the novel — take place outside the narrative. The felt distance between the narrator and the lives she manipulates is tautly held, and a sense of common, even clichéd life — "such usual griefs" — is endemic to the novel, making more intense the knowledge of hidden, unavoidable fate.

Shirley Hazzard's highly stylised, mannered prose, with its excess of ordinary, observable detail establishes exactly the world she both mocks and relishes. Groups or individuals are particularised by their idiom: "'Dored it, simply 'dored it'" society guests gush as they leave a Thrale party. Sefton Thrale, the aging eminent scientist, "used outworn idiom . . . Still spoke of Turkey as 'The sick man of Europe' although the entire Continent was a casualty ward long since." Yet he is not wholly condemned: "It was easy for youth to scent this out . . . Less easy to feel for what was human in it, let alone pitiful." Carefully

punctuated, the prose is often attenuated or syntactically disarranged, giving it something of the flavour of Patrick White. A curiously arrested, decadent quality results: Paul Ivory, making love with Caro, is interrupted by the arrival of his fiancée, Tertia Drage. Unperturbed, he calls "‘Anything up?’ There was the hard intimacy of tone, the naturalness with which he did not use her name. If he had even added so much as ‘Tertia’." As lives intersect, the narrative is studded with moments of immobility, tableaux which signify consequence or crisis, and are thus rendered timeless as is the moment when Venus and the sun intersect. As Paul, in shirt and tie, stands at a high window talking to Tertia, Caro comes to his side, naked, and the three are caught: "Moments passed, or did not pass."

This static element, sometimes in danger of becoming ludicrous, is relieved from its potential portentousness by Hazzard's wit. Decades of Australian pilgrimage to London are ambiguously recalled: "Going to Europe, someone had written, was about as final as going to heaven." Colonialism and British parochialism provide simultaneous targets as Sefton Thrale reflects on Grace Bell's heritage: "Australia could only have been mitigated by an unabashed fortune from its newly minted sources — sheep, say, or sheep-dip. And no fabled property of so many thousand acres or square miles, no lucky dip, attached itself to Grace." Dora, Caro and Grace's half-sister, insensitive, vulgar and a snob, marries Major Ingot, and each is characterised by her dialogue: "Bruce was rovable," Dora told them. "And Bruce is usually a patient body." Charmain Thrale, Sefton's wife, at the end of her life and of the novel "in a place for old people" particularises the imbalance of life: "When you are old, you are presumed to be a sage or an imbecile. Nothing is permitted in between." And minor characters are sharply realised. A pompous civil servant, in an apoplectic male chauvinist rage, becomes "molten Leadbetter."

This novel, with its lucid language, its unforgettable, static moments, its complexly masterful interweaving of individual destiny, its indictment of the limitations placed on female lives, its celebrations of love, remains in the mind as much for what it implies as for

what it states. Its final sound, the long hiss of air the plane makes as it leaves the ground, renders that fragile moment between earth and air, between life and death, just as Hazzard's novel accomplishes that delicate fictional balance between form and content, so rarely achieved.

DELYS BIRD

THREE POETS PHILIP SALOM, WILLIAM GRONO, NICHOLAS HASLUCK*

Philip Salom's book of poems, *The Silent Piano*, is one of the latest titles in that commendable series, *West Coast Writing*, produced by the Fremantle Arts Centre Press. The series is devoted to poetry and short stories by West Australian authors, who, if not naterally wicious, must be grateful for the opportunity to see their work published in volumes that are, as prices go nowadays, unusually cheap to buy but not at all nastily cheap in their format, being well designed and well printed on good paper.

My copy of *The Silent Piano* contained a 'press release' that ushers Mr Salom in with two glowing testimonials. Mr John Barnes, the consultant editor of *West Coast Writing*, congratulates Mr Salom on his 'impressive command of image . . . work remarkably rich in observation . . . precision and control and the immediate sense of the personal voice . . . vivid metaphor that has the impact of a revelation . . . sheer verbal felicity . . . exciting and surprisingly mature first book.' Mr Thomas Shapcott echoes Mr Barnes's sentiments, but in a more expansive and rhapsodical fashion: 'It is a voice at once precise and rich with overtones . . . The qualities of regional preciseness, a clear observant dignity, and a questing urgency take us at once into a compelling landscape of the imagination . . . the same line of metaphysical search as one finds in Francis Webb or Randolph Stow . . . The large country sequences . . . seem to me the most genuine creation of a rural "poetic" territory" we have had since David Campbell

* Philip Salom, *The Silent Piano*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1980, 94 pp., \$4.00.
William Grono and Nicholas Hasluck, *On The Edge*, Freshwater Bay Press, Claremont, 1980, 78 pp., \$9.00.

. . . and Les Murray . . . Philip Salom populates his country poems with flashes of fresh, arresting imagery, a capacity to make his observations work for him, and that underlying metaphysical search that makes the best poems tingle with a sort of quiet urgency'. 'It is,' Mr Shapcott sums up, perhaps unnecessarily, 'an exciting thing to discover a new poet'.

These expert critics do Mr Salom proud, and I hope that in yielding them the pas I have allowed their enthusiastic emphasis to make its full impact. For, though I am in general agreement with them about the characteristic virtues of *The Silent Piano*, I find that I am for some reason not quite so wholeheartedly enthusiastic. Perhaps—it may well be—it is simply my more grudging and cautious temperament. At any rate, as I begin to recover from a slight bemusement over Mr. Shapcott's sentence about populating poems I shall try to formulate a few comments, more pedestrian but more particular, on Mr Salom's poetic style; and I can at least give one or two specimen samples of it.

Mr Salom, we are informed, grew up on a dairy farm in the south-west of W.A. Most of these poems, those constituting the vital core of his book, spring directly from his experience of living and growing up in that environment. They are life studies, felt as authentic; and as a whole they present a vivid and varied picture of a distinctly Australian rural existence, ranging from the quotidian, the staple or the externally unexciting (sinking a well, mustering, feeding calves, a cattle sale, walking home in rain from the paddocks) to the more obviously 'dramatic', violent and colourful (drought, bushfire, destroying a sick cow, shooting and butchering a steer). They catch the immediacy of scene and action sharply and forcefully, and display a notable 'realizing' strength of sensuous language and image. Mr Salom moves, intensely responsive, through a 'landscape of the senses' (his own phrase). Here is his bushfire:

We fought along the river, seeing shrubs
explode, riddled with fire,
eerie sounds of trees shrieking
like things alive, feral, flames like faces
spilling down into the ferns.
We staggered, sick with the hammering
heat,
dousing endless flames that slammed at us
like nightmares, sullen ghosts

groping at our limbs. We plunged
into that day's red thunder,
subsumed like suiciders who stare into
the rifle, gulp the flame. Individuals
meandering in something large.

A little further on in the same poem:

The noise of heat. Strange pressure on my
eardrums,
sound on so many unseen nerves.
Bush like a shaman's spittle,
sand, powder and breath, crash
of an animal leaping in the bracken:
spirits in the gritty palm.

Feeding calves:

A bunting chaos: calves
forcing through the gate,
their feet like hammers on my boots,
milk from the bucket
pouring in the air, fraying scarf
filled with wind's
white curve, the laws of feeding.

That slurp and suck of feeding . . .

Walking home through rain:

Sodden, all thought
drummed out by the tractor,
I walked for home,
stumbling across the clods
where the scalloped discs had broken
forces in the earth.

Roar of the trees,
a far-off murmur in the hills,
Universe flowing from the purple flare
of sky: this same soft plosion,
sonorous and repeating, shaping
from each step, like the first
and last phrase ever spoken.
I was in the drench of ecstasy,
blindly, mutely, on a huge crescent of land
reading the book of law, year by year
walking on the eyelids of Gods.

Fishing with father:

The shore behind, we wade in the shallows
of the late sun. Shadows and light
gleam into sepia. A slight surge
enters our watery arms, the muscled earth.

In silence the net trails out
behind us. Warmth tussels [*sic*] to the
surface
as we lean, the sticks flexing, weight
bodying out in the string's reach.

The young Siegfried Sasson was once shattered (salutarily) by an old friend's querying

whether his poems should not be more *physical*. She would not have said that of Mr Salom's, which are obviously, as Henry James might have exclaimed, 'of a physicality!'. Reading them, I thought vaguely of a Van Gogh jabbing intense chromatic brushstrokes on his vibrating canvas. Mr Salom's verbal equivalent, into which he frequently breaks, is a verbless syntax, a stringing together of sensory notations, a kind of urgent commentary on impinging sensations and pressures. Nearly all my excerpts illustrate this; and it will be seen that it can certainly produce effects of striking immediacy. But used too often, it can come to seem a rather tedious mannerism and prompt comparisons not so much with Mr Vincent Van Gogh as with Mr Alfred Jingle (I exaggerate a little, of course). And on occasion the unsuspecting reader can be puzzled by the passing strange ('seeing shrubs explode, riddled with fire, eerie sounds of trees shrieking'—seeing sounds?) or the cryptic ('spirits in the gritty palm?'). The laudable desire to be sharply and arrestingly 'physical' leads at times, or so it appears to me, to a straining after verbal intensity that misses the mark, dropping into a wordy, too explicit emphasis. In the first excerpt, for example, 'eerie' is surely a banal and unnecessary adjective, and similarly weak and unnecessary is the phrase 'like things alive'. Indeed this passage (if I am not being hypercritical) falls below Mr Salom's usual standard of the precise and powerful. 'Endless flames' is ambiguous, unprofitably so, I think; there is an apparent inconsistency between 'flames that slammed' and that were in the same breath 'sullen ghosts groping'; 'suicides' is an unnecessary neologism — a mistake, I expect; and 'Individuals meandering in something large' seems at best a vague and anticlimactically tame summing up — it might even be rather ridiculous if you get a picture of people wandering about in grotesquely outsize garments.

But when Mr Salom is not trying too hard to stun us with violence, he actualizes his scenes (the 'bunting chaos' of feeding calves, for instance) with a few strokes that are precise and powerful, using language and image strongly expressive and imaginative ('fraying scarf filled with *wind's* white curve'). Fortunately many of his poems have this kind of excellence. Nor is it invariably a matter of slamming and hammering. Look at the deli-

cacy and subtlety of sensuous perception embodied in the waterscape of the last excerpt: a finely achieved 'bodying out', indeed.

It would be misleading to leave the impression that Mr Salom is no more than a descriptive poet. Although these images of the sensuous world, intensely observed and expressed, are the striking feature of his work, they are there more often than not to convey, to intimate, to lead into an inner world of thought, emotion, memory and imagination. Some of his best poems are growing-up poems, concerned with significant incidents and phases of childhood and adolescence. The destruction of the sick cow, a starkly forceful account, is described not for its own sake but for the significant connexion it establishes in the moral sensibility of the watching child between the killing of the cow because of 'something wrong with the blood' and his dead brother whose grave in the cemetery his mother is visiting. 'Rhesus' is a moving and finely organized poem. And there are other good poems of this autobiographical kind: 'The Hostel', 'Poem for my Grandmother' and 'The Fall'. This last poem, by the way, I find an interesting indicator of Mr Salom's poetic temperament. It recounts freshly and intensely an episode (*the* episode, as the title implies) of first love in an atmosphere of antipodean Eden: 'we made love upon the earth as if our flesh was new . . . a dream woke, like a prayer'. Cattle come to investigate, but they and the dream are rudely disturbed by a bellowing bull. The lovers are left in a state of shock: 'I was lost, afraid of myself . . . my lungs clasped on breath'. It is an intense and serious experience, and that is my little point. Other temperaments, including my own, could hardly have failed to see the episode, at least in retrospect, in a comic or ironic light. But seriousness and intensity are symptomatic of Mr Salom's poetic world, and comedy and irony are alien to it. The title of 'The Fall' has, I'm sure, no ironic glint; the lovers are enacting in all solemnity the primal religious myth.

Mr Salom's inner world, in fact, is distinctively felt in several of these poems in the apprehensions that visit him of 'something large' — revelations of the mythic, the noumenous, the transcendental; the 'mythologies of the heart', no doubt, that he attributes to 'young Ovid'. I'm not sure that Mr Salom is always

altogether successful in expressing these intimations. Look, for example, at my fourth excerpt. It begins quietly, concretely, convincingly enough, and the gradual stepping up of the transcendental current is at first skilfully managed — ‘forces in the earth’, ‘Universe flowing from the purple flare of sky’ and the hypnotic ‘same soft plosion, sonorous and repeating.’ But then, for me, doubts creep in. What precisely is or are the portentous ‘first and last phrase ever spoken?’ How does one *blindly* read the book of the law? And has that blindness some connexion with ‘walking on the eyelids of the Gods’ (which affects me as a grotesquely uncomfortable image)? Or take this instance, in a rather different vein, from a poem in which Mr Salom, looking from present drought to the anticipated rains of winter, exclaims:

I, earth’s creature, huge risen urge,
will meet as lover, winter, the radiant
whore
vast cleaved cockteaser, voluptuous
priestess, shaking out her brazen skirts,
her raucous laughter filling my head.

I find that rather stridently factitious. It may be, however, that a native wariness of transcendentalism makes me unfairly captious; it may be that these very images had the impact of a revelation for Mr Barnes and impressed Mr Shapcott as evidence of a metaphysical search.

The last section of this considerable first collection bears the volume’s title and differs from almost all that has gone before in containing imaginative reconstructions of episodes from *other people’s* lives and deaths. Certain themes and preoccupations previously discernible are here more distinctly concentrated: violence, suffering, guilt, death, mysticism. It may be styled in shorthand a Dostoevsky-Patrick White world; its inhabitants and happenings include a shaman, Judas, Rumi the Persian mystic, the execution of Hallaj the Sufi, a Russian prostitute with a turn for transcendentalizing her trade, the knifing of a raped Italian girl, the birth of a volcano. Exciting, potent, heady stuff, it is true; but perhaps so consistently and insistently so, both in subject-matter and matching style, that it becomes overpowering. Yet some of the individual poems are finely imagined and expressed. None more finely than the last poem; with a controlled strength, with an in-

tensity that is not over-insistent it tells how Petior, a prisoner in a camp, ‘escapes’ from pain, cold and imprisonment by constructing from old bits of wood a silent piano:

From Petior’s roughened eyes, memory
moves
down through fingers spread like time,
down onto his proud wood. And from
his silent piano, mute, imprisoned music
begins to climb; from a not-yet-forgotten
universe of ghosts, sweet, sublime
bars of brokenness ring out.

Be cold, Chekkov used to say; possibly ‘sweet, sublime’ is not quite cold enough, and does piano music ‘ring out’? But it is a good poem. And when all is said, Mr Salom must be recognized as a talented young poet with a strong, fresh, individual voice. *The Silent Piano* is an impressively rich first collection, a book of achievement as well as promise.

On the Edge is the second book of poems to be published by the recently resuscitated Freshwater Bay Press. It is a limited edition on expensively thick paper, with opulent margins and attractive illustrations by Romola Morrow; and each copy is signed by the two authors, William Grono and Nicholas Hasluck (who is also the publisher). Compared with Mr Salom, both authors are old stagers on the literary scene. Mr Hasluck has already written two novels, a book of short stories and a volume of poems; Mr Grono is well known as an anthologist and as a poet — though this (it is hard to believe) is the first collection of his poems.

Mr Hasluck has the edge over Mr Grono in the matter of space: he occupies over three-fifths of the volume. And the greater part of that space is taken up by four sequences. Three of these are concerned, as the titles tell, with three different places: ‘Cornwall’, ‘Rott-nest Island’ and ‘Search for Sybaris’. But it may be more enlightening (forgive the word) to look first at that entitled ‘Silhouettes’. The opening poem begins:

As at nightfall.
When only the outline
can be seen—
the rest of whatever
it is (the sun behind it)
turning black

Put it that way
and see what happens.

A little further on:

Bits and pieces
of the day disappearing.
Things turning black.
Until only the outline
can be seen.

But seen like that,
more real than
than we care to admit;
etched into memory.

What clearer clue to procedure, in this sequence at least? Significant outlines: a few precise uncluttered strokes etching a scene, capturing its essence.

Flickerings of roadside scrub.
Splinters of dead timber.
Fence-posts stumbling into salt flats.
A tractor, an iron shell, lop-sided,
one axle deep in the mire.

Peter Dawkins' tractor —
left to rust.

He went to the wall.
After his wife cleared out.
Though what went wrong between
them
is anybody's guess.

No other landmarks.
And not much to see.
Not on this road.
A rabbit sometimes . . .
A windmill.

That is admirably done: quiet, unforced, unfussy, effective. And it is generally characteristic of Mr Hasluck's style in this book. He likes the few deft strokes, the light touch, the easy unobtrusive manner. He has a coolly observant eye. He is a little detached; he plays it cool, whether he is being playful or poignant.

These qualities are well displayed in 'Rottnest Island', where he assembles as it were a sheaf of snapshots of a typical Rottnest holiday: the voyage out on the ferry; the familiar games—

First, we played finding
the sun-cream. Then, we went
hunting the thong.

"Who's seen my thong?"
An indignant voice from
the front bedroom tells us
the chase is on;
the trackless beast
is at large again . . .

the boys with their snorkels 'goggle-eyed/ in a downward gazing/ scrutiny of rapture'; the bicycles that 'come and go/ from General Store to bungalow'; and so on, not excepting an impression of the island on its discovery in 1696. In a contrasting mood and country, 'Cornwall in Winter' sketches in a landscape of cobbled streets and salt-blown cliffs, and a church-interior containing the effigy of a mermaid who, lured by the voice of a chorister, came 'to listen, touch — and to claim him with her own song.' The image of the mermaid embodies the yearnings of the dramatic narrator ('Will she join me?') on this bleak coast, in this poverty-stricken town where the mines are failing. Thinking of a letter from his brother in an Australia of gold and canvas townships, he gazes out from land's end at dawn, at nightfall: 'Will she join me? Be my wife on a brother's word?' Images of place become expressive images of feeling. My only small grumble is that, granted the suggestive virtues of outline, the dramatic context might have been a little fuller, a little more forthcoming in circumstantial detail. But of course he is treating his 'story' lyrically, poetically.

The most ambitious sequence, I think, is 'Search for Sybaris', in which Mr Hasluck evokes the ambience of a remoter country than Rottnest or Cornwall in the eighteenth century: the ancient city of Sybaris, devoted to delicate living, sloth and extravagance', devoid of any interest in the intellectual and artistic life. The speaker is Milo, a young poet, who in a succession of scenes reveals his frustration, sense of ineffectuality, deep dissatisfaction and unhappiness as an artist and *sensitif* in a land of hearties and pleasure-seekers. The most compelling image is provided by his encounter with the Sponge-man whose body is covered with sponges and whose tongue is 'nothing but pink flesh burnt to a bobbling cork'; a nightmare symbol of bloated flabbiness and brutally - enforced voicelessness. Less grotesque but not less effective images compose his farewell poem, as he recalls the early ecstasies of love with a wife who has now gone:

O, wife. That fire, those
stars, stretch into my heart
alone on this balcony —
the cactus plant in silhouette,
my shadow watching me.

Up there, in the outermost
dark of our distant selves,
they burn within me.
I touch the cactus blade.
touch it, retrieving the past . . .

Think of me, sometimes.
Think of Milo; undeserving.
His namesake — a great athlete.
But he, for his part, cactus
touch, shadow, and silent tongue.

A remote country, did I say, this country of
pleasure-seeking where 'all roads lead to the
beaches'? Not so far from home. In the
Browning tradition Mr Hasluck (a novelist
also, after all) invents place, character and
incident to colour, objectify and externalize
home-bred inklings; empathy and detachment.

I have not mentioned Mr Hasluck's half-
dozen single poems, and I particularly regret
not having room to quote extensively from
his telling and entertainingly comic-satirical
'Ode to Apathy'. His is a civilized voice, and
his lightness of touch and tone should not be
undervalued. Re-reading his poems only deep-
ens their interest and increases awareness of
their restraint, elegant precision and frequent
felicity of word and image.

Mr Grono's collection consists of twenty
poems. It seems a small garnering (especially
as half of them are very short) but as one
begins to look attentively at them, one be-
comes conscious of how carefully they must
have been worked over, sweated down, con-
centrated so that every word, the position of
every word, every spacing of the lines, every
rhythmical flicker are exactly so and not
otherwise. Mr Grono, it is clear, is a restless
perfectionist.

One poem stands somewhat apart from the
rest in its combination of qualities: the com-
plex elaboration and organization of its im-
ages, the Romantic openness and directness of
its expression of feeling, and its use of rhyme.
'The Oleander', it seems a safe guess, is an
early poem, in inception at least. It begins
with the flowers of the oleander (swaying
'blood-bright, dark', but some also falling 'di-
minished, brown, and dead'), then turns to a
two-year-old daughter playing in the garden.

It is the early morning of her birthday, and
one of her presents is a garden swing (a par-
enthetic image shows her swinging through
the air — 'lovely, frail'). As she plays with
a birthday doll, the wind ('warm as blood or
breath') moves west to where a murderer 'falls
into shade, hangs trembling, hanged.' In con-
clusion the poem returns to the garden where

dead petals fall. Each morning takes its
toll.

Nothing frail can stay. A body swings
inside my head.

My child breathes life into her rigid doll.

With all the subtle elaborate weave of its
imagery, it is a moving poem, trembling with
feeling. The occasional patches of rather over-
insistent, exclamatory emotional expression
are slight flaws, I think; yet the poem's pri-
mary strength springs from the fullness and
openness of its feeling.

Certainly the poem stands in extreme con-
trast to the many short, laconic (presumably
later) poems such as this, for example, en-
titled 'Discussion' — the context is marital
discord:

The kitchen curtain slowly
lifts, billowing

so slowly,

as we discuss again our
'situation'

carefully

choosing words to say as little
as possible

not noticing

the altered weather until
a door slams shut.

The unguarded emotional expansiveness of
'The Oleander' has disappeared. This poem,
stripped to bareness, seems matter-of-fact, un-
emotional, guarded. The poet seems, like the
couple in discussion, to be choosing words to
say as little as possible. The words, it is true,
are muted, understated and scanty; but of
course he is really trying to say as much as
possible in as little as possible. The words are
chosen, and they are so placed, so arranged
on the page, that they induce a slow ponder-
ing reading that gradually brings to imagina-
tive realization the emotional implications that

lurk beneath the superficially expressionless understatement. For instance, as the first slowly moves over the line-ending to 'lifts', the movement of the curtain is mimed and the pace of the reading is set. The 'billowing' flaunts out over the double spacing, and the slowness intensifies with the repetition and sound-echoing of 'so slowly', braked in addition by its enclosing commas. 'Situation', already ironically nuanced by the quotation marks, is given a sharper ironic edge by its status as a whole line, and 'carefully', isolated in its double spaces, has its 'meaning' doubled by its positioning. The last two climactic lines, decisively slamming shut the discussion and the door, with the slow weight of the whole poem behind them squeeze out the symbolic suggestions of the image. The analysis is crude and laborious, but it may serve to give a hint of the artistry involved in these laconic pieces, which no doubt at first glance appear artlessly simple and prosaic. Much of their impact and effect depends, naturally, on their almost epigrammatic conciseness. Witness the pregnant (indeed) brevity of 'Marriage':

Doing the morning's washing
she heard her eldest
tell the baby:

"You come from a little seed
in Mummy's tummy.
Daddy put you there."

And she, between
two sharp breaths, breathed: "Christ,
if only that were all;"

then, hair hanging
lank into acrid water,
resumed the day.

Most of these laconisms 'speke of wo that is in marriage'; and one or two other poems, ampler in scope and more complex in procedure, extend the 'wo' to life as a whole — the wet grey world of 'Winter', the desolation of 'Absence'. It is a middle-aged, aging world. In 'Revisiting Lake Bidy' the speaker hears his wife sighing in their borrowed bed. Does she dream, he wonders,

of our green youth,
that imperfectly remembered country,
that never-to-be revisited land

of smooth skin, resolute flesh, and eyes
that smiled without irony?

Does she yearn for what she thinks we
were . . . ?

The sardonic precision of the last formulation is notable. 'Absence' evolves a complex concatenation of images to compose a world of loss, death, lovelessness, diminution. Some relief (of a kind) is offered by several satirical poems. The neatest of these, perhaps, is 'The Way We Live Now' (shades of Trollope?), which takes its departure from Homer's description of the Elysian fields and blandly exposes the complacent blindness of Western Australians. The same target is hit in 'A Sad Case', which also develops an epigraph: 'Irving's body and mind are . . . leading separate lives'. The speaker's mind has retired to Cypress Villas Garden Suburb:

Well, not to worry. If he can't be bothered
making an effort, I don't see why I should.
Besides, the way things are in Perth these
days,
there's really no need to keep in touch.

Bob Cavanagh, who runs Progressive
Imports,
agreed with me. "Forget him", he said.
"He always was a bloody no-hoper.
You're better off without him."

At a business lunch at the new Lord Forrest
Tavern:

"Yes," he said, settling back, "we can't go
wrong.
Chain saws are a growing market.
I've seen the figures."

Behind his head, a purple lobster reared
and teetered, legs flailing feebly in the deep
blue glow.

The colloquial idiomatic speech is dramatically effective; every detail is calculated to tell; and the grotesquely vivid crystallizing image of the lobster is a finely poetic stroke.

These poems are, to invoke Henry James once more, eminently *written*. The only disappointment with Mr Grono's first collection is its relative smallness. Let us hope that we shall not have to wait so long for the next.

L. R. BURROWS.

WESTERLY INDEX

1978-1980

EDITORS' NOTE

This Index, covering the years 1978-1980, is a supplement to the previously published *Westerly Index 1956-1977*, compiled by Linda Goldstiver and published by the English Department, University of Western Australia in 1978. Copies of the *Westerly Index 1956-1977* are available from the University of Western Australia Press for \$8.95. Our thanks go to Con Coroneos for the compilation of this supplementary Index.

Bruce Bennett and Peter Cowan

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------|------------------------|
| ed. | edited, editor |
| illus. | illustrated |
| intro. | introduction |
| no. | number |
| opp. | opposite |
| r.a. | review article |
| trans. | translated, translator |

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WESTERN AUSTRALIAN PRINTMAKERS OF THE '20s and '30s

see

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MABEL REID—has published articles, and had poems read on radio, and published in a recent anthology. At present is secretary of the Poetry Group of the Society of Women Writers in Victoria.

RON TWADDLE—lives in Brisbane. He is a full-time writer interested in theatre and radio. He is now writing short stories. *The Pilgrimage* is his first story to be published.

GRAEME WILSON—born in London, and lives in Hong Kong. Has been the British Civil Aviation representative in the Far East since 1969, and held a number of positions in the British Civil Service. His publications include a number of translations of Japanese prose and poetry, Korean poetry, and Chinese poetry. He has broadcast on Tokyo's N.H.K. programme, the BBC and the ABC. Is working on two scripts for the ABC on the poetry of Japanese women.

JUDITH WOMERSLEY—has had poetry, short stories, and articles published in Australian publications, and broadcast over radio in Australia and the BBC.

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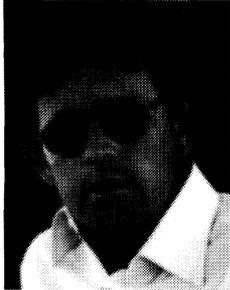
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