

WESTERLY

stories poems reviews articles

Short Stories

Gwen Harwood—Carole Wilkins—Mina Gray—
Ian Williams—Wendy Morgan—John Wright—
Leigh Allison

Poems

including Vergulde Draeck by W. Hart-Smith:
Bass Strait Poems by Rod Moran

Discussions with Randolph Stow—Bruce Bennett, in England

DECEMBER, 1981

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WESTERLY

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GWEN HARWOOD

Among the Roses

In one of my Christmas annuals was a spell to make faries visible. It began

“Take a wizened child of seven,
Take her from the smoky street,
Let her see the light of heaven
On a field of golden wheat.”

I considered myself thin enough to be wizened. The pale dust stirred in our long street like smoke. I stood among the sweet corn, but the spell never worked. Sometimes my father said teasingly “I know where you can see a couple of old fairies”. This made my mother laugh and my grandmother frown. “That will do,” she would say, “that will *do*.”

One morning when my mother had taken the Little Man with her in the sulky to visit friends, my grandmother and I were preparing for a baking day in the kitchen. We heard someone running round the house to the back steps, and went out to the back verandah. Mr Snoad stood on the steps holding the rail, gasping and crying. Rivers of tears ran down through his powder and rouge.

“Please come quickly,” he said to my grandmother. “Mr Mandl is bleeding to death. Please come, please.”

“The clean rag-bag, quickly!”

As I ran to get it I heard Mr Snoad say, “The little girl . . . there’s such a lot of blood.”

“She’ll be all right. Blood doesn’t worry her.”

That was true. I came from a family of nose-bleeders. It did us good. We would never have high blood-pressure. The teacher in second babies fainted the first time my nose bled in her class. A boy whose mother was a nurse removed the arum lilies from a vase and poured water over the teacher. His friend was about to empty the tadpole jar when she revived. The headmaster sent her to lie down, and entertained us by writing our names in illuminated letters on the board, using a whole virgin box of coloured chalks. I had never been inside the house where Mr Snoad and Mr Mandl lived. Their weatherboard cottage was close to the street in front. High fences and trellises hid their back garden, which ran through a double allotment to the street behind. Delicious flower scents always hung in the air. One of the Bowers boys who climbed in and was savagely bitten by a small prancing fox terrier that sometimes snarled through the gate, said the dog had got out; but my friend Alice told on him and he got a whipping from his mother as well as a dog bite.

Mr Snoad, still sobbing, took us in through the front door, through a cool dark passage and into a bedroom where Mr Mandl lay, apparently lifeless, in a black-painted and brass-knobbed double bed.

"Oh, it's only his *nose*," said my grandmother. She leaned over and seized Mr Mandl's large nose firmly, holding the nostrils tight with her thumb and forefinger.

Mr Mandl breathed in gasps through his mouth and moaned, but my grandmother held on for several minutes. "There you are," she said, finally letting go. "It will have stopped." Mr Snoad clung to the bedstead, pale and fainting.

"Where's the kitchen? Come along, I'll make you a hot drink. Gwennie will stay with Mr Mandl and tell me if his nose starts again."

She led the collapsing Mr Snoad away and I watched Mr Mandl recovering among a heap of gory white towels and handkerchiefs.

"My flannel, please," whispered Mr Mandl.

I brought his face flannel from the white-tiled washstand, which had enchanting frilly curtains of its own, hung from a carved frame above the marble. Mr Mandl cleaned his face and smiled bravely.

"Why does your washstand have curtains?"

"To catch the splashes, I suppose."

I gathered up the linen into a bundle, and offered Mr Mandl a clean rag, which he tucked into his pyjama pocket.

"What does M.M.M. stand for," I asked, pointing to the monogram, "do all your names start with M?"

"Ah yes, my dear: Manfred Maximilian Mandl. But Mr Snoad calls me Freddy."

His nose seemed to have stopped for good, so I took the bundle of linen and went down the passage and through the back door to look for the troughs. The wash-house was in an open shed, wreathed in climbing roses which even poked through gaps in the boards. I knew what to do: rinse, soak, rinse, rub the blood-stains with soap, roll up, leave in cold water. The bluebag was too tempting, and I coloured the last water, which had lost all traces of carmine, deeper and deeper blue.

"You know I told you to stay with Mr Mandl."

"I'm sorry, Granny. I was soaking the towels."

"That's a good girl, but you shouldn't have used the bluebag. Go back to Mr Mandl."

Mr Mandl seemed well enough to talk to. I was in the middle of a story about how pennies were made, which I had just read in my Children's Encyclopaedia, when my grandmother carried in a tray.

"Mr Snoad is still very upset," she said. "I will stay with him. You look after Mr Mandl. Pour carefully. Don't spill on the traycloth."

She had made delicate rolls of crustless thin brown bread and put out some almond biscuits. I saw with greedy relief that she had provided for two. The tea-cups were so fine you could see the light through them. Now that the excitement was over I could stare around the room. Plate glass mirrors on the doors of a splendid wardrobe reflected Mr Mandl through the bars of his bed; he looked like the genial honey-bear in my animal book, smiling in his cage. In a corner a set of shelves bore his treasures: a tankard, an opalescent vase, some small glass ornaments not meant for careless hands like mine. Roses rubbed against the window-glass.

"Lots of sugar," said Mr Mandl. "And just a dash of milk please. Oh I am relieved. Mr Snoad thought I would bleed to death. Help yourself to the food. Do you know what Mandl means? It means an almond. Have a Mandl biscuit, my dear!"

We both thought this was very funny. He looked at us in the wardrobe mirror. "My hair is silver and yours is ginger. But we both have brown eyes, nut-brown. Do you know what your Granny is?"

At once I became uneasy. Was this someone planning to take my grandmother away?

"She's a widow," I replied.

"Oh no," said Mr Mandl. "She's an *angel*."

"Where do you keep your cow?"

"We don't have a cow, my dear. We put out a billy."

"Do any ladies live in your house?"

"Goodness me, no. Mr Snoad and I manage very well. He does the house, and I do the garden."

This seemed to fit. Mr Snoad was pale, and Mr Mandl golden-brown.

"We're very different," he continued. "I like to get up very late, and he likes to get up very early. I like to smoke, and he hates cigarettes. I have to smoke in the garden. I'm untidy, he's tidy. I like to do the shopping, he likes to stay inside."

He told me an exciting story of escape from his enemies in disguise; of a journey on the longest railway in the world; of travelling from China on a boat and meeting Mr Snoad who was very seasick and lonely; of their finding just the right place in the world to settle down in peace and quiet, with lovely chocolate soil for the roses.

I recited a poem I knew by heart:

"The prisoner sun, in his cloud-tower throws
A silver ladder from sky to land.
A breeze as soft as a gentle hand
Brushes the cheek of each rain-drenched rose."

Mr Mandle thought it very beautiful.

"I'd like to give you a little present, if your Granny says I may. Do you know what a pagoda is?"

Yes, I had read about pagodas, and I told him all I knew about pagodas and a great many other things. He listened patiently, then asked me to bring him the piece of deep blue glass from the corner shelf. He held it up to the light.

"There now, can you see it? Look in the glass, and tell me what you see. It's a kind of magic, really."

I turned the glass obelisk, and a shining pagoda appeared; I turned the glass again, and it was gone.

My grandmother came to get the teatray.

"Be careful with that ornament."

"Granny, Mr Mandl says I may keep it."

"That's very kind, but you know you shouldn't ask for things."

"It was my offer," said Mr Mandl. "It would give me great pleasure if you would accept a small gift for your household."

"*Please*," said Mr Snoad, appearing at the door. He had washed his face, but still looked like a rain-drenched rose. "*Please*, I don't know what we should have done without you. And you've even seen to the linen."

"It's a magic glass," I said. "I promise not to break it."

"If you have any trouble with the stains," said my grandmother briskly to Mr Snoad, "collect the wood ashes from the stove. Put a clean rag over the linen. then pour boiling water over the ashes and leave the things to soak for an hour. The potash will make them perfectly white. Remember, pinching the nose hard stops the bleeding. Now, you promised me some cuttings."

"I'll put Frisky on his chain. He doesn't *mean* to bite, but he gets excited."

"Foxies are great little nippers," said my grandmother.

I feared all dogs, and decided to stay inside with Mr Mandl and the glass obelisk. While I was telling him some Tales from Shakespeare he fell asleep. Mr Snoad tiptoed in and covered him tenderly with the white counterpane. My grandmother, holding a brown-paper sheaf of cuttings, beckoned to me. I did not dare to ask about the glass ornament, but picked up our clean rag-bag and followed her home.

That evening, my grandmother was telling my mother about our visit. "The house is spotless, and the roses—I've never seen such roses—"

My father arrived home with a small parcel.

"Extraordinary thing," he said. "Old Snoad has never spoken to me in his life. Runs inside if he sees me. But tonight he came to the gate and gave me this. Said to tell you Mandl sent it."

"Maybe the old anarchist has put a bomb in it," said my mother.

But Granny and I knew what it was. "Just a trinket," she said, "a souvenir for Gwennie."

"All that fuss over a nosebleed," said my mother.

It was too dark for the magic pagoda to shine when I was tucked in that night, but I put it under my pillow to wait for the light of heaven in the morning.

CAROLE WILKINS

A Sound Overhead

Julia looked up into the sun as the bird passed over. The quiet of the garden had been deceptive—her rockpool was full of interesting animals. Until the bird came, driving them into crevices. She was alone now. Julia was a mollusc, watching the wings that could swoop down on her.

The seagull dipped and hovered overhead, watching the pool for ripples that could indicate food. Julia was not afraid. She stretched to leave her pool and be with the bird but it banked and turned, rising into the great blue above. Julia remained fastened to a rock, awaiting the battering of the incoming wave. The grooves on her grey shell glittered.

She knew it would come suddenly, not with the gradual rhythm of the sea. This special emotional assault—one great resounding crash, testing her strength, her will to survive. The pool would be flooded—it was a matter of holding on, holding on. Once it was satisfied the wave could go back and the rockpool would return to normal.

Wind began to stir the garden trees, to unnerve the sea creatures. A taxi pulled up in the drive and blew its horn. Julia waited. A plump matron appeared, brandishing a string bag and a suitcase. Was the water getting closer?

“Julia!” White arms, soft and strong like those of an octopus. Arms that held her loosely, for lack of purpose. Julia’s rock was slippery now. Mrs Russell stood back. “Tom well?” “Yes.” “And yourself dear?” “Fine.” “That’s good. It’s too hot out here for me—I’ll have to go inside to rest for Tom.” Her tentacles moved over the grass, dragging the case to her room. Out at sea the large wave was forming.

The wind died down suddenly. Life in the rockpool sweltered in the heat of the sun. A car door slammed. It woke Julia—how could she doze at a time like this. There was a laugh in her ear—it came like sand grating under her shell. Tom leant over her. A wet kiss was bestowed by another from the sea, a seal who dived and surfaced in the waves. His briefcase balanced against her leg, a piece of driftwood weighing her down. “Mum here yet?”

“My boy!” And the water was coming now, rising at Julia, ready to drive against the cliff. She tensed for the impact. A mother hurtled on its crest from the back door. The wave threw Tom on the shore, gasping and coughing from its strength. Those who dive do not know how to fight, Julia thought.

Mrs Russell released her son. The foam slid over rocks and back to its source. Julia saw froth ooze from between the arms of the octopus, which balanced

securely above her. The wave was spent. Tom narrowed his eyes. "Time for tea."
"Yes—and Julia is such a good cook."

Julia grilled steaks and prepared dessert while Mrs Russell wrestled with the vegetables, skilfully avoiding water stains on her skirt, giggling with Tom as the potatoes squealed beneath the knife. Tom sat with his chair pushed against the fridge—an irritating, semi-permanent position.

Leaving her rock, Julia tried to move him from the door. The suckers of an octopus held her fast for a moment. She flinched. The octopus released her and went about its business. Tom slowly flipped his seal body and moved the chair for his mother.

After her dinner had disappeared Mrs Russell skimmed the television programme. She mentioned a movie that—"Well if you don't mind, Julia—." Why should a limpet mind. Tom blinked at her and wiped his grey whiskers with a flipper. He and his mother left the table and began to chuckle at the old film. Now and then a tentacle drooped over the back of the couch.

Alone in her seat, Julia watched the fruit salad trying to hide beneath a layer of cream. She poked around, searching for a slice of peach and found one sulking in the liquid. It slid onto her tongue, a golden pebble, smooth and warm. Julia held it there then swallowed slowly. In front of her in a grandstand seat the octopus and the seal swayed to the music, nodded to the music.

Julia carried her dishes to the sink. Mrs Russell followed her. White plates glimmered through the water as the taps gushed. Mrs Russell's front tentacle sought a tea towel from the rack. "Didn't you like the movie dear?" The rings on her fingers accused. Through the window the falling dark rubbed Julia's eyes. "Headache dear?"

Rows of washed shells accumulated in the drainer then disappeared at Mrs Russell's efficient touch. Afterwards sea foam lay in the empty sink. Julia watched the bubbles circle the plug hole and disappear. Mrs Russell shook her tea towel impatiently.

Tom barked from the lounge room. Mrs Russell slid to her boy, to follow him movement for movement as figures fought on the screen. Julia sought her rock-pool outside. She shed her skirt and waded into the water, drawing her shell about her and sighing when the still warm liquid splashed as she met it.

Safe on a ledge, she gazed for a long time at the sky. The seagulls would not come now. It was too dark or they had found food on land—perhaps bread in the park. The memory of the big wave made her shudder. The octopus brought the wave—why did she bring it. Why did she not come quietly, with understanding, like the moon. Julia clung silently to her rock, listening to a lone crab scuttle by.

A sharp cry thrilled her. One seagull lingered in the distance. It came closer to see if anything foolishly moved about but the crab had passed out of sight. The round whiteness of the gull's body rivalled the moon overhead. Julia sensed the moment had come.

She released her sucker and rolled onto the edge, exposing her soft underside. The effort was tiring but not in vain. The bird saw her and came down. Her heart rushed with its wings, and as the gull picked her up in its beak Julia gave herself without fear. A shadow passed then moonlight covered the water again. The octopus came out to look for Julia but she was gone from her rockpool, safe in the belly of the bird as it flew out to sea.

MINA GRAY

The Dispossessed

He came out of the home paddock towards the withered garden where the house stood. Shabby now, withered at the edges like an old tapestry he had loved when his father had sent him abroad that year of his youth. But the withering of the tapestry with its mediaeval farming figures carried the blessing of antiquity, of something spared by time. The house's shabbiness was the withering of death.

His hair was spindle-dry in the wind, his face furrowed more than his forty years. He bent and scrabbled up a handful of earth. The wind blew it away. He cupped another handful in his palm, bent his head to sniff. There was no moisture, no smell of earth. Sighing, he let it fly away, anonymously, not even bothering to rub his hands on his cords.

The house no longer seemed to welcome him. As if he had been the one to fail it out of three generations. Moira was on the 'phone. After a minute she put it down and her sigh echoed his out in the garden. "C.W.A. It seems senseless making plans, but I promised a sponge." Her face which should still have been pretty was lined. "I heard that sound again." He knew. The chant was melancholy, it came from the hill where the cave was, gathering force as it rolled. It was the wind on certain days of course. If you had been born here you knew. She had never noticed it before.

He said harshly, "You heard nothing. Look, I searched. There was nothing, nobody. It's the wind I tell you." Her lips a thin line, she poured tea, proffered scones. "What did Bill say about the stock?"

"That if we tried loading them out in their condition, we'd be back into the bank for cartage. Good beasts now are only breaking even." Her pressed lips did not part. Drought, loss of markets, prices. Somebody up in the Capital that could do nothing. Nobody to listen. Both his neighbours had walked off, now it was happening to him. He couldn't quite believe it yet.

"Great scones."

"Mmh."

He wondered about a job in the city, what sort of a job he wondered. He only knew the land. But there was the house too. He had been born in it. His grandfather and his father had taken up the land when it had been scrub. Had cleared the trees, so that the kangaroos and the emus were first to go, and then the flock of pigeons, and then the aboriginals, the Wirrinoora. Nobody had wanted them to leave, there had been food and work, but suddenly one season they had gone.

His own son was still at boarding school.

Suddenly he remembered uprooting the biggest old tree on the hill. It had been hollow-branched, its withered limbs creaking in the wind. It had been the only tree they had taken from the hill, and that, only because it was dangerous as it stood in the middle of the narrow path to the summit. Someday there'll be an accident, his father had said, so they laboriously took out the tree. The last of the roots had seemed to come up with agony out of the rock itself. The heat that day had been so searing that neither of them had gone on to fill the gaps the roots had left in the rock. They were the only ones to go that way, they would remember it was there.

Afterwards he had been taken to see the old cave, the wall above the ledge with the hand paintings, the frail but lifelike bird and animal outlines. They had acknowledged that the women of the dark tribe did not go in the cave; neither did any white woman. As if it would have been sacrilege for them too. This was a cave of men.

He looked around now at the comfortable room. He had never been homeless, always at his back had been this square old house. Lean times often enough, but not an ending like this. His father and his grandfather had got through lean times; were they better men than he?

Even as they sat thinking their own thoughts of the past and the future, the sound swelled back very low into the room. A primitive chanting, a beating of sticks? The beseeching of Moonkabilla for help in the dry time? But the white man did not recognize the sound as this.

He shut the windows irritably, understanding how she felt in the days left alone now. "Insects, the wind, the dry branches of those dead trees," he said. Her eyes did not believe him. But she did not mention that before there had been people around the house, around the paddocks, making their own comforting noises: oaths over recalcitrant saddle or machine, kitchen noises, laughter . . . now there was this silence. Just her and the man. They had paid off the last hand. No need for help with the few beasts left, with only the two of them in the house. People no longer visited, their two nearest neighbours had already gone.

The trees outside stood like iron cut-outs, their leaves like metal with lack of water. There were no longer birds, even sparrows had gone with the drying dams.

"Better get going," he looked back at her, "Don't worry, it'll be alright." Even to himself they did not sound comforting words. He wandered down to the little cemetery. It was rarely he came this way, but over the last few weeks it had seemed a comfort to look through the iron railings which kept the small huddle of graves safe from wandering cattle. His grandfather, his uncle, his father, their wives, children taken early sometimes. Some with dusty jars of dried flowers. The roots were here. In time he had expected to lie here too . . . maybe with an occasional jar of Salvation Jane, the purple flowers no longer a weed in this setting. Now he would lie ultimately in a place he didn't know. Most people had to, they had been privileged till now.

But no time to waste. He had left two hundred head. He'd done shooting in the past but this was different, this was to the last one. Most of them were yarded, but not all. The dog and he. His mind shied away from the dog. The dog had only known this place too. Would take no other master. So there would be the dog too. A tide of death. Blood and the sun and the smell of it.

The guts of the fine red dust country leaked slowly beneath the pads of man and dog. Three generations, that was what worried him most, that all their work had gone for nothing in the end, that he had let them down.

The dark men who belonged to this country had gone in his grandfather's time.

First the trees had been cleared for pasture.

Then there had been fire.

Then waiting for the grass.

The animals that belonged to this land had retreated, and the flock pigeons, one of the totems of Dintabana's tribe had vanished too. Dintabana, the elder of his tribe, sat in front of the cave nursing his spears. The whisper of smoke was a signal for the homecoming of the Wirrinooora shades. Long since the tribe had faltered and died out in strange places. They would never be complete until they came home.

Dintabana did not hate this whiteman. He had seen his labour in the land. He saw no reason why this man should go. Past Dintabana now fled home shades of the animals and birds that had long ago dwelt here. Soon would come the last of his people. He was content.

The silence oppressed the white man. Normally his keen ear heard even the snapping of a twig. But now the birds had deserted the dry land too, even birds he had known all his life.

No single voices warned others of their kind that man walked abroad. No flight of corellas or sulphur-crested cockatoos took noisy escape in the crackling air. It was as if he walked in a vacuum. Even the beasts when he came to them, scarcely turned to look.

All day he walked with the gun and the ammunition. Because mercy for the beasts now grew out of the mouth of his gun. Their dull eyes looked to him for help.

Next week he would go down the road. There might be some work left. Owners with man-short properties, still able to pay; and if not able to pay and needing help, help would be given. But this was his appointed day with his own beasts. He bent and fondled the ears of his dog. You couldn't take such a dog to the city. Later the dog would have to be buried, a stone rolled over. Mourning in the heart for all their good and useful days together. This was the dog's home too. But he at least could lie at home. First he had to ask this last job from him. The dog answered his orders, sometimes unspoken. Afterwards he would go back towards the little cemetery with its iron railing. In his mind he sought a proper place for the dog to lie. Outside the railing, he thought, under the small boulder. It was a small decision, but he was glad to have made it.

He did not fear he would not have the strength in the still heat to kill them all, strength would be found . . . would come from the earth . . . from deep inside himself . . . from those who had gone before. Some kind of faith would have been kept. The cattle smelt each other's fear.

He loaded and shot, the hours went by in a maze of heat and killing, but the man did not think. Afterwards he went after the stragglers.

When he was sure it was all done, he looked at the dog, who heeled now, wagging his bushy tail.

The dog followed him back along the path to the railed-in square.

All the afternoon from when the first bullets had gone in, he had focussed his mind on Moira. She should be in the kitchen, listening. Knowing this was the one time she could not help him. He would not ask. He thought of her slim form on a horse. The bullets were expensive, but he did not think of that this time. With all her accounting, Moira would not mention *this* expense. He wiped his forehead wishing almost that the sound from the hill would start up again, glad that the smoke had ceased from wisping up. Smoke? He wondered, but his thoughts were sluggish.

All day he loaded the rifle and shot.

Standing by the railing, before he could think too much, he shot the dog. He dug the hole, he buried it at the foot of the small boulder. The dog was at home.

Now at last the man could be tired. He leaned the gun against the iron railing, he bent over them to look for the last time inside.

And on the hill, the spirit that was Dintabana acknowledged the white man's right to be weary, understood it, and sent one small smoke signal, like an arrow. And like a weapon before sunset, the hunter came and with quiet spirit hands moved the gun, so that the white man's head half asleep on the railing rested above the barrel's path. And moved gently. And went back the way he had come from the hill. The white man was no elder of his tribe, wise in the ways of life and man. This was a little man with a little story. A man not initiated and so not really a man. This was one who needed help to die. Dintabana did not hate. It was long since he had allowed himself to hate. His decision had been carried out. There had been no sound from the gun yet it had acted. Afterwards through the air whispered the spear of the hunter. Because that was the way a man would have gone in his own tribe. It was the formal signal of death.

Dintabana acknowledged the return of the hunter into the circle of shadows about him. The circle of men. He watched where the white man's body fell and was still, in the darkness of the answering of Moonkabilla. For this too had been a beseechment for mercy to the powerful one.

In the kitchen, the woman jerked awake. It had not been a shot. There had been no shooting for a long time. It was half dark. But there had been something . . . like a man running bare-footed towards the hill. She frowned. Bare-footed? A dream.

She looked at the clock. And forced herself to get a torch and go towards the cattle yards. Her eyes took in the scene without expression now. She searched for the man. And afterwards on horseback, moving quietly as she called. She did not find the man or the dog. She sighed with relief. While there was still somewhere else to look, she did not want to look towards the hill, flashing her torch carefully now, in case he should be under a bush on an unfamiliar path.

Dintabana watched, he knew this time she meant to enter the cave. This time she looked for the white man. Dintabana could not allow her to enter the cave, even though in his old and wise heart he knew her deep need. His gaze was not harsh. He had watched this woman work on the land, the sweat running from her. Now he smelt her double fear. First for the white man and then the dingo-running fear of the soon to be dispossessed. He had watched it in the women of his own tribe when they had squatted and muttered to each other gently outside the land sacred to the cave. This was a woman. He spoke into the dark cleft whence had been torn the roots of the oldest tree. The dark holy place that guarded the way.

Her foot slipped on the smooth side of the gash made by the tearing of the roots out of the rock, where the long eroded earth had washed away, leaving the smooth side of the rock. Her head hit the rock, her limbs went slack.

Dintabana watched for a long time, but she did not stir; presently his messenger told him she did not even breathe. Swift and merciful. Dintabana nodded; she was no longer dispossessed.

Sacrilege had been averted. She had not been permitted to enter the cave. But, like the white man, she was at rest in her own land.

But the word Dintabana used was made of the mutta mutta of the man shadows, of the bunch of feathers tied at the entrance to the cave, of the oolbri inside, the carved stone slabs of ancestors protecting the cave. Beyond antiquity was the word.

The chanting around Dintabana was no more. The clack of the sticks was no more. The smoke had long ceased.

Dintabana stood and surveyed his land.

There was to him no different colour now in the skins of those who slept in the land, and those who had come home. They had all lived in this land in their own way, and been made part of it.

None of them were dispossessed. They had all come home . . . or stayed.

AUDREY LONGBOTTOM

Like the Matterhorn at Sunrise

the townspeople said. One moment the mountain
dark against the skyline and then—
Lit up like a torch.

The spectacle was beyond us
in the blanketing smoke at the base, coping
with sightseers gleaning sensation,
enthusiasm of volunteers losing themselves
in the heat hover of the peaty earth.
Our regard covered the sacrificial offering
of charred birds, animals betrayed by cover,
the smouldering threat of rekindling.

When the sun rose, the townspeople closed windows
complained of soot.
No one mentioned the Matterhorn.

IAN WILLIAMS

Pictures at an Exhibition

Just when she looked through the window, there he was, slinking round the side of the shed like some devious wild animal. A bear, she thought instinctively, sizing him up. Not that she'd even seen a bear, other than a Koala, which isn't really a bear at all, she'd been told, but something else entirely.

But there he was, hairy and bear like; though quite unmistakably a man beneath it all. She bounced on the balls of her feet, and rapped at the window. 'Get out of it! I'll fetch the dog to you!'

He looked up then, and seeing her must have known immediately that she had no dog, because he lifted his hat, and displayed his teeth with an enormous grin.

Cheek of it! she hissed to herself, thinking me a liar like that!

They met at the back door where she found him selling not encyclopaedias, cosmetics, or religion, as she'd feared, but a hard luck story about a car that had given up the ghost, as they say, just outside her front gate.

How convenient, she thought drily, and nearly said so.

He begged her pardon like a city gent, but could he use her phone to call out a mechanic? She led him through the hall, and stood under his wing while he rang Mac who ran the service station at the Pinchgut crossroads. 'I see,' he kept saying, after expounding his educated guess at the cause of his car's demise. Mac, she knew damn well, wouldn't be the slightest bit interested in a city bloke's diagnosis, nor would he be very happy about foregoing his lunch at the pub just to come out to prove a bloke wrong.

Sure enough, the city gent replaced the receiver, and said, 'It seems he can't come out for about four hours. He has another job on.' And frowned.

No, she had to explain, there wasn't another mechanic for miles; he'd just have to wait.

The man, who looked enormous in her narrow hallway, swore politely, and supposed that they would. He lingered while she considered his dilemma, hoping, no doubt, that she'd noted the subtle transition from he to they. The poor man probably had his wife outside, fuming and steaming in the heat, and wishing to God that they'd stayed at home.

Presently she said, 'Well if you must, come up here and wait.' And then thinking how ungracious this sounded, murmured, 'I'll cut you a bit of lunch.'

The man was beside himself with gratitude. She guessed he'd read those stories about country folk being simple but good hearted.

He followed her through to the front verandah, and stumbled out into the heat. He was still thanking her fervently, but broke off for want of a name.

'Beatrice Symes,' she obliged, but confessed that most called her Beatie.

His teeth crackled in the sunlight, and the hat was returned to his head. He introduced himself as Theodore Jacks (call me Theo), buyer and seller of paintings and fine prints, and said that he'd just nip down to get his brother, and be right back.

Beatrice (Beatie) Symes stood in the shade of the verandah, and thought it a dirty trick. She supposed it was too late to change her mind. The invitation had been made. And anyway, Theodore Jacks' hulking frame was shrinking down the long drive, and was quite possibly out of earshot. Nevertheless she muttered a token, 'Don't come back, you cheat!' to his now barely visible back, and considered herself properly indignant.

Leaving the house, she crossed the paddock, and ducked under the fence to her neighbour's property. Better, she thought, that Mr Katz knew what was going on. The careful virgin protected herself against all eventualities. Besides which, she needed a lettuce for the salad. Mr Katz' lettuces were the envy of the neighbourhood, though all agreed that he was welcome to his wife. Prize winning lettuces were of little consolation to a man with an insufferable spouse. Some said quite bluntly that she was a little mad, though most preferred to be nice about it.

Hilda Katz opened the door, and said as though to a stranger, 'Yes?'.

'It's a lettuce I'm after,' Beatie said gaily, 'and a word on your husband's ear.' 'I'll see if he's in,' Hilda decided, and shut the door.

Beatie walked round the side of the house to where Mr Katz was attending his tomatoes. The plump red fruit sagged on the vines, and his thin banker's fingers flicked through the leaves as though they were banknotes.

Beatie said, 'It's a good crop this year then,' and Mr Katz, without looking up thanked God and Tomato Dust for the absence of grubs, caterpillars, and thrips. Mr Katz loved his vegetable patch as he'd never loved his strange wife.

Presently he wiped his hands on the trousers that he'd once worn to the bank each day, and said, 'Would you like a nice lettuce? I've had some real beauties this year, heads like cabbages!'

Beatie confessed she would, and revealed in passing that she was having company to lunch. Mr Katz, she knew, would say nothing, but look up at her from his lettuces with an enquiring raising of eyebrows. Which very shortly he did.

'Yes,' she said, 'two gentlemen from the smoke. It's their car you see, broken down out on the road there near the gate, and you know what old Mac's like this time of day, properly jugged and fit for nothing. So I'll give them a bite while they wait. I mean, it's the least I can do, isn't it.'

'That's most accommodating of you, Beatie,' Mr Katz said. 'You're a real kindness.'

Beatie liked to think so, though she regretted her neighbour's turn of phrase. It was just a little suggestive, and Beatie, who had never accommodated a man in the carnal sense in her life, was well aware that the suggestion was intended. With a wife like his, mind you, it was little wonder. Mr Katz and Beatie's mother had been outrageous flirts, and even now with her mother some years dead, Beatie would feel the old man's eyes flicker at her bare knees if ever she had occasion to sit down in his presence.

'City folk eh!' Mr Katz remarked. 'Bit out of their way.'

'Well they'd be going somewhere or coming from,' Beatie determined, 'they'd have no business round here, that's for sure.' And she added with just a touch of reverence, 'In the trade, one of them, would you believe!'

'In the trade?' Mr Katz quite rightly queried.

'Paintings!' Beatie cried. 'He sells paintings! *Real* paintings!'

'Ah!' said Mr Katz, enlightened. 'And are you going to show him some of your little works?'

'Oh no!' Beatie shuddered at the thought. 'They'll only laugh. Oh no I couldn't. I wouldn't!'

'Oh but you should!' Mr Katz enjoined. 'Here's your chance to get them *expertly appraised*. I mean, it's the least he could do after such a fine lettuce as this!' And he held up such a plump round specimen, that Beatie could only gasp, 'But Mr Katz, he may not even like lettuce!'

Crossing the front lawn, she saw Hilda's face snubbed at the window. The case-ment swung open, and a voice shot out, 'He's not in! I told you so! He's at the bank!'

Beatie said, 'I'll call tomorrow then,' and slipped through the fence.

Back in the lounge, she found her guests sat comfortably on her mother's old chesterfield. 'Do make yourselves at home,' she insisted, though she could see quite plainly that they had.

Theodore Jacks stood up and said formally, 'Miss Symes, this is my brother Hillier. Hillier, this is Miss Symes, who has generously invited us to lunch.'

Hillier, evidently the younger of the two, effected a little nod, and crossed his legs. He snuggled into the corner of the chesterfield with a feline delicacy that to Beatie smacked of affectation. She couldn't say she disliked him particularly, but he seemed so fragile, so artificial. Hardly a man at all.

Theo had sat down elsewhere, and the chair squeaked under his weight. I hope, Beatie thought, they aren't going to damage anything, spill the wine, or put their feet up on the furniture. She asked would they like an aperitif, a little dry sherry perhaps? and they said yes they would, very nice.

Beatie liked a little nip herself, just before dinner. She wiped the glasses carefully, and set them out in a row. They sparkled like silver goblets, her mother's Genuine Lead Crystal.

Hillier said, 'Thank you Miss Symes. You're a doll.' And purred.

Theo said cheers as though he were in his own home.

Beatie felt a bit giddy, not drunk yet, of course, but a little overwhelmed by her guests. Because people never came to visit, unless it was neighbours, or Mr Kenn from the bank still untangling her mother's affairs. Her financial affairs, that is. Her mother'd had little pockets of wealth all over the place: she indulged in the most outrageous schemes. Everyone said she'd end up blowing the lot, but she must have had a lucky face, or something, because she always landed right side up. If not exactly wealthy, she'd left Beatie, as they say, in comfortable circumstances.

Her only regret was that Beatie had shown no inclination for marriage. It was a sore point, in fact. Beatie remembered her mother's remark when she turned twenty-five, that she ought to be *ashamed* of herself, being unmarried at such an age. Beatie's mother knew what was natural, and knew damn well what was needed to shake her backward daughter out of her peculiar habits.

But Beatie held them all off, those suitors that her mother had arranged to call; those young men with pink faces and smart hats, who polished their boots before they called, whose fathers were mostly men of substantial property. Beatie's mother had a fine sense of the rightness in things, and despaired of old maids and unbroken maidenheads. Beatie, she rightly feared, with her squat nose and fat ugly hands, her strange hobbies, and her insistence on wearing her father's old clothes round the house, was a lost cause.

Beatie, leaning over the sink, washed the lettuce that Mr Katz had given her. Hillier, she could hear, was telling Theo about a party he'd been to where a certain Fitton's wife had spilt beer down his strides, and tried to mop it up with a paper serviette. Theo guffawed like a baboon, and said something in a low voice that had Hillier in squeals.

Beatie waited until the room was still and mirthless, and then took in the bowls of salad. 'It's not much,' she warned, 'but it's fresh cut this morning.' She listened while the brothers sang her praises, and then poured more sherry. It was at this stage that she realised that she'd been using wine glasses for the sherry, which mean't they'd been getting more than their due.

Sitting them at the table, she pointed out the plates of cold ham and chicken, the jars of mustard and pickle, and begged Theo to open the magnum of Spumante that had been stuck hastily in the quick freeze half an hour earlier.

'You're doing us proud, Miss Symes,' Theo toasted, 'such hospitality, eh Hillier, it's enough to restore a man's faith in humanity.'

Hillier, indulging in great layers of pickle, concurred. Theo, she noticed, was more a mustard man, and indeed he confessed a preference for English rather than French, but said that American was very good, if it was all she had.

They both drank like troopers, and Beatie determined to keep pace. After all, she told herself, it wasn't often she had gentlemen to lunch, and the role of hostess rather flattered her. But it wasn't until she spooned up the ice-cream and pears that she became aware of that cocoon-like sense of detachment that marks a state of insobriety.

Theo was saying that they'd spent a few days in Brisbane, where a special exhibition at the opening of a new gallery had included some water colours by his younger brother. What he said exactly was, 'my young brother', and Beatie, staring through a window in her cocoon wondered if he meant cat-like Hillier, or was there another baby member of the family? But there could be only the two, otherwise he'd have said 'our' or 'youngest' (her faculties hadn't quite gone to pot), and anyway, Hillier's smug curling of the lip suggested that he was the clever one.

Beatie confessed she liked a little dabble too, and rummaged in the bottom of the fridge for some cans of beer. Not that she was very good, she admitted upon return, but then all she had was the small talent God gave her, and nothing of the training that marks the man of professional ability. She remarked too, in defence of her poor efforts, that she was self taught, and then wondered if she hadn't said something of that nature already. Brothers Hillier and Theo, she perceived through thickening glass, were looking on intently. Had she said something out of order? she wondered, or was she dribbling icecream down her chin, as was customary? Licking her lips, and sweeping her fingers across her chin, she went on to say that she never talked about her little hobby as a rule, because country people tended to look on those of Artistic Temperament with some suspicion, although Mr Katz, her neighbour who'd supplied the lettuce they'd all enjoyed, had often remarked upon her small talent, but then he was a friend of the family, and could hardly be objective in such matters.

Here she paused for breath and a drink of beer, and was only vaguely aware of Theo saying something about having a look for themselves.

Beatie guessed that she'd said too much, and shrilled, 'Oh I couldn't! You'd only laugh. They're such silly things!'

Theo promised they wouldn't laugh, and pointed out that being in the business, and in no way related to her, they could give her an objective appraisal. And he added, a little patronisingly she thought, 'What is regarded today as silly, may well be tomorrow's masterpiece.'

Beatie thought that this was taking things a bit far, and was about to refuse flatly to show what were after all private things when Hillier leaned across the table, and rubbing the back of her hand with his paw, murmured, 'My dear Miss Symes, you have nothing to fear from us. Surely you can appreciate our interest. Apart from which, we may be able to advise you professionally on some of the finer points of the art, that may, in some way, improve on your small talent.'

Beatie doubted that she wanted advice, professional or otherwise. They were her little works, and she was afraid that once she'd displayed them before these venerable gentlemen from the city, they would have lost their innocence. They would be known, deflowered one might say. It was all too horrible to consider.

But Theo opened her another can of beer, and gently insisted. They were professional men, he repeated, and she thought of doctors probing around inside her. One examining her head, and probably finding precious little in it. The other, more frighteningly, was fumbling with her private parts. But she had never known doctors who could coax so, who had such reassuring voices, whose unfamiliar forms had become so much of a blur before her.

'All right!' she screeched, standing suddenly, so that the chair fell back with a crash, and the room spun. 'If you insist, so you shall—insist!' She guessed she wasn't making much sense, but it didn't matter. It was the pictures that counted. 'Come with me,' she beckoned, and was conscious of Theo at her side, taking her arm.

She led them across the back yard to the shed, and then made them wait at the door while she addressed her little works in all their purity for the last time. 'My little wonders,' she apologised, forgive me. You are about to be molested.'

Hillier and Theo entered cautiously, their eyes round with expectation and mirth. She couldn't look them in the face, but gestured to the bottom end of the shed where dozens of masonite squares had been stacked. They prodded and probed, muttered between themselves, and cast the odd piece into the light where they could scrutinize her follies with greater delight.

Beatie mooned in the cobwebbed corners, and plucked at her skin. She knew they were laughing at her, cackling over her stiff cows and decapitated hens, the trees like lamp posts, the fence that became higher the further distant it became, and the moonlit landscapes with the silver eyes poking out of the blue earth.

'Um Beatie?' Theo half turned and caressed. 'These poles, these stick things on this side of the canvas, they're um symbolic, yes? They represent in my interpretation that is —'

'They're telegraph poles!' Beatie snorted, nearly choking on phlegm. 'Anyone can see they're telegraph poles! Mr Katz knew they were telegraph poles straight away!'

'Oh yes,' Theo saw at length. 'Telegraph poles. Green telegraph poles.'

Hillier looked at the wall, and scratched his ear. He seemed to be absorbed in a knot hole.

Beatie thought to say that they weren't meant to be green telegraph poles, that she couldn't see too well, and that sometimes the green and the brown looked the same. But she didn't, and was sour because Mr Katz had known they were telegraph poles, and had been polite and not remarked on their greenness.

The brothers nodded and rubbed shoulders, and carefully replaced the masonite squares. Theo turned round, and said, looking past, her, 'Well Beatie, very interesting, not quite what we expected, but interesting. Right Hillier?'

'Right,' said Hillier.

Beatie shuffled and said, 'Well you may as well see the rest.'

'The rest?' Theo gaped. 'You mean there are more?'

'Oh yes!' Beatie smiled. 'My special ones.'

'Your special ones,' Theo uttered, and laughed a little. Hillier squirmed as though he wanted to excuse himself, but Beatie was determined that they weren't going to leave her in a state of half-undress, so to speak. Naked they wanted her, naked she would be.

Pulling them over to a wooden crate, she made them clear off the spider infested cartons, magazines, and old shoes that had been piled on top. Inside were her gems. The lid fell away, and was crunched under their common feet.

'To be quite honest,' Beatie confessed, 'I haven't looked at these for, oh, absolutely *ages*!' And she warned solemnly, 'Not even Mr Katz has seen these!'

Theo and Hillier must have known they were about to witness an uncovering of extreme significance, for they hung over her like bats, and Beatie nearly died as their fingers clawed at her back.

'These,' she announced, beating them away, 'are the Self Portraits.' She confronted them, and screamed, 'Not too close! I'll get them out, and you can see.'

Quite indelicately, she heaved the boards from the chest, and dumped them on the floor. Dropping to her knees, she scattered them in all directions, flicking certain ones face up, revealing their pink fleshy surfaces. 'Look look!' she screeched, 'see this one! and this, ooh! I'd forgotten all about that!'

The brothers had dropped to their haunches, and were nervously inspecting the specimens that she shoved under their noses. It never occurred to her to point out that none of the portraits showed any particular resemblance, although she could remember noting once that one of them was an uncanny likeness of the woman in the post office.

'Here it is!' she cried, almost joyfully, 'this one. See it's just like Penny Coutts, isn't it just. And Mrs Coutts,' here she looked up at them as they picked over her bones, 'is distantly related, I do believe.'

Quite suddenly she flopped down to one side, utterly exhausted. As she settled down, a sharp crack burst from beneath her skirt. 'Oh dear,' she sighed through her weariness, 'I think I've broken one.' With some effort she pulled the two pieces of board from beneath her. Remarkably, the portrait had split almost directly down the centre, obliterating her nose completely, leaving nothing but a pudgy deepening of pink just above one half of a thin lip.

For some reason the two brothers seemed acutely embarrassed, as if, she mused, it had been one of their bums that had done the damage. Beatie sighed a little more, but felt too tired to care. She gazed round at the various mis-shapen masks, and reflected that the only thing they had in common was their utter grotesqueness. Bloated cheeks, pointed chins, and odd shaped ears all peered gloomily back into her solemn face. It all seemed so terribly absurd that she began to laugh, just a little chuckle at first, and then, letting herself fall back onto the scattered boards, she practically roared. 'Oh dear!' she wept, 'oh God!' Her body shook and shuddered, and her muscles danced with such vigour that she was overcome with a pressing urge to urinate that could barely be contained.

When even the effort of laughter became too much for her, she let it drain away. And yet it persisted, the sound rolling round the shed like a rumbling inside a tin drum. Turning on her side, she observed Theo and Hillier fallen into each other's arms, and convulsed with hysteria. Beatie thought this a bit much, and dragged herself to her feet. The brothers separated, and while Hillier collapsed against the wall wheezing, 'What a scream! Jesus, what a scream!' Theo took her in his arms, and crushed her to his chest.

Really, she didn't know where it all might have ended, had not the door been suddenly flung aside, revealing an astonished Mac who bellowed, 'Shit and Jesus! What the God in Heaven's going on here?' And Beatie howling back, 'Mac you old bastard, don't you ever knock?'

Hillier fell to his knees and began collecting up the boards, but Beatie, kicking them aside, snarled, 'Leave them! I'll sweep them up later!'

Mac was saying, 'If that's your car out on the road, mate, someone's busted the boot open.' But Theo didn't seem to mind, insisting there was nothing inside other than a jack and a bald spare tyre.

Back at the house, Beatie flopped down on her mother's treasured chesterfield. She was still bursting to urinate, but for some strange reason put it down to aching limbs. Theo was rubbing her hand, muttering platitudes and words of encouragement that seemed to be in reference to her remarkable talent. Hillier, she could sense, was round the back of the chesterfield somewhere, smothering his face with his hand, and emitting a high pitched whining sound that may or may not have been laughter stifled at the source.

She wasn't really sure of their going. One moment the room was full of brothers and mechanics, all talking at once, and then she heard the door thump shut. A second of silence, and then a whoop of muffled laughter bounced across the verandah, rising sharply into an ejaculated, 'Jesus man! Those bloody cows!'

Beatie pulled herself round, and lay across the chesterfield. One leg dangled to the floor, and she became faintly conscious of some internal organ begging her pardon. I wonder, she dreamed, as the juices burst forth, is it always like this? Or only the first time?

JEAN KENT

Introducing: The Writer

Now his Fame is flung upon him
like a facemask. No doubt
when he stood in his bathroom this morning he thought
he was coming to us naked but no
we cannot see. We sit on the edges of chairs—locked
in old cupboards thoughts of how many essays
we almost wrote on the significance to Australia
of his Art, of reading at fifteen my first (sneaked from the adult
shelves) novel and feeling sick because
of it—we tremble on the edges of chairs
and tumbling through the looking glasses on the cupboards
our twin faces are so relieved
at having overcome the sickness, at having avoided
in eighteen yearold innocence those essays, at having
escaped those deaths.
Nevertheless I have read too many of his books. I am daunted
by what I think I know of him
but suspect
as he stares stiff-faced more disturbing than a mirror
straight at me,
that I know nothing. The dogs he takes for walks
every morning know more.

Foolish to envy the freedom of a mongrel to snap
at his heels, to make him wait while it sentences a tree
or a flowerbed to a moment of intense
acidity. Now because even the famous catch colds, scrape
vegetables and must grow old,
the yapping is commonplace—yes, he is better
today, although only a week ago at death's door.

Before that thought I cower
as many others of my generation did before the shooting
of John Lennon. I have never been inclined
to kneel before pop gods, never wanted a thread
of Anyone's clothing or to gloat in tabloid ecstasy
over the mucky manuscripts of famous songs—if touched
by Fame I am not likely to go home swearing
Never to Wash—still the thought of this death is like
a lighthouse beacon smashed. Over crab and avocado mousse
he is desolate as the harbour at low tide. I am stringy
as a mango seed
his flesh is sucked
away the detritus—old plastic, jellyfish, aluminium
flip-tops, the sea's cheap
modern jewellery—nags into him only his eyes
are the same still early morning blue. Microscoping my motives
I am wary of being hooked although those waves
of light are almost like emotion
stroking over his skin. In the silt, the line of a bay
under one hollowed cheek there is a twitch
devastating as a yabbie and for all
my absurd desires to dive headlong into the mud
to scoop out that private ache, I
am bogged here in the foreshore ungainly as a pelican
condemned to lockjaw.

But he had better go and mingle,
he says. He is not very good at it, he ruefully
smiles. Face pack cracking. Sea swirling
in. He leaves. I grin as ruefully
back. From the great secret hold of my bill gulp down
fineboned facades of words.

MIKE LADD

Hot Wind

that bloody buzzsaw
eating into my nerves
on a hot and windy morning
when I'm trying to sleep in
my penis gets hard
with the blood pumping
for no reason
the sun's accelerated
see her
in the windcrashed house next door
that old woman
with those scraps of breast
on her ribs
—and the wind abandons everything,
tears the rings off its brides fingers.
When I need to go outside
I have to tread barefoot
between the knives
that've blown off the table.

WENDY MORGAN

The Food of Love

The family's problems, for some reason, always seemed to involve eating. Alone in the house at the kitchen table Martita eased one weighty thigh over another and absently ground out her cigarette butt. She could still recall vividly the difficulties she'd had feeding Jamie years ago when he was only three months old. One moment he'd be gulping and pulling at her breast in greed. (She could still feel the warm tingle when the milk flowed out so easy to the rhythm of his jaws.) The next he'd start away, his back a rigid arch, mouth split wide in impotent gummy fury. The more she'd tried to fit her nipple back in that hole, the more he yelled and stubbornly screwed his head aside. In all her nineteen years she hadn't ever felt so frustrated. She knew she needed to get enough into him to last through to the next feed, but no amount of anxious effort would make him take what she had to give. In the end his refusals grew so unbearable she'd dash him down on the bed and shake him from side to side with trembling hands.

"—You—bloody—rotten—little—bastard—!" Her pursed mouth warped her words. "*Go* hungry then. You'll get no more from me. What do I care?"

Jim hadn't been at all pleased when she broke down like that: said she ought to grow up and show more sense. Couldn't she see he was only a helpless little creature?

—That was all very well for him, he didn't have the child hanging round his neck. Funny kind of set-up it'd been all round: Jamie hanging onto her breast—or puking into her lap, and her needing Jim just as much for love or money—mostly money. And Jim? She still didn't know what he wanted. Kick in the pants, most likely. She couldn't depend on him for either now that he'd fastened on this blonde overdone dish among his business management students at the college. Marty knew what little business that piece was hot on: she was no lamb. Much good might it do her. Fat lot of use he'd ever been to Marty in that way.

—Well, no point now crying over spilt milk. Marty'd wanted to tell him a few home truths, when he finally upped stakes, about all the things he'd failed to provide her with. But somehow she couldn't get the words out. Funny how she never could express herself with him. Jim being the educated one, she'd long given up trying to match words with him. He could say such cutting things it made her feel quite sick with fear. And even if she had spoken up finally, he wouldn't have taken any notice, he was too worked up over the mutton bone from Sunday's leg he'd just found shoved in the corner of the bench under the week's newspapers.

Even when he'd started giving her a tongue-lashing (it *was* a repulsive sight, the way the remains were feeding a green mould) Marty just sagged deeper into her glum bulk, resting her elbows on the frost-patterned laminex table. The back of her throat swelled tight.

"Look at you sitting there without a word to say for yourself—you're enough to freeze any man with your sly sulky ways. An iceblock, that's what you are: a rotten great iceberg. Big enough for one anyway. Make it impossible for a man to work up any interest in you, you're so cold and dull. And bloody filthy into the bargain. It's simply indecent, the way you've let yourself go. But then, the only thing you've ever wanted out of me was lolly. Well, tough shit: do you good to go short for a bit. I've had a gutsful of this breadwinner business: I'm clearing out."

—Yeah, he'd got it all together, he was more of a piece than she could ever manage to be. He'd always been on the make, cutting his losses without a single backward glance. No doubt it came from being a commerce expert: overheads, margins, returns, stocktaking, supply and demand. Jeez, she was sick of all that. All theory though—he wouldn't be able to run the corner deli any better than old Bernie who couldn't read a word of English. Simply a matter of organization, Jim used to say; claimed a home and family should be just as efficient as a business. That's really how he'd thought of their whole domestic set-up: J. and M. Hibberd, props.

—He had no idea about left-overs, for instance. He'd always nagged at her to toss them out, when she'd been saving them to mash up for the kid's lunch—and hers. You can do really creative things with left-overs, just look at the Home Hints in the *Women's Weekly*. And now that Jamie was at school she liked to put them in his sandwiches. Mind you, the boy always made the left-overs into a problem too, the ungrateful wretch. Kids are no better than savages when it comes to eating.

As a toddler he'd treated her food the same way as he had her milk: he'd tongue the tacky mess right back at her feeding spoon, spatter gobs of it into her face, or squelch it through his fingers. She still had the same sort of battles—only now he'd leave half his lunch in his case, and she'd find bits of cheese squashed between the pages of his reader or soggy sandwich wads mouldering under his jumper. He wouldn't eat the nice moist fillings she made up out of last night's stew.

The door slammed and Marty's head jerked up. She'd been half asleep in a warm fug of smoke over the glossy pages of *Creative Cuisine* propped against the teapot. That'd be Jamie home. She twisted round in her chair to greet him, but he just dumped his bag down in the middle of the floor as he made straight for the cupboard. Grabbing a handful of biscuits from the tin and cramming his mouth full, he muttered through the crumbs—

"Just going to play Superman with Paul"—
and slammed out again. Marty sighed and took another long drag on her cigarette.

Jim had at least eaten the lunches she packed for him, even if he never commented on what went between the bread slices (thanks were out of the question). But he would keep forgetting to take the package, even though she set it conspicuously on the bench beside his Weetbix. Once, as a mark of protest, she'd let the

same lunch sit there in silent reproach for a whole week. But he hadn't even noticed.

Perhaps he just couldn't bear to look among the untidy litter on the bench: a sock waiting for its mate, a dish of lottery tickets, some letters to answer, a pair of underpants to mend, some lemons she'd been meaning to squeeze, some seeds it'd got too late to plant this spring, a half-eaten jam roll she was going to make into trifle, some *Homemaker* pages that showed you how to make Creative Canisters from empty jars, and some fabric scraps to cut into quilt blocks. He was always on at her to clear up the mess—but Marty claimed they were all things she was going to attend to when she got time, and needed them there to jog her memory.

Anyway, when on the Friday he finally remembered to take his lunch, he didn't comment on those fillings either, though they must have been pretty ripe by then. That was one time it can't have paid him to be absent-minded, though in general he did pretty well out of it. His air of preoccupation made him such a comfortable blanket, Marty felt she could hardly ever unwrap it. It was like shouting through cotton wool: very fuzzy. Sometimes she had to say three or four times, "Your tea's getting cold", before the flat exasperation of her tone reached him. And other times he'd go on working at the kitchen table, spreading his sheets of figures all over it, when he must have known she wanted to lay the plates and cutlery (there'd been enough clashing of saucepans, surely, to wake the dead).

Marty recalled one Saturday lunch time—she could see the funny side now—when she was carrying their three plates round the bench into the dinette and she'd tripped on one of Jamie's trucks, a heavy metal fork-lift. Jim's spaghetti and poached egg on toast slipped right out of her hands to land upside down on his statistical tables.

—He sure lost his cool then, worked himself up into a real lather. As if she'd done it deliberately! He should've blamed the boy instead—but the two males always did stick together, perhaps because they were like two peas in a pod for looks. Christ, how she'd fawned on him to put out his anger, fussing round with a teatowel to dab helplessly at the red and yellow oozing into the figures. What a ridiculous sight he'd made, snarling at her and the worms while he tried to scoop up their gooey mess in his fingers, loathing in every line of his face.

That was probably the first time he'd ever dirtied his hands—their stickiness must have caused him as much fastidious horror as the stained purity of his pages. To the best of Marty's memory he'd never once changed Jamie's nappy: pretended he couldn't stomach it, and found it convenient to regard it as her job to clean up the dirt the kid made; his hands were presumably for better things, like pushing a pen. She didn't enjoy it any more than he would have, and never did get over her first uneasiness at handling that flabby complicated piece of gristle. That was a man's affair—nothing she knew about. How could you be sure it was clean, and did it matter if you folded it up or down, and what if the pin pierced it? Well, Jamie'd survived. Pretty well, considering.

He seemed to know just what he wanted out of life. And took it. Not bad for a seven-year-old. Better than her. So Marty wasn't at all surprised to find how easily he'd been able to wheedle her into making a trip to Hungry Jack's. It didn't seem worth the bother of putting up any resistance, when she knew he'd win anyway. Just like his father. She looked at him now as he sat sturdily on his stool,

head down over book and bun, suddenly seeing him as a stranger among the rest of the crowd in the bright noise. He didn't seem perturbed by the din and bustle, too absorbed in *James and the Giant Peach*, which he was reading for the fifth time. He just kept devouring that book. She couldn't understand what he got out of it, though she stared as his hand moved automatically from turning the page to lift the hot dog again. The slowness of his chewing made it clear he wasn't really hungry—he'd just been fascinated by the way the man at the counter thrust the spike up into the bread roll and injected a quick spurt of tomato sauce with the sausage.

He must have felt her stare. Raising his eyes from the page he licked his lips and wiped his hand across them. He eased his solid thighs off his stool and sidled across to her, ducked under her arm before she could resist and nestled into her side. Then he began gently stroking her neck as he looked up sideways into her face with calculating appeal. His touch, sure and rhythmic, only made her stiffen against responding to its current.—In public too. God, the kid was shameless.

"I'm still thirsty. I want a milkshake."

The little shit. Her jaw tightened with a spurt of anger that felt acid on her tongue.

"I like your cheek. You've already had two Cokes. D'you think I'm made of money? To fill you up with rubbish? You're a bloody bottomless pit." But she reached for her purse, as much to remove his touch as to satisfy his wants, and put a coin into his cupped hand. "Go on, suit yourself. But mind you don't bother me for anything else."

But he did bother her. She shifted on her stool, lit a cigarette and blew the smoke absently at his retreating back. Absently peeling the skin back off his frankfurter she bit hard into the meat. She knew it was nothing but cupboard love, so it was pointless for him to come to her with his sloppy open-mouthed kisses. She had nothing she could share with him. These days even eating with him made her gorge rise as she watched and listened to the gusto of his noisy eager chewing.

Marty licked her lips and headed for the Ladies to check her reflection: stale and dry. A sour sigh dragged her lips down. To avoid confronting her disgust she ducked away from the mirror and rummaged through her handbag for the new lipstick. Contorting her lips into a fixed grimace that her lack-lustre eyes didn't match she smeared on an imprecise paste. The Creme Mousse slick was soothing, but Marty was pretty doubtful about the Banana Passionfruit shade; hopefully it was just the bilious lights of the loo made her look so constipated. She was still peering uncertainly at her reflected self when the door burst open with the gusty assurance of a pair of young mothers and their toddlers.

"And I said to the doctor I said it's the apples that's giving him colic—"

"Come on, Adam, time to do a job for Mummy—"

"Nice clean handies—"

"Anyhow we're taking a barbie up the river Sunday: why don't you and Kev come along and bring some tubes? I'm making a big fruit salad—pull your pants up Jason—"

"That's Mummy's precious boy—"

Marty stared at their strangeness—until she caught sight of her own, fixed in dreary silence. She shoved vehemently through the door to find Jamie. —Must pick up some milk on the way home; wonder if there are any eggs left; have to

write to grandma this evening; did Jamie leave his parka in the car; what happened to the gas bill; could get some barbecued chicken for tomorrow's tea—

At last she got the child settled into bed with threats and promises, equally unfulfillable, turned away from his warm untidy nest back to the unlit kitchen and walked straight over to the fridge. She opened it and crouched down before the cold glimmer. The bleak scraps in disarray weren't at all appealing. But she pulled out a chop and began to gnaw through its congealed fat, still on her haunches before the seeping chill. Putting the ragged bone back on the shelf she reached for a pasty and ate mechanically down to the dry crust. Then she took out a finger bun and dipped it into a jar of hardening cream before she tore off each bite, and followed it with a boiled potato, two cheese singles, a custard slice, and some liverwurst she scooped out of its casing with a gherkin. She interrupted her steady chewing only to gulp from the spout of a carton of strawberry milk.

Staring vacantly at the shelves, Marty ate on and on till her eyes glazed over and her face flushed in a kind of ecstasy. Her jaws kept pace with the rhythm of blood pumping through her stomach to fill the emptiness within. Some of the pain of craving eased, but still she handed the food into her mouth. Her core seemed to expand, its edges lost their icy aching tension, blurred and dissolved into the dark silence.

GEOFF PAGE

The tenor

And why should he not
possessed as he is
of talent, voice and training?
Good wines and lunch
have done their work;
the edges of the room
are rubbed away.
A friend helps out—
a small duet
to get things started:
'The Wild Colonial Boy' perhaps
Jack Doolan was his name,
snatches of Mozart
and Verdi.
His wife at this stage
slips away,
her face quite free
from all emotion.
An American somewhere
is loud throughout;
a beer-cellar German
is grandly amused—'Boom! Boom!'.
The centuries of Ireland
are troubled again
in all their aching scales . . .
climaxed by 'Danny Boy'.
And silence is complete at last
(the eloquent forearm,
the cunning dynamics).
The American is
'genuinely moved'; also this

whole room of drinkers.
Talk takes a little time
to build again
The German calls
'Boom! Boom!' for more.
The wine is too good
to be left.
A friend joins in
and even
tries it on his own—
Click go the shears, boys,
click, click, click.
The room and mood
are thinning
but still for the singer
all flows on:
the resonance of
throat and torso,
the well-managed
column of air,
the joy of an octave
nicely hit,
the false libretti
turning true.
You walk out past him
to sunlight and the afternoon
and, yes, you know
he would do it alone—
the audience is something
but not so very much.
He cannot stop.

GEOFF PAGE

The elegist

Sleek, dark-suited
as if on the payroll
and with an undertaker's
nervousness of hands

he has touched down this morning
having smelt out the news.
No poet's death
can possibly evade him—

the shifty
sentimental eye,
the steady nose for grief.
Sidelong in the silence

of oregon and stone
he places like an usher
the mourners either side—
remembering old photos,

guessing from the clothes.
Later at the graveside
the breeze cannot
unslick his hair;

his eyes assume
the texture of the sky
and in the rhetoric
of dust and ashes

his images
begin to harden.
A necessary friendship blooms.
Saturday next

their two names meet
across a matter
of four or five stanzas—
though one is always

better known
the printer's ink
unites them nicely
over coffee in the morning sun.

JOHN WRIGHT

The Customer

She'd been waiting for a Yellow Cab which hadn't shown up, so she hailed my green one. Glad you were round, she said, as I made a rather nimble turn into Grey Street and began to re-negotiate my contract with the evening traffic, I mustn't be late for work. She sat in the back, chatting, telling me about her day. She'd had people over and they'd stayed too long, in fact they'd only just this moment gone, which is why I ordered a cab, usually I catch the bus. What sort of day have you had, she asked me. I told her I'd had people over too, had cooked some lunch, then played tennis and, since I'd been to Port Melbourne beach in the morning, I'd had a busy day even before picking up the cab at a quarter to five. Yes, it's a good feeling to know you've achieved something in the day, she remarked. What sort of work do you do, I asked. I work in a parlour, she said, matter-of-factly. Enjoy it? It's quite good, pays well. Smiling. I accelerated into the right lane, ready for anything. Hell, I've probably driven hundreds over the years, myopically content in my stereotype: she'll be around five-six, in her thirties, but looking older beneath her too-heavy make-up (including heaped black around fluently evasive eyes), and there'll be some flashy giveaway in the way she's dressed. Years back I thought I'd identified one and she turned out to be the wife of another taxi-driver, on her way to the supermarket.

The woman now in the car had stepped into the middle of the street to hail me and I'd noticed jeans, denim jacket (pale, cheapish, the same shade as the jeans), thin blonde hair, no make-up, flat shoes. Is this how they dress to undress, these days, really bringing it back to basics? Her presentation was a challenge to the customer, to the customer in every man, some kind of declaration of ordinariness in the face of the sordid bargains she negotiated each night in an eight by ten bedroom behind the red light.

Traffic bustled the length of Fitzroy Street and she told me how most prostitutes have a habit and have to rip off clients and even other parlour girls (oh what a mockery that delicate, dolly term makes of the old fifties tv parlour games that bored bored housewives on weekday afternoons) just to get enough to buy their cap-and-a-half of heroin each day in Fitzroy Street. The habit costs a hundred and fifty a day for some, she told me, but in the parlour she worked at, all the girls were habit-free, saving their energies for the job in hand, as it were. I believe it's forty bucks a throw, I proffered, for a . . . Yes, forty bucks the basics—what the customers (I saw them leering after thirty beers, daring to say the words to a sheila) call a rub, suck, and fuck. One rub, suck, and fuck against twelve hours driving this taxi. Are there any jobs for gigolos, I asked her, trying to catch a quick look at my Lakes Entrance suntan in the rear view mirror (but

saw mainly a yellow Monaro), flexing my forearms, imagining the clientele. Oh, there's a place called The Fast Buck, but I don't know what sort of guys they look for, it's really just an escort agency providing partners for interstate business-women, someone to accompany them to dinner, but now and then there'd be extras, I guess. I saw myself in a silver dining-room, adding a special inflection to my tone as I floated some literary allusion across the red-table-clothed table. Beside me some nameless, faceless, ageless client hung to my words and my hand, mentally preparing herself for laters and deciding how much she'd tip me.

I contemplated Punt Road's single-lane-north-against-the-peak-hour-traffic with horror. The yellow Monaro had already squeezed past me, nearly flat in second gear, approaching the lights at St Kilda junction. Now the mauve Valiant dived across me under brakes. As the driver surfaced, I asked her if he were a likely customer (diminutive, with his Marlboros on the dashboard). Not straight enough, she said, most of ours get round in suits and Fairlanes. With all this traffic and haste it was hard to get an improper look at her, so I could imagine her at work and me taking off my taxi clothes, ready for formal experimentation. Snapshot glances in the rear-view mirror kept showing up bits of this plain, pale, pale-jeaned, plain-jane looker. No good looker, this hooker, I said to myself hilariously, but a perfectly neat, almost prim person in a hurry to get to work on time. Most of them are just nameless faces, she said, nameless faceless men, even the regulars.

I'll get out of it soon and settle down, I'll have enough cash to buy a house interstate by Christmas, my Christmas present to me. Why interstate? Well I wouldn't want to live in a city I've worked in. (What's in a city? Some millions of people, buildings in the central business district that look absurdly beautiful, solidly golden against this January sunset, streets and suburbs and junctions and spaces of all kinds with edges and identities, only the residents blurred, anonymous.) Yes, nobody wants to be a nameless face I thought (or a faceless name, Jenny in the dark room at 3 a.m. ready for the next one), even at forty bucks a throw. A rub a suck, a fuck, even a fantasy or two, but no being to stitch it all together out of time, out of mind, just a street name and number and a suburb. Furtive ex-customers would surely recognise her in New World buying aperitifs. (Something in the way she moves attracts me like no other lover.)

A hatted gentleman in a bucolic Benz slowed by progress down the Richmond side street. But he turned off, disappointing my hope that I'd pull up behind him, by the red light. Sharp cracklings of jobs over the two-way radio spoke of restaurants to be gone to, films to be seen, evening jobs, long after-work drives home to outer suburbs, a thousand dinners resurrected in white ovens in brick venereal homes. And the night sky was rupturing itself into great welts of red and apricot, with clots of puce. I thought again of Margot in the Carlton bedroom ten years back, telling me she might go into business for a year or two to get something to put down on a little weatherboard in a neat quiet street. Things put up in a house, forced in in a house, things stretched and squeezed and slipping and sweating in a house, a million potential blackmail positions in the name of work, to make some money to build a routine life in a nice suburb. And then there is me, of course, flogging this green car through the night traffic, my hands sweating on the steering wheel, the front wheels out of balance, the whole car having to be cajoled to drag its sagging suspension over another ten thousand streets, under another ten thousand nameless passengers (before turning up in a car yard, behind barbed wire, with \$950 in white paint on its windscreen), to make forty bucks a night, if I'm lucky.

The lights went green, then pink, then deepest lilac and the street rippled with Rubens' women, nude, half-laughing beside faceless men. The no-nonsense voice of a female operator over the radio: Fred Four-Two, how much longer to North-

cote? In this crazy traffic, another twenty minutes, I said, surveying a glittering litter of cars mindlessly manoeuvring beneath the hands of troubled drivers, in the pink afterbirth of a better than customary sunset. Eight o'clock on all five channels and customers everywhere.

We neared her red light which leant out crazily into the crazily narrow street. What do you say to the cops, I asked, when they question you about the red light outside the house, just that you *like* a red light? Yes, she said, smiling. I turned the meter off at an even five bucks, wondered fleetingly if I could make it a deposit, just to see what the forty bucks trip were like. I turned for a good look. Twenty-six, perhaps a year or two more. Certainly not thirty. A thin blonde moustache, bored hair, bored eyes, that ever-ready smile. I took the money, plus twenty cents, towards your life savings she said, savings for *what* I thought, and she comported her perfectly ordinary, entirely inoffensive person out of the taxi. She walked quickly down the straight concrete (narrow) path to the quarter-open front door bearing a large 69, and I heard a matriarchal admonishing voice. She was five minutes late. The rules are the same for most jobs. Proud of my right to be five minutes late, I urged the reluctant Kingswood away from the high kerb, back into the unconscious traffic and we washed with the current deeper into Melbourne's working north.

R. G. HAY

Aristotle talks some bull about imitation

They were politely reading some of my poems, and one said "They're very sensuous, aren't they?" and I could only murmur confusedly, thinking "They're only words on a page." Then I looked up to see this lithe young woman bending so that her skirt clung and there in profile was one long sweep from her waist to the back of her knees that one hand might travel, and back to rest on her palm-snuggling bum, and another lovely convexity (while concave) of the female body that you might say belly but it's a surface that sweeps over intestines, ovaries, and uterus, I suppose, though any such clinical consideration isn't it at all but just the soft smooth sweep your other hand might take, and later, shedding draperies, you find yourself thrusting against that yielding but supportive mound and home to the warm sweet welcome between those rounded flanks—and I thought, for my part, I'd never hope to write a poem anything like so sensuous as a lithe young woman bending in profile, or not bending, and from any angle for that matter.

LEIGH ALLISON

For a little girl

The sun's too bright today. Don't show me there are other things today. I'm almost asleep and sleep is playing games with me. I'm even carrying a mattress which is more like a mat, and I wish I knew what 'ress' meant. Copy for 'rest' I suppose. Not 'wrestle'. It's been a long time since I've felt primitive in pleasure. And then sleep.

Train is stopping. Too late. I can see. Cancel that thought. Too late. A grand mal on the platform. Those years of repeating inwardly that people are not diagnoses—a person not a case—and now realizing a second buzz on that. Sick people are not the same people, and I can only see a grand mal on the platform.

I don't know who you are but you're here—here. Your daughter sees this. 'Be brave, mummy, be brave.' She's looking around trying to contact mummy who must be in the air. I can see. I can see a little girl with undelicate hands forcing them together delicately. Feel her spirit only wanting courage from another. She is here and it hurts. I am here knowing things I don't want to know. Is mummy's brightness red shadows like her face? It's pure brightness from the child. Repeated pain takes it away. Does repeated pain bring it back? Does anybody see?

This child sees stranger-forms pinning a known form to harsh cement. Gesticulates with little arms—arms that aren't working too 'good'. She wants a cushion (softness) for her mummy's head. I can see but I can't speak, having forced a piece of wood between mummy's teeth, jolted her jaw, commanded fascinated on-lookers to sit on mummy's jagging limbs, and cursed station-workers who are the only uniforms around. Twenty minutes and no ambulance.

How I'm tempted to try to win this child. Say you don't see me doing this. Say you understand asphyxiation in the physical as well as emotional sense. Say you can't see my person-non-recognition. Say you can't see I can't see my soul. It's yellow brightness for me. Yell-oh.

Mummy's blinking. The shadow sees and leaves, and she is trying to talk—to sit up. The little girl walks round and round looking for her feelings. The ambulance men stroll down the parched stairs and shortly I walk up them . . . with my mattress. Don't show me any more things today.

ANDREW SANT

A Baptism

Missing, on my way home from school
when the storm cracked through the barricade

oaks, smashing branches along the lane
that were usually a giant arch

hushed as a cathedral. The river had swollen
gracelessly, so when I crossed the bridge

it grazed its grey, abundant skin
on the supporting girders.

I saw no squirrels, the ground littered
by the hail of a million acorns

that had frightened them to the Noah-like safety
of their nests, poised enviously

I always thought, above the cricket pitch
to miss the red and spinning ball approaching

like a meteor. How could I,
being pursued by this sudden storm

not run faster into it?
(I preferred to immerse myself in hymns.)

Nearby there was an air-raid shelter
walled-up to keep us out

of trouble. The sky dropped
bombs of thunder. I ran and ran,

until a policeman, outside my panic
took me home to find my mother; her strained

emotions reached towards me like a rope
as the river overflowed into my eyes.

ANDREW SANT

The Resort

Dandelions, sunworshippers
in cool climates, populous
and phlegmatic as the Englishmen that lie amongst them
enduring this holiday resort—
those single blooms
across unmown lawns
have tap roots
nourishing in a history
that has known much common ground
but few manorial gardens
so they cleave only
a sufficient space
in the grass

 their compliance
lies in enduring the superior
whims of climate
till age whitens them;
then the puffs
of seed become folk-lore
picked and blown by children
before the arrival
of those unbelieving mowers

BRUCE DAWE

Kummerstaat

To be a petty burgher spokesman for sorrow,
that small principality on the edge of the river,
with its own curious history: overrun often
by dynamic neighbouring states with their commercial vision,
gross cannon, and noisy troops whose jovial ways with women
are known only too well . . .

To be such a person recording
the lives of its citizens, remote from the great world
whose hob-nailed boots are frequently tramping its cobbles,
whose gay pleasure-boats and barges float past daily
on the broad waters of the River Glück
—is still to feel chosen and responsible. Here, after all,
where one is at home, so may still come
to walk the town-square, purchase lop-sided carvings
from the little shops, and sit for hours in the beer-garden, amazed
that a small place should hold so much . . .

BRUCE DAWE

Creative Process

When the drought breaks we scamper madly about,
putting dishes and saucepans under the dripping ceiling,
on the verandah, under the broken drain-pipe—anywhere likely
to trap the run-off, turn the excessive abundance
to future benefit, having in mind parched flower-beds, stricken shrubs,
window-boxes wilted like shrunken eye-lids,
lawns seared to brittle mats by the long heat.

But after the first few days, when the sounds of drinking,
the rustle of reviving leaves and strengthening stems,
has muted to a confident murmuration
—we become increasingly hostile to the downpour,
neglect to replace the dishes, discontinue
primitive walks in the rain, until even the sound
of the rain on the roof, itself so recently magical,
we begin to think of now with a certain boredom (so many fingers
drumming imperiously on so many table-tops)
—and wait with growing impatience for the rain to stop.

And when it does, and the sodden earth ceased steaming,
the flying ants flown to wherever it is they go,
and weeks again pass without a breath of rain
—how petty and arrogant seems our previous boredom,
how just a punishment seems our present drought!

SHANE McCAULEY

Topic for a Seminar

Do we finally become the characters of our reading?
Is love an abstract noun, or simply misleading?
Once upon a time I firmly believed
In cities under the sea, was finally relieved
To find this merely colourful fiction.
The intellect offers one such benediction.
Then, at a later and more impressionable age,
This metaphor called love leapt from every page,
All sorts of people had it in different capacity,
Some suffered, some rejoiced, some fostered pity,
Others killed for it, with it. And me?
I thought it would somehow offer itself, for free;
Not so—one was required to change role so often,
To slide out of the skin of old reality and soften
Someone else's responses, offering a feigned insight.
I incline to think I am fiction now, my premises right.

W. HART-SMITH

Vergulde Draeck

Abram Leeman, Upper Steersman of the *Waekende Boey*, went south in the 17th century under the command of Captain Samuel Volkerson to see if traces of the lost *Vergulde Draeck* could be found. It seems that Volkerson was more interested in charting the islands and reefs (they went as far south as Rottnest Is.) than undertaking a serious search for the *Golden Dragon*, and rather casually gave the job to Leeman. Once Leeman was in the ship's longboat, he wiped his hands of the affair; but Leeman was unusually persistent. Eventually Volkerson returned to Batavia saying he had found nothing and had lost Leeman. Leeman tried to rejoin his ship, the last time off a small island (unknown) where the *Waekende Boey* had taken shelter for the night. Volkerson must have known Leeman was on the other side of the island, but he sailed without him or his men during the night.

Leeman, amazingly, made the voyage back to Batavia in the longboat, turning up at Batavia, much to Volkerson's chagrin.

The story is based on fact but I have taken liberties with it. The germ of the poem is the extraordinary vindictiveness of Samuel Volkerson towards Abram Leeman. It must have been a shock for Volkerson when, some time later, Leeman turned up.

W. HART-SMITH

Vergulde Draeck

Mynheers, I ask you—
does he know I have returned,
the man he thought marooned?

Tell him we are alongside once again
and are coming up the ladder.

His jaw will drop upon his starched cravat,
his mouth gape in amazement,
when I confront him after all these months.

Will you lay charges, Mynheers,
and have him retell his story
now I tell mine?

Strange I do not hate him
for all he has done.
He still has me curious
as to why, why.

He has been the muscle in my arms,
the strength in my back
to row here.

He will not believe it.
Two thousand miles
by my rough reckoning.

I say this
and will put it all in writing
that on that last time
he slipped away before dawn
making as if he had not seen
the beacon we lit on the shore
on our side of the island.

We clearly saw
the tips of his masts,
the tops of his royals,
which is why we lit our fire
thinking he would take us in the morning.

For still I trusted him,

climbed the low hill at daybreak
only to find the bay empty,
the ocean empty,

for the ship had gone
from that accursed island,
white hot in the heat,
its beaches heaped with coral rubble.

So we rowed home.

He will, no doubt, be genuinely astounded.
In my delirium I saw him
given at last to a genuine emotion.
But the sea has calmed
something of the violence
in me towards him.

Fiddle-dee-dee, let it go; but
Mynheers, does he know I have returned?

Men lost with me I can and will account for.

Can he? Can he?

Mynheers, you have heard his story,
now hear mine;
and I have witnesses,
bodies down to bone and sinew
as is mine,

from weeks at sea in an open boat
under an open sun,
eating fish raw, and shellfish;
and drinking rain. And

it did not often rain.

I tell you, Mynheers,
that Captain Samuel Volkerson
of the Waeckende Boey,
never left his ship

and seldom his cabin either
except to look over the rail
and rail at me for a goat in a boat
that would not lose itself.

I was his scapegoat
to blame for something guilty on his mind.
He was a shapeless mollusc
and the ship his shell.

All down that reef-cursed coast
he made his soundings and his sightings.
And he is good at this, I grant you,
always busy in his cabin with the portholes closed,
measuring with ruler
and sticking pins

perhaps to make a profit with his mappings
which was ninety percent of his concern,
which leaves ten for the lost Vergulde Draeck

which he was sent to find.

On the 24th of February,
fiftyfour days out and south
from Batavia, having lost the Emeloort,
dropped anchor off-shore

of a large island
some few miles off the coast
of New Holland,
secured with a short chain.

And it was here the game began, and I,
Abram Leeman, Upper Steersman,
am given my orders to go ashore,
on the nearby coast that is,

with seven men at oars
with orders vague and instruction random
to look for signs of the lost Vergulde Draeck
while he returns to the cabin and his chartings.

He has a way of making sure
whatever I do is wrong
if he wants it so.

Found wreckage

all along the shore,
strewn pitifully,
from the lost Dragon of a certain.

Those wretched rocks
some two metres high
are riddled with holes like worm-sculptured timber,
cut your boots and razor your flesh,

would smash any ship
into the smallest of pieces:
nothing but shards and shives,
oddments of flotsam, splintered timbers, spars,
and shreds of sail and cordage;

and once a block all bruised,
its copper rusting green

and once an oar we found
wedged fast in a cleft,
as well pull a bone free
from the mouth of a starving dog!

But never a sign of any people,

only a small, thin smoke
far away inland.

Was it to rescue people he was sent
and the chests of coin lost with them,
or to make maps and charts
the farthest south of any vessel yet?

A cynic is our Captain Volkerson.
He knows the people dead.
A realist also for the coin
is wide spent on the seashore with its shells.

Still, he makes a gesture
and uses me to make it.
I am his conscience,
excuse to say he tried

to find the Dragon and her people,
and lose me in the trying.

All the while he does his charting
for posterity. He well knows
I see inside his devious mind.

Nothing to do but row north
scanning the beaches,
the tops of the low cliffs
covered with scrub only,

a low tree sometimes
takes on the likeness of a man
until we row in closer,
sometimes going ashore

in search of water;
but we find none. And re-embarking,
keeping the ship in sight at all times
where she rode in safety and deep water.

This we did for four days uselessly.

Thought, on the fifth day,
to investigate a smoke somewhat nearer,
but the wind gusting strongly
and promising stronger, food and water short
and the men exhausted
rowed out towards the Waeckende Boey
where she was anchored,
pulling hard on her chain.

No sign from the ship that we were seen,
and no response to our hail.
It growing dark and the wind still rising,
put out a grapnel which caught quickly.

And both of us pitched and rolled there,
ourselves in the greatest danger,
lying as we were
in under her stern.

Suddenly, riding high on a swell
huge as a hill
the ship's chain snapped
and she bore right down upon us.

Seeing this happen, we cut our own hook free,
riding back over it,
and with the aid of oars
pulled in alongside and made fast.

Even then, Mynheers, it was only
doubt I had of the man's mind towards me,
and easily dismissed. Why
am I so quick to justify
the conduct of a villain in his favour?

I leave this thing unsolved.

We were astonished therefore
on going up the ladder
to find the deck alive with hostile men,
and our Captain's face, scarlet with rage,
glaring down at us,

"Fool! Fool!" he screamed at me,
strong above the wind—
"It was your good luck our cable snapped
or we would not have helped you."

And fool I was
to go ashore again the following day
with more of his equivocal instructions.

Mynheers, Mynheers, will you inform
our Captain Volkerson
that I am come alongside once again
and am coming up the ladder!

SIMON BROWN

About an Ancient Sea

take off their masks, Lysias, we have no need of heroes
let the paragons return to their walled, marble cities
let them shut their eyes and turn their heads away
ignoring us
we have other duties that won't attend the wants of a martial few

leave behind the Peloponessus, the land with a throttled neck
and a red warrior city embedded in its stomach
like a tumor
leave behind the Argive Plain where lion gates
and the walls of one-eyed giants crown the rises
that salt the Argive soil and mark its history

follow now the lines of Greece
around the tines of Chalcidice, complete the arc
and rest on Ilium, exhumed for the eyes and spades
of modern Achaeans, eager Priam hunters all

now home, Lysias, into the Aegean
blue womb for the islands that have haunted
western minds since Homer's age

an old age
two thousand years gone, into the sun
westwards, to be carried by new minds
blue Aegean
alone
all your lovers dead
and all your dreams come true

BRUCE BENNETT

Discussions with Randolph Stow

Randolph Stow was born in Geraldton, Western Australia, in 1935 and educated at Guildford Grammar School and the University of Western Australia. After working as ration-storeman on the Forrest River Mission in the north of Western Australia he studied anthropological linguistics in Sydney, followed by a period as Cadet Patrol Officer in Papua New Guinea in 1959, when he was attached as assistant to the Government Anthropologist. He has lectured in English at the University of Adelaide (1957), the University of Western Australia (1963-64) and the University of Leeds (1962 and 1968-69). His interest in linguistics was further developed in 1965, when he took a diploma in Indonesian language at Yale University.

Following a serious illness in the tropics, Stow settled in Suffolk in 1960, first at Hadleigh (where his great-great-grandfather, Rev. T. R. Stow, a pioneer of South Australia, who was an historian of the region, was born) and then at East Bergholt. In March 1981 he moved 15 miles down the Stour River to the Essex port of Harwich, where he now lives.

Stow's main early works were five novels: *A Haunted Land* (1956), *The Bystander* (1957), *To the Islands* (1958), *Tourmaline* (1963) and *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* (1965); a book for children, *Midnite: The Story of a Wild Colonial Boy* (1967); and three books of verse, *Act One* (1957), *Outrider: Poems 1956-62* (1962) and *A Counterfeit Silence: Selected Poems* (1969).

Since then he has written two music-theatre works, set to music by Peter Maxwell Davies: *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969) and *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot* (1974). Two further novels have recently appeared: *Visitants* (1979) and *The Girl Green as Elderflower* (1980) (reviewed in *Westerly* No. 4, 1980).

A Swedish publisher has published a selection of Stow's poems entitled *Tystnadens Landskap* (*Landscapes of Silence*).

At present, Stow is working on a story with a Western Australian background while continuing to research the history of exploration in the Indian Ocean region and associated interests. He reviews occasionally for the *Times Literary Supplement* and other literary periodicals.

* * *

The sky is bruised blue-grey. The smell of sea is in the air. Randolph Stow, wearing a light blue 'Geraldton 350 Years' T-shirt says the sights, smells and sounds remind him of his birthplace.

We look across the water from Harwich docks to where Suffolk is dimly visible to the north-west and the dockside machinery of Felixstowe is audible in the east. The long arm of water to the left is the Stour valley, Constable country. Stretching northwards, away from us, is the Orwell, whose name has been lifted from decent obscurity by a writer who had no real identification with this place. Away to the south-east is the North Sea, where ferries regularly cross to the Hook of Holland or Esbjerg in Denmark.

Randolph Stow's recently acquired terrace house in Old Harwich, near the quayside, was formerly a fisherman's cottage; several doors away is the birthplace of Christopher Jones, master of the *Mayflower* in 1620. The port is alive with a sense of voyaging: one is reminded that Conrad has always been one of Stow's favourite authors.

Here, he lives frugally, a life of regulated solitude: people don't just 'drop in': they are invited, or he meets friends at one of the seventeen pubs within walking distance (four 'within crawling distance'). His former place, a rented farm cottage near the Suffolk village of East Bergholt was more secluded. While nostalgic about the lush country lanes he has left, he enjoys Harwich, which he describes as a 'no-bullshit working town' where it's possible to mix with a wide social range: the idea of mixing only with other writers and academics appals him. But he treasures the opportunity to be alone. A favourite pastime is combing the cobbled beaches for driftwood.

In our various discussions over several days in May 1981 a recurrent topic was the question of place and its relation to one's sense of belonging. Stow now regards this part of England as 'home': its landforms, vegetation and the people's voices, in Judith Wright's words, are 'part of [his] blood's country'. When I commented that he had brought the Suffolk countryside alive in *The Girl Green as Elderflower* as he had for Geraldton and its hinterland in novels from *A Haunted Land* to *The Merry-go-round in the Sea*, he replied:

At the age of 19, when I wrote *A Haunted Land*, I had about 15 years of memories of Geraldton to draw on and I now have 21 years of memories of Suffolk.

BENNETT: Are the graves of your forebears in Hadleigh churchyard part of a connected story for you?

STOW: I suppose they are, to an extent. This is the rest of the history of my life, and connects it with the period before the 1830s. But I don't make a great thing of it. I live in East Anglia because I like it.

BENNETT: What do you like about it?

STOW: I find it an agreeable country to look at. I like the voices. I love the dialect.

We talked further of this appeal of the East Anglian dialect, which comes through so strongly in *The Girl Green as Elderflower*:

STOW: When I go away for a while I get homesick for the voices. I come back from the Hook or Esbjerg and I hear the porters speaking East Anglian and I feel good. It's musical, it's got a special tune. I'm aware of the flatness of my own voice, but when I go into a shop, or a pub, I find myself adopting something of the Suffolk tune.

- BENNETT: Dialect has many uses in literature. One of the most common is to make fun of characters or their regional group. I don't think you used dialect in a dismissive or diminishing way in *The Girl Green as Elderflower*.
- STOW: I certainly hope not. The dialect has a high status in the general view. And it seems to be the opposite of exclusive, to be saying, rather, 'To hell with this class/status thing, we're all yokels together'. I'm glad it doesn't seem diminishing, as many of the characters are based on my friends: it's a way of remembering them in years to come.
- BENNETT: I particularly enjoyed the irreverent, fun-loving sprite, Malkin.
- STOW: Very Suffolk. One Australian reviewer called her a larrikin. I'd forgotten that word, but it's probably right. The linguistic original of Malkin, far from being a sprite, is a particularly massive chap who looks like Henry VIII.
- BENNETT: How did you get that voice, and the others, right?
- STOW: By listening to people around me, repeating their expressions to myself and trying to write them down.
- BENNETT: No doubt your training as a linguist helped in this.
- STOW: Probably. I used to read things in the dialect, such as "Tom Tit Tot", a Suffolk version of Rumpelstiltskin. But the main thing was listening to expressions I heard in shops, pubs and elsewhere and repeating them to myself over and over, often in bed at night.

Later, walking through the lanes and meadows of East Bergholt, Stow would stop and examine flowers, plants and trees: a great love of this countryside was apparent, together with an extraordinary botanical knowledge. We stood and looked at Fishpond Cottage in the May sunshine, Stow's first return after several months to a place he had inhabited for four and a half years. This was the first of two cottages he occupied during his twelve years in the village. I remembered the fisherman's visit to the cottage in *The Girl Green as Elderflower*:

'Lonely old place, this', Reg said. 'But pretty.' Moaning with pigeons, blooming with lilac, hawthorn and laburnum, the neglected garden seemed to belong to some idyllic time before nature needed to be rearranged by man . . . From the field opposite the cottage an oak leaned its bright new leaves over the van. The steep sides of the stream were a mass of cow-parsley, reaching up to the overhang of a flowering hawthorn hedge. Though buttercups and red campion were everywhere, the insistent note of the countryside was white embowered in green. (p. 107)

This is the countryside which is largely instrumental in Crispin Clare's return to health, as it was in Randolph Stow's own recovery.

I was interested in Stow's views on literature and place, and whether he saw himself now as an English writer. On the latter point, he felt he was an Anglo-Saxon writer, not English or even British. But he conceded important literary influences from English literature, particularly in regard to the literature of place:

STOW: This is quite a British thing, to go in for place. The first ones who interested me when I was a schoolboy were Dickens, the Brontes, Hardy. Since then I've read a lot of the minor Victorians. I like their particularity. Some of them, Wilkie Collins, for instance, are very strong in that respect: take out the sensationalism of Collins's plots and the rest, especially his rendering of place, is very good indeed.

BENNETT: Do you find this attraction to place lacking in much twentieth century writing?

STOW: I don't know that it's been lacking—not in Lawrence or Virginia Woolf, just to take a couple of English examples. No, I think it's still a British thing, to try to be particular about place.

BENNETT: Is that true of Suffolk? I don't know of imaginative writers, leaving yourself aside for the moment, who have brought this place alive in their writing.

STOW: It's an odd thing that Suffolk has produced two outstanding landscape painters within one lifetime, Gainsborough and Constable, and in Britten one of England's few internationally celebrated composers, whose inspiration was often local, but very little literature. There's George Crabbe from Aldeburgh, and Robert Bloomfield, the "Farmer's Boy" poet. And in this century, H. W. Freeman's novel, *Joseph and his Brethren* (1928). I learnt from Freeman's use of dialect, but found myself going a little further in altering the spelling to suggest regional characteristics. Not very far; just enough to remind people who know the region.

BENNETT: You also incorporated some twelfth century legends of the region.

STOW: Yes. I found these very interesting in themselves. There were things which made me connect with them. I was particularly pleased at discovering the story of the sprite of Dagworth. The wild man of Orford and the green children of Woolpit are quite well known in the area through local guide books and so on, but I don't think the story of Malkin had been translated before.

(Typically, Stow has returned to the Latin originals and translated them himself.)

How did someone with these notions of the importance of place in literature respond to the 'global village' idea and its manifestations in literature? Was there a false kind of internationalism in the air?

STOW: I do think there can be an unrewarding kind of internationalism. There are a few signs of this in recent Australian writing. Some short story writers are going in for a kind of rootless writing which is not based in any particular place or society.

BENNETT: Some would argue that such rootlessness is a condition of modern society.

STOW: That seems to be patently false! Modern societies are different, diverse. That notion comes out of the global village idea, which most people have decided is quite nonsensical. There aren't many McLuhanites still around. It's been noticed that the Dayaks of Borneo don't watch *Coronation Street* because they can't.

Close attention to the landscape and way of life of a particular region is not restrictive for Stow, but provincialism is. Provincialism derives from an attitude of complacency and an associated lack of curiosity. Stow became vehement as we discussed certain writers, literary critics and popular psychologists who propound provincial views of personal and social maturity:

BENNETT: What is maturity then?

STOW: Maturity is a cant word employed by people like F. R. Leavis and Anthony Storr. It means you've decided to settle down in Hampstead Garden

Suburb and live like your neighbours. That's what maturity is. It's a word I'm sick of. Especially in David Holbrook, who's always going on about how mature he is. This seems to mean: "I've settled for less."

BENNETT: Can you explain further what you mean, in Leavis's case, for instance?

STOW: Leavis seemed to think that his environment was the world. He didn't have the curiosity to find out any more. He seemed to suggest that the environment could fulfil every possibility.

In Stow's case, this curiosity was aroused early by the coming-and-going of ships at Geraldton, and by his reading. Much of this is in *The Merry-go-round in the Sea*. But I was interested especially in his attachment to Taoism, which may be seen as a kind of guiding philosophy in much of his work.

BENNETT: When did this interest in Taoism begin?

STOW: I was very conscious of South-east Asia as a schoolboy. A number of schoolmates were from Singapore and Malaya. One of them introduced me to Lin Yu Tang, whose enthusiasm for Taoism is infectious. There was also an influence within my family: my grandfather, who was very active in the foundation of the University of Western Australia was a Buddhist, and I read some of the books he left behind. By contrast, my great-great grandfather, who was a clergyman, took everything as literally revealed truth.

BENNETT: Do you think we Anglo-Saxon people generally have a lot to learn from the East?

STOW: Well, yes—though probably only part of that can be assimilated. There's certainly no harm in westerners thinking about these things, but it's probably not very fruitful to be a western Buddhist. I don't know. . . . My main interest is in the *Tao Te Ching*, which provides for me a satisfactory model of the world. Fritjof Capra in *The Tao of Physics* has shown how the implied model of Taoism does conform with the randomness and mysteriousness of the world of sub-atomic physics.

BENNETT: Do you find any other approaches to religion helpful?

STOW: I am a communicating Anglican who's probably nearer to Quakerism. It's hard to find out what orthodoxy really is these days, but I'm probably heterodox.

As we walked among the gravestones of the parish church of St Mary-the-Virgin in East Bergholt, which dates from the mid-sixteenth century, I was reminded of the magic element in the myths of this region of England which Stow incorporated so successfully in *The Girl Green as Elderflower*; and of the apparent magic of the 'star-machine' in *Visitants*.

BENNETT: There's a strong interest in intuition and non-rational understanding, even in magic in your last two novels.

STOW: In *The Girl Green as Elderflower* it was partly a detective story I was involved in. I wanted to reconstruct the world-view of the people who reported and believed in these strange stories. It seemed to me that the world they lived in was as mysterious as the world of some people since the 1960s, who have gone in in a big way for spiritualism, the Tarot pack and the ouija board. But it's not true, as some reviewers such as Norman

Shrapnell in the *Guardian* seem to think, that I am personally a devotee of the ouija board and the Tarot pack. Not at all. I should have thought it was pretty obvious that I'm cynical about that sort of thing. As far as I'm concerned, the ouija board is a game. It's something you buy in a toyshop.

BENNETT: Nevertheless your capability is 'negative' enough, as they say, to give these things full play in your novel.

STOW: Well, I'm interested that there are things there which one can't explain. I have played on the ouija board in a cynical frame of mind and have got messages that were strangely coherent. But I think some unconscious manipulation was going on, on the part of the teenage girl who was my partner.

BENNETT: It seems to me that the anthropologist in you is fascinated by what is strange or inexplicable in human behaviour; but rather than attempt to explain these things scientifically, you have the urge to render them in artistic form, to give them a fuller expression.

STOW: Perhaps. At one time I was thinking I might try to finish *Edwin Drood*. In fact, I didn't. Somebody else went and did it. But while thinking about that, I did a lot of work on drugs and mesmerism to see what was known or believed about such things then. The process was similar to what I did for *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, trying to work my way back into the intellectual climate of the time on the information that was available. For *Visitants* it was different. I was there, in the Trobriands, when a famous UFO was reported. But it still required a lot of reading and talking to people: I re-read all of Malinowski and my own diary for that year, 1959. And I had my field notes, and a dictionary of the Kiriwina language, which I put together while I was there.

Stow considers *Visitants* and *The Girl Green as Elderflower* as 'companion pieces'. This is understandable, in spite of the fact that the two novels are worlds apart in space and time for the reader. *The Girl Green as Elderflower* was completed first, at the beginning of February 1979 and could have been published in November of that year. For some time, Stow had felt unable to think about *Visitants*, or to finish it: the three-quarters completed manuscript had lain around for eight years awaiting completion.

The reason for this writer's 'block' are probably complex and personal. He had broken 'a lifetime rule' and accepted a commission (from Weideneld & Nicholson) to write *Visitants*, but had paid it back when he saw he wasn't going to meet the deadline: thinking himself back into the place and time of that novel, and switching from one mind to the other, was enormously difficult and concentrated work. Somehow, the writing of *The Girl Green as Elderflower* freed him to write the concluding section of *Visitants* and the new publishers, Secker & Warburg, decided 'in their wisdom' that the books should be published in the reverse order of when they were received: the Papua New Guinea novel would be a winter publication in 1979; the Suffolk novel a spring book in 1980.

It was clear from many things Stow said that he doesn't write as a journalist, sticking to strict deadlines. He has returned government grants and paid back contract money in order to retain the freedom to write what he wants when he wants to. He can't write effectively when the pressure is from outside. When I asked if he had considered writing a potboiler, his reply was characteristic: 'I wouldn't mind at all writing Agatha Christie-type thrillers, but I don't know how it's done.' How then does he go about writing a novel? He talked first about how *Tourmaline* began with a dream:

STOW: I woke up one Christmas morning and found I had made up a ballad, a sort of bush ballad in my sleep. I remembered the whole of this ballad, which was a bit in the style of Lorca. The main idea of *Tourmaline*, and the town's name, came from that ballad with its images of duststorms in the red country.

The composition of *The Girl Green as Elderflower* was different:

STOW: It happened over a number of years, in pieces. I wanted to recreate the mental state of the twelfth century and did a lot of research on the chronicles. Then there were the voices, the dialect. I repeated them over and over to myself. One night at the pub I transcribed the conversation of my companions in phonemics and showed it to them. They were shocked.

BENNETT: They expected to see it in standard English?

STOW: Yes. They thought they talked more "proper".

BENNETT: This was all preparatory to the actual writing. How did that occur?

STOW: It wrote itself.

BENNETT: How do you mean? You didn't work from a journal or early drafts?

STOW: No.

BENNETT: But you had an outline in mind?

STOW: It had been so worked out in my head that I thought it would never get written. In a way, it was already a finished artefact. I thought it might not interest me to write it out.

BENNETT: What started you then?

STOW: I sat down one day, not knowing what I would write, and wrote that rather Jamesian paragraph which is the first in *The Girl Green as Elderflower*.

BENNETT: You then knew where you were going?

STOW: That's right. But it wasn't until I was actually sitting there with pen in hand that I realised I had observed things which I hadn't consciously noticed. It wasn't until they were resolved into language that I saw them much more clearly.

BENNETT: When did the writing begin and how long did it take?

STOW: I sat down in the cottage at Bergholt on New Year's Day 1979 and the novel was finished on the first of February, in thirty-two days.

BENNETT: That seems amazingly fast, even when the long incubation period is taken into account. If I remember rightly, *The Merry-go-round in the Sea* was written in a snowed-up orchard in New Mexico in quick time too—in seven weeks. The cottage at Bergholt must also have been snowed-up in that freezing winter of '79. Do you prefer being isolated, and writing in the cold? What are your writing habits?

STOW: Huddled over a heater. I sit in an armchair with a board across my knees and a lot of paper and just write and write until I get so tired I go to bed. Sixteen hours a day or more. A supply of pork pies in the fridge. Very unhealthy.

BENNETT: That's the long-hand version. What next?

STOW: A typescript, corrected, followed by the final, typed manuscript.

I wondered aloud about the sense of urgency which had impelled Stow in his recent burst of creative activity. It was partly, he said, a near-fatal car accident

in 1978, when he and the local painter John Constable, a great-great-grandson of the famous one, were 'cleaned up' in East Bergholt. He had escaped with his right hand broken in three places, head injuries and paresis which affected his sight for several months. The experience had made him settle down to producing some visible work. Writing was also good exercise for his hand. From there, we talked of a recurrent theme in his early novels and poems, time passing, a theme which seems less insistent in his recent work. He was surprised, he said, to discover he had been here, in England, for most of the past twenty-one years.

BENNETT: You're now forty-five. Do you count your life in decades?

STOW: Not really, although *A Counterfeit Silence* was my poetry anthology to the age of thirty. Maybe my next anthology (not counting the Swedish one) will take me up to fifty. But that's mainly because I haven't yet written enough poems for another one. I don't suppose I believe in decades, except I think thirty is an important age. I don't think forty is.

BENNETT: A lot of others do.

STOW: I didn't notice it.

BENNETT: What's the difference between thirty and twenty-nine then?

STOW: I thought it was a very significant difference. Maybe it's because I had my thirtieth birthday at Berkeley in California, where the saying was you can't trust anyone over thirty.

BENNETT: It must have been significant to someone who was widely regarded as an early-flowering prodigy.

STOW: Early-fumbling, perhaps; but I don't regard any of those works as an early flowering. Just as experiments to find what I really wanted to do.

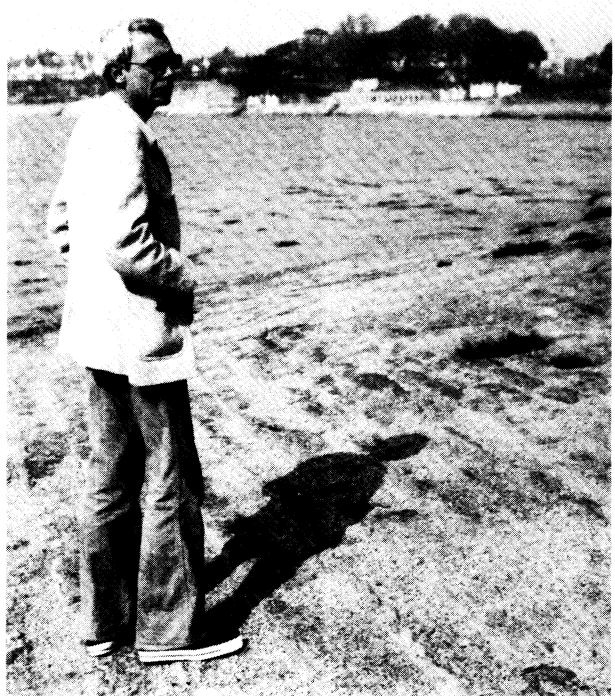
I resisted the question, 'And where do you go from here?' because Stow is not the kind of artist who will programme himself, or allow others to do it for him. Instead, I asked him what he thought of the recent publishing explosion in the United Kingdom (some 39,000 titles in 1980). His response was to recall an advertisement in the *Times Literary Supplement*, which struck a chord: "Save Trees. Buy old books."

STOW: There is a lot in this over-production which must worry new young writers, in particular. A very large number of these titles are what Americans call "non-books". You know the sort of thing: *How to Collect Beer-cans*, *Your Nuclear Fall-Out Shelter and You*, *Hang-gliding for the Over-Eighties*. Almost every face which appears on television is invited to write its autobiography: even, or perhaps especially, newsreaders and weather-men. It is depressing to think that new writers of, for instance, poetry and serious fiction are competing for the publishers' attention with a sort of printed pet-food which has the same hope of immortality as a TV dinner. But all is not lost. Publishers can be quite quixotic; if they weren't, they could easily get to hate their job. Secker & Warburg, for example, tell me that their poetry list is subsidized by their profits on the novels of an American best-seller novelist.

In Stow's view, 'there has to be a damn good reason for somebody to put another book in the world, sacrifice all those trees'. The next book he writes *will* have a damn good reason and will be worth the sacrifice, like those before it.



Randolph Stow at Fishpond Cottage, East Bergholt, where he wrote *The Girl Green as Elderflower*.



Near Harwich, Essex, where Stow now lives.

ROD MORAN

Bass Strait Poems

1. *Wybalena Chapel,
Flinders Island.*

“Developed by George Augustus Robinson
in an effort to save the Tasmanian Aboriginal
from extinction.”

The chapel ministers to gulls,
a parish of tussock and kelp;
below the dunes, a mass grave
and other accusations:
the rancid huts bulldozed,
clay mounds of tern nests,
gull-shit and dead scrub.

Sea-birds arc half the world to nest here,
eyes bright with constellations,
star-maps, curving water.
The tribes trekked centuries
of ice and rock to arrive, far south,
make fire, camp, and together
dance between gums scaling
cliffs of sheer light.

Instrument of God's love,
Robinson, entrepreneur,
harsh hand of history
and invented fate,
hurried them deathward:
graves mapped, named,
a bucolic Belsen.

The granite remembers,
night-birds, wallaby,
the sand knew their soft tread;
their songs return in bird-throats,
or well up through the wide
clear rapids of silence.

Now the chapel stands empty with wind.
Imagination bends like light
to recreate what is gone;
lizards congregate against the moss,
invisible, ever present.
Finches hymn in the rafters.

2. *Kelp Farmers.*

Like sea-birds they scan the distance,
pray for storms;
stranger than Druids,
they worship the gales
that rip the kelp from deep under.

On the beach, enigmatic gulls,
they kick aside the lesser weed,
lean into the wind;
talk in metaphysics
of kelp, delivering tides,
a litany of tempest.

I ask of boats swamped
by winds from the Pole,
of men lost in the gales,
washed tangled in kelp
like spars on the shore.

They return silence,
their eyes circles of stormy distance.

On the beach a crew of gulls
awaits the next harvest.

3. *Flinders' Island.*

The water's history is etched
in tide levels on rock and estuary mud,
beached clams, mussels, crab husks.
Lava hissed boulders round as planets
into the boiling sea; waves crack
like granite against them still.
Mutton birds burrow the tussock,
and this mankind, recent arrival by carnage,
brief as a green lizard on a rock,
reaches towards earth's core
to snap their tense necks.
They are how I have read geography
moulds a man's heart, how history's
nightmare weighs on our daily brain.
On the beach the men are furtive:
great migrations swirl inter-hemisphere
high above their heads, small birds
have Polar bearings and bright lichens
weather an epoch of storms; fishermen,
legacy of sealers' carnal havoc,
they know the sea is guilty of nothing,
scuff cuttle and kelp in meditation,
dark boatmen, haunted.

4. *King Island.*

Tides from the Cape tear keels and kelp,
the sea black as sculpted basalt;
terns skirt the granite bay,
their eyes full of wrecks.
Vagrant gulls loiter, scavenge shark-guts,
crying always a drowned man's hymn;
patrol the Strait, the southern ice,
storm blown like the combers.
In summer the air is bright as mica,
the sea like coppersulphate;
gulls picket the old wooden pier,
irate as strikers, squabble arch-necked.
Old sailors haunt drifting dunes,
derelict forever, chartless, swamped
in a gale of years; their foot-prints
follow them across the wet sand.

5. *Beach Walk, Apollo Bay.*

The bay shines like purple slate;
beached hulls and dune wood,
the sea belling fathoms of brass air,
an amber distance scything
water and sky in its bright curve.
The world gathers itself like this
against human designs, or so it seems:
sand and tide, storms, gull flight,
the long migrations, dune-wind.
Afternoon, and the water swells
gold as molten glass, the Strait
a tangle of light and dead ships,
the coral skulls of drowned men
ephemeras, feed for polyps.
Ebb, lap, a long surge of wind
through the salt-scrub, terns poised
against the slight breeze; lap, ebb,
my steps washed rhythmically
from the ancient sand.

VERONICA BRADY

Katherine Susannah Prichard and the Tyranny of History: *Intimate Strangers*

Intimate Strangers is not one of Katherine Susannah Prichard's best novels. What makes it interesting, however, is the light it throws on the society it describes.

Published in 1937 and composed over a period of nine years, a period which saw Prichard's visit to Russia and the tragic death of her husband, it shows a writer trying to come to terms not only with her personal problems but also with the social disaster of the Depression. As the epigrams declare, she saw "the international chaos, the social chaos, the ethical and spiritual chaos . . . [as] aspects of one and the same disorder" and she offered to counter them by proposing an explanation of the "nature of the universe". This explanation, however, creates as many problems as it solves. This is true even at the formal level. An odd mixture of romance and political tract, symbolism and social realism, satire and prophecy, the book is formally incoherent. As for the story, it is full of surprises and sudden changes, the result not of development within the action itself but of the author's own needs—originally, for example, Elodie's husband, Greg, was meant to commit suicide, but instead he is rescued from despair by his conversion to Communism. The tone and point of view are also strangely ambiguous. Even though much of the story is presented from Elodie's point of view, the story identifies at times with Greg and occasionally with other characters like Tony or Dirk. Mostly, however, a knowing yet also strangely unconfident omniscience prevails, uneasily suspended between acceptance of the world and of the body and disgust with it.

What, then, has happened to the writer of works like *Working Bullocks* and *Coonardoo*?

To answer this question is to broach the question of the relationship between literature and society. The disruptions evident in *Intimate Strangers* reflect the larger disruptions of a society which had been precipitated from its dreams of rural Arcadia into the larger world, into the War of 1914-18 and then into the boom and Depression which followed. The structural disorganization of the novel thus throws light on Australian culture in general and West Australian culture in particular. As Raymond Williams has observed, "a relation of content may be mere reflection, but a relation of structure . . . can show us the organizing principle by which a particular view of the world, and from that the coherence of the social groups which maintain it, really operates in consciousness".¹

To look first at the mere reflection, the content, the novel suggests the alienating pressures of historical circumstance. Greg has been drawn in a "frenzy of patriotic idealism" into the war, to return, broken in spirit, "astounded to find himself alive, when he had seen so many men blown to pieces about him . . . [and

feeling] it . . . indecent, somehow to survive them" he no longer seems to belong but exists instead in his own private state of disgust, loathing "the whole civilian population which had driven men like sheep to this shambles . . . [and] a civilization which . . . made money out of the beastly business". (25) The boom of the twenties provides a garish background to the anxieties which return in force with the Depression of the thirties. Losing his job, Greg loses his self-respect, being forced to depend on the charity of friends while Elodie has to sacrifice her ambition to become a concert pianist, playing at dances and parties to pay the household bills. Explicitly it is true Prichard sets out to criticize this situation and to point to its source in the capitalist system. Implicitly, however, the structures of feeling underlying the novel are those of the society she criticizes. The self has become a mere cipher, at the disposal of economic, social and factors beyond personal control. Thus the novel opens on a note of impotence. Lying on the sand beside Greg Elodie is pondering his failure to become the artist he once hoped to be:

Jagged rocks, grey and white, whitey-grey, sand petrified and woven with fine black earth, torn by the wind, worn by the sea. Gigantic fragments of rock, the sea stretching out from them, hyacinth and pale blue, with green shallows, clear as glass.

From the sand on the edge of the sea where she stretched Elodie got them under her eyelids through sun-dazed eyes and sleepy brain. That wedge of rocks pressed down on a black there with the outlines Greg cut on a block for one of his colour prints: those kingfisher hues of the sea seeped through her. But could any process of painting or printing ever give them? And blue of the sky, so diaphanous, inebriating? To be haunted by the desire to re-create them, how maddening. You could hold them within yourself, swoon on them, interpret them in music; but reproduce them, never. Poor old Greg, no wonder he had torn up his sketches, folded his easel! (13)

At the end of the story, however, little has changed. There is talk of transfiguration, it is true, brought about by their conversion to communism. But, if anything, Greg and Elodie are more, not less, passive before the powers of the world.

The bright sunshine crept through them, with electrifying currents that permeated to the depth of their bodies, dispelling rancours and secret animosities. A blissful unconscionable languor absolved them from care. Every day, as she lay on the sand in the sun, Elodie was conscious of glowing to a new valour. She thought it must be so with Greg too. Between them burned the fire of a regenerating idea in which it seemed they would attain freedom and unity. (410)

The sense of reality in both cases is magical. Personal choice is in abeyance to physical necessity, apparent in one case in the symbolic pressure of the rocks and in the other in the "electrifying current" of the sunshine, is endowed with inscrutable, overwhelming power to which Greg and Elodie are subject. In this way, far from providing an alternative, *Intimate Strangers* reflects the situation of the time, the sense of personal defeat and fatedness characteristic of so much of the literature as well as of life in the thirties.

Prichard's complicity with the attitudes and values of her society is evident even in minor ways, as, for example, in the concern Elodie is made to feel for the appearances when her heart is made to "ache to see that shiny seat in [Greg's] pants, and the leather cracking on the upper of his worn brown shoes". (331) Inappropriate in a professed radical, this concern echoes the "bourgeois" notion that it is important to possess money, dress well and live in large houses—in this respect the fascination with "Eendracht" and the tennis parties and dances held

there is significant also. So too with Elodie's attraction to Jerome Hartog which is based on reasons to scandalize a strict Marxist; a sexual fascination which is empowered by the stories he tells of a "reckless vagabond existence" as captain of his own ship trading through south-east asia.

In effect, for all her conscious criticism of capitalism, Prichard is victim of its emotional and intellectual hegemony which is something more profound than ideology, a world-view "lived at such depth . . . [that it] saturates the society to such an extent . . . [that it] even constitutes the substance and limit of common-sense for people under its sway . . . [and] corresponds to the reality of their social awareness".² Consciously, Prichard may be critical of people like Jerome, but unconsciously his way of life is something she finds deeply attractive. Similarly it could be said that at the end of the novel as Tony sails away with Dirk on his own ship this way of life, free-boating and irresponsible is confirmed. Tony's Communism, it seems, is a matter of words. Dirk, too, another ardent convert to Communism wins her place in the story as a "bourgeois individualist", competitive, the winner of races and as the one who always swims outside the reef, the proclaimed enemy of communal life.

The hold of her culture on Prichard's mind becomes even clearer when we examine more closely her sense of self and of society. Implicitly the novel presupposes a world of competition and mutual suspicion. The paranoia which Greg voices towards "the farce of . . . civilization" (25) and, by implication, most people in it, sets the tone throughout and often extends to the natural world as well—the rocks in the opening scene, for instance, convey a menacing impression and the sea is frightening, full of sharks and dangerous currents, as well as beautiful. Personal relationships seem even more threatening. Marriage is seen as an aspect of the struggle for property and power—in one scene Greg effectively rapes his wife.

True, such views might be seen as part of Prichard's indictment of capitalist society. The difficulty is, however, that she herself seems to share these views and has little to offer as an alternative. Implicated as she is in her character's fears and desires she has little sense of the brother-and-sisterhood basic to Communism. Other people usually figure threateningly. Jerome, for instance, for all his original attractiveness, turns out to be the murderous stranger of paranoia (he brings death to Elodie's friend, Chrissie) and Dirk, Chrissie and even Greg, with whom Elodie is supposed to be setting out as the novel concludes to build a new future, are often antagonists rather than comrades. Distrust rather than trust prevails, registering the "tragedy of whole lives and the long fatalities of human relationships" which Paul Fussell sees as a result of the World War not only on those who fought in it but on society as a whole.³

Beyond that, however, *Intimate Strangers* also reflects the colonial situation of disinheritance, the displacement from the sphere of values which produces the need for some ideology, for the "something bigger than ourselves" (409) which Greg and Elodie find in communism. Without it, their lives are meaningless. The drab face Elodie sees in her mirror from time to time reflects the cost of the social struggle which leaves her exhausted. But it is this exhaustion rather than the excitement of intellectual discovery the book pretends to which underlies the conversion to Communism with which the novel concludes.

Throughout, both Greg and Elodie are passive rather than active ready to receive the gusts of passion which sweep through them from elsewhere as the winds pass across the sea. Emotions do not so much exist within people here, then, as people exist within emotions. When Greg suddenly gives way to his passion for Chrissie and kisses her passionately, for example, it seems to her as if he "had

sprung . . . from some gulf of passion" (213). In this sense they are "prisoners for life" in the "dullness and dreariness" (212) of a life governed by forces beyond them. Greg's feeling for Chrissie is not really his but the product of something impersonal, the surge of the sea [and her] youth and beauty" (212) and worshipping her makes him feel "beside himself" (212). In her feeling for Jerome Elodie, too, is subject to forces outside herself, "drawn by the centripetal force of this man's virility . . . whirled into it, [her] instinct towards the primeval source of existence: irresistible as that of moths to the light". (373) The effects of this instinct, however, are dehumanising. Greg's "spring" towards Chrissie from the depths suggests a wild beast, and Elodie is drawn to "a prowling and detachment", "something insatiable" (75) which she senses in Jerome. Once more, we are back in the world described in the literature of World War I in which human beings turn into beasts of prey. Significantly metaphors of War are common. With Jerome, for instance, Elodie hopes for an "armistice" from her daily struggle, dreaming of being able to lay down the "weapons" she needs to survive with Greg. As a war self-determination gives way and fate prevails. Tony gets Dirk for example, because it is implied that they have been destined for one another. Greg's "flare" for her, we are told, "might be sheer fantasy and every man's grasping after an idealistic illusion". But Tony's attraction is "something more" which has little to do with choice of consciousness. Indeed, they threaten it:

If you saw Dirk and Tony in swim suits on the beach you would think they were made for each other. Such splendid young things. So hard and strong and confident, each in a different way, though they complemented each other curiously. But in their clothes, what a mass of prejudices, superstitions, separated them . . . like a backwater filled with decaying seaweed. They could barely recognize each other across that debris, though she seemed to have arisen, 'the sacred mother of gods and men', sea-born and immaculate for him. (58)

As the echoes of the myth of Aphrodite rising from the sea-foam suggest, they are governed by the logic of myth.

The concluding scene confirms this abdication of human choice, bringing us back to the beginning of the novel in which human beings are mere spectators and the natural force, the breeze, is the active force, moulding the world, "ruffling and cutting . . . the broad expanse of placid sea into small waves, spitting about the island, hurrying shoreward, glittering under showers of sequins the sun cast". (17) The only difference is that where in the first scene Elodie's response is defensive as she sits "arms clasped around her knees" (17)—at the end, she has made a complete surrender to the "blissful unconscionable languor" of the sunshine and the "electrifying currents" it sends through her and Greg to absolve "them from care". (410)

This submission here to the powers of nature, the "gods of the soil" as Tillich called them,⁴ is remarkable enough in a book written by someone who professed herself an orthodox Marxist and even a Stalinist. What is even more surprising is the tribute she pays from time to time to the "gods of the blood", notions of race and of tribal loyalty to the soil—hinted at also, of course, in the feeling for the land evident in earlier works and in her poetry. In an early description of Greg and Elodie, for instance, we are told that "Elodie had her roots in mixed blood, Slav instincts, while [Greg] moved from an Anglo-Saxon base, assured and composite" (17) and later on a good deal is made of Greg's patriotic determination to design a house for Trixie that is truly Australian, true to the "genius of the place". This sense of place is not new in Australian writing or culture, of course, and Lawrence's visit to Western Australia may well have had something to do with its influence on Prichard's imagination. But the appeal to the "gods of the blood"

was particularly potent throughout the world in the 'thirties, the age of ideology, its effect on Prichard may reflect the pressure of her time. As the divergence between the ideal and the real world became more apparent, more people were escaping into worship of the folk and of the powers of nature embodied in some folk hero. In *Intimate Strangers* Tony, the Italian fisherman, a figure of freedom and erotic power, is a hero of this kind, displacing Jerome who for a time promises to be a similar figure. Significantly, it is through him that Elodie and Greg come to Communism as to a kind of mythical homeland.

My point here is not that Prichard was an unconscious Fascist. Rather, it is the classical Marxist point, that social being determines consciousness, and that as an Australian, someone belonging to a culture which lacks an inherited sense of self and of value, a culture of dispossession, Prichard was particularly vulnerable to the pressures of her time. Thus the last scene represents the return of the repressed, of nature-worship disguised as Communism, a nature-worship moreover which has arisen out of ignorance and wish-fulfilment, not out of experience.

So, the primary question of power, the question of its effects upon the body, remains unsolved or, indeed, even acknowledged.⁵ Intuitively, it is true, Prichard seems to realize the primacy of this question—hence the emphasis on sea, sky and on beach culture as a kind of “pagan festival. An adoration of life, of the sun and the sea”. (75) Yet this intuitive realization is not enough. Rather, it makes for the mystification evident in the descriptions of the surf carnivals, and of the tennis, swimming, sunbaking and flirting at Coolatta in which eroticization becomes a means of social control.⁶ The account of the march-past at the surf carnival, for example, pays tribute to the myth of the social body, the worship of a will to power which subordinates the individual to the functioning of this social body as a whole.

Elodie thrilled to the sight of them, all those brown limbs swinging in unison, taut breasts, supple, sturdy trunks moulded to bright torsos by their close-fitting woollen sheaths. A murmur ran through the crowd, swelling to an outburst of cheers and hand clapping.

The life-saving team marched past, swung into position, facing the sea, set down the reel and stood to attention, every girl as still and immobile as a wooden doll.

Behind them, the Cottesloe banner flew, white with gold and black monogram and bearings, the girls in their white suits, embroidered with black and gold of the club monogram, holding themselves erect and alert, legs flashing, the angle of knees and shins keeping an even rhythm. City Beach entered the arena, scarlet clad, scarlet pennant fluttering before them, a superb damsel carrying her lance and goose-stepping proudly. Other battalions with their stately standard bearers and sun-browned girls, wearing azure, black, gold and brown swimming suits strutted forward, Calatta bringing up the rear, its green silken pennant, flaunting gaily, held aloft by Molly Maguire, Dirk as skipper, stepping along beside the team: all her girls in their new jade swimming suits, as brisk and well trained as any on the ground. (70-1)

The individual here is subordinate to a collective which helps along the illusions of a society “distracted from distraction by distraction”. Elodie’s fascination with this display, this “pagan festival”, represents a surrender to mystification, “an adoration of life, of the sun and the sea” (75) which seems, like the vogue among men in the trenches in World War I, of books like Bridge’s anthology, *The Spirit of Man*, to derive from the need to escape from a world in which the self is a prisoner.⁷

This sense of imprisonment and dehumanization is apparent in the language and syntax. The description of the dance at the Flutterbys, for instance, reflects

the pressure of material things, forcing objects and social categories to the foreground to culminate in the awkward inversion of the last sentence which subordinates persons to their work and clothing:

Work in shops, factories and cafes all day, they might; but at night, at Estelle's, under the coloured lanterns and strips of red and yellow paper drifting down from the ceiling, in their backless gowns, held by a string of mock diamonds, or pink roses, in creations of blue or orange lace, frilled muslin and tinselled gauze, they lived in an enchanted world, as greedy as moths in their brief flight after the honey of life. (315)

Lacking a personal world view, consciousness here is overwhelmed by sights, shapes and colours. Significantly, there is little verbal activity. Instead objects and attributes take on life of their own, subordinating people and intentions to them. So the dance, the traditional emblem of concord, becomes an occasion of cruelty, of the sado-masochism which is the effect of power as it is exercised in this society:

Elodie flogged [the] rattling and wheezy piano to get all the possible sound from it, with saxophone, fiddler and drum trailing in pursuit, gong and triangles clashing after them. Nobody minded whether they were off their beat, or Bill's fiddle strings slipped in the heat, so long as the noise was loud enough and flagellated the dancers to delirious zest in their entwined embraces. (318)

The language here suggests that the war which damaged Greg is still being fought not merely in Elodie's but also in her creator's psyche. Elsewhere in personal relationships are a matter of "clenched antagonisms" (294) and society is held together by a molecular tension of warring egos. Images of dismemberment recur, and descriptions of the body tend to dwell upon its component parts, a shoulder, wrist, fingers or a leg, implicitly registering, as pornography also does, the effects of force upon the body. Not surprisingly, therefore, bodies are also often seen as machines. With Jerome, "the motor of a grand passion" (358) enters Elodie's life and his presence sends her "works whirling in crazy fashion" (105). Similarly, lying on the sand beside Elodie, Greg enjoys a mechanical bliss: "the dynamos of his being flickered and flashed towards her". (28) Personal feeling becomes a matter of "some magnetic quality" (128), which starts up a "flow" (107) of attachment. At other times, it is a form of "bewitchment" which puts Chrissie, for example, at the disposal of Jerome. Elodie's response to him also has little to do with anything personal but represents something more primitive and impersonal:

There was a quality in the voice that pleased her instantly: a tone mature and clanging. She thought of a Chinese gong which had hung in her old home: its deep, suave melody when you struck it, seeming to come from remote ages and resound within you . . . There was a prowl and detachment about him. He stared out on the crowd with keen seafaring eyes . . . something instiable in their depths, a demand that went queerly to lurking irony: the poise and assertion of his head and shoulders. (75)

Personal choice gives way to compulsion which is often of the sado-masochistic kind hinted at in the description of the dance at Flutterbys. Necessity rules, embodied in the inaccessible sky and glittering sea, representing "the life greater than all our efforts to divert its purpose" (96) to which Elodie surrenders herself. Equated with this force, Communism thus becomes the equivalent of the God who is the product of wish fulfilment, "the religious dream of the human mind".

The outcome of the story thus appears not as the result of hard-headed social analysis therefore but of impatience, of the need to put an end to a situation

which has become intolerable. Given the divisions within the self which are apparent in the language and structure of the novel, this need is entirely understandable, of course. Indeed the relief at the end is almost palpable, figured in the image of the ship Elodie sees sailing "across the darkening sea . . . moving out past the islands" (409), taking Dirk and Tony away to a world of freedom and bliss elsewhere, to the world Elodie finds briefly in her music or with Jerome. But where Dirk and Tony sail away, Elodie has come upon the promised bliss already, it seems "From the recesses of her brain sprang that phrase of the F minor Sonata [which she has hitherto associated with Jerome]. A wraith flew singing it in the high air about her: it circled and died with the fall of the requiem", and as it dies the ship disappears, "merging with the horizon and fading into infinity". (09) The suggestion of death and rebirth here point to the religious impulse of her feeling. For Elodie and Greg the belief in Communism is for them the equivalent of the Messiah coming with regenerating power to absolve "them from care". (410) The "other whereness" they longed for earlier is theirs.

This is an eloquent, emotionally satisfying—indeed, sentimental—conclusion to the novel. But it is not a Marxist solution. Nor does it really represent an answer to the problems, human and social, which the book has been describing. Rather it surrenders to the illusion of some magical solution which compounds the problem since it arises out of the eroticization of experience which is one of the primary means of control in this society. It follows, then, that Prichard has been overcome by the situation she has set herself to change. Tony, who rescues Dirk, Elodie and Greg and, converting them to Communism, gives their lives new purpose and energy, belongs to a woman's magazine story, empowered by the erotic appeal he attributes—significantly—to the Communism he preaches, "an expression of the virility of the younger generation", in comparison with Fascism, "an impotent old man, jealous of the younger generation". (239)

Intimate Strangers in the long run, then, represents the triumph of life over literature. The impulse underlying it is conservative rather than radical, the impulse to escape from history into myth. Turning the world into a set of magical explanations and promising even more magical transformations, thus liberates the individual from the responsibilities of choice and leaves the way open for dictatorship. The vogue the novel seems to be enjoying at present therefore may well be more significant than it seems.

All page references, given within the text, are from *Intimate Strangers*,
Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1976.

NOTES

1. Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*. London, Verso, 1980, 3.
2. *ibid.*, 37.
3. Paul Fussell, *The Great War in Modern Memory*. Oxford University Press, 1975, 3.
4. Paul Tillich, *The Socialist Decision*, translated by Franklin Sherman. New York, Harper & Row, 1977.
5. Michel Foucault, *Power-Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon, Brighton, Harvester, 1980, 25-32.
6. *ibid.*, 26.
7. Fussell, 26.

GEORGE DANIEL

Arethousa

i am a man alone in my room. i have
no one to live with nor to love.

i think somewhere in this city there is a relative of
mine, but when i see her i do not feel drawn; the blood
does not call to each

other

i cannot be sure that she too
is not a stranger.

in this city i am perpetually a foreigner. my
hair is dark, my tongue is beautiful. early in the evening
there is music and i hear

the songs and voices of my homeland
over the radio.

but i do not believe they are broadcasting from
this city. i have no faith that it is not an imported
transmission.

i am the last of my race. the handing on of
what was mine is fragile. to whom will i pass it?

whom will i teach to listen to my language or to sing

before morning, before the panther, unleashed, reaches its
open heart of fresh waters?

i am four minutes before dawn

i am rising

heliakal. who will i reach out to? my arms
are banded. my seed is dry. i have written my name

upon the aither

BOOKS

Quarry, ed. Fay Zwicky, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1981, \$6.00.

Fremantle Arts Centre Press has just brought out an anthology of contemporary poems written by West Australians. The collection is called *Quarry* and is edited by Fay Zwicky.

The publication of any book should be cause for celebration. A book, after all, represents a very special human act—an act whereby a person, through language, brings form from the chaos of experience. This act adds to the on-going process of culture—the process through which we come to recognize and know ourselves as the special creatures that people are. If the book is an anthology of poems, then the act is particularly noteworthy, since it involves, as is the case with *Quarry*, a community of voices working within a range of registers, showing us how we are the same but different in our private responses to the self in this society we create publicly for ourselves.

Alexander Pope, in talking about the act of writing and the act of reading, claims that the best works of culture “give us back an image of our mind”. An exemplary work, for him, allows us to see in it a reflected truth about the self. To focus on the visual implies that the test of a text lies in its ability to mirror reality. Pope acknowledges that the work may please us in another way, too—and, perhaps, in a more personal and dynamic way. Literature, we sometimes tend to forget, is written by people, about people, and for people. A poem, thus, communicates itself by engaging listeners. The voice of the poem is one we should be able to identify with; we should be able to feel that it articulates for us, to paraphrase Pope, “what so oft was [felt] but ne’er so well express’d”. It should present life to us through the rhythms of speech, so that we might hear the poet’s vision and see it as sounding truth.

These may be rather grand generalisations, but I offer them because I think that to be aware of the human context of literature is to experience most fully the selection of poems

chosen by Fay Zwicky to tell ourselves about a few of our selves. She has orchestrated a number of fascinating voices, each of which conveys an expanse of moments which we, in the West, have moved through, knowingly or unconsciously. And these voices, thus, attune us to those silent stirrings within us. In this connection, I suppose, it’s important to take particular note of the final sentence of Fay Zwicky’s introduction to the anthology; Mrs Zwicky says:

I would only hope that readers will come to this anthology with an open mind, a ready ear, and the sympathetic consideration one would accord to the voices of friends.

To this statement I can only say: “friends”, they probably are, because these poets negotiate so much to present themselves, and people who give of themselves must be our friends. “Friends”, I think these poets are; neighbours, I’m certain they are, as they imagine for us the tones of our town.

There are nearly thirty poets represented in the collection and, unfortunately, I can’t talk about the way each of them talks. What I’ll do, then, is excavate and explicate three voices from *Quarry* and ask that you lend your ear as they speak their minds and their hearts.

The first voice I’d like you to listen to is Olive Pell’s, whose poem is the first in the collection. Olive Pell, born in Kalgoorlie in 1903, has spent most of her life in Perth. She’s held the position of foundation librarian in the Music Department of the University of Western Australia. She writes for radio, and has had poems published in various Australian journals. Her two volumes of poetry are *Gold to Win* (1965) and *I’d Rather Be A Fig* (1977). Miss Pell’s poem is entitled “Surely Musicians”.

The voice of the piece finely articulates a few paradoxes central to life and art. Miss Pell uses the word “surely” twice in the verse of the poem. And yet the certainty denoted by the word “surely” fades away as we move through the poem which structures itself as two questions. These questions don’t work to state the information of certainty, but to arouse the feeling associated with mystery. The mysteriousness is reinforced by Miss Pell’s use of visual images in describing an auditory experience. The musician, she says, draws “power from ivory” as the pianist’s “treble [waterfalls]”, “till

one quiet note is gentle as a drop". These images encourage us to participate in the speaker's awe of the musician's mastery, the musician whose note is sounded and, paradoxically, quiet, as "quiet and as gentle as a drop". The poet's voice moves to a moment of eloquent silence, and she asks us to consider the mystery of it all still further as she says that this moment is similar to that when "breath" "[presses] through wind". Again, in this image, we have the poet talking about music in terms of the inaudible. After this, the silence is punctuated not by the pianissimo of the piano, but by the strident singing of the strings. And in the second part of the poem this sound—"to blare or string sing"—is given visual dimension by likening it to "lightening flare". The "blare" is a "flare". The audial is rendered experiential by the visual. And the poet in contemplating first the quietness and then crescendo permits her to appreciate the moment of mystery and "ecstasy" connected with a musician's—and a poet's—"mastery" of sound in giving form to feeling.

Here, then, is "Surely Musicians" by Olive Pell:

Surely musicians are special lovers
with such nuance of touch

or is the passion in their fingers

drawing power from ivory
or waterfalling in the treble
till one quiet note is gentle as a drop

reserved for instruments

breath pressed through wind
to blare or string sing
a might of feeling?

Surely such tenderness
must glide on flesh

such power
like lightning flare

an ecstasy
mysterious
as this mastery?

Another voice, equally captivating, although different, is the voice of a poem entitled "Mrs. Noah Speaks" by Fay Zwicky. (The poem, I might parenthetically add, before I give you some biographical information about Fay

Zwicky, is from a collection of poems called *Ark Voices*, a collection which is to be published soon by the Queensland University Press.) Fay Zwicky was born in Melbourne in 1933 and was a child prodigy, studying piano from the age of four and performing in public by the age of six. (I must say, again parenthetically, that it's probably more than but curious that both Olive Pell and Fay Zwicky have music in their backgrounds; I suspect that having a good ear is connected with having a voice that communicates itself with particularly pleasurable nuance.) Fay Zwicky has worked in the United States and Europe and is currently a lecturer in English at the University of Western Australia. She is very widely published both here and overseas.

Mrs Zwicky's poem "Mrs. Noah Speaks" offers us an honest voice of an apparently simple woman asking straightforward, although profound, questions of herself, her family and her God. It's a poem which is both sad and funny, serious yet playful. The jokes, I suppose, are Jewish jokes, based on the stock character of Mrs Noah, whose chores aboard a stocked ark, full of livestock of every description, are a bit much for any fastidious boatwife to contend with. The voice of Mrs Noah, from the start, is amusingly engaging:

Lord, the cleaning's nothing.
What's a pen or two?
Even if the tapir's urine
Takes the paint clean off
there's nothing easier.

But sir, the care!

As I read this poem, I'm caught in an interesting double role. I am the listener of the poem, the "Lord" to whom the poem is addressed, and I am also Mrs Noah, the speaker of the poem, the one who is complaining and yet not complaining. This principle of doubleness marks my response to the act I find myself engaged in. On the one hand, as "Lord" above Mrs Noah, I laugh at her and dismiss her non-dismissal of the chores. On the other hand, in identifying with her, I take her seriously, knowing that her plight is metaphorical of the mess we're all in, in this world of ours, adrift as it is in the perilous oceans of space.

This principle of doubleness is given additional dimension in the next stanza of the poem, as the voice of Mrs Noah leads us to

see the fullness of life within, the way the world of the dream is marred by the nightmare of reality. The duality of inner and outer worlds, of private thought and public statement, is imaged through the opposites of land and water: the “stony town/without water” opposed to the “flesh eddying/driftng with the strain” of “[pushing] a boat against a tide”. Mrs Noah puts it this way, and her sentences with their rhythms suggest the sense of struggle she’s talking about.

I used to dream perpetually
About a boat I had to push
(yes, push) through a stony town
without water
There was no river and no sea and yet
I pushed a boat against a tide
It wouldn’t float although I pulled and
hauled, my flesh eddying,
drifting with the strain of it.
Is this a dream?

Through Mrs Noah, Fay Zwicky is externalizing for us “what so oft was [felt] but ne’er so well exprest”. Mrs Noah’s nightmarish dream of the struggle and its apparent futility is known to us all, and we know it to be not a dream, but a reality. We’d like life to be different . . . , easy; but we know it to be otherwise.

This is a voice that talks extraordinarily of ordinary matters, like the way a family copes with the burden of life they’re born to bear. The voice, I repeat, is sad, yet funny, and works with a kind of bathos, which, in underscoring the commonplace, suggests the heroic. Referring to the members of her family, Mrs Noah says:

He takes it well
and Shem and Ham do help—you can’t expect
too much of anyone can you and
Japhet’s still a kid. Their wives are
young and tremble in the rain
their wits astray.
As soon as we’re born
we’re all astray—at least
You seem to think it’s so or else
why this?

Mrs Noah is both critical and caring, anxious about what’s happening and yet accepting of her fate. She’s both tenderhearted and tough-minded. It’s these sorts of contraries which Mrs Zwicky moves us between in listening to her persona, who is very much like us all, veering, as we do, between the experience of reality and the dream of ideality.

The poem is a long one, each line creating more fully the character of Mrs Noah who, though she gives herself in all ways—even as an object of humour—is a person we eventually see as someone who is strong yet fragile. And as her monologue finishes, our hearts go out to her, as hers goes out to us all. The final lines of the poem are:

The speckled pigeon
and the tawny owl have drawn me to the edge.
The drowned folk call to me:
Deliver us from harm!

Deliver, sir, deliver them
and all of us . . .

The final voice I want you to listen to is that which speaks poetically of poetry. The poem is called “On Poetry”; the author is Andrew Lansdown, who was born in 1954 in Pingelly, W.A., and who, like the others, has published widely. His first book of poetry, *Homecoming*, was published by the Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 1979; two more books of poetry, *Counterpoise* (Angus and Robertson) and *A Ball of Gold: Poems for Children* (The Nine Club), are scheduled for publication in 1981.

The voice of “On Poetry” is a father’s voice. In the poem the speaker talks about talking about poetry. The speaker’s infant son, “still months from walking”, and we assume from talking, conveys more, however, the poet-speaker acknowledges, than poets themselves do. This is another piece, then, like Olive Pell’s, which verbalizes the eloquence of a non-verbal communication. The “statement” made by the young child is, in the love of his father, more expressive, although unarticulated, than his father’s philosophising about Art could ever be. It’s an exaggerated statement about understatement, but I’ll let the poet make the point for himself; he says:

As we sit talking
about poetry

my son (still months
from walking)

lounges without a care
on my knee, fronts

my old friend with
a vacant stare

spasmodically stops
our talking with

a short sigh
and lifts and drops

his foot rhythmically
on the flat of my thigh

The ironies of the situation are evident, I think. Two adults are discussing poetry; one child is enacting a poem. His sigh, his movement, the rhythms and resonances of that "foot" on the flat of [his Dad's] thigh", show the child to be poetry. This short poem suggests the connections between life, love, and art, and it says a great deal without saying much at all. One idea that it implies is that we should all stop talking about poetry from time to time, so that we can hear the real artists speak.

With this, then, I should end;
Quarry, I recommend.

JIM LEGASSE

David Ireland: *City of Women*, Allen Lane, Melbourne, 1981. 171 pp., \$12.95.

If discontinuity and irony can be said to be the defining characteristics of contemporary fiction, then David Ireland, whose narratives continue to fulfil these criteria, ranks with American writers like Coover and Vonnegut who are intentionally selfconscious, mocking, as they insist on the fictionality of their works, the traditional value of the novel as representational art. The expectations readers bring to these texts are continually challenged or frustrated, and a desire for meaning through coherent narrative structures denied. Like the works of these authors, *City of Women*, David Ireland's sixth novel since 1964, resists conventional methods of interpretation. Yet the bafflement which persists after several readings of this novel is, I suspect, a product of no more than the combined uncertainty of form and content; the narrative lacks a focus, and, although witty, it also lacks the superb technical skill which would allow it to exist as a verbal construct which is its own justification.

City of Women, like its predecessor, *A Woman of the Future*, has a female narrator.

Billie Shockley is sixty-two, a retired engineer, who lives in the heart of Sydney which is both realistically defined—streets, buildings, parks and landmarks are named—and futuristically portrayed—it is an embattled city, inhabited entirely by women. Shockley is both lonely and alone. Her narrative is a long, discursive, self-exploratory and explanatory letter to her lost love, a female companion called Bobbie. Also an engineer, and much younger than Billie, Bobbie has walked out of Billie's life following a phase of vague withdrawal, and a number of taunting, memorably reductive remarks addressed to Billie's age and professional redundancy. "Failure's the last refuge of the meek" is one; another: "Nothing recedes like success." Billie has gone to the far north coast, where she works on problems in tidal electric works, and writes occasionally to Billie. Billie, on the other hand writes incessantly to Bobbie, endlessly probing the wound of her loss, turning over her memories, and relating the incidents of her present life.

However, Billie has a substitute companion, a leopard who arrives one night after Bobbie's departure, filling the emptiness she left, thus being named Bobbie the Second. This leopard is beautiful, gentle, and seems to have human comprehension. Since *A Woman of the Future* ends with the metamorphosis of its central character, Alatheia, into a leopard, the alert Ireland reader cannot but help muse upon the significance of this beast. Literature's most famous leopard appears at the beginning of Dante's *Inferno* as a medieval symbol of lust, a fact which does not help unravel the mystery of Ireland's use of leopards: their meaning seems to be self-referential, generated within and between his texts. Billie's dream life is twice identified by its connection with the leopard. At first she dreams a funnel-shaped valley, "like a complicated ants' nest". Women are drawn into it, seized by leopards, killed and stored for food. It follows that "women are meat in the city of leopards", just as men are meat in the city of women. Later, in an apparently realistic experience outside the city of women, Billie re-enters this dream valley by way of a series of tightening circles (shades of Dante's *Inferno* again?) and recognises it as the valley of women. In an increasingly surreal sequence, Billie sees a multiplicity of leopards "like a mess of ants" feed women into a hole

in which cheerful, tidy "smooth rows of machines" render them helpless, then process them as meat. "All flesh is meat in the city of machines" Billie tells Bobbie, recalling the symbolism of *The Flesheaters*, an earlier Ireland novel, in which technology devours humanity, which is flesh, in endless, entropomorphic activity. This interdependent perception releases Billie from the dream valley, which becomes the navel in an enormous female body, that of her first Bobbie, which in turn is seen as the land, lapped by the sea.

The elements of these dreams hold within them, as does the nature of the leopard, the paradoxes and oppositions by which Billie's narrative is structured. Animality and humanity are constantly juxtaposed, while the Bobbie leopard has both qualities. Life in the city of women is bestial and brutal; the women spend their time drinking and fighting. In a crowd in Kings Cross, Billie notices "A violence; an unseeing, unregarding stare; an obtuse carelessness of others; a blind, shallow connection with all the rest; an ugly comfort at being surrounded by beings so like themselves". The antidote for this recognition of meaningless depravity is its opposite: "In such moments I think of birds, which move in the air like fish in the sea; . . . each has a freedom we ground animals don't have." Sun, spring, a peach tree growing from a pit in a pot, above all water are positive aspects of life in the novel. They exist in opposition to its physical reality, typified by death and decay, and realised in the women who suffer variously from grotesque ailments: "head bounce, foot fester, labial pus, tongue crumble, lung quake, hand bunching, nipple destruction" among other diseases. Life in the city is repetitively monotonous, horrifying confined, disgustingly unnatural; the leopard its most extraordinary victim: "wildling out of place—trapped in a City of Women."

In this parody of feminist utopia, man is the enemy. When a male is captured, he is sexually abused by gangs of women; man baiting has replaced the ancient sport of bear baiting. Meat is seen as an index of the animality of human life. Abattoirs and butchers shops are prominent in the narrative, and the women are at once repelled but yet desire meat, which is crudely equated with male sexuality. A series of attacks on women by male marauders from outside the city are a grotesque metaphor for the pervers-

sion of productive sexuality. Rape is carried out after incision into curious parts of female bodies—legs, arms, and fatally a heart and a brain. "One sex does, another suffers" the narrator comments, a polarising masculine aggression and feminine submission. The novel ends with the narrator's horrifying vision of a male invasion of the city of women, which is a recreation of the past: "It seemed to me that our City of Women had vanished and the streets were back as they once were: men everywhere. . . . But there was a difference. All was decay. The males moved sluggishly, their faces seemed to *flow*, there were holes on their surfaces, like bomb craters on a landscape, their flesh crawled." Yet if women figure the possibility for life and growth, separated from the corruption and destructiveness of men: "In the City of Women the female is the symbol of youth and the future. The old order was male and sterile", Ireland's abusive treatment of collective female life is negative, indicating nothing more than emptiness, hopelessness, nausea and dismissive contempt.

Love is the bulwark against this reductive condition. Although it can be a "cannibal" too, it is potentially productive, "a bridge . . . not a chain". But loss and pain are Billie's present life, and her method of containing the pain is to mock it; language games displace its reality: "Fiddling about with words gets to be a habit of the lonely mind, as it clenches and unclenches, grasping nothing." Words organise the emptiness: "There was no pattern, apart from the words." Billie's father bequeathed her his word collection, saying "In the beginning was the word. Hang on to words. Words can arrange your life. Words were invented to arrange our lives." Word jokes abound; a group of women have "not a caries in the world", and attention is drawn to them: "(couldn't resist it)" the narrator remarks to this. Billie's message to her world depends on a series of puns: "there is a tide in the affairs of women that comes on time and once a month, a march of memorials in blood down the calendars of your life, that taken at the flood will wash all men away." *City of Women* could be retitled *City of Words*.

As Billie mocks her pain with word games, so the author mocks the illusion that a language construct can create reality. There is no security for the reader of this fiction. Bobbie

the lover is also Bobbie, Billie's child, is also Bobbie the leopard. The narrative is a series of "dream strings", and the nightmare Billie observes and records is perhaps no more than that. She speculates on the nature of reality and fiction, then ridicules her speculation:

Am I as substantial as a shadow? Am I merely an echo bounced off the events of my lived life?

Perhaps for me all time has already happened and my existence is a memory. Perhaps all of us are memory come alive; through us time is remembered, ghosts playing a recording of human life over and over, the memory of lost races.

What a mouthful. Perhaps it's no such thing.

Numerous italicised comments and rhetorical questions, largely concerned with "my engineer" or "the engineer", punctuate the narrative. Their insistence on the nature of things, and apparent importance as a structuring device, gesture towards the idea that Ireland is the textual engineer, the *auteur* of the narrative, one whose eclecticism is provocative but often counter-productive. Like the professors Gulliver encounters in the school of languages on his Voyage to Laputa, Ireland creates his process out of a seemingly bottomless bag of sources. But this bag, too, is threateningly cumbersome, and the engineer of the *City of Women* needs a surer material to convincingly cement its many parts into a structured whole.

DELYS BIRD

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

LEIGH ALLISON—has worked as a nurse and in counselling, and is currently working as a bookshop assistant.

BRUCE BENNETT—co-editor of *Westerly*, now in England, and while on leave visited China and edited the Contemporary China Issue, No. 3 1981, of *Westerly*.

DELYS BIRD—teaches in the English Department at the W.A. Institute of Technology, where her teaching includes a course on women's literature.

VERONICA BRADY—is a lecturer in the English Department at the University of W.A. She has contributed critical articles to Australian and overseas literary journals and edited *Soundings: A Selection of Western Australian Poetry*. A new book, *Crucible of Prophets—Australians and the Question of God*, has just been published.

SIMON BROWN—lives at Kambah in the A.C.T. and would like to be able to write full time.

BRUCE DAWE—has worked at a number of occupations and served nine years in the R.A.A.F. He is a graduate of the universities of Queensland and New England, and is a senior lecturer in Language and Literature at the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education. The latest book of his poems is *Sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems 1954–1978*.

MINA GRAY—her short stories have appeared in literary magazines in Australia and other countries, and been broadcast on radio. She has combined with her husband in radio documentaries for the ABC. Now living temporarily in Albury-Wodonga.

W. HART-SMITH—widely known as a poet. Now living in New Zealand.

GWEN HARWOOD—has published three books of poems, is a contributor to literary magazines, and has written opera librettos for Larry Sitsky, James Penberthy, and Ian Cugley. Now lives in the country in Tasmania.

R. G. HAY—was born in Queensland, where he has been a teacher and is at present senior lecturer at Capricornia I.A.E. His poetry has been published in Australian literary journals.

JEAN KENT—was born in Queensland and completed an arts degree at the University of Queensland, is at present living in Sydney, and was awarded a Young Writer's Fellowship in 1981 and has now received a writing grant for a further twelve months. She was awarded the John Shaw Neilson Poetry Prize for 1981 by the Victorian F.A.W.

MIKE LADD—is a full-time writer, singer, and lyricist for a flamenco-punk band in Adelaide called The Lounge. Lives in the industrial-urban suburb of Thebarton, and this landscape has been his interest in a book of short stories and a current Poem for Drum and Voice.

JIM LEGASSE—is a lecturer at the English Department, University of Western Australia. He is a graduate of Ohio State University.

AUDREY LONGBOTTOM—born in Coramba, N.S.W., left school early but returned to study at Wollongong University. She commenced writing in 1968 and, besides poetry, has published short stories and articles. A first collection of poems, *Relatives and Reliques*, is being published.

ROD MORAN—is a graduate of Melbourne University. He has published in Australian literary magazines and is a technical teacher with the Education Department in Victoria.

WENDY MORGAN—has been a teacher and research worker, and writes poetry and short stories. Is part editor of *Mattoid*, published at Deakin University.

SHANE McCAULEY—was born in England and has lived in Western Australia since 1959. He has published stories and poems in Australian journals.

ANDREW SANT—an Adelaide writer, was recently awarded a Literature Board grant.

CAROLE WILKINS—worked as a typist and started writing full time five years ago. Is interested in writing for children and science fiction poetry. Her stories and poems have appeared in Australian magazines and been broadcast on radio.

IAN WILLIAMS—was born in England, and since coming to Australia in 1970 has worked in Perth, Sydney and Melbourne. He returned to England in 1975, and is now back in Australia.

JOHN WRIGHT—was born in Tasmania and is employed by the Council of Adult Education in Melbourne. His poetry has been published in Australian literary journals.

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