

# *Westerly*

stories poems reviews articles

## Stories

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Dianne Bates, Peter Loftus, Pat Jacobs

Court in Power  
by G. C. Bolton

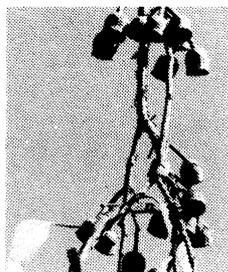
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SEPTEMBER, 1982

NUMBER 3



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# WESTERLY

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JEAN KENT

## Low Tide

It was Saturday. Thank God.

While Margot huddled in her seat in the car Terry leant lightly on the steering-wheel and stared at the sky. Then he returned to his book. Below, to the visible ends of the world the sea stretched metallic and cold, shivering with each gust of fitful wind.

Suddenly in the sky, a hang-glider. A floating panel of silk, juice-light, only the caterpillar-like body solid and dark against the sky.

More limpid in flight than a bird, it appeared silently, slid serenely across the headland, and then drifted out of sight.

\* \* \*

“If I did what I want to today,” the woman said as she moved into the room and sat opposite Margot, “I’d walk straight to those windows and jump out.”

There was sun on the glass. Only a little, a yellow dust which mingled with the layer of pollution in a thin, restless cloud.

And in a voice breathless as exhaust fumes, this woman was declaring that she wanted to die. So, why shouldn’t she? With a life like hers what could be saner than to say I quit, I’ll not be battered any longer — then float through the dusty sun, five floors down come to rest like a broken doll on the busy road, or draped across the bonnet of a car?

Her ex-husband, she said, was threatening to kill her.

At the very thought of him she shrivelled. She was no more than a paper bag, poked with bones. Only one wild tremor ran like lightning over her closed lids.

But she hadn’t the energy to die. Not by jumping. Today it would have to be pills, curling up in search of snug, black sleep.

In Margot’s office, the woman tried to cry, but only a wheezing, dry grief escaped. An hour later, she seemed calmer, leaving. But behind her, the silence in Margot’s room remained perilous with spiderwebs, those thin drooping trails of her sad, angry sighs.

\* \* \*

Still the wind teased the tops of the gum trees. And although underneath the brittle heads there seemed to be an immense stillness, there was no sign of the glider.

The last sentence of Margot’s letter trailed off: “to get away for the day . . .” no, to float away gliding on that still lake of sky life balanced brittle as a nerve on the whims of air . . . How petty life must look, viewed from up there.

Putting down her pen, she slumped in the car and her eyes scanned the fringes of the treetops for a return of the glider.

But for the wind Margot and Terry might have been sitting on the grass, growing loose and less constrained in the wider space of the bush.

In fact, just beyond the lookout Margot had found a small clearing. Grey tables of rock and flattened grass surrounded by spider flowers and tall eucalypts trailed with yellow hibbertia. But even as she was walking back to tell Terry and debating how comfortable they would be considering the spasmodic whoops of wind, another car whisked through a defiant screech of gravel, two surfers who had pulled up to gape at the flat sea so far below began to explore, walking towards the place where she had been, their arms engaged in exuberant exercises, congratulating the air as if the discovery were all their own. In no time they were back at the car, hauling out sleeping bags and camping gear, ready to trundle back to the clearing.

Later, one of them appeared alongside the car.

"You wouldn't have some matches we could buy, would you?" he asked. "Got a gas barbecue and all, but guess who forgot a match?"

His hands were in the front pockets of his jeans, his shoulders hunched forward, his eyes very wide — at any moment he should flutter off like a kite. Precariously weighted, he hung there while Terry shuffled through the box of food and cooking utensils.

"Have you seen the fantastic parrots?" the boy asked, jerking on his string and pointing to a red and blue beauty perched tame as a fly in the shrub overhanging the car. Gold silk tearing in the wind, rippling jubilant above the sea if ever he left the ground — what could they do but forgive him for stealing their space? In his face, as far as Margot could see, there was no hint that life in one cold slap might wind him, toss him down, as matches in hand he cheerily thanked them and tripped back to his campsite above the sea.

"Dear Jane," Margot was writing. The words were in her head, but the pen on the page was reluctant to begin. "Yesterday when you rang I had barely finished talking to a woman who wanted to suicide . . ."

Then suddenly there was your voice.

It appeared in her office like a cat coming home after days walking by itself, and as it raised its enquiring face with feathers caught on guilty whiskers, she reached out to stroke it, to caress from its throat a comforting purr.

"I didn't ring up," Jane suddenly said, "just to chat."

"Oh." Margot's hand drew back. "What a pity."

A truck went past Jane's office.

"What was that? I can't hear you—"

"I said — " a coal loader revved. Suddenly like the woman who had recently sat opposite her, Margot had no energy left. She lapsed into silence.

Jane began her business. What was more important, friendship or work, love or the earning of a living? Only precarious fools asked such questions. Without doubt the daily routine took priority, and once you stepped outside that safety belt of breakfast, the 433 at eight twenty-one, office at nine, memos in the pigeon-hole, shopping in the lunchbreak, the rest of your life squeezed in wherever you could make it fit, you were in danger of an accident.

The voice clicked off. Through the window, chains of traffic bumped far below. In long, anonymous waves, shiny coloured capsules dodging the dotted shapes of pedestrians. (By now the woman would be down there—perhaps she had found the energy to avoid stepping in front of a car, perhaps not.)

On Margot's desk was an administrative circular from the morning's mail: the correct format for ministerial correspondence. It made her want to laugh, but all she could manage was a cynical sniff and a shake of her head, as she screwed up the paper and hurled it at the bin.

\* \* \*

Down at the picnic ground, Terry built a pyramid of sticks and air under a barbecue plate and then lit a fire. The wind teased the flames too high; they leapt and bit at the air.

In the twilight people were wandering over the slopes or sitting around tables eating and poking at fires. Down the mountainsides the deer were walking on stiletto legs. The unbroken seam of sound the sea had stitched was knotted now and then with the glossy doodles of birds. Now no brilliant parrots came down in gusts of blue and red. Only an odd raven ripped black across the sky.

As they sat on the tartan rug and waited for the chicken and tomato to heat through, Terry talked of the book he was reading. With her legs tucked underneath her, Margot sat, neat as a cat within the lapping spread of her skirt. She held her head high on a neck long and tense, as if she were preparing to hiss. When he turned to the fire to poke at the dinner with an egg slice, she watched his every move.

He came back and sat down, his voice trailing off, his eyes red from the fire, watery and evasive. But the book, the book . . . everything is hopeless, Margot thought, and the ghost of a scream began to flutter inside her. Was that what people did if they were happy? Did they sit by barbecues and discuss the latest books while the sky swelled overhead in loose, enormous gusts of darkening cloud and twilight leapt over the sea in a soft haze of oysters? Was that what . . . ?

Still watching as Terry sprawled on the rug and talked, she thought how inside there was never the right little ticking heart, snug and content as a Swiss watch. No, on frail threads people hung, in little breaths of blown glass, that every moment quivered and expanded, brittle and tinkling. How far could the glass be blown before in a fitful pop it became nothing but fragments falling like dust through the air?

"Social work," she said to Terry, "is an unnatural profession."

He grimaced, and shrugged. "But without you what would become of those who need help?"

The trouble was there were too many of them. She couldn't walk down a street without seeing around the corner a black eye, a broken life.

And what did they expect, these people who walked in from the street and before a total stranger laid out their lives? They came, they unloaded their bundle, they went away, only to return a little later, with some other dreadful load. She had to pick up the bundle, tie the strings in different places, show them how to carry it so that it might seem lighter. Ah-hah! they said on their better days, and went off almost grateful. But the trouble was—they left bits of their bundles behind.

She was exhausted. Losing her grip. Lately even her smile had come unhinged. Greeting these strangers had become so difficult. When she walked away to close the door before sitting down, precariously her mouth slipped. She was terrified that one day someone would turn and catch her resigned to her grimace.

On the other hand . . . it was true she half hoped to be caught. She was so tired of being *nice*.

I do not have the necessary magic pudding of compassion, she thought. Already I have given too much away.

She lay on the rug under the hovering sky and hoped that somewhere on the other side a prick of light, like a star, might be trying to break through.

No. I do not have the compassion, she thought. How vain of me to have even imagined I might have.

\* \* \*

Accustomed to listening all day to strangers, now she lay there while Terry talked and talked. She did not hear a word he said.

After the woman who wanted to die had gone, Margot walked down the corridor to another room, just like hers, from which Angie was farewelling a man on crutches.

"Caffeine," offered Angie bleakly. Margot nodded and the ancient yellow jug began to croak. The cups were old and cracked and there was a tightness in Angie's face again. Back on the job for only one week since her holiday on the south coast and already she was in need of another one.

"That was a long session you just had," said Angie. She handed over a bitter, black cup. In spite of the tightness, her face was tender with concern.

"Just a would-be suicide," said Margot flatly. And as they both began to sag at the thought, she clunked her cup onto Angie's desk and suddenly gasped: "But you should have seen what wandered in last night! Straight off the street and into my room looking straight past me at the wall the whole time, with one hand up between me and his face like a fence!" And she mimed this odd man who talked to her as if she were somewhere else, unable to see him, until even Angie, in spite of her embarrassment, was laughing.

"But what on earth did you *do*?" Angie asked.

To tell the truth, she hadn't known what to do. He talked non-stop like a balloon at the mercy of the wind and after exactly one hour he put down his hand, looked at her and said, "Was that all you wanted to see me about?" and then he left.

She told Angie this and they sat in a conspiracy of guilty laughter, defying the signs on their doors to fall down in professional horror.

But the weariness and desperation were still upon Margot, and her laughter fell off like chips from the cup which she held too tightly in her hands. Perhaps if you were as compassionate as Angie you did not need to laugh at this crazy world and you own hopelessness within it. Perhaps. She felt wretched and ashamed, and wished the little voice which kept babbling about the poor, odd man would stop hiccoughing with laughter — but what if it did, and then something else snaked out of her instead? The something which was on the other side of all this irreverence, this callous amusement in the face of despair.

Because only yesterday she had stood by her bed, watching Terry still asleep there, snuggled into a brown blanket like a lizard in a log, not even leaving his dream to farewell her as she scurried for the bus. So easily she could have squashed his head. In a stilled flutter on the floor, she saw the paperback he had been reading the night before. And as she bent to read the title, suddenly she felt an immense greed for books, for that deep sanity of perching within one's thoughts, accompanied only by the printed page.

How dare he have time for such indulgence . . . she searched mentally for a cup or glass to smash and looked at Terry with resentment until his face became nothing but an old tennis ball, which could be stepped on.

Then, like dud fireworks in her head, the thoughts fizzled. She became morose, and walked slowly away, having done nothing..

He was not really the one she wanted to hurt.

In Angie's room, Margot squeezed her hands against the sides of her cup. Their laughter hung like icicles under the fluorescent light. It broke and fell in a shiver of glass.

"We must be crazy to work in this job," Margot said.

Angie bit her lip and sighed.

Outside in the corridor, clients were waiting with worried faces. For just a moment the two women sat silent. They might have been about to weep themselves, ready to pack up their things and go home, they felt so tired already. But clients were waiting.

"Crazy!" Margot said, rolling her eyes and turning it into the greatest joke of all, as they stabbed the coffee cups dry with cold teatowels and prepared to rearrange their faces, far away from thoughts of themselves.

\* \* \*

Down by the beach, the deer were trailing in single file. A young girl and a man were wandering toward the toilets, the girl skipping and dancing around the man. A stag lifted a garbage bin lid with his antlers. Waiting for the girl, the man, already too old, stood outside the toilets, his hands lost within his dufflecoat. A group of people around a picnic table began to laugh. Somewhere a motor bike chugged and roared.

(In the city, the Saturday nighters would be about to spin. Monday's clients would be throwing meat at plates, avoiding fists aimed at their eyes, and curling up into the womb of the television's glow.)

By the time Margot and Terry had scraped their orange picnic plates and hissed the last of the smoky tea over the fire, all the world was muted with dusk. Only a faint wind cut a fine edge around the soft light. The sea rolled and unrolled in long soothing bandages, as they wandered along the beach.

Where the water had laid itself flat in slow, lacy arcs, the sand was spread with bluebottles. Margot stood on one when Terry wasn't looking. It collapsed with a startling pop.

Not knowing they could sting, you might think what delicate creatures, sculptural as glass ornaments, puffed into sleek Brancusi shapes. Even the little finlike ridges with their seeping blue and the inky point rearing up like a tiny breast might be fascinating then.

Like the old lady sitting crosslegged on the pavement, stroking a doll. What a quaint old eccentric, you might say, not knowing that she has killed her cat for dinner, or that some time soon she will be found, Madonna-like in her kitchen, peacefully cradling the doll with the doors and windows closed and every jet of her gas stove full on.

What curious, vulnerable creatures.

"Each sting," Terry said, "is a little hypodermic syringe."

He tried to squash a bluebottle beneath his boot. But the frail substance resisted. It seemed strangely tough and determined to survive. At last it yielded in a flubbery sigh, while forward and behind, the scattered lines of blue looked on.

\* \* \*

Now that the beach was swathed in a thick veil of dusk, the flaking lives of surfers and barbecue grillers, vagrants and commuters began to recede. Even the recent certainty of the hillside where Margot and Terry had sat eating chicken and tomato seemed little more than a trick of the light. From where he stood on the spreading fringe of rock, Terry found he could not unite the scene from which he had come. The windcombed hillside fell abruptly to the road, trees and grass flipped backwards in an austere line from cliff face to land. Far below, where the shaved hillslopes meandered in search of cricket balls, picnickers came

and went, while here on the beach, a million sea creatures lay stranded and the heavy sound of surf began to separate into fragments as distinct as the staggered shattering of clear, green bottles.

He looked from the sea to the rock pool, a dark reflecting eye within its lash of ruffled weed. Then, looking up, he saw coming towards him a Dickensian shape, a dark cloak moving slowly across the creamed sand.

He blinked. Margot shook the tartan rug she had draped around her shoulders and stepped onto a rock.

Now he would have to think differently. He would have to emerge from his reverie of texture and light and come back to a world where people were not shapes or patterns within a landscape, but people.

"How would you like," he asked (it was surprising how easily he found his voice), "to live here?"

Margot smiled. That wistful look in which her lips curled lines on her forehead rose in cynical query, and her eyes drooped, sadly resigned.

"You mean be crabs. Run away and retreat into shells."

She sighed, and he wondered where she had gone. Whether it would ever be possible to call her back.

Already she was wondering which of them would be waiting for her on Monday. The woman whose husband beat her, someone lately left by a lover, or another chasing suicide as if it were an express route to the end of the rainbow? A reformed alcoholic, desperate for a little learning, a housewife struggling to escape into the world, or one of that motley group not much different from herself, dissatisfied, clinging to ideals and helplessly searching — for what? For something more, that elusive something which might make life seem more than just a habit?

Now that the beach was veiled in dusk and the sea had almost disappeared into sky, he stood happily within the endless, shattering sound.

Bleakly, Margot stared at the fading horizon. Then she looked down at the thin, lacy water. She shivered.

"But it must get so *tired*," she suddenly said. "Always crashing, crashing onto the land — "

A dark chill swept over the ocean. He had to thread his arms inside his pull-over to ward it off.

\* \* \*

It was almost dark as they trudged back to their car. On the hill behind the picnic ground, a startled deer shrieked. A cricket bat swung, sending flittering towards the heads of palms a faint red ball. Dim figures moved upon the slope, knots of picnickers came undone.

All along the beach, stranded above the receding sea, the bluebottles lay. Long carelessly graceful loops of blue, facts of life flung in their way. It was tempting to take off a shoe and offer a foot, give them a chance to fight back.

Millions of them translucent and soft, drifting like shawls on the glossy shoulders of the sea. Millions of them, trailing after fish and the bare legs of surfers, bubbly and sleek, their pure blue stings streaming out behind them.

In the dim light they looked eery, bruised capsules of nothing.

Nothing could be done.

They could only trust that in the night the tide would turn, return, slowly carry them away.

# MARGARET HOUGHTON

## Silent White

Silence. Stillness. Darkness . . . except for the beam of a torch shone around. Then darkness again.

Silence. A moan. A cry. A gentle voice. Then silence again.

Quick, quiet, footsteps, fading on a wooden floor. Then stillness.

Large eyes, staring from a hollow face, watching the torchlight flit from bed to bed, then disappear, disappear with the white clad figure holding it, disappear into a corridor.

She will return again, go out into the same dimness, then go out of sight. She enters from a door at the far end, shines the torch from side to side, stops, lingers, then proceeds. As she comes closer, I pull my face back into the darkness to watch. Left to right to left, nearer and nearer to my bed. The closer it comes, the brighter it looks. No longer a flicker. Once the flicker has gone, where is the light? Once it spreads over the floor, then out into the corridor, where does it go? My bed is parallel to the wall, near the door, so that there is more room for the wheelchair alongside the other bed, which juts out like all the rest. The torchlight will hit the shiny metal of the chair and scatter. So it won't reach my bed at all.

Each night the light covers the floor. Deeper and deeper pools of light drench the floor and the legs of the bed. As it nears the door it rises higher and higher, piling up around my bed, although not reaching it. Just how high will it become night after night? It floods into the corridor, spreads out, seeps slowly along the polished floor, then merges with the darkness. Where does it go?

The white shoes plough silently through the shallow light, go out into the corridor, growing fainter and fainter.

Perhaps the light is deeper at the end of the corridor? Does it cover her white shoes? Creep up her grey stockings? Touch the hem of her grey uniform? Touch the white apron? Rise to the veil and cover the Red Cross? Then float beyond?

The flicker, repeated, becomes a flood. Having waded to the end of the corridor, she is gone. Where? What lies beyond the depth of fading light?

Tonight, when her first round begins at nine o'clock, the light will start again. The first layer will spread thinly over the floor. At ten o'clock, more light will fall across the beds, another layer over the floor. At eleven o'clock the third layer will push along the entrance to the corridor. At twelve o'clock the beds will stand in pools of reflections on the polished floor. By two a.m. the floor has been covered five times by light, dropped from a tiny globe. Now it is thick and dense, devoid of any combat with the moonlight which cannot penetrate the

coarse, cotton curtains, drawn across the long windows above the beds on either side of the wall. The darkness is a defenceless victim of the torchlight, challenged only by the even tide beyond the door.

The wheel chair in black sits still. There is the chance of a flash upon the shiny steel. Now my bed along the wall is also threatened.

There are three more rounds left. Another light. Other footsteps, slower. More beams fall. Nearer. Nearer. Sleep now. Tinkering of glass. Swallowing. Footsteps move closer, slowly. The rug on the wheelchair is moved. The chair is hit. Light splashes onto the floor, striking my bed by the wall. All but an eye is caught beneath the blankets. The light has risen, covered the bed, merged with the electronic tide outside, passed along the corridor, vanished at the end.

A close miss. Darkness has won. She is gone.

It is morning. He is dressed completely in white and stethoscope. Every day he looks into my eyes with a tiny light. Sometimes he sits on the bed and just looks at me — I don't know for how long.

I can't remember coming here, only waking up one night, seeing the light and closing my eyes again.

While he looks at me I sleep. I only wake up at night — to watch her and the light, wishing I could stand on two feet in her light, even put my hand in it. Only my eyes work. I wonder what became of my hands, my feet, my voice? If I slept at night I would dream. That would interrupt her work and I wouldn't see her light any more. People who make noises or cry in their sleep disappear. It happened to someone in a bed near me. I never saw him again.

If she knew I was watching her, she would probably shine the light straight onto me, cover me up, perhaps even turn me over to the wall. Then I would lose track of the light completely.

One morning I awoke facing the wall. I could hear him speaking to her quietly. I tried to listen. In spite of all the nightmares — my own and those of the others — it was the first time I had felt afraid. Now and then I peeked at the pale green wall. Light footsteps hurried up and down. Food-trolleys were being wheeled in.

Suddenly I felt a weight on my bed. It was a heavier weight than the usual one, who always visited after breakfast. I dug my fingers into the side of the mattress, holding firmly onto the edge. Then he took my hands, and slipping his hand under me, he turned me onto my back, so that my face looked into his. I kept my eyes closed. "Can you look at me?" My face felt quite cold. Then I realised they were there. I was more than a pair of eyes and ears. "Open your eyes". He was older than the usual one. "Can you tell me your name?" He was English. "You've been asleep for a very long time." Although I tried to keep my eyes closed, I could not stop looking at his face. "What is your name?"

Suddenly I felt more afraid. I also had a voice. I kept perfectly still. If I answered him I would have to continue. He would ask me more questions. Even more terrifying was the thought that sooner or later I would have to tell him about the light, the nightmare, the entire secret. Those who talked in the night disappeared. I closed my eyes. The weight lifted from the bed. I watched him go out through the door as a cup was put to my lips.

After having been bathed and my bed straightened, I suddenly saw a chair at the end. The top of the bed was solid, like a wooden table. For the first time I was sitting up, propped against several pillows. I looked straight down into his face. Now we were five feet apart. His mouth was moving but there was no sound. He made gestures with his hands, pointed at me, shook his head, frowned, beckoned as if wanting me to speak.

Suddenly my head was jerked backwards. A tiny light was shining into my eyes. "Sitting up today? That's good." The tiny light out. Looking towards the end of the bed again he'd gone. The grey, woollen blanket was tucked tightly across the mattress.

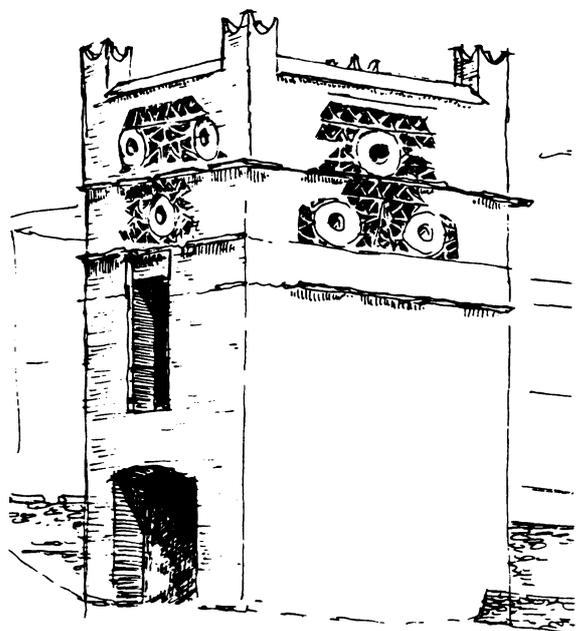
The dim, night lights are on in the corridor again. The quick, light footsteps enter from the far end. The light flashes from side to side, lingers awhile, then moves on. The soft, pale, yellow glow creeps over the floor, up beds, over slippers, chairs, faces, always falling back onto the floor. The steel of the black wheelchair gleams in the fleeting surge. It comes nearer and nearer the grey woollen cover. It covers my face . . . "I hear we sat up today. Good. But please try and sleep." The pale flood flows silently out the door.

I didn't speak. I'm still here.

## ELIZABETH SMITHER

### Animals who are entirely faithful

Apes, cows, sheep entirely promiscuous  
But geese, eagles, wolves totally faithful  
And the serially monogamous, those who swing  
Between the eagle's eyrie and the pen.  
How good to know we descend in threes  
From escarpment, to meadow  
Where the ruminating eyes lift  
Over the skirts, proprietorially.  
Or that we may climb up  
Past the byre where the track thins  
And the rocks prick our feet, towards the ledge.



ΠΟΥ ΕΙΝΑΙ ΤΑ ΠΕΡΙΣΤΕΡΙΑ ;

Που είναι τα περιστέρια της Άνδρου;  
Οι περιστερώνες είναι άφωνοι κ' άδειοι.

Που είναι τα άσπρα φτέρα των περιστεριών  
να κάνουν μαλακά συννεφάκια  
για τους γαλανούς θόλους του ναού;

Που είναι τα μурμουριτά των περιστεριών  
να κάνουν τη φωνή της Άνοιξης;

Αλλά οι νύχτες της Άνδρου  
έχουν τα φτέρα και τις φωνές.

Όλη τη νύχτα μικρές κουκουβαχίες  
καλούν επανειλημένως  
μια νότα από τους αηχούς του Παν.

Νταϊβιντ Χατσίσον  
"Χρυσή Άμμος Β'"  
Άνδρος στη Μύκονο  
24 Απριλίου 1980.

WHERE ARE THE DOVES ?

Where are the doves of Andros?

The dovecots are silent and empty.

Where are the white wings of doves

to make soft small clouds

for the blue domes of the church?

Where are the murmurs of doves

to make the voice of Spring?

But the nights of Andros

have wings and voices.

All night small owls

call repeatedly

one note from the pipes of Pan.

David Hutchison. "Chrysy Ammos II"  
Andros to Mykonos,

24 April 1980.

DIANNE BATES

## The Op Shop Bride

The bell on the church Op Shop in market street tinkled late one Friday afternoon shortly before closing and three women lumbered in.

Their late arrival annoyed Mrs Dignam who had been just about to leave. Her son Frederick and his wife were expected for dinner and she was looking forward to hearing their promised news. Sixteen months ago they had married and she was hoping to hear of a grandchild. A baby would fill some of the lonely gap of Frederick senior's passing.

To look at, Mrs Dignam was an unremarkable woman, her body angular and thin, having long passed childbearing. The skin of her face, stretched taut over the skull, emphasised her aquiline nose and gave her skin a waxy, embalmed look: a rigid back that carried her head erect re-inforced the first impression most had of a middle-class Baptist matron. Friday was Mrs Dignam's day for serving behind the counter for the church.

She patted down a stray strand of hair on her blue-rinsed perm and addressed the women succinctly, "Can I be of any assistance?"

They may not have heard. At any rate, immersed in a common search, they ignored her.

Ros, a stout woman in her forties, was bent over, presenting a view of her broad behind as she scrambled in the Odds-and-Ends bin. Shirley's preoccupation was with the rack of long gowns — patio wear and cocktail dresses — mostly stained and out-dated. Her practised hands flicked through the labels, looking at sizes and prices. Marlene, heavy with her third child, was at the other end of the rack, sorting through the gowns as well. However, she was constantly being distracted by Eddie and Mary, active youngsters fretting for attention.

"Eddie, leave that alone, willya?" She whined at the eldest boy. He had found a long leather belt which cracked as he swung it around his head.

His smaller sister, clutching at her pants announced, "Wanna do a wee."

"You would," Marlene sighed tiredly. She seemed to suddenly notice Mrs Dignam.

"Where's the ladies?" She demanded.

"Well, I'm sorry dear," Mrs Dignam said, "We're not allowed to let the public use the conveniences. Perhaps you'd care to take her to the public lavatories in the council park. It's only a five minute walk."

She felt uncomfortable offering the compromise, but the Minister had stressed the health aspects. Frederick, too, had been a difficult child, always wanting to go to the lavatory at the most unsuitable time.

"You'll just have to wait," Marlene announced.

"Wanna go now."

"Well you bloody well can't and don't you dare wet yourself or I'll give you a good clip on the ear."

The extra weight was wearing on her feet and her temper. She lowered herself into a nearby chair and took out a cigarette.

"Did ya find anything yet, Shirl?" she asked.

"Nuh." Shirley turned from the rack. "I told you it'd be a waste of time."

She was much younger than her sister but the family similarity was there; slender limbs, gaunt face and blonde hair. She had tried a hair rinse once but it had grown out. Beneath the long limp strands was a red bushy undergrowth. Her skin was tanned contrasting with Marlene's sickly white.

Shirley rubbed at a tattoo of a heart on her arm. It was inscribed with the single word, "Billy" and was embellished with roses.

"It's cause of this thing," she sniffed.

"No it's not," Marlene began, but Ros interjected just then with a triumphant, "Look at these!"

The object of her delight was three pairs of gloves, slightly grey, with tiny pearl buttons at the cuff.

"They'd look real nice washed in Lux, love," she said. "Now all we gotta do is get the dresses to go with them."

From behind the counter Mrs Dignam ventured a slightly louder, even more succinct, "Can I be of any assistance?"

Finally they acknowledged her.

"Well . . ." Shirley said thoughtfully, "I'm looking for a wedding dress. A white one."

". . . and not too pricey, you know," she added.

"Yeah, and bridesmaids' dresses," Ros said decidedly.

Mrs Dignam was relieved. Now she knew what they wanted, she might be able to go home earlier.

"Oh yes," she said brightening. "We should be able to help you."

"Mum," Mary yelped again. "I wanna . . ."

"Not now," her mother snapped. Marlene's varicose veins were aching. She rubbed at the fat blue worms around her ankles.

In the back room Mrs Dignam was showing Ros and Shirley to the formal wear rack. They ogled with delight at the crumbled silk, satin and velvet gowns that drooped on their wire hangers, and, wasting no time began sifting through the offerings. Moments later Marlene joined them.

"Oh girls, just look at this, will ya." Shirley gave a high pitched squeal of discovery.

The prize was held aloft: an off-white affair, scooped at the neckline with billowing sleeves and a net veil splayed across the hanger.

"I'll try it on, and youse can see if you fit these." Shirley produced identical satiny gowns; one a light shade of mulberry, the other a shocking pink.

"Geeze they look lovely," Marlene nodded approvingly. "And they're empire line, too. I reckon we could fit into them, pretty easy, even with me being preggio, and Ros . . ." she paused, glancing at her companion. ". . . without hurtin' your feelings Ros, but you are a bit over-weight, love."

"Fat ya mean . . ." Ros grinned, showing a wide band of denture. "Been going to Weight Watchers for nine months now," she beamed at Mrs Dignam who was reddening with embarrassment, "Not done much good, has it? Love me beer too much, you know." an excuse.

The easy familiarity of the three women disturbed Mrs Dignam. Working class women and their ways were not a part of her territory. She looked for

"I think I heard the door bell ringing," she said.

In the other room her white lie and act of inhumanity struck her forcefully. It was uncharitable to feel superior, she corrected herself, resolving to go back in. Poor things. There, but for the grace of God . . .

Just as she was about to turn into the backroom where the women were giggling among themselves, she felt a small hand tugging at her dress.

"Mary done a wee in her pants."

She looked down at the grimy four-year-old, serious with the responsibility of his sister.

"Mum'll hit her hard," Eddie said.

Mary hid in the corner behind a rack of frocks, a puddle at her feet.

"Never mind dear, I'll fix her up and mother will never know," Mrs Dignam said kindly.

She had just finished wiping the trembling child as the three women walked in.

"You been behaving yourselves?" Marlene demanded, searching out her children's guilty faces.

"Oh, they've been *very* well behaved," Mrs Dignam said, "Eddie's been telling me he's getting a train for Christmas, haven't you Eddie?" She smiled.

The boy hung back.

"Yeah, and pigs can fly," Marlene said. "I told you Eddie, Santa Claus's got no money this year, and you'd better believe it, son."

A lump settled in Mrs Dignam's throat. "There's some very cheap toys out the back," she offered.

Marlene dismissed her with a withering look.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Mrs Dignam said, changing the subject.

"Oh yeah. Shirley got this lovely gown and our dresses fit us, too," Ros said.

"But we want to know what they cost first," Shirley interrupted casually.

"Well now, let's see." Mrs Dignam ran a trained eye over the clothes piled on the counter. "We don't get much call for bride's gowns and this one would probably have hung there for a long time, so what about . . ."

The trio of faces trained intently on her words.

"I think \$5 is quite reasonable, don't you? And four dollars each for the other two."

A slight audible sigh of relief escaped Shirley's lips.

The gowns were wrapped, and the gloves, as well as a pair of slightly stained satin shoes which Ros had found. Shirley leaned against the counter as Mrs Dignam settled the bill, Ros poked around in the belt bin and Marlene sat in the chair, resting her varicose veins again.

"Are you the lucky girl, then?" Mrs Dignam asked.

"Yeah," Shirley said proudly.

"And when is the wedding taking place?"

"Next week. We're having one of them wedding celebrations, or whatever you call them that marry you."

". . . in my Mum's garden," Shirley expanded, softening to the stiff-faced woman.

"That sounds delightful, my dear."

"Course I gotta get married," Shirley explained.

A pause hung in the close room that smelt of mothballs and unwashed feet.

"I'm having his kid, you see," Shirley added.

Mrs Dignam didn't know where to look. The poor child, she thought. What a way to start a marriage.

"I'm not big yet," Shirley continued. "*You* couldn't tell I was in the club, could you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You couldn't tell I was expecting, could you?"

Shirley leaned forward, her face close to the older woman's. A staleness of tobacco and cheap perfume hung about her.

"Oh dear no!" Mrs Dignam exclaimed.

The parcel was hastily dispatched, the children herded out of the backroom and Marlene waddled outside pushing them before her. Ros and Shirley linked arms affectionately. At the doorway they paused.

"I reckon you'll make a fantastic bride for Tommy," Ros smiled.

"Yeah, and he's got to marry me now I got all the clothes." Shirley sounded determined. She turned and winked at Mrs Dignam.

And then they were in the street, the shop bell farewelling them.

Mrs Dignam could close up for the night.

## DAVID JACOBS

### 'Over and over'

Over and over I say there will be no returning.  
In the end the hills always give up their towns.  
The puzzle of those childhood roads  
Was how they brought us here.

A politician might say we live in troubled times.  
But I need more than the kite above the common,  
Whose origins the bushes hide, and the child,  
Gladly returning to its father's hand

To move me on. At night I stand sometimes at the bay window  
And watch the one street light illustrate  
The well known silence meaning settle lives  
And homes. I see it now through bamboo blinds

And it would be perfect enough were my age  
Not out of step with summary and pat conclusion.  
In the lull before the giving in to sleep  
My eyes still test the upper night for stars.

## Taking Stock

### Taking stock!

That's what my bum is doing, sitting on the marble front step. Taking stock, watching the grass grow. Foolish grass. Grow all you like, the lawn mower lurks and will strike in its or my time. Watching the house across the road. The house across the road has been the source of constant dialogue between myself and Elsie, the next-door neighbour. Elsie is a sort of substitute grandmother. She gives us pots of jam, instructions (and clippings) on how to garden and when to plant, and the history, scandals and daily doings of every house in the street for a good two hundred yards in every direction. Except the one directly across from us.

It is a changling house. One day it is full of kittens — the next ferocious dogs. One day cool young business men emerge, up and coming real-estate men or perhaps insurance salesmen. The next day there will be a bewhiskered frized hobo picking his teeth, reading the Mirror and listening either to Mozart or Santana.

You never see any girls although Elsie tells me that there is a 13 or 14 year old girl, truanting school, who comes and plays with the kittens. But scandal is avoided. Elsie has watched but the girl never goes inside and no-one ever comes out whilst she is there. Elsie tells me that the girl has been coming for three or four years to play with the cats, even before these new tenants. Elsie thinks she must live in a flat and not be allowed pets of her own.

It is a waiting game this. The postman here comes early. He is a young fellow and although Elsie's skills are well tried they have no triumph over this postman. He cannot be engaged in conversation and we do not know what postmarks the letters bear or for whom and how many occupants the letters are addressed.

For Elsie it is the mystery of new people that excites her. That and their disregard for decent public exposure and loud music on Saturday mornings. On Saturdays the business men always dominate. They always wash their cars on that day, with their car radios on full bore. Perhaps they hope to shake off any remaining dirt? For me I am intrigued by the transmogrifications. One day a businessman with cats, the next a hobo in a definite Centennial Park overcoat and a yappy dog. I have also never seen the girl, but as I usually work this is no great mystery.

But today I am home and swear I will solve the mystery. And today, across the road nobodies home. Not even the kittens/dog. So I am sitting taking stock of it all. Perhaps I could connive a meeting? On a Saturday pretend my car has died and that I have lost my last screwdriver. I could saunter across, borrow

one and if they look half-way sociable invite them to a beer later. That would be one up on Elsie and in exchange for the information I am sure to get a batch of next Sunday's scones. Do I really need a substitute grandmother that much?

It is peculiar sitting here. The street fades as I sit and stare in the autumn sun. It doesn't really matter and besides Elsie will find out. We have already discussed how. She knows that they are renting, and she knows who the agency is. All she needs do is pretend she is thinking of selling her house and request an evaluation. Then she can drill the agent and find out all there is to be known. Be a pity if the fellows were real estate agents and they came — but Elsie is an old trooper. She could handle it.

So I sit here and take stock of my thoughts. Across the road fades as I dream of warmth. Santa Claus himself could emerge with Rudolph of red snoot fame tucked under his arm and I wouldn't notice. The grass has it's respite today too. It's not just that I am lazy, but why disturb the day with the rumble of a mower.

Instead I get up and go for a beer. Inside my thoughts return. Perhaps the people were waiting for me to go inside before they appeared in whatever manifestation the day calls for? Perhaps they are shy? Or perhaps I am playing a game with myself. I want something to think about because I have lost the habit of exploring free-time.

Perhaps I should forget about "taking stock"?

## LUCY GIBSON

### Geography Again

Meridians are tightropes to hunch over  
the zenithals are crumpled all to hell  
the saint does tricks to catch the light above her  
pray god pray god we all die fasting well

PETER LOFTUS

## The Wave

Now that it was over, she could give herself back to the house.

The kitchen demanded her attention first—perhaps because that was where they'd been happiest, she wanted to divide it from her grief as quickly as possible. She moved, at first, as if she was dreaming.

The lime-green ramparts of the combustion stove could have been clouds—or wings rising, in trepidation, away from her knuckles. She dusted both sides—flicking the little sandy cloth with bitter precision, in every nook and cranny. And then she went over the plates—with the white residue of the stove-cleaner, getting in under the nicks and the curls of the big round pot-holders, on occasion using her fingernails, standing back and looking down with a kind of iron fastidiousness—detachment and an inquisitorial eye

The sides of the stove were of that enamelled, speckled green—they had a lustre all of their own, in the shadowy, cool depths of the kitchen, and she made the most of them. She flicked the little lace ruffs of the curtains aside—as if she was determined that sunlight, more of it even than usual, would have its way in here—despite the darkness . . . within.

On the shelf above the stove there was the tea canister, a poky browning yellow with red letters like hoops—she curled the duster round its soft bulge, and did the same to the coffee tin, with its bold, sticky-red lid—there was a little wooden carving of a sea-captain, with a great squiggled, foaming beard, and an eternal twinkle in his eye, under his thoroughbred cap. She had trouble looking at it, and stared for a moment at the lawn outside the window, behind the little white sea-wall, instead.

She ran the hand-mop up and down the silvery trench of the sink, until it gleamed, its flanks and its rounded edges feeling like antique silver under the balls of her fingers. The table was neatly set with the cheese cruet and the salt-and-pepper shakers. She ran the duster all the way round, until the wood came up and gave her an amber flash, like a signal, as the sun broke in over the top of the sea-wall. The sideboard, cluttered with glasses, would have to be sorted out . . . later.

She stopped, in the doorway, and gave the air a last little flick, from her waist. If it hadn't been for the sunlight, it would have been like descending . . . into a cave. There was one drop of water, hovering, pearly, under the snout of the tap.

In the hall, the first thing she saw was a great pool of sunlight, wavering, under the staircase. When she moved past it, to the other side, on her way to the back door, it seemed, she turned, involuntarily, and looked back, through it, towards the kitchen door.

She found that her fingers were squinching up the little sandy cloth—as if there was . . . pain. Because by looking through the wavering, bread-shaped hollow where the sun had slipped down through the banisters, she saw . . . her fingers folded the cloth. Her knuckles felt as if they would go over, for ever.

She tramped, stolidly, to the back door, and looked out. The clothes-hoist, its galvanized spokes, still, in a streaming circle on the lawn, where the sun was . . . revolving. To the right, at the back of the fence, the rose-bush—three blooms, rigid, pointing at the sea, where the horizon lay low, behind the slope where the track ran off to the dunes.

She turned again, and faced it . . . she saw him, in a single glittering flash that spread the bread-light on either side as if his image was swimming through it, to get at her—his spectacles glinting, something in a little pearly-glassed dish in his hands, a look of immense . . . gladness on his face. For her. The cloth lay in her hands, like a wounded butterfly.

She put her right hand to her brow. And creased it, once or twice. Moving. She must keep moving, or it would never get done. The price of her failure . . .

She went left, into the sitting room—and there the sun poured through the big flat window, attacking things . . . the crystal vase shot up like a . . . lighthouse. On the window sill itself there were three little gold model cars, tootling along, their snouts looking cheerful . . . but surprised, in the flood of white light lying stark and still on their little crusty, almond-coloured seats.

The big armchair with the flat tartan cushion looked like something nestling in a broad valley—bagpipes, heather, the tufts of pinkness waving in sleet—the green ash-tray, shaped like a scallop—the hollow under the chair, where the sunlight had poked its way after slipping off the coffee table—where his slippers could be reached, without . . . thinking. On the mantelpiece over the fireplace, the photos in their heavy chrome frames. She could concentrate, however, at the moment, only on the carpet.

On the sideboard in the middle of the wall, flush with the flood of sunlight, the wedding photo. With nothing but a sea of storms possible on the sunny uplands of the carpet, she made for that as if it was a beacon meant for her hand. She launched herself into the golden wastes . . .

When she got to it, she pulled up, and stood for a minute, breathing. She trailed the cloth backwards and forwards over the brilliant amber surface—a tiny ridge of feathery dust was pushed up at the fringe of the cloth. She looked round, helpless, for somewhere to . . . leave it. The sun was striking across her shoulders, her back, like a huge . . . comfortless hand.

Behind the wedding photo, which she had no hope of looking at—it was simply a square bracket of metal, cold silvery stuff with fluted edges, that lay for the moment in the back of her consciousness like a mine—there was a row of blue-crystal goblets, upended—the sun struck at their rims, and flowed up, in little clouds of indigo—with bitter white traces, up, towards the handles.

And then, in a row beside them four whisky glasses, which he had won . . . she thought . . . the very last time he played golf. They had brilliant spiked sharpnesses, little diamonds dented into the glass—when had she last seen him drinking whisky?

But this, this unconscious method of calling up facts—it helped her. She no longer felt the victim of the sun, like a floodlight, all this brightness . . . the cold sheerness of merciless glass—its spears of light wandering, with tricks, into all sorts of nooks and crannies—cluttering up the walls. So she turned.

The baby pine, which he had planted inside the twin white railings of the fence, looked like a little lonely, green figure at the bottom of the lawn, waiting for someone to come by. When she turned, just a fraction, to find whatever comfort there might be in the bald black sheen of her own leather chair, she caught sight of the duster—a little sandy fringe of it, curled in her fingers, in the bottom of the mirror over the fireplace. She saw the red tips of her knuckles—as if she was holding . . . stones. She walked away, with more conviction, from the sunlight, the glass, and the photo—as if she might survive after all.

Out on the patio the two little white cast-iron chairs were sitting in a breeze, their white shoulders looking like smoothed ice-cream—beyond them the sea rolled, the horizon lay like a spur to the west. She walked over to the little table, and stared at the little flowery hole in the middle. Where his glass had once got stuck. She smiled, without knowing it—without feeling the foreign crease spreading, away from her teeth—how puzzled he had looked. And how he had wrestled it, while she sat back, with her hand over her mouth, laughing . . . genteelly.

A healing process? Warmth—she looked up, at the heights over the sea—there was a tiny spiral of cloud, lying on its back—spinning, secretly. But the rest was a great dazzle of blue—one of those days when you could have put your hands up and washed in it—it made her think of the roses, and their red furled petals hanging in it like dense jewels.

She looked at the table again. They used to sit out here, all the way into autumn, as if they were part of the noise on the beach. The little duster might have been swallowed in the glare from the concrete. She went back inside, feeling, for a moment, almost a sense of . . . automatic . . . repose. She turned left for the stairs.

At the top, where the landing spread to the bedroom on the left, and the spare room in front, she hesitated. She pulled the duster gently up under her bosom, and held it there, and stood, at the head of the stairs, as if . . . listening. She looked down at the wide brown stained planks running away to the walls with their rich, oiled . . . eagerness. A few spots of sunlight lay on them here and there like . . . treacle. She suddenly heard the emptiness of the rest of the house. As if to protect herself from it, she drew the little cloth closer to her breast—her knuckles felt like pellets—hard things buried under her skin. She stood with her left hand on the railing—the oily planks seemed to be swimming up at her—for a moment, she had to think of nothing . . . but breathing.

Outside the front door the sea creaked once or twice as it took its hands from the rocks, and swept leisurely past. She could have sworn she heard the shingles rising, and flopping over, in a great grey sheet . . . like coins.

The rooms on either side spread out under her fingers—hollowness, the sunlight flickering against the walls—like shells—the breeze swirling across the lawn, tickling the roses. A great river of sunlight ran to the front door. She took her hand from the railing, pushed the little duster out in front of her . . . as if . . .

Determined to get on with it, like any other housekeeping day, she stemmed herself for the door—she took the two necessary steps, and pushed it gently aside.

There was the bed—the big beige pillow where she had greeted him with her clinking tray for so many mornings—the smell—his white, creaking laugh—the window to the left of the pillow.

She stepped inside, took a breath, felt her bosom rising—held her neck stiff—if only . . . there was iron . . .

She held the cloth out, and tried to ignore the sweep of the room itself—how impossible it was to adjust—but it must be done—it must be—every day she faced it feeling like this—would only be worse—it must be treated, at first, as only a minor handicap. And then time . . . time. She looked at her shoes—and stepped forward.

But when she lifted her head, she saw the chair—where he had sat in front of the window, for the week or two before . . . Its brown ledge of leather shining at her over the two pearled spokes—the feeble little flap of the rug—

And she suddenly felt the terrible pain—a great gap of parting opening under her side—and behind her the hollow rooms of the house marched like gongs to the sea—she caught her breath—it would come—she would fall—it would always be like this—and she hunched, slowly towards the floor, letting what agony had taken so many days to rise, to break, to let itself . . . free . . .

And as she looked at the floor, where the echoing empty rooms reached up to her from underneath, and the sunlight flooded in its cold active indifference through the rest of the house—she looked up, to see if she could bear it—and saw the chair, the soft light from the sea over its shoulder, and heard a great wave, a great rush of greyness and shingles, parting, carrying the weight of something, forever, behind the cliff, the house, and the shadow under the stairs.

## SIMON GIPSON

### magnus

magnus the old grey cat  
smiled at me yesterday  
I don't know why he did but  
uncle henry says it's  
because he cares

uncle henry should know  
magnus never smiles at him  
that's why we'll bury magnus  
tomorrow under the flint

# DOROTHY FEATHERSTONE PORTER

## From the Nashville Poems

For me  
    religion  
        was an erotic affair—

I was more aware  
    of my hand  
    or my face  
than the Bible  
    or the toothsome  
    clan—

it was pure camp-fire;  
    the scent  
    of crushed leaves—  
it was a dark room.

Swing Low, sweet canoe,  
    thudding across the river  
now, lookee who . . .  
my baby-brown eyes  
    are flashing hymns to—  
paddling  
    with my heart  
    dipping  
    in n' out  
        of all the love passages  
        in the New Testament  
my jeans  
    soaked through  
shivering wet  
    turning around  
to caress  
    my redeemer's  
cold foot.

If sleeping/eating romantic love  
    was accepting Christ  
well, I was saved, *saved*, sister—  
    rolled and tumbled  
    in the wild, dangerous stream  
    of heaven  
    on earth.

W. GREEN

## Reunion

1.  
A family wedding;  
watching each other warily,  
shifting memories like counters.

Noting the tell-tale signs  
of bones like glass breaking  
beneath the flesh . . .

Breathing in each other's bruised  
silences uneasily, so carefully  
unwilling to disturb

this delicate balance of things.

2.

Cousins I haven't seen in ages.

All older now;  
wives, husbands:  
companions like bookends.

Someone recalls me to  
long, empty streets  
& the darkness blowing;  
stories, echoes; Spirits  
of the Wind . . .

Three of us then,  
roaring boys;  
& now one of us is dead.

One week older than me.  
What could I say to him now,  
nearing thirty, fearful?

3.

I feel myself, imaginary,  
straining against darkness.

Footsteps echoing  
in the hushed, empty rooms  
of my history.

Coldness. Silence.

Two aunts gone,  
others going.  
I taste the air, hungrily.  
My heart aches.

## ROSEMARY DOBSON

### The Eater of the Pomegranate Seeds

That girl in a dress like a campanula  
Which is to say, a bell-shaped flower,  
The dress swinging as a bell swings  
Back and away in time with her hastening, hastening.

And its colours in dips and squares and pieces:  
Loam brown, the crumbling of earth,  
Black, of an underworld blackness,  
Campanula blue, the shreds of sky in a storm.

The door opened, the high-rise building swallowed her,  
But it was really the earth that swallowed her.  
Dis, Dis, commanding Come. She went down to darkness  
Swinging like a bell-flower, bright with pieces of sky.

# JAMES HARRISON

## Icebreakers

Each argument jammed Dad tight  
as our wardrobe drawers. Mum would rummage  
among old wedding vows,  
drooping from coathangers . . . and you, mothlike  
you'd flit around those silent rooms

in search of a cocoon. Or skipping stones  
on the river, you'd prod dead eels  
dribbling over sandy bibs. Later, as gulls  
clustered turban-like above trawlers,  
you carved up the sky

on park swings. Each day clocked on  
for its shift: Dad attacking garden snails  
and Mum

poring over tealeaf scripts, eyes  
brittle as boiled eggs. You can only wonder

why parents linger in arctic zones: bitterness  
always avalanching into deep fiords.  
Probably you just kept bobbing up  
like driftwood  
on their deserted shores.

# NEA MALLAS

## The Generations of Cain

There were the usual  
after-school confrontations,  
& I am here at 2 a.m.  
drinking your brandy  
— the beer ran out hours ago —  
& sitting in the only chair so  
you're stuck with the milkcrate again

telling me about Borges, Cavan,  
your Scottish childhood,  
wind rattles the skylight you  
once almost fixed,  
from an uncurtained window  
I look down on cold lights  
the damp empty street.

Half-finished paintings lean against walls,  
the desk too cluttered to  
accommodate the typewriter  
which is on the floor  
with papers, poems,  
a woman's fur coat makes a sensuous cover  
for the unmade bed.

We talk of snowblindness, Velasquez,  
assure each other there is  
no such thing as love, your once-  
expensive sweater is out at the elbows  
I wonder if I'm mad.

Later I will cut lunches  
in an ordered kitchen,  
lauding yesterday's man of the match,  
commending the recorder player's  
earnest french carol.  
Somehow they know their gifts fall short  
& they will go away, guilty children,  
bearing on their foreheads kisses  
that leave a cold, indelible mark.

Gatsby Who?

What I'm trying to say is  
he was a famous writer & besides  
you might do it later in school  
— the book of course —  
what do I mean do it?  
I mean read it, study it,  
if you don't stop talking  
we'll miss half the picture  
no I'm not giving a résumé  
yes there's blood at the end  
what do you think of Daisy?  
it's cynical to talk that way at twelve  
Ashanti only got two stars  
you're not missing a thing  
must you boys click your rubik cubes  
so energetically? okay you liked  
Butch Cassidy better will you please  
be quiet? I suppose men do perspire  
more than women it's something  
biological. okay it's foul.  
what's so great about Gatsby? well,  
it's obvious isn't it?  
no I didn't do the charleston  
the blood comes later just be patient  
why did he marry her?  
because he loved her I suppose  
well there are men like that  
they're immature

yes you repeated in infants  
because you were immature  
will you stop grinding those cubes  
yes you only threw pencils at the teacher  
let's not start that again  
you think Myrtle's a dumb name?  
you're glad he belted her in the teeth?  
you don't like her teeth. okay.  
no it's not God it's Dr. Eckleburg  
it's slack that he messed up the fender  
running over her yes  
I can't hear the TV while you're giggling  
yes it's enthralling pow-pow-pow  
(how many bullets?) yes I can see  
the body twitching  
you don't have to demonstrate  
the rubber raft has had it  
(you would think that foul yes)  
the swimming pool's a mess  
the goldfish aren't *in* the swimming pool  
you don't pay attention  
yes Robert Redford has moles on his face  
nobody's perfect, it's immaterial  
who gets the car & the motor boat  
wasn't that a sad ending?  
no it's not a true story  
yes ugg boots smell foul I told you  
to clean them, no I don't know  
what happened to the dog.  
what's so great about Gatsby?

# RORY HARRIS

## house divorce

you go back to the house  
where you shared your years

you stand on the edge of entrance  
knock  
& no-one's there

you enter  
& it all comes back

you could imagine  
the gurgling of your siblings  
as they sleep  
sounds purer than speech  
growth that  
may have held you together

you walk through the rooms  
they occupy you  
with what has been

they surround you  
with what they have become

you file the years  
leave  
& recover your footsteps  
in someone else's house

PAT JACOBS

## Landscape

The house was quiet without Lila. Up to the last moment she'd been tidying up, telling him about watering the hanging baskets on the patio, about the ferns. In the last hour or so, he had begun to feel a slight excitement, an eagerness for her to be gone.

At the airport she had clung to him embarrassingly.

"You'll be alright?"

"Of course I will, it's only three weeks"

"I wish you were coming Harry"

"You and Sylvia'll have a better time without me"

He sat at the kitchen table to look at the paper, but couldn't get interested, he folded it and put it on the cupboard, aware of the immaculate order he had to maintain. He wandered out onto the patio. The begonias made a nice show, their bronze leaves crisp and fleshy. Muted light filtered through the green plastic roofing. It gave a hot-house effect which he liked. He looked around. It was a good job, the last of the renovations and extensions he had done over the years. Lila had chosen the cane lounge with the bright floral cushions to go with the begonias. Since it had been finished, at the beginning of summer, she had insisted on having tea out there. It wasn't that comfortable. He preferred sitting in the kitchen, with his plate on the table, but he didn't say anything. It had happened before — when they did the lounge — for awhile she had served coffee there after dinner.

Late in the afternoon he went out to put the sprinklers on the lawn. The smooth turf which covered the steeply sloping frontage was a rich green, perfectly maintained. He was proud of it. They were close to the coast. The salt and the wind made it difficult but he kept at it. It was like a curved blanket, durable, tight fitting. The last few summers though, it had begun to get him down. The weather pattern seemed to have changed. There had been water restrictions two years in a row and that meant he or Lila were always hand-watering. It was never-ending. He'd made inquiries about a bore, but they were on top of a hill, the watertable was too far down. It wasn't worth it.

He left the sprinklers and walked down the hill towards the angling club. He'd have time for a couple of beers while the lawn was soaking up the water. He hadn't been to the club for awhile. These days, the place was full of people he didn't know. Lila liked to go on Friday nights when they served food and had music. He didn't like it. The noise . . . the strange faces. He had been a foundation member of the club. It had been only a tin shed on the beach in those days, just somewhere to keep their gear. Ken Phillips greeted him loudly as he walked through the door.

"How's it going Harry?"

"Not bad Ken. How's yourself?"

"Been fishing lately?"

"No . . . hardly worth taking the boat out for a few whiting."

A few beers later, he felt better, more cheerful and greeted Colin Armstrong jovially.

"Col, how are you boy?"

"Harry, you old bastard, where've you been?"

"Oh, up the hill, same as ever."

"How's Lila?"

"Just sent her off to Singapore for a few weeks."

"Half your luck." Colin's full ruddy face creased with laughter.

"What are you going to do with yourself? Why don't you come up to Shark Bay with me and a few of the boys?"

It sounded good. He'd get away for awhile. Do a bit of fishing, a bit of drinking.

"When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow, about seven. We're just taking it easy, there's no hurry."

He couldn't go. Couldn't leave the place, the garden, the lawn. Not without time to make arrangements. He drank deeply from the glass of beer, finishing it.

"No, can't Ken. As a matter of fact, I've got a job on. I'm going to dig out the lawn."

He heard himself say it — not believing — yet letting his voice go on, committing him.

"Jesus! What are you doing that for?"

"Ah well . . . you know . . . Too much time goes in looking after it. Never use the bloody thing. A man's up half the night watering."

"Get the wife on to it," Ken chipped in. They all laughed.

"I'll tell you what Harry, a mate of mine's got a truck and bobcat. He'd have it out in no time. I'll give you his number."

Colin groped in his pocket for a piece of paper and finally wrote the number on the flap of his cigarette packet.

"Give him a ring when you go home," Colin mouthed at him, his lips loose and slack with the beer. "Tell him you're my mate. He'll do the right thing by you."

Harry took the piece of paper and carefully put it in his pocket. He'd had enough beer. The lawn would be flooded at the bottom of the slope. On the way home he took notice of the new houses that had been built. Big lavish places, dark brick and timber. None of them had lawns. Some were rolled gravel, or succulents left to run wild, or native stuff. Shrubs and trees with rocks and bark chips and that sort of thing.

He slept deeply and woke to the noise of someone knocking on the front door. For a moment he couldn't think what was happening, whether he should be at work, where was Lila. Then he remembered . . . phoning Colin's mate. Telling him he wanted the lawn dug out . . . being definite.

"Dug out — carted away." They'd discussed rates.

For a moment he wanted to ignore it. He wasn't sure. He wished he'd never gone down to the club. He would've had more time to think about it. They'd always had the lawn, right to the edge of the road, covering the frontage boundary to boundary. He didn't know what he wanted to do with it. He had to think quick. Maybe he could tell the chap he'd changed his mind. Give him twenty dollars for his trouble. The knocking came again. He'd have to go on with it. He'd put in one of those native gardens, give the place a face-lift.

He pulled on pants and a shirt and went to open the door. He was a young chap.

"Harry Jordan?" he said thrusting his hand out, "I'm Joe Marchioro. Ready to dig her out?"

Harry nodded, leading the way across the porch. The lawn looked fresh and smooth. He must be mad to think of digging it out. As he moved ahead of Joe along the path, he reasoned with himself. There was still time. He could still tell him. But it was only a patch of lawn after all, too much bloody work. He'd take a bit off the slope, he'd always wanted to do that and go to one of those native nurseries and buy up some shrubs and trees. It would save him money in the long run.

"Right." Joe stopped near the truck with the machine poised on the tray.

"We'll rip it out, eh? I'll take it down about a foot, make sure we get rid of the roots. You want me to cart it away don't you?"

Harry nodded, rubbing his chin with the back of his hand.

"Bloody nice lawn," Joe said, kicking it with his boot.

"Seems a shame . . ."

Harry lit a cigarette, feeling queasy — the beer, he wasn't used to it now — and he'd had no breakfast. He decided he didn't like Joe, he had too much to say.

"While you're at it," he said firmly to Joe, "I'd like you to take a bit extra off the slope, flatten it out a bit."

"Righto," Joe said and pulled himself up on to the truck. The engine of the bobcat started with a roar, scraping the metal tray, the hydraulic rams squealing. He backed the machine off and swung it sharply around. It seemed to Harry that Joe should pause, that he should consider how he was going to do it. But he dropped the bucket immediately and dug deeply into the green verge, cutting away a wide chunk of turf, lifting it, exposing the bare soil beneath.

The man and the machine moved and turned, lifting and cutting. The lawn came up easily. Deep green, fresh and moist from the night air, tearing away, dropping into the truck. Harry stood back, watching. It didn't take long before the hill was bare. Loose dry sand spilled around his feet. Joe stopped the machine and climbed down. Diesoline fumes and the aftermath of sound were dominant temporarily. He lit a cigarette and bent down, picking up a handful of sand. Slowly he let it trickle through his fingers, looking around at what he'd done.

"I reckon you might be in trouble," he said to Harry.

It confirmed the dullness that Harry felt in his head. The dullness that was surely the few beers, or sleeping in late when he was used to getting up at 6 — it had to be. But all the same he turned away from Joe, saying as he moved down the path

"Like a cup of tea? I'll put the kettle on."

Joe followed him through the door, stamping to free his shoes of sand. Harry was surprised to find the kitchen dark, a cup and plate on the sink. The bread and the half-eaten meal still where he had left them the night before. He had forgotten that Lila wasn't there. He filled the kettle and turned the hotplate on, clumsily brushing crumbs from the bench top.

"Like a piece of bread?" he said, his back to Joe.

"No thanks, just a cup of tea." He could feel the man's curiosity, his frank appraisal of his surroundings.

"Nice place you've got here."

"Not bad," said Harry.

"Married?"

"Yeah, the wife's gone to Singapore for a few weeks."

“She’s going to get a bloody shock when she gets home isn’t she.” He grinned at Harry as he joined him at the table with the tea. Harry sat silently, drinking his tea, thinking he didn’t like the man, even if he was Colin’s mate. Thinking it was a good thing he had his holiday pay in the house. He could pay him cash and get rid of him. He would enjoy showing the man his wallet crammed with notes. But first there was something he wanted to ask him.

“What did you mean, I could be in trouble?”

“Well, you’ve got a bloody sandhill out there. It’s going to take a fair sort of retaining wall to hold it back. A few good westerlies and you’ll have the whole lot in the house. What are you going to do with it?”

“I’m going to put in some native stuff.”

“Oh, yeah,” Joe said, finishing off his tea.

“Well, you’ve got my number. A mate of mine has started a native nursery at Two Rocks. When you’re ready, give us a ring. I might be able to do a deal for you.”

“I might be in that, I’ll let you know.” He wasn’t ready to think of planting. He wanted Joe to go so he could get outside and look at it by himself. He was impatient.

“How much do I owe you?” he said, ending the conversation.

“One hundred and fifty bucks, that’s what we agreed, right?”

Harry went to the kitchen drawer and took his wallet out. Slowly he counted out the twenty dollar notes, aware of Joe’s interest.

“There you are. I’ll let you know about the plants.”

“Right.”

They went out together. Harry politely standing by while Joe loaded the bobcat on the piled remains of the lawn. Then he was gone and at last Harry could look.

It was worse than he had thought. A rough swirl of sand, tumbled down. The steep slope reduced, shapeless. It had taken a lot of his time that lawn. He kicked at the sand which had spilled over the concrete path. Bone dry, loose, nothing in it. The tyres of the bobcat had pushed up rough furrows. It was a bad job, not like he’d imagined. In his mind he had seen a smooth rounded slope easy to replant. He had had a confused picture of it covered with trees and shrubs, with a few granite rocks here and there and the ground in-between covered with creepers. He tried to remember what the block had looked like when they had bought it. It had been covered in thick growth, a big old tuart in the centre — that had taken some getting out — Lila had picked wildflowers, he remembered that. It had no shape now, that’s what was wrong with it. He got a shovel and began energetically to clear the loose spill off the pathway, enjoying the activity, the morning sun on his back. It took him a little over two hours to do the path, the driveway and the verge. He straightened up, wiping the dampness from his face and neck with his shirt. The sand was now confined by the concrete edges and the roadway.

He went inside to get a drink, tracking sand with him onto the polished tiles of the entry — he’d sweep it up later. The exercise had made him hungry. He cut slices of meat off a cooked joint Lila had left and buttered a slice of bread. He sat at the table to eat it. He’d better get himself organized. There was no doubt he’d have to shape it up a bit. Do it with the rake, smooth out the furrows the machine had left. Maybe it would look better if he shovelled it back further, but that would increase the fall again and he wasn’t going to put in a retaining wall. No, he’d have to smooth it out, keep it low. He ate the food hurriedly, anxious to get at it.

He worked steadily all afternoon, feeling the sun burn through his shirt. When he stopped, it looked neater, but it was still just a pile of sand. Disheartened, he left it. He took a plate of meat and tomatoes into the loungeroom, too tired to clean up the growing mess in the kitchen. He sat watching the news and weather. The barometer was falling. If there was a shower or two it wouldn't hurt. It would damp the sand down, make it easier to work. He slept deeply and didn't hear the wind during the night. It blew steadily from the ocean, fresh and salty. By morning the air was still again. The sky clear and empty of cloud.

Harry couldn't believe it. During the night the slope seemed to have turned liquid. All the rough edges were gone. It seemed reduced even further, to have flowed subtly forward. The path was covered again. The late January sun burned clearly, drawing the sweat out of his body, heating his blood. He shovelled until he was forced to stop and rest. He finished clearing the path and driveway then stood looking at it, thinking of what Joe had said. Only the path separated the house from the sand. He felt oppressed, as though the mass might somehow lurch forward and smother him. He would have to move it back a few feet. It would be easy with a machine, but he wouldn't get Joe back again. He decided he'd do it himself. It was mid-afternoon when he stopped, too exhausted to continue. The sand followed him into the house, dropping from his shoes and clothing unnoticed. He made hot sweet tea and ate some of the bread he had left uncovered. He didn't feel hungry, just tired. He slept in the cane chair in the kitchen, hot and uncomfortable, unable to stir himself to lie down.

When he awoke it was almost 7 o'clock. The house was shadowed, filled with warm still air. He got up, feeling his joints stiff and sore, and put the kettle on. Flies clung lazily to the food scraps littering the bench top. He would have to clean it up, cups and plates were accumulating. Clumsily he bundled them into the sink. He took his tea into the loungeroom and turned the television on. The bland voice related what had happened during the day. He wasn't interested. The barometer was still right down. There was a cyclone forming off the coast, near Shark Bay, a bit further south than usual. Colin and the boys would be heading for home. The pretty girl was saying there would be further reports if it developed. They usually petered out before they got this far south. He went outside. The sea was blue-black, a low bank of cloud the same colour, banded the horizon. It looked as though there was some weather on the way. He looked again at what he had done during the day. It was hardly noticeable. Dispirited, he turned his back on it and went inside. During the night he tossed and turned, getting up once to look through the window. There was no wind, just the warm stillness. In the moonlight, the mass was soft and white, almost graceful. He returned to bed and slept.

He was up early next morning, determined to get it under control. He cooked himself eggs and bacon and drank several cups of tea. It was overcast outside and he was thankful, the sun had tired him the day before. He began immediately, rhythmically shovelling, ignoring the stiffness, working it out of his muscles. It felt good. It was some time before he became aware of the change. The humidity had increased sharply, his body was wet with perspiration. The clouds were thickening, piling up, tinged with bronze from a hidden sun. He threw the shovel down and went into the house. He twisted the knob on the transistor radio backwards and forwards, impatient to find a weather report. There was a cyclone alert on. He'd known there would be. He sat at the table listening, drumming his fingers. It was expected to hit the metropolitan area about 4 o'clock, gusts of up to one hundred kilometres were expected. He turned it off and sat on at the table, looking through the window. There wasn't much he could do, except hope that it would veer off, or peter out into a bit of rain. He got up and went

out to the patio, surprised to see it littered with leaves and rubbish. It must have blown in the other night. The begonias were wilting, he'd forgotten to water them since Lila left. Lila! He hadn't thought of her. He emptied water into the baskets, letting it run over. He unhooked them and moved them and the furniture to the far end, near the kitchen wall. It would be some protection. He put the shovel and rake away, there was no point . . . He would wait.

It began to blow about 2 o'clock, slightly north-west, strengthening steadily. Occasional gusts drove the particles of sand sharply at the glass. Despite himself he would draw back. Runnels of sand formed and disappeared on the window ledge. The air was dense with its movement. He began to feel uneasy.

Harry sat in the darkening lounge room. The closed house was stuffy. He could smell the stale sweat on his clothes and body. He rubbed at the stubble on his chin. He had about six hundred dollars left from his holiday pay. He decided to get someone in, shift the sand back and . . . landscape it. Do the whole lot. The profusion of firms listed surprised him, he hadn't realised it was such a big business. They all offered what he needed. Lawns removed, landscaping, clearing up, garden rocks. He chose two at random and arranged for them to call and give him a quote.

It was embarrassing, the following morning, when the first man arrived. He hadn't realised the sand had piled in so thickly. It slid forward as he opened the door, crested with leaves and debris. They picked their way around it. The morning was clear and soft after the storm and Harry felt confident, eager to get on with it. A utility, brightly sign-painted, stood in the driveway. GARDEN-WORLD it said, Landscaping Specialists. The man moved on ahead, looking around, then turned back to Harry.

"You want the lot done?"

"Yes, that's right," Harry said, "native stuff, you know . . . a few trees, shrubs, ground cover that sort of thing. Maybe a few rocks."

The man made calculations in a notebook.

"Well, Mr. Jordan, we'd need to use a front-end-loader for about two hours, to get it back into shape. I think it should be moved back about ten feet. You'd need a retaining wall of course." He looked at Harry for confirmation.

"Planting would need to be fairly dense, because of the location. I'd recommend using some of the junipers, they're hardier than the native varieties."

He talked on about species and it pleased Harry.

"Stone retaining walls of course are pretty expensive, looks much better of course. If you like I'll give you a price for rock and sleepers?" Harry nodded.

"Well, complete landscaping with rock retaining wall would be approximately \$1800.00." A disbelieving coldness filled Harry's stomach. "How much?" he asked stupidly.

"\$1800.00," the man said. "Of course, the timber retaining wall would be cheaper," he calculated again. "With sleepers, it would cost you \$1300.00."

He waited for Harry's response.

It was impossible. He had no savings other than his superannuation and insurance. They'd spent a lot of money on the house and then Lila's trip . . . It was out of the question.

"I'll think it over and let you know," he said. "I've got another chap coming out to give me a quote."

"Sure, no trouble. Give us a ring when you've made up your mind."

The second firm sent a landscaping consultant who bewildered Harry. He kept on repeating that the full co-operation of the client was a necessity in coastal landscaping and asked Harry if he was prepared to spend about \$3000.00. Harry said he wasn't and the consultant agreed it might be over-capitalising.

That night he couldn't sleep. The white softness outside his window drove him to anger. It lay there waiting, passive, mocking him. He thought of Lila . . . he'd been so busy . . . It seemed as though she'd been gone for months. He discovered it didn't matter. He lay there thinking about it. He must have felt differently once, or why had he married her? He tried to remember how he'd felt then. She'd been good-looking, well-shaped. He could remember wanting to get his hands on her breasts when they went swimming with the crowd. She hadn't let him make love to her until they were married. Maybe that's all it had been. Anyway, they got on well enough. Better, since he'd knocked off the beer. He hadn't wanted to be tied down. She'd done all right out of it anyway. A nice home, car. A trip overseas, a bloody landscaped front garden. He could just hear her.

"While I was in Singapore, Harry had the front landscaped . . ."  
Stupid fucking bitch. A man worked his guts out and got nothing for it — nothing for it. He flung the sheet back and sat up, groping for a cigarette.

He fanned his anger against her in the next few days. He knew it was unreasonable but he connected her with the unpleasant hollowness he had inside him. It was like a hurt, an ache . . . something she had done to him, or not done for him.

He phoned Joe, although he hated doing it. He came the next day and was tactless. Harry said nothing. It cost him another one hundred and fifty dollars to push the sand up again and one hundred and ten dollars for a load of sleepers to build the wall. While he was waiting for them to arrive he had attempted to clean up the house. He'd washed the dishes and left them to drain on the sink. There was sand and dust everywhere but there didn't seem much point in cleaning it up until he was finished. He was surprised to find the begonias and ferns had died. In a few days they had withered to nothing. He moved the furniture back, but he took a slightly malicious pleasure in the destruction of Lila's patio. It was all she thought about — How Things Looked.

He had planned how he would manage the wall of sleepers, but he hadn't realized how heavy they were. He kept at it, laboriously levering them into place. Falling into bed at night exhausted. When it was finished, he wasn't happy with it. It was angular, rigid and he had wanted flowing lines, naturalness. But the sand was contained and his relief was enormous. For a few days he did nothing more. He slept and watched television, indifferent to what was happening outside. The path was always covered with sand now but he didn't care. He could almost have left it as it was, just the bare sand, held back by the wall.

It was difficult to stir himself to go and see about the plants. He was tentative when he talked to the nurseryman. He was no longer sure. In the end he told the man how big an area he had to cover, where it was and left it to him to select them. He decided against the bark chips, even though the man advised him to use them until the ground cover took over. It saved him eighty dollars. Driving home slowly, with the trees and shrubs swaying behind him in the trailer, he recovered his spirits. It was almost finished. In a year or two, it would be thick, grown over. He had flowering gums and grevilleas, it would be alright.

He stopped at the shopping centre on the way home and bought some fried chicken. He was hungry. Somehow the days had slipped away from him. It was Wednesday, only three days before Lila came back. With any luck, he'd have it all tidied up by tomorrow night. Maybe he'd see Colin, take the boat out on Friday.

It didn't take him long to do the planting. He had positioned them first as the nurseryman had suggested. But it was no good. It didn't look anything. There was too much sand showing. There weren't enough shrubs. He went inside and washed his face and hands, changed his shirt. It was easy to arrange a per-

sonal loan at the bank for Five hundred dollars. In the morning he left early with the trailer and went to the nursery. He selected the shrubs himself, reading the labels, choosing what seemed most likely to survive. He bought the bark chips and ordered the moss rock. He argued with the man about delivery.

"I want it by Friday."

"Sorry mate, can't help you."

"I'll try somewhere else."

"Suit yourself, it's not easy to get these days, not much left around."

In the end he'd had to settle for Saturday morning.

He was waiting for the truck to arrive with the rock. He had wanted it all along. It was an extravagance but he no longer cared. He had chosen them himself at the yard. They'd been near water. The dark rich loam they'd been torn from still clung to the dull underside. The exposed surface was etched with lichen. Some of the shrubs were crushed manoeuvring the rocks into position, he'd have to replace them later. It was better with the rocks.

He was spreading the bark chips when he heard the phone ringing inside. It rang repeatedly until he was forced to answer. For a moment he didn't recognize Lila's voice, the anxious querulous tone.

"Harry, I thought you would be here to meet us. Why aren't you here?"

It shocked him. He had forgotten to check when the flight would arrive. He wasn't ready. He couldn't leave now. He didn't want her home yet.

"Harry?" her tone was hurt, anxious.

"Yes, well, I can't leave now Lila. You'll have to get a taxi. I'll see you when you get home."

He put the receiver down before she could answer him. He hurried outside. There was still so much to do. On his hands and knees he moved between the shrubs spreading the bark chips. The anger began to burn in him again. He had done it for her. But it wasn't true. He knew he had done it for himself — and it hadn't worked. He didn't want to see Lila, didn't want to be here when she arrived. He stood up and brushed the sand from his clothing and began to walk down the hill toward the club. He didn't use the boat much but he always kept it ready. Unhurriedly he moved it out and into the water. He could see a thin line of white where the waves were breaking on the outer reef and he headed for it steadily. There was a light fresh breeze and he held his face up to it thankfully. It eased the uneven pounding in his head. On the outside of the reef there was a wreck. He had discovered it years ago. He had never told anyone about it. He had kept it to himself. He had intended, one day, to do something about it. He wondered, as he had in the past, if there had been loss of life.

As he swung the tiller to run parallel with the reef, he could see the soft outline of the coastal dunes. They looked easy. He thought of Joe, a know-all. He didn't begrudge him the Three hundred dollars. He'd been right. He should have left it the way it was.

DIANA BRYDON

## Barbara Hanrahan's Fantastic Fiction

Of all the new novelists to appear in Australia in the 1970s, Barbara Hanrahan is one of the most unusual. Her work challenges conventional orthodoxies, both of out-dated social realism and currently fashionable metafiction, to compel a re-definition of the fantastic as a contemporary genre. Tzvetan Todorov defines the fantastic as arising from "that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event".<sup>1</sup> Such is the central situation in Hanrahan's last four novels—before *Dove*—where neither her characters nor her readers can be sure of the ground they stand on. Australia, traditionally sceptical and secular in its concerns, may provide particularly fertile ground for fiction of this nature, because "faith in the supernatural must be undermined before the sensation of the fantastic can emerge".<sup>2</sup> If, as Eric Rabkin argues, fantasy is an escape from a predominant world view,<sup>3</sup> then Hanrahan's fiction offers an escape from what in *The Frangipani Gardens* she ironically terms "the real Australia"—the sun-burnt outback and its predominantly masculine concerns—but also from the predominant rationalism of the twentieth century. This paper proposes to examine the contribution Hanrahan's fiction makes to our understanding of the fantastic as a contemporary literary genre not only capable of adapting to the twentieth century and the advent of psychoanalysis, which Todorov thought would render it obsolete, but also particularly appropriate to a consideration of feminism's concerns with women's culture and experience.

Because Hanrahan is not yet well-known as a writer, some background information may prove helpful.<sup>4</sup> Born in Adelaide in 1939, she realised her dream of attending art school in London, still the great good place for her generation in South Australia, in 1962. After two years of study, she returned to Australia for a little over a year but was back in England by the end of 1965. At this time she first met the sculptor, Jo Steele, with whom she now lives, moving between Adelaide, Mexico and England. Throughout the sixties, she taught and worked successfully at her art. She was an established print-maker by 1967, when her grandmother's death triggered in her a compulsion to write. Adelaide, originally the city from which she only wished to escape, had slowly become during her years of exile a kind of dream world, an imaginary place, which with her grandmother's death receded even further into a disappearing past. *Scent of Eucalyptus*, her first, autobiographical book, attempts to recapture that past and to defy its death by recreating that lost world. *Sea-Green*, also semi-autobiographical, followed in 1974. After a three year break, the fantastic novels followed in quick succession—*The Albatross Muff* in 1977, *Where The Queens All Strayed* in 1978, *The Peach Groves* in 1979, and *The Frangipani Gardens* in 1980. With *Dove* (1982), I see her moving into a new, more realistic phase, deliberately drawing back from the pull of the fantastic.

A number of the circumstances of Hanrahan's life appear to have influenced her fictional preoccupations. The early death of her

father, the remarriage of her mother, her mongoloid aunt, her grandmother, and the strong female community they formed with her mother as a support in Hanrahan's early years, all recur, transformed, in her fiction and no doubt have influenced her decision to write in a gothic mode which focuses both on women and their fears and on the grotesque. But while it would be fascinating to consider the ways in which personal experience influences the handling of literary conventions in Hanrahan's work, this paper must limit its focus to her manipulations of the fantastic.

Todorov's definition of the fantastic stresses the primacy of perception: the fantastic involves "a special *perception* of uncanny events".<sup>5</sup> The network of themes he terms "themes of the self" seems most relevant to Hanrahan's fiction. Todorov summarizes the chief characteristics of this network as follows:

the principle we have discovered may be designated as the fragility of the limit between matter and mind. The principle engenders several fundamental themes: a special causality; pan-determinism; multiplication of the personality; collapse of the limit between subject and object; and lastly, the transformation of time and space. . . . We may further characterize these themes by saying that they essentially concern the structuring of the relation between man and the world. We are, in Freudian terms, within the *perception-consciousness* system. This is a relatively static relation, insofar as it implies no particular actions, but rather a position—a perception of the world rather than an interaction with it. The term *perception* is important here: works that are linked to this thematic network constantly emphasize the problematic nature of this perception, and especially that of the fundamental sense, sight . . . to the point where we might designate all of these themes as 'themes of vision'.<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly for a novelist who began as an artist, Hanrahan's imagination is essentially visual. Like Edith, one of the two central female characters in the antiphonal narrative of *The Albatross Muff*, she sees in pictures<sup>7</sup> and writes both to record and exorcise them. The intensity and accuracy of her seeing provide the greatest pleasure in a Hanrahan novel.

In the autobiographical *Scent of Eucalyptus*, she describes her younger self as being happiest when "a spy, a voyeur, an eavesdropper",<sup>8</sup> in-

trigued, like Patrick White's visionaries, by "the minute hidden facets of things". She writes:

I was forever walking with my head bent, looking at the ground. I saw an ant picking its way across the earth, the moss at the base of the well, the wings of the bee in the hyssop. I watched the shadow-play the rose leaves made on the fence. I saw the ant run under a leaf, over a stone, past seed-pods into a hole. I peered into the clipped stems of the valerian and saw green . . .<sup>12</sup>

The verbs characterizing her activities here stress looking, seeing, watching, peering; they are verbs of perception. A disgruntled Seymour describes Edith as a similar creature in *The Albatross Muff*: "Really, he said, it was starting to be a bore—her shadowing them constantly. She'd been there as a pair of eyes gazing through the barred pantry window . . . there, as a pale blur of face squashed against a diamond pane. . . ." (127). In *Where The Queens All Strayed* and *The Peach Groves*, Thea and Ida fulfil this same function: they watch everything with the distanced involvement of the voyeur. Although Tom plays a somewhat similar role in *The Frangipani Gardens*, he is less capable of distancing himself from what he sees. He is more the visionary, less the voyeur.

In each novel, these innocent child voyeurs are pitted against evil adult voyeurs. The difference lies in the nature of their perception. The child's innocent eye looks to celebrate and to know, whereas the adult's jaundiced eye looks to control, or failing that, to destroy. They see the same things, but interpret them differently, because the adults have become trapped by social definitions from which the child is still free. Thus Tom, in *The Frangipani Gardens*, sees Charlie as a protective saint, while most of their community sees Charlie as the evil Cockroach. The two adults capable of a more comprehensive vision, incorporating the knowledge of both good and evil, are the artists Zillah in *The Peach Groves* and Doll in *The Frangipani Gardens*, but they cannot maintain such intensity continuously. Finally, the reader herself must employ her own perceptions to form a comprehensive vision from the fragmentary perceptions recorded by the text.

The problematic nature of perception, then, is at the heart of all Hanrahan's fiction, determining its method as well as its matter. Frequently, her characters are more involved in perceiving the world than in interacting with it. Her central characters are observers rather than actors, and her secondary, complementary characters are acted upon rather than acting: Meg in *Queens*, Maud in *Groves* and Lou in *Gardens* are each compared to mechanical dolls. All these characters—both central and secondary—are presented as if caught in a series of stylized poses or choreographed in an elaborate ballet. They never develop; they merely reveal or learn what they already are. But what they see, and therefore allow us, their readers to see, is more important than what they do. Perception, more than action, provides the interest in these novels.

As a result, cause and effect are minimized. To recall Todorov's terminology, these novels are static. The stories proceed through a series of set pieces that recall paintings, slides or the formulas of fairy tales rather than the movement of the traditional *Bildungsroman*. *The Peach Groves*, in particular, is like a marvellous slide show displaying scene after scene in succession, with little connecting movement between them. Instead of the continuous flow of a movie, there are a series of posed scenes: Tempe floating in her pool, the incestuous brother and sister asleep together after the ball; even Maud's flight from that scene and the mad chase of the climax appear to be without movement.

Like so many of her characters, Hanrahan seems obsessed by the desire to arrest time, to recapture it and freeze it as it was forever. In her fiction, she is able to do this by transforming time into space, thus fulfilling yet another of Todorov's conditions for the fantastic. Oc's Calendar House in *The Peach Groves* is a perfect image for such a transformation. It has "365 windows to represent the days of the year, 52 rooms (the weeks of the year), 12 chimneys (the months), 7 entrances (the days of the week), and 4 staircases (the seasons)".<sup>9</sup> When time becomes trapped in space, it can no longer flow. Similarly, when history is represented by objects rather than events, it loses its kinetic qualities. Hanrahan weighs down her narratives with historically accurate details of the fashions in clothing, decor and prejudice

of her chosen periods, yet the effect is to create an aura of timelessness rather than of an historical novel as we usually conceive it. Within a given historical period, she works spatially, not chronologically. Her titles suggest the importance of objects or place over movement in her fictional worlds. Nouns predominate. Only *Where The Queens All Strayed* contains a verb and that suggesting an action which is already completed.

The interest of a Hanrahan narrative, then, lies less in the development of character or plot than in the way her style presents and moulds perception. Such a style tends to be visual, static, concerned with turning time into space and self-consciously aware of the problematic nature of perception. In her first book, *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, Hanrahan's younger self is both isolated and saved by the special qualities of her perception. From being the canker at the heart of the suburban dream, precisely because she could see more clearly and completely than those around her, she finds herself saved, she says,

by something awkward and unyielding, prickly and resisting deep inside. I was saved by the crudity that made me pee into the bath, and revel in the tar-black shit that poured out of me and stank . . . I fled to a dark world that came alive only at night, nurtured by the very inattention of those others (wireless sets and electricity for them) who bound the day. I became Daphne and froze into the berry bush, Narcissus and gazed into the well. I clung to the iron of the fence and surveyed the desolation of a lane where old Mr. Stone from next but one roamed mad, where strange boys smoked tobacco in the barrel-yard, where someone shed the sanitary pad that lay bloodied and wilting further down. (158-59)

It's all here: the transformation of the self into the other ("I became Daphne", the freezing into the berry bush); the escape from the predominant world view of the day-time into the liberating darkness of night, from the suburban fear of the physical to a whole-hearted embracing of it; the pose of voyeur; the narcissistic looking into the self and then out at a world that is perceived as a whole, where aberration and physical necessity are accepted. *The Scent of Eucalyptus* carries this way of seeing as far as a realistic narrative can. Day

and night time worlds must always remain opposed in such a narrative because there is no way, within this fictional world, of bringing together two selves which should be one. In her later books, after the comparatively weak *Sea-Green*, which I shall ignore here, Hanrahan discovered a more flexible form, that of fantastic fiction, in which her understanding of the problematic nature of perception as fundamental to identity could be explored more fully.

Her discovery was to substitute the hesitation of a fantastic narrative, created by the shifting ground rules of a fictional world, for the certainty of a realistic text. The epigraph to *The Peach Groves* suggests her method:

And just as on these mornings white silky mists rise and uncover some beauty, then smother it again and then again disclose it, I tried to lift that mist from my people and let them be seen and then to hide them again . . . .

Mansfield's calculated alternations between obscurity and clarity, covering and disclosure, as outlined here, correspond to Hanrahan's shiftings from dream to reality, from the inexplicable to the explicable, from the day to the night time worlds and back again in her best work.

The hesitations she creates in her readers cause them to reconsider the assumptions they bring to the reading of a text and to the interpretation of their world. By setting her stories in the past and presenting them in terms of gothic conventions, Hanrahan conditions her readers to accept her literary, "unrealistic" plots and the traditional assumptions about good and evil on which they depend. The hesitation is never about what is right or wrong; it is always about whether or not there is a rational explanation for what is happening. Whereas much twentieth century writing begins with the assumption that everything is absurd, Hanrahan begins with the idea of an ordered universe, which she then proceeds to undermine. She introduces taboos, so that her characters may break them. But unlike Angela Carter, whose early work Hanrahan acknowledges as an important influence, Hanrahan does not flirt with decadence or with the idea of a moral pornography.<sup>10</sup> Her interest is in the nature of innocence and its possibilities for survival in a hostile world. Her central situ-

ation—the innocent young virgin threatened yet attracted by sexual assault as an initiation into the adult world—works because of the context in which it is presented. But this context tends to give an anachronistic feel to her fiction, separating it from the kind of work most of her contemporaries are creating. While Moorhouse and Wilding dissect the new morality and Ireland speculates about the morality of the future, Hanrahan still seems to be exploring the conventions of Victorian morality. Certainly this is the initial, surface impression created by a Hanrahan novel, but it is precisely this impression that is subjected to questioning as the narrative proceeds.

Todorov defined the fantastic as determined by "that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event". In *The Albatross Muff*, the reader experiences this hesitation along with Stella as she wavers between magical and rational explanations for the strange events she experiences. Stella thinks: "Mama saying: Stella, there is that man again—the cripple with the carrot hair, and he looks familiar. (But did she say that? I'm not sure.) And Stella answering No, she didn't see anyone. But he was—he was always there. (But was he?)" (115-16). Here one no longer knows which of Stella's two voices to believe. Is she the victim of madness? of her own psychosis? of her society? She herself is confused. Her companion, Edith, is in a similar position. She writes: "Often I thought Stella was only pretending. She seemed to look at me slyly as she greeted her old companions. I suspected her of trying to drive me mad, not herself. I began to get mixed up, too. I thought it might be I who heard things wrong" (155). Edith is unsure whether Stella is going mad, merely pretending, or whether she herself is perceiving incorrectly, and we as readers share her doubts. Is Moak really magic? Is Stella going mad? We can never be sure. Hanrahan keeps us always in that frontier region of uncertainty between the real and the imaginary that Todorov has identified as the realm of the fantastic.

Our uncertainty about interpreting events extends to embrace the nature of the story. Do the laws of realism or the laws of legend govern the telling of Stella's history? Again, there is a shifting back and forth between the

two. The author constantly reminds us of the tensions that exist between one kind of narrative and another, and between any narrative, which predicts its ending, and the unpredictability of life. In *The Albatross Muff*, Hanrahan asks: "Could a legend have a happy ending?—for it seemed that Stella's might" (116). Within the story, Edith, the would-be writer, vacillates in a similar fashion, as she tries first to disguise, then to reveal, her perception of reality (which is Hanrahan's fiction) through language. "The words weren't any good. The life they sought to disguise, constantly foiled them. It seeped through the nib of Edith's pen and rendered her ink invisible; made the spaces between words stretch out alarmingly long" (145-46). It is these spaces which Edith and the reader must explore to render their silences articulate. As Rosemary Jackson points out, "With time, as with space, it is the intervals between things which come to take precedence in the fantastic".<sup>11</sup>

This kind of self-consciousness typifies the fantastic: the literariness of the form is striking.<sup>12</sup> It's not surprising, therefore, that *The Albatross Muff* is set in Dickens' London and *The Peach Groves* in Mansfield's New Zealand. Because no literary context for perceiving the Adelaide hills yet exists against which Hanrahan may play her own vision, *Where The Queens All Strayed* suffers in comparison. The alternative contexts of fairy-tale and local history Hanrahan uses against the hills setting of *The Frangipani Gardens* in addition to the references to the world of *Queens* make it stronger than *Queens*, but still less effective than the other two at playing off one literary form against another.

Thinking in terms of visual images rather than in terms of traditional notions of character and action may have made Hanrahan exceptionally aware of the composition of her work and of its essentially arbitrary nature. In *The Albatross Muff*, she reminds her readers of the ways in which life is often seen, and even lived, in terms of fiction:

Even the hyphen, though it might convert the two situations into a tidy single, couldn't make the role—orphan heiress—easier to play. Stella had been cast for heroine, but the part came bereft of its trappings. No petticoats meant no romance. And she couldn't even brighten things up

with a pinch of Gothic splendour. There were no portwine birthmarks or doleful rooks or mist creeping up from a river. (107)

This apparent mocking of gothic trappings reassures the reader that Hanrahan is familiar with the conventions she is employing and that she is deliberately modifying them according to her own way of visualizing the many possible interactions between novel and romance, between reality and dream.

The title, *The Albatross Muff*, embodies the central difficulty. By invoking Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", it implies a fictional world where magic cannot be dismissed as if it were simply superstition; however, there are just enough plausible explanations for the bad luck that follows the killing of the birds to keep us wondering. Stella herself takes on the role of the albatross, of bringing and suffering misfortune. Does she have the Evil Eye, as the servants reckon, or is she simply the victim of her feminine perfection, which necessarily involves an infantile selfishness? The story presents us with a series of alternatives of this nature. Edith, of course, takes on the Mariner's role. Haunted by the tale she is compelled to re-tell and attempting to make sense of its ambiguous message, she represents both the writer and the reader within the text.

The interest of this novel lies precisely in this continuing tension between alternatives, rather than in their possible resolution. Bourgeois London and slum London live in ignorance of one another, yet the existence of each determines that of the other. Stella would not exist without her phantoms, yet eventually they kill her. Neither would she exist without her bookish, unattractive opposite, Edith, who records her story and who loves her. The reader who requires these paradoxes to be abolished and our hesitations quelled is asking for the falsifying abstractions Hanrahan appears to associate with history books. When Stella is sick, she thinks: "Maybe when today—1861—was written down, it would seem as safe and done-with as then: all the sharp colours bleached to a soft dull sepia, all the people—street people like Moak, and proper people like Mr. Hall—reduced to mere cypher by words like Society and Class" (132). Hanrahan's fiction reverses this process. Ciphers

are brought to life, abstractions made concrete, and mysteries renewed. And the mystery depends for its existence on the hesitations the reader experiences in assigning meaning.

Todorov points out that the system of perception in literature of the fantastic is very similar to psychologists' descriptions of the child's and the madman's modes of perception. Madmen and children abound in Hanrahan's fiction. With their eccentric, unflinching vision, they provide constant reminders of the problematic nature of perception and of alternative ways of being. In *The Albatross Muff*, Stella and Edith order what they see according to their notions of what is proper or exciting, but even what they see is largely determined by their education, by their reading, and by their individual fears and desires. Edith's world is matter of fact and chronologically ordered, while Stella's is "hedged with danger". Edith realizes: "We walked side by side, but we walked far apart" (152). In Stella's world, the boundary between mind and matter may dissolve at any time: she wishes Baby dead and Baby dies, the handsome Seymour turns into a monster before her eyes, and any beggar may metamorphose into Tom or Moak. At first, her childishness seems to explain the magic connections and special causalities she reads into events. Then, as she grows older, an explanation appears to lie in a growing mental disorder triggered by her father's violent death and her subsequent dislocation from her antipodean homeland. But the ending of the novel makes such attempts at locating the text simply in a tradition of psychological realism untenable.

As Stella lies dying after childbirth, Edith envisions a realistically probable ending to her story. The smooth flow of her predictions is interrupted by the arrival of Moak. Hanrahan writes:

For Moak was still so much possessed by magic, that anything might be true. Had she spelled Louise Victoria away? Clare Court might never have existed. Moak was someone out of legend, spirited to Percy Villas from some storm-wrecked headland, some bushland eerie. Queer and brown and foreign, hate—or was it love? had made her strong. (203)

This is indeed a narrative in which anything might be true, in which it is sometimes hard

to distinguish between hate and love and where the dividing line of personality is so fluid that characters sometimes change and merge identities. Stella is both herself and becomes a reincarnation of Pensa. Moak's voice becomes Old Nanny's. Hanrahan supplies an ending satisfying in its symmetry: Moak raves about the coming of the Apocalypse and Edith rejoices that "for those lunging moments on the hearth-rug [her papa] had been worthy of Stella and her legend" (205). It is an ending that meets the requirements of fictional form, not truth to life as we live it. The grand finale with its burning house, and escape with the new-born baby to a country retreat far from men are as true to the conventions of Victorian gothic as Hanrahan's historical details of decor and language are true to the Victorian period. What makes her re-working of elements from historical and gothic romance, legend and melodrama most interesting is the way she maintains our hesitation in forming final judgments in order to remind us of the complexity of seeing and the problematic nature—the fluidity even—of what is seen.

*The Peach Groves* employs these techniques in a slightly different fashion. Again, the journey to a new place represents an upsetting of comfortable assumptions about reality, and again there is an absent father. Jackson explains that "to introduce the fantastic is to replace familiarity, comfort, *das Heimlich*, with estrangement, unease, the uncanny", motivated by a desire to undermine dominant patriarchal and capitalist orders.<sup>13</sup> Ida thinks: "But New Zealand, and now The Peach Groves, had turned everything topsy-turvy. The heroes and the villains had got free of the story-book and stalked the drawing-room carpet. All the old certitudes meant nothing" (141). The dead Linda's haunting and possession of her daughter, Tempe, and the voices Zillah hears may be psychologically explicable. Sometimes Hanrahan seems to encourage this kind of reading, as when she explains a character's motivation in careful detail (see pages 149-151 and 199), but there are also the moments when magic takes over, the inexplicable asserts itself, and the demands of story triumph over verisimilitude, as in the wonderful chase scene at the conclusion.

As in *The Albatross Muff*, it is not always easy to distinguish between "the reality of

illusion and the illusion of reality".<sup>14</sup> The blurred terror the child experiences in the face of the unknown and the confusion about one's proper identity that Oc, Zillah and Tempe all experience in *The Peach Groves* deny the simplistic patterns that Blanche Deans wills herself to see while they affirm the ability of art, whether painting or literature, to comprehend—to contain and to interpret—more effectively. Ida, the child through whose innocent eyes we see much of this story unfold, knows that although "dreams were dependable where reality wasn't" (130), she cannot deceive herself, as her mother and her sister do, by neatly separating her experience into tidy compartments. Most of the characters in this novel prefer dreams to reality. Ida survives the traumatic events of this fictional world by neither confusing nor rigidly dividing one from the other. Not only does she survive, but her way of seeing and of remembering triumphs, because she remains open, even to fear, while everyone else tries to close themselves off, to shut out experience one way or another. Thus the changing currents of the sea are her mother's enemies, but the "waves were Ida's friends" (228). She can embrace the flux and danger of a world where even if it is possible to see clearly, what one sees remains complicated. The book ends with an affirmation of the primacy of the natural world over the social, a theme developed more self-consciously in *The Frangipani Gardens*.

All the stock Hanrahan figures are present in *Gardens*, though with some interesting twists. For the first time, good triumphs almost unambiguously. The wicked witch Pearl is banished; the adulterous brother and sister die together in a suicidal car crash; the nasty, sexually deviant Brother Swells dies a suitably nasty death, one he had designed for another. On the other hand, the fair heroine of traditional romance, Lou, is permitted to live happily ever after with her Garnet; the artist, Doll Strawbridge, torn between her passionate nature and her prissy old maid exterior is allowed to forge a strong, new identity by bringing her day and night time roles together; the visionary Tom resists the temptation to become an ordinary boy, retaining his specialness and his affinity with mystery until the end, to carry on the traditions of folk wisdom passed on to him by Charlie, and to Charlie by

old Peg; and finally, Charlie himself escapes this time (as he hadn't during the war) the self-righteous wrath of the mob out to destroy him. His last appearance illustrates the continuing centrality of the hesitations that define the fantastic in Hanrahan's fiction:

For a moment, Tom saw him, then he was gone. Night took him—or that clump of trees, that bend in the land.

And where was he going, what would become of him? Would he trudge on for ever, an old man from myth, bound for those lost cities that were part of his past, where the wolves howled and snow whirled and the Fat Boy tucked into faggots and mustard pickle, and the Bearded Lady minced forward draped in a tattooed shawl? And would he find peace at last, had he found it already—slumped in tangled grass, sunk away beneath a drift of rusty leaves?<sup>15</sup>

Whether he has simply vanished, supernaturally or naturally, into the landscape, whether he will head for Europe or disappear into another story, we cannot know for sure.

Here too the tyranny of objects in the social worlds of the Duke and Duchess and of Girlie and Boy jar against the chaotic growing plentitude of the natural world as Tom learns to see it. Groves and gardens impose upon a mystery they cannot finally control, just as the writer imposes patterns only to shatter them, and the reader imposes meaning only to find it undermined. Therefore, although Hanrahan's fiction does not employ realism, it remains closely in touch with the real, as indeed the fantastic must in order to interrogate the primacy of such definitions. Hanrahan's interest lies in testing individual experience against conventional wisdom, an interest first displayed in *The Scent of the Eucalyptus*, when the narrator/protagonist looked about her for the sunburned land in vain (91). This regional questioning of national myth extends into the fantastic's questioning of "the irreducible opposition between real and unreal".<sup>16</sup> Todorov calls this subversive tendency of literature of the fantastic, "the bad conscience of the positivist era".<sup>17</sup>

Hanrahan's fiction, however, is more than simply the "bad conscience" of a positivist era she believes still holds sway; a recognition of the "problematic nature of perception" does not preclude a celebration of perception in all its complexity. Like Patrick White, Hanrahan

values an inclusive vision, which pays particular attention to the minutest detail (symbolized in both by the activities of small insects) and which can incorporate opposites (symbolized in both by the grub in the heart of the rose). Yet unlike White, who is so often disgusted when he looks closely, Hanrahan delights so much in seeing that she appears to celebrate everything she sees. In *The Scent of Eucalypts*, she writes:

I came inside, and found the dust that lay under the mat, the stale hair in the brush, the soap's awful underside like a sweating sore. . . . I came closer to the three who were important: to the grandmother, and saw the hair in her nostril, the dirt between her toes, dye spots in her scalp; to the great-aunt, and her parting was thick with scurf, she had sax-buds in her ear, a sour handkerchief up her sleeve. And my mother tried not to cry: face all crumpled, eyes gone blurry, ugly mouth square. I watched unmoved. (13)

Pure existence fascinates her here, although it is clearly also important to see what is normally hidden or deliberately overlooked, particularly in the realm of the physical. Conventional distinctions between ugly and beautiful become meaningless when everything is described with such love.

The primacy of perception leads as we have discovered not only to a fascination with what is seen and with how intensely and accurately it is seen, but also with how it is conveyed through language. Hanrahan is very conscious of the words themselves, as objects with an incantatory and mysterious quality as well as a signifying function. Her ear for the nuances of speech matches her eye for composition and colour. For example, most of her comedy depends on the manipulation of cliché, which empties words of meaning. Her characters often define themselves through their sensitivity to language and their habits of speech. In *The Peach Groves*, Cissy views sex through the coy metaphors of her marriage manual, Harry and Blanche through the filters of sanctimonious religious precept, Oc thinks in the simplified oppositions of the fairy tale, and Maud consciously decides to restrict herself to the platitudes proper to a thoroughly conventional young lady. Tempe and Zillah, like Ida, are caught between the languages of two worlds: between the terror of a direct confrontation

with experience for which ordinary language proves inadequate and the diminished reality which ordinary language can encompass. Hanrahan's language mediates between these two worlds, chiefly through its ability to recall the conventions of various literary forms—romance, gothic, fairy tale, novel—in order to play them off against one another, and to question the means by which her society establishes meaning.

Having defined Hanrahan's fiction as fantastic, we must ask ourselves what contribution she has made to the genre. Most obviously, she has introduced a new region—Adelaide and its hills—into the landscapes of the fantastic. But much more importantly, she has contributed to a renewal of the genre by disproving Todorov's contention that the fantastic could not survive in the twentieth century, where the "normal" man has become the fantastic being and the fantastic has become the rule, rather than the exception.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Todorov argues that "psychoanalysis has replaced (and therefore made useless) the literature of the fantastic. There is no need today," he writes, "to resort to the devil in order to speak of an excessive sexual desire. . . ."<sup>19</sup> In Hanrahan's fiction we are never quite sure whether she is "resorting to the devil" or not. Sometimes her characters appear to be possessed by evil spirits; sometimes they seem simply to be bearing heavy burdens of guilt. But certainly there is always a generalized sense of evil as a power at work in the world, which no exercise of rationality can explain away. Hanrahan knows that the ability of psychoanalysis to deal with these matters in the "undisguised terms" that Todorov celebrates need not destroy the pleasures of the fantastic, a genre which nourishes our need for mystery and reminds us that rationality cannot exist without the irrational.

Finally, Hanrahan's work demonstrates the appropriateness of the fantastic genre to depicting women's experience from their own point of view. Hanrahan employs stereotyped sex roles to an exaggerated degree in order to use the hesitations of the fantastic in questioning the basis for all our assumptions about what is real and what is not, what is natural and what is not. She deconstructs social definitions of female perfection—the Girlies, the Dolls, the Pearls, the Doves—to reconstruct

the world from the imaginations of her female watchers. Some feminist critics argue that women tend to perceive "culture" as male and their own experience as peripheral.<sup>20</sup> Hanrahan shows us characters who feel this way, but makes their experience of being peripheral central in her stories, thus displacing traditional standpoints as well as ways of seeing and reading. Her eccentrics provide a vision that is ex-centric. Hanrahan's tendency to show both women's friendships and women's love for one another as destructive could be disturbing to the prescriptive feminist critic who would like to see literature provide positive role models. I don't wish to deny that there are some unpleasant conclusions to be drawn for all of us from her vision. The alienated consciousness is her subject, and she compels her readers to experience it directly through the hesitations peculiar to the fantastic as a genre.

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#### NOTES

1. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland/London: Case Western University Press, 1973), p. 25.
2. Theodore Ziolkowski, *Disenchanted Images: A Literary Iconology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 239.
3. Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 82.
4. For the following biographical information I am indebted to Barbara Hanrahan herself, who helpfully answered a number of questions during an informal interview held in July, 1980. See also Verity Laughton, "Barbara Hanrahan", *Ash Magazine*, No. 6, Autumn 1981, 5-7. I am grateful to Deb Jordan for drawing this interview to my attention.
5. Todorov, p. 91.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
7. Barbara Hanrahan, *The Albatross Muff* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1977), p. 136. Hereafter cited by page.
8. Barbara Hanrahan, *The Scent of Eucalyptus* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p. 39. Hereafter cited by page.
9. Barbara Hanrahan, *The Peach Groves* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1979), p. 81. Hereafter cited by page.
10. Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* (London: Virago, 1979), p. 33. Carter's fiction fits into Todorov's second category, themes of the other, dealing with problems generated by desire.
11. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (Methuen: London and New York, 1981), p. 48.
12. Ziolkowski, p. 254. See also Jackson, p. 84.
13. Jackson, p. 179, and pp. 176-7.
14. Patrick White, *The Aunt's Story* (1948; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 289. The similarities between this novel and Hanrahan's work are striking; she acknowledges it as her favourite of his novels.
15. Barbara Hanrahan, *The Frangipani Gardens* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980), p. 214.
16. Todorov, p. 166.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
20. Joanna Russ quoted in Cheri Register, "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction", in *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, ed. Josephine Donovan (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1975), p. 15.

# TONY LINTERMANS

## The Unnecessary Yacht

Look long enough and you'll see it —  
hand hidden in the sun breaking through  
morning's still-rising gauze  
to put down without a splash a red yacht  
dead in the middle of the bay.

"I wonder where it came from," they say.  
"Who put it there?" they all want to know.  
What will it do? Where will it go?

It stays put while the day sails away.

Before dark a delegation gathers  
on the beach, someone with a loudspeaker  
hurls questions across the water —  
"Ahoy there! Who or what are you?  
Why squat like a nesting chook  
on an eggless ocean? Explain yourself."

No answer comes back. Day sinks,  
someone thinks aloud, "Must be something simple.  
A red stain on unquestionable blue?"  
"That'll do," someone mutters, and it does.

## Australian Studies: Practice Without Theory\*

In an authoritative survey of "Australian Literature and the Universities" in *Melbourne Studies in Education* (1976), Bruce Bennett identified some 'significant tendencies' in the development of Australian literary study at tertiary level in this country. Principally, Bennett noted the "broadening of the study of Australian literature to include other social and cultural concerns", and "indications that several universities are moving towards the notion of 'integrated' studies in which the viewpoints of several disciplines will be brought to bear on certain central topics of Australian life and thought".<sup>1</sup> Since 1976 this trend has accelerated, reflecting a general movement towards the relaxation of rigid disciplinary boundaries. At the 1980 A.S.A.L. conference, papers offered in the symposium "Approaches to the Teaching of Australian Literature" also reflected this change in attitude to integrated studies. At the same time, the symposium expressed its unease with the pedagogical arguments currently being used to justify new approaches. In particular, the problem of the 'text-context' dilemma was acknowledged. However, there was significant support for the view that the teaching of Australian literature should employ a different approach to that used in traditional English literature programmes, and indications that there was a strong case for placing the study of Australian literature in a broader cultural context than that supplied by traditional literature pro-

grammes. The conference discussion indicated that there is now some justification for and acceptance of the proposition that the study of Australian literature, rather than occupying a small section of a literature degree, might most profitably take place within the context of an Australian Studies programme.

However, it is apparent that there is no universal commitment to a particular theory or set of theories to support a valid discipline of Australian studies. Many Australian Studies programmes remain centred around the literature or history programmes from which they grew; if the need for other disciplinary perspectives is recognised, it is not systematised. When interdisciplinary contact does occur, its objectives seem to be at best loosely formulated. Although the principle of a broader setting for Australian studies, and the need for the application of more than one discipline to the area is accepted, the theoretical concepts which would support an appropriate methodology are rarely examined. Rather, it is assumed that a pedagogy or theory will arise from the inspired eclecticism of the approach, and that a discipline will evolve from the course of study. This is too informal; we need to examine what we mean by 'Australian Studies' in order to find out what precise objectives these courses should set out to achieve. If by 'Australian Studies' we mean the 'study of Australia', then it is in the 'ways of seeing'<sup>3</sup> Australia that a theory may be found, resulting in interdisciplinary courses which are humanistic and holistic, but which are based on a theory of culture, a method, by which they are made coherent.

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\* Portion of this paper was delivered at the Association for the Study of Australian Literature Conference in Adelaide, May, 1982.

Currently, the 'ways of seeing' Australia provided by Australian tertiary institutions fall into four general categories, all of which have problems that need to be confronted on a theoretical level before they reach the classroom or lecture theatre. The first of these categories is that of the multi-disciplinary course employing at least three disciplines.<sup>4</sup> The lack of interaction between the disciplines involved in these courses means that any cross-fertilisation which may take place as a result of the programme occurs privately, in the student's mind; thus the potential benefit of such a programme is wasted. Failure to pursue the relationships between the participating disciplines in such a course raises questions about the justification for its design. One could well ask, why study a range of material from, say, the perspectives of literature and history without examining the problem of how these two modes of thought relate to each other.

The second category is that of the genuinely interdisciplinary course, in which no specific disciplinary training is given. Rather, the course will be organised around issues or themes, such as 'Urban Australia', or 'The Australian Identity'.<sup>5</sup> Of course, those teaching the material do draw on their own disciplinary backgrounds to create a synthesis which will continually cross traditional boundaries. Such courses, while challenging the student and the teacher, seem more suited to study at upper undergraduate or graduate level, since rarely is a discipline, a method of learning and thinking, being imposed. The danger is that such programmes are subsumed by their topic, providing strategies which emerge from theories to which the student has no access, and conveying subject matter to the exclusion of concepts.

The third type attempts to combine the advantages of the previous two categories while avoiding their disadvantages: these are the multi-disciplinary courses which become interdisciplinary at times. This seems the most positive contemporary development in the field, and is particularly successful when the interdisciplinary content is carefully integrated. But an inherent difficulty with this type of course arises when the interdisciplinary concept conflicts with the demands of the single discipline. The phenomenon of 'cross-sterilisation' occurs as disciplines are diluted to facilitate the move-

ment across disciplinary boundaries. Allegiance to interdisciplinary objectives may effect a reduction in the rigour and detail of each discipline's contribution; the danger of these objectives destroying the individual studies they seek to expand is a real one.

The final category results from pragmatic progression rather than an instituted pedagogy. It is the kind of course which has developed from a single discipline, in which assumptions about the central importance of that discipline to an understanding of Australian culture are formalised. The primary problem in this category is that there is rarely any recognition that the choice of the single discipline to provide the core of the course is an arbitrary one. It is clear that economic considerations have had a necessarily powerful and undue influence over the design of these programmes, and that this problem is regrettably becoming more common.

Historically, in fact, most Australian Studies courses have evolved from this last category. In many cases a single discipline—usually literature—has been expanded through a series of informal and *ad hoc* decisions; the result is, typically, a collection of loosely allied material, organised by its being Australian and by the fortuitous neatness of Australian history. In general, then, Australian Studies courses tend either to employ a variety of disciplines without any formal theory connecting them or cover a wide variety of subject matter from a single disciplinary viewpoint without questioning the appropriateness of that disciplinary perspective. While attempting to exploit the advantages of multi- and inter-disciplinary course structures, Australian Studies programmes in this country suffer from a lack of theoretical justification for the ways these methods are used in course design.

This situation seems to be accepted because Australian Studies programmes are seen as new, unique and still developing their justification. Further, this country lacks a climate of theoretical pedagogic debate. More centrally, a significant body of opinion is still unwilling to concede that teachers of Australian Studies and, particularly, of Australian Literature need a theory at all. Australian literature is, traditionally, taught in similar ways to English Literature; Australian literature courses continue to expose students to what are agreed to

be the "major" works in the "tradition", without explicitly imposing a theoretical construct on either the works or the tradition.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, to do so is seen as interrupting the reading of the literary work for its intrinsic quality, which is somehow self-evident. The very humanism of the assumptions behind this method of teaching negates the possibility of a theoretical approach: teaching to a theory is identified with dogmatism, or, at its most active, indoctrination.

Behind this scepticism about the need for theory lie certain assumptions. Most important is the assumption that literary texts are selected for a course, and taught within that course, in a way that is innocent of ideology, and is therefore atheoretical. The liberalism of approach, and the consequent encouragement of a range of student interests, becomes an index of both the lack of prescription and the absence of restriction on the modes of the student's access to knowledge; it follows that this method is good and desirable. However, this is a naive position, as Catherine Belsey's attack on "commonsense" criticism (still an influential position in our universities) makes clear:

Presenting itself as non-theoretical, as 'obvious', common sense is not called on to demonstrate that it is internally consistent. But an account of the world which finally proves to be incoherent or non-explanatory is an unsatisfactory foundation for the practice either of reading or of criticism. Empiricist common sense, however, effaces this problem by urging that the real task of the critic is to get on with the reading process, to respond directly to the text without worrying about niceties of theory, as if 'eclecticism'—or the lack of any systematic approach or procedure—were a guarantee of objectivity. In this way, empiricism evades confrontation with its own presuppositions, protects whatever procedures and methods are currently dominant, and so guarantees the very opposite of objectivity, the perpetuation of unquestioned assumptions.

But there is no practice without theory, however much that theory is suppressed, unformulated or perceived as 'obvious'. What we do when we read, however 'natural' it seems, presupposes a whole theoretical discourse, even if unspoken, about language and about meaning, about

the relationships between meaning and the world, meaning and people, and finally about people themselves and their place in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Belsey's argument here refers specifically to the practice of literary criticism, and is not unmotivated by an animosity to a particular kind of New Critical approach. However, her argument denies the possibility of 'neutral' reading, and her later recognition of the inextricable fusion of language and ideology, which asserts that every discourse is shaped by the ideology of its user (writer, reader, critic) supports that denial, making the idea of atheoreticism untenable. Further, if the activity of reading "presupposes a whole theoretical discourse, even if unspoken", and is concerned with expanding interactions and intersections of meaning in the world, then Belsey's stance is apposite not just to literary studies, but to the larger problem of integrating literary studies with other disciplinary approaches to Australian experience and Australian writing. If literary studies themselves are now theoretically problematic; if we can now argue over not just what constitutes an Australian literary text, but what constitutes a literary text, then theoretical positions about literature, conscious or unconscious, demand close scrutiny. And, if we intend to explore the potential of interdisciplinary approaches to Australian culture and experience through literary studies, the recognition of the indivisibility of practice and theory is an enabling condition for this exploration.

From the kind of scrutiny suggested one does not, of course, expect to diagram for students, or for oneself, the final paradigmatic relationship between literature and society, or between literary studies and other disciplinary areas, so that the dynamic interaction between literature and its social world is explained. There are, however, ways of approaching the topic which are logical; procedures which forbid unquestioned pedagogical and critical assumptions, and are themselves open to examination. It does not seem unfair to suggest that we have not taken full advantage of the areas of academic and pedagogic growth here and overseas, which illuminate the plight of Australian Studies in Australia, and offer possible methodologies for the design and operation of integrated courses devoted to examining Australian culture. Tertiary courses

based on an inter-disciplinary approach to a national culture or body of ideas—American Studies, Canadian Studies—are numerous and provide useful models for Australian Studies programmes. In the U.K. particularly, the organisation and approach of “studies” programmes has developed beyond the basic trio of literature, history, and one extra option.

More importantly, the burgeoning interest in the study and explication of culture has given rise to the growth of specific and general culture studies courses in the U.K., Canada, and the U.S.A. amidst active and sophisticated theorising concerning the justification of such studies, their disciplinary core, and possible methodologies. This dual trend suggests that there are ways of studying a national culture that can be formalised. (In particular, this seems true of the study of colonial culture, which invites interdisciplinary attitudes and which is developing a strong theoretical base.) Teachers may then accept the responsibility of making explicit the relationship assumed to exist between disciplines; indeed, it has encouraged them to see that they *do* assume such a relationship. While there is still much work to be done in this area, the culture studies’ search for appropriate and useful theory has expanded the enquiry of literary scholars, for example, into semiotics, culture theory, and Marxist “ideology theory”, as the complexities of the relationships between literature, language and culture become the subject of increasing numbers of modes of enquiry and analysis. These are valuable developments, but if we accept that the resistance to the need for a theory of Australian Studies, discussed earlier, is actually an objection to making theory explicit, then we must realise that this position denies us the intellectual and pedagogical opportunities currently available. The lesson to be learnt from contemporary debate and developments overseas, and increasingly here, is that this resistance should be broken down, and theory made explicit if the interdisciplinary and disciplinary objectives underlying the enterprise of Australian Studies are to be achieved.

Far from being covertly doctrinaire, this position is necessarily a pluralist one, since no one theory of culture studies has yet reached a position where it is self-sufficient. We are not, then, asserting a particular theory; rather,

we are asserting a particular view of Australian Studies in which the relationship between the various disciplines is acknowledged as the central theoretical and academic issue. If this relationship is examined according to the information each discipline allows about a particular culture, then the result will be a multi-faceted but explicitly inter-related series of perspectives on that culture. This approach argues for the necessity of teaching what it means to “know” in each discipline if the effect of employing the different disciplines is to be explored. The objectives and advantages of disciplinary integration can thus be achieved without the risk of weakening or denying discrete disciplinary methods.

The role of the study of Australian literature in tertiary courses then becomes more articulate than is presently the case. Richard Hoggart’s research from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies argues for the value of the literary critic’s perspective in cultural studies enquiries.<sup>8</sup> Stressing, initially, the importance of the ability to read a text with precision and sensitivity, Hoggart goes on to claim a special role for the literary critic, who is equipped to recognise and analyse the “massive cultural meanings” which are part of the literary text, or of any work of art.<sup>9</sup> However, Hoggart asserts that the literary critic should seek aid outside his own discipline, or extend its purchase, if he is to enter cultural enquiry. Hoggart suggests the use of sociology, of psychology, or semiology, of Marxist theories of the relation between history and literature, and of Eco’s theories of structural analysis as possible theoretical tools for the literary-cultural critic.

The use of sociology in the sociology of literature, and of history in reading literature for its social content are familiar methods. But they do fall into the difficult text-context area, and they can be seen as methods which threaten the notion that the literary utterance is unique or reduce literature to social documentation. However, there are other ways of studying the relationship between literature and society. For example, Eagleton argues that ideology—“the ideas, values and feelings by which men experience their societies at various times”—is central to an understanding of the past and the present, and that “certain of those [ideologies] are available to us only in litera-

ture".<sup>10</sup> Without resorting to "reductive determinism", Eagleton suggests that the relationship between literature and society, between language and ideology, can be explored in ways that do not dilute, but extend the theory of literary criticism. A further, less recent example can be seen in American criticism where the typological methods of Fiedler and Lewis demonstrate that the conventional tools of literary criticism, used skilfully, can reveal patterns of metaphor, myth and symbol in the literature of a nation that define its subject and disclose central determinants of what constitutes American experience.

Among Australian scholars, admittedly, such trends have not gone totally unnoticed. Ian Reid, in an article in the *New Literature Review*, argues for a more comparative methodology in Australian literary studies, one that is not monographic, but both culturally diachronic and interculturally dialectical. This methodology allows comparison to be made between "this nation and others, between regions and coteries within Australia, and between different points in Australian cultural history".<sup>11</sup> At the recent A.S.A.L. conference, from which this paper emerges, comparison between Australian literature and history and that of other countries was an exegetical tool, providing the basis for Patrick Morgan's paper, and contributing to the methods in the papers given by Diana Brydon and Nola Adams.<sup>12</sup> And, as theories of reader-perception, and the various structuralisms become more widely understood in Australia, the opportunities they provide may be grasped more readily—allowing re-examination of the assumptions (if only to re-affirm them) on which our courses are implicitly or explicitly based.

It is this process of admitting that such assumptions exist and are embodied in courses of study in Australian tertiary institutions that is necessary. Once teachers of Australian Studies recognise the need for a "theory of Australian Studies"—one that acknowledges the place and function of literature in a culture—we suspect they will find that this theory is one which establishes the concept of culture itself as the problematic. Whatever theoretical approach is taken, we maintain that while the different disciplines employed to engage with the culture are understood and respected, culture is the focus. The disciplines themselves

are essentially tools which must be used skilfully and accurately, then addressed to the subject at hand; that subject, the Australian experience, then becomes available. Understanding of this Australian experience is enhanced precisely because the ways that understanding has been acquired and the conceptual framework each discipline has contributed to the process are formally acknowledged in the integrating theory. An enrichment of the contributing disciplines, and a full comprehension of the culture, as well as additions to the range of conceptual and methodological tools available to the student will result from the unification of theory and practice.

#### NOTES

1. Bruce Bennett, "Australian Literature and the Universities", in S. Murray-Smith (ed.) *Melbourne Studies in Education 1976* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1976), p. 127.
2. In a recent edition of *New Literature Review*, devoted to studies of methods of teaching Australian literature, John Docker's Introduction, "University Teaching of Australian Literature" identified the "rigid canons for teaching and research" that dominate the field.  
*New Literature Review* (No. 6), p. 36.
3. This idea is central to Raymond Williams' thesis in *The Long Revolution*: "Since our way of seeing things is literally our way of living, the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the sharing of common meanings and thence common activities and purposes . . ." and becomes part of Stuart Hall's description of the major influences on Cultural Studies.  
Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms", in *Media, Culture and Society* (1980, No. 2), p. 59.
4. The difference between multi- and inter-disciplinary courses is that while both terms refer to programmes which apply the methods of a number of disciplines to the same subject matter or problem, multi-disciplinary courses do not integrate these participating disciplines formally.
5. Ian Reid, in his article "Australian Literary Studies: The Need for a Comparative Method" refers to "the attempt to delineate 'national identities' as if these were unequal, fixed or all-inclusive categories", identifying the tendency of these studies towards superficiality.  
Ian Reid, "Australian Literary Studies: The Need for a Comparative Method", in *New Literature Review* (No. 6), p. 7.
6. John Docker argues that Australian literary traditions have been created by the informal imposition of English literary critical values and ideologies. It is not necessary to agree with all that Docker says to recognise that this trend has created canons of sufficient rigidity to deny the flexibility of choice in the texts available for study, and to negate the potential value of alternative critical approaches.  
Docker, *op cit*.

7. C. Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London and New York: Methuen, 1980), pp. 3-4.
8. Richard Hoggart, "Contemporary Cultural Studies: An Approach to the Study of Literature and Society", M. Bradbury and D. Palmer (eds.), *Contemporary Criticism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979).
9. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
10. Terry Eagleton, *Marxism & Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1976), p. viii.
11. Reid, *op cit.*, p. 36.
12. Graeme Turner has also recently published an article employing such an approach: "For the Term of his National Life: A New View of the Self in Australian Fiction", in *Overland* (No. 86, Dec. 1981), pp. 55-55.

## JENNY BOULT

### listening to love songs on the radio too long

i tell the overfull face of the loungeroom door  
"somebody must like me" & drive two more pins in,  
secure two more postcards think confidentially that  
at times i must sound like the lovelorn heroine  
of an afternoon tv soap opera.

& you can overstay your welcome on a theme  
if you stick  
around too long

it's just the mercedes in you  
that's broken down & it's time to take buses  
walk thru town at lunchtime & admire the crowd &  
share a little laughter  
with the gentle solitude of dawn.

so you've messed up all the ashtrays  
in a house of non-smokers &  
you're all alone in the loungeroom  
with the clouds of another love song  
boring the airwaves.

sweetheart, you've been listening to love songs  
on the radio  
too long.

G. C. BOLTON

## Court in Power\*

Future historians of Western Australia will probably be tempted, as many contemporaries have been tempted, to divide Sir Charles Court's ministerial career into two phases separated by a short spell in opposition during the Tonkin Labor government of 1971-74. In the first period he could be depicted as the vigorous and single-minded minister for industrial development and the North-West in the Brand ministry of 1959-71, his abilities and energies harnessed to a specific set of goals and his occasional bursts of impatience tempered by strong colleagues and a conciliatory premier. Himself in the premier's office during 1974-82 he becomes the autocrat, dominating a cabinet of lesser seniority, intervening at large in the affairs of Western Australia, but in the long run bequeathing fewer substantial benefits to the State than in his earlier political incarnation. There are precedents in Western Australian history for this kind of progression. Sir James Mitchell, for instance, was arguably at his best when specialising in the lands and agriculture portfolios under more temperate if less dynamic leaders, rather than during his two masterful terms as premier. Yet in dealing with Sir Charles Court's career the most obvious line of interpretation may not be the most adequate. We should at least notice the changing international and federal milieu in which he and his colleagues had to operate.

At the outset one piece of hindsight must be avoided. Because the Liberal Party and its rural partners have lost only one election since 1959, and that one narrowly in 1971, it is possible to view them as secure in their hegemony, confident in their ability to impose long-term policies without much risk of relegation to opposition. Despite the coalition's enormous advantages in a largely subservient Legislative Council and a seldom over-critical local press, it is in the last resort possession of ministerial office that counts, and this is determined by control of the Legislative Assembly. Except between 1965 and 1968 and since 1977 the Brand and Court ministries worked on slim majorities in the Assembly. They could never be sure of retaining office for more than three years ahead; they lacked that sense of philistine complacency which governments in Queensland, for instance, enjoy as a result of a really efficient gerrymander. To a large extent Court must be seen as a man always working against time, never certain that he would be allowed to retain control of the exciting and important tasks to which his energies were addressed.

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\* This is the second of two articles on Sir Charles Court, who retired from the position of Premier of Western Australia on 25 January 1982.

At all times Court's commitment to his managerial role made it difficult for him to accept the turns of the political wheel with the fatalism of many professional politicians with lesser goals. Not that the State Labor Party under Hawke and Tonkin would have been the worst supplanters. They at least shared many of the same developmental aims for Western Australia, drew advice from the same senior public servants, in short talked much the same language. But beyond lay less accessible and therefore more dangerous opponents. There was the firm of Hancock and Wright with their readiness to go behind the State government's back in negotiating with overseas investors and their capacity to make friends among the coalition's own back-benchers. There was the ever-present threat of interference by Canberra: bad enough under Court's hero Menzies, worse under Gorton, insufferable under the Whitlam Labor government, and as it turned out not appreciably better under Fraser. And beyond Canberra lay the faceless ideological forces: the stirrers, the troublemakers, the malcontents aiming to destroy Western Australia's economic progress . . . It was said of the great conservative Edmund Burke at the time of the French Revolution that he had the look of a man menaced by murderers. Court never had to face a crisis like the French Revolution, but even in his plenitude of power he behaved like a man watchful of adversaries at every turn. Although this was in part fuelled by his honourable determination to effect the important work to which he had turned his hand, it was not a preoccupation which many easygoing Western Australians found easy to share.

Nor at the outset were they altogether prepared to yield him the authority he sought. One of Court's first initiatives on taking ministerial office in 1959 was to propose the establishment of a three-man Western Australian Industries Authority, a board charged with promoting industrial development and advising on the future of state trading concerns. Suspecting that this would equip the minister with a power-base standing apart from the usual public service channels, a former Liberal cabinet minister in the Legislative Council opposed the enabling bill, and drew enough support from both sides of the House to bring about its defeat. It was a rebuff but it was soon swallowed up by the economic opportunities which came crowding at Court's door.

By the end of the 1950s the Western world's postwar economic revival was running sweetly. Japan and Germany were moving from recovery to boom; American capitalism thrived; even the economy of the United Kingdom appeared to enjoy an Indian summer under Harold Macmillan. A sellers' market awaited producers of such commodities as iron ore. Unfortunately since 1938 the export of iron ore from Australia was forbidden by the Commonwealth government, originally from strategic motives, subsequently in order to conserve Australia's holdings of what was apparently believed to be a limited resource. In 1958 the Hawke government pressed unsuccessfully for the lifting of the embargo, and early in 1960 the Brand government tried again and was again denied. Then in December 1960 Canberra relented. The minister for national development, Senator Spooner, lifted the ban to the extent of fifty per cent of deposits approved by his ministry. This may have been in response to the advocacy of Brand and Court, who were after all fellow-Liberals. On the other hand during 1960 the Australian economy underwent a minor crisis caused by over-importing, unemployment was nearing the then unacceptable figure of two per cent, and the federal government was casting around for means of stimulating Australia's exports. The ban may have been lifted irrespective of whoever held office in Perth. What is certain is that the iron ore export industry turned out to be a bigger winner than anyone imagined in 1960, and in securing the orderly and beneficial development of that

industry Court's role was crucial. It was his great opportunity and he handled it ably.

Between 1962 and 1964 Court's department negotiated five separate contracts with consortia interested in the development for export of the vast deposits of iron ore which were now revealed in the Pilbara. Each of these agreements committed the investors to an unprecedentedly lavish investment, particularly in assuming responsibility for the provision of company towns, railways, harbour facilities, and other amenities, so that it was claimed that Western Australia would benefit from the gain of long-term assets above and beyond the creation of jobs and the resultant multiplier effect on the State's economy. Unused to capital investment on this breathtaking scale, Western Australians readily assented to the view that the State could command neither the capital nor the know-how to assume for itself the responsibility of developing the Pilbara's iron ore. Nor was there much criticism of the expense to which the State might be committed in providing roads, deep harbours, cheap power, and social welfare such as health and education facilities. Court's strategy seemed justified by results. When the first iron ore was exported in 1966 there were few to challenge his forecast that by 1980 the Pilbara would support 100,000 inhabitants.

What were the alternatives? One strategy little canvassed at the time was the practice chosen by some Canadian provinces of levying a resource rent assessed at a flat percentage of total productivity. The proceeds of such a resource rent would have been diverted into the State's coffers and could have been deployed to reduce taxation, initiate major public works, and generally to improve the quality of life for Western Australians. The difficulty which probably stuck in the minds of Brand, Court and their Treasury advisers was that any sudden access of wealth to Western Australia would have been promptly followed by substantial cuts in federal funding, so that instead of becoming better off Western Australia would largely remain where she was and the rest of Australia would share the benefits. Besides, by keeping royalties comparatively low Western Australia would attract outside investors against its competitors in India, Brazil, and elsewhere in Australia. Since before his entry into politics Court was committed to the view that a country of plentiful resources such as Western Australia could afford to price those resources generously in order to attract substantial and continuing investment. In the 1960s this approach seemed to be vindicated by the unprecedented quantity of capital pouring into Western Australia. As early as 1961 an academic commented that 'the Minister for Negotiated Industries had a busy year dealing with a procession of concession hunters, commercial travellers, and trade missionaries'. If this meant linking Western Australia's economy with the demands of multinational capital few in those boom years of the 1960s were heard to complain.

One who complained loud and long was Langley George Hancock. An indefatigable and successful prospector, Hancock was responsible for the discovery of a number of the Pilbara's most significant iron ore deposits, though not so many as he was sometimes inclined to claim. Unfortunately he was not content with the reputation and royalties which those finds brought. Because his family had lived a hundred years in the Pilbara, he thought he possessed a deep instinctive wisdom about the district's needs, superior both to the Aborigines who had lived there for a hundred centuries and to the modern experts and public servants who merely qualified through education and professional experience. He sought recognition as the pre-eminent expert on whose opinions the future development of the Pilbara iron ore industry must be based. It was as if Paddy Hannan had claimed to be the only voice worth hearing about the development of the Kalgoorlie goldfields. Hancock more closely resembled that eighteenth-century Dublin

statesman of whom it was said that if he was given the whole of Ireland for his farm he would still be crying after the Isle of Man for a potato-garden. He grizzled when the State government ignored his view that the Pilbara's iron ore should be transported to a central port by a single railway system, ignoring the chances of bottlenecks and industrial problems. Where Court wanted a policy of total resource development, concentrating the Pilbara's resources into the hands of a few companies under government supervision, Hancock believed in the right of prospectors to market their ore indiscriminately, even if this meant gouging out the premium-grade ores and leaving the long-term consequences to Providence. Unable to stomach disagreement, Hancock damned Court for a socialist and the State public service as incompetent bureaucrats. The one judgement was as silly as the other.

Court's planning was less sure when it came to the other plank of his North-West policy, the Ord river scheme. Just as Forrest had seen the mining boom of the 1890s as leading to the agricultural growth of the South-West, Court hoped to bring off a similar double for the North, with tropical agriculture in East Kimberley complementing Pilbara mining. Brushing aside the testimony of experienced observers such as Kim Durack who argued that the Ord was not yet ready to go beyond the experimental stage Court whipped up enthusiasm for a projected Ord River dam with a storage capacity bigger than Sydney Harbour. But what was to be the main crop? Here the government's planning was incremental and piecemeal. Sorghum and sugar were both suggested when prices were high and discarded when they fell again. Eventually cotton was to be the staple. It mattered not at all that cotton, like sugar, was already grown in parts of Australia more convenient to markets. When agricultural economists queried the profitability of the Ord scheme other economists were subsidised to argue to the contrary. The Commonwealth was at first reluctant to put funding into the major second stage of the Ord dam, but in 1967 Harold Holt, anxious for votes, gave the word. It is at least arguable that the Ord scheme brought federal funding to Western Australia which would not have been made available for any less glamorous, if more immediately useful project; and it may yet be that a use will be found for the Ord dam justifying the expenditure of the 1960s as timely and far-sighted. By 1972 it was clear that cotton was a failure, and that many of the investors who trusted to the Ord scheme were little better off than the group settlers of the South-West who had succumbed to Sir James Mitchell's beguilements a generation earlier; by 1982 the search for a crop was still going on amid occasional puffs of optimism from Court's successors, and tourism remained the only major spinoff from the Ord dam. The human cost, the economic disappointments were ignored. Pioneering, 'having a go' in 'a big country'; these were the powerful emotive forces which fuelled Western Australian enthusiasm for Court's Ord scheme and disarmed rational criticism.

All this lay in the future when the Commonwealth agreed late in 1967 to support the Ord dam. Those who conjectured about Court's future thought that, having brought off the double of the Pilbara and the Ord, he might retire from State politics. Brand was a year younger and not yet showing the health problems which would eventually compel him to give up the premiership. There were rumours of Court's resignation early in 1968, and again at the beginning of 1969; but after a two-hour conference with Brand he agreed to stay on, a decision for which the Japanese consul-general later (probably mistakenly) took the credit. Nor did Court seek in 1969 to follow Sir Paul Hasluck as federal member for Curtin—a proposal which reflected the shortage of leadership material in the Liberal party at the national level rather than a considered belief that such a confirmed barracker for Western Australia as Court could make a comfortable

transition to Canberra. The decision to remain in State politics was sensible, and insofar as it blocked Court from pursuing a personally profitable business career, disinterested. Yet it led Court into the most embattled five years of his public life.

By 1969 the mineral boom was overheating. Speculators dreamed that any Western Australian find must lead to riches, and the Poseidon nickel fever resulted. Seeking to expand their stake in Pilbara iron ore Hancock and Wright laid claim to more than a million acres of temporary reserves, and without waiting to secure confirmation that their rights were validated by the Mining Act entered into negotiation with American investors. When Court tried to corral overseas investors back into negotiating through the State government Hancock sought allies elsewhere, first wooing the Commonwealth government (despite the centralist proclivities of the prime minister, John Gorton), later backing Labor in the State elections of 1971. Labor's victory probably owed little to Hancock and Wright or their newspaper, the *Independent*. Certainly when the Tonkin government acquainted itself with the situation it disallowed many of Hancock and Wright's claims, thus siding with Court's view. However it was Court who was pilloried. A journalist came up with some serious allegations about Court's personal and family share portfolio, and gained coverage in Eastern States media before refutation and apology were exacted. For a man with a strong sense of personal honour and competence these pressures must have been galling.

Nor was Court comfortable in opposition. It was hard to relinquish control of developmental policy, but when he offered himself to the Tonkin government as a consultant on the North-West he went unheeded. Although 1972 saw him honoured with a knighthood from the Commonwealth Government and unanimously elected leader of the State Liberal party in succession to the ailing Brand the tide in the constituencies was flowing to Labor, and at the end of the year Whitlam took office in Canberra. All Court's worst fears took shape. Under Rex Connor Canberra sought to create a centralised minerals and energy policy overriding the State governments and in particular reaching for control of the natural gas of the North-West shelf. If these policies triumphed there would be little scope for a State premier to negotiate developmental strategies of the kind which Brand, Court, and their colleagues had promoted in the 1960s. At the State elections of 1974 the Liberal policy statement (fronted by a portrait of Sir Charles Court, LEADER) urged that the continuation of democratic government in Western Australia depended on the restoration of 'Liberal leadership that can stand up to Canberra'. High-handed and tactless, Whitlam and Connor had antagonised many Western Australians, not least the State Labor government; and not surprisingly the coalition won and Court became premier.

Partly in reaction to the pressures of the Whitlam government, the Liberal party machine in Western Australia was shifting perceptibly to the right. Probably no State Liberal party during the 1970s was less sympathetic to 'soft' issues such as Aborigines, the environment, feminism, the abolition of capital punishment, and the claims of social welfare. These were not issues to appeal to the men who had done well out of the mineral boom, and Court was not the leader to nudge his party back towards the old Liberal tradition of consensus. His priorities were the feud with Canberra and the resumption of the West's economic development. In his cabinet there were no contemporaries who could stand up to him and temper his enthusiasms; most were new men, and his senior deputies, O'Neill and O'Connor, were younger and loyal. The Country party was under new and inexperienced management, whose resentment over Court's masterful ways carried them briefly out of the coalition in 1975 and split the party in two in 1977. It was a shadow of the powerful rural party of the 1940s. So Court bestrode State politics, especially after Tonkin's retirement in 1977 left the Labor Opposition

without a leader of similar calibre. Not since Sir John Forrest had a premier been in such a strong position to influence the level of political discourse.

The commonest complaint about Court's style was that he was too much given to confrontation. Certainly while Whitlam remained in office he opposed the Commonwealth government implacably, joining with Bjelke-Petersen in an anti-federal overseas tour, and not much mollified by the favourable treatment accorded Western Australia at the 1975 loan council. But when Whitlam was dismissed his rejoicings were not as indecent as Bjelke-Petersen's. As much as anything it was what he saw as their incompetence which displeased him most about the federal Labor party. For State Labor leaders whose managerial skills matched his own he could show respect. Of Don Dunstan, a politician whose style and outlook were in many ways diametrically opposite to his own, Court could say:

While we may not have seen eye to eye politically, I always respected his abilities. I don't believe the public at large has ever seen the best of Mr Dunstan. His most outstanding contribution was made within the confines of the Premiers' conference and in particular the Loan Council. To both forums he brought a responsible, well informed, and thoughtful attitude which was helpful to South Australia and the nation as a whole.

The same might have been said about Court. His skills at management and negotiation were not always apparent to the public. His tendency to meet opposition head-on was all too evident.

Partly the fault was Court's. He found it hard to follow Sir James Barrie's aphorism never to ascribe to an opponent motives meaner than one's own. In particular he was baffled by the mentality of those who did not share his belief in the social benefits of dynamic economic progress; they were at best wrong-headed if not wilfully ignorant or even subversively motivated. Unlike the iron ore developments of the 1960s, away in the Pilbara among a landscape capable of tolerating massive transformation, many of the economic initiatives of the 1970s—bauxite mining and woodchipping especially—took place in the accessible jarrah forests of the South-West under the eyes of urban environmentalists who were moved to protest. Conscious of intensified competition for Western Australian exports in a constricting world economy, Court saw such criticisms as distracting energy from the urgent task of reviving the State's economic well-being; and his intolerance sharpened accordingly. By 1976 he was judging it necessary to take stubborn stands—and thus risking public disapproval—over issues such as the future of the Tresillian hospital for handicapped children, where a premier of more pliable or conciliatory temper might have sought to defuse an emotional issue. Increasingly he was disposed to thrust his personal values into moral questions of a kind which might have been left open to individual judgment. It was not just that he vetoed a Department of Health pamphlet which sought to warn the young and semi-literate against venereal disease by the use of a comic-strip format of which he disapproved; but it is also fairly certain that the bill to remove the status of a criminal offence from homosexual acts between consenting adults, having passed on a mixed-party vote in the Legislative Council, failed in the Legislative Assembly because no member of the coalition parties there cared to antagonise their leader by coming out in support of an unpopular cause to which he was known to be strongly opposed.

But in many respects he was a benign autocrat. Easy-going Western Australians felt an admiring awe for one who, past the retirement age for most men, worked at least sixteen hours a day for what he saw as his community's well-being. They knew that in semi-retirement, enjoying a brace of well-chosen company directorships, he might have been better off financially; for he lacked Bjelke-Petersen's

too obvious enjoyment of the opportunities of office. More than most State premiers he was a sincere and consistent patron of culture. Music was his chief love, and he gave valuable support to the initiatives of Sir Frank Callaway; but he also took an active role in fostering the Cultural Centre, with its new art gallery and library building, the various branches of the Western Australian Museum, and the restoration of His Majesty's Theatre. Without his personal involvement it is unlikely that all of these projects would have survived in years of tightening finances. Unlike his rural predecessors he had a lively sense of pride in Perth as his home city, and as the facade of towers grew taller along St George's Terrace, he sought to promote its claims as a venue for conferences; not without benefit to the hotel and accommodation industry.

All these interests culminated in the 150th anniversary celebrations of 1979, an operation which throughout bore the imprint of Court's enthusiasm. In many ways the sesquicentenary typified both the weaknesses and the strengths of Court's Western Australia. There were behind-the-scenes difficulties which were carefully played down; the original executive director was replaced, and some of the major features were less well attended than had been forecast. The platform for the Miss World contest collapsed, and in the international press Western Australia gained as much publicity from that mishap as from the many ceremonies that went according to plan; though not perhaps as much as resulted from the accident that Skylab's debris plummeted to earth only a few hundred kilometres from Kalgoorlie. There was a good deal of artless boasting of Western Australia's virtues. But for the average citizen the celebrations were a success. Country districts in particular recovered a sense of purpose and identity in preparing for the festivities and family re-unions generated a lively if at times uncritical interest in Western Australia's history. A number of publications of academic merit resulted from 'the 150th', and remarkably nearly all of them came out on schedule. It was a good year on the whole, and would have made a graceful note on which Court might have retired.

But he held on, and the goodwill was lost in a series of further confrontations. Perhaps only a minority were interested in protesting about Section 54B and the right of assembly in Forrest Place. However many Western Australians, even those who normally approved of Court, were disconcerted by the long-drawn dispute over Noonkanbah. To Court it became a matter of upholding the determination of the State government to administer the law without yielding to pressure-groups or do-gooders. Yet in an Australia where the issue of Aboriginal land rights stirred consciences there was a nasty feeling of authoritarianism about the convoys roaring north to enforce drilling on the sacred sites of Noonkanbah. To mining companies there was little value in the State government insisting on its right of intervention when it might have been easier to come to terms with Aboriginal groups by a process of direct negotiation. To outside observers there was something out of proportion in forcing the principle of the precedence of mining rights over Aboriginal claims when there was apparently so little evidence that Noonkanbah was a payable proposition. Court's love of the semi-military style of leadership, his determination to show that Western Australia was a secure environment for investment, and his view that compromise might be seen as a sign of weakness left a worrying legacy. Henceforward Western Australia would be bracketed with Queensland as the rough edges of Australia, where the drive for economic growth overrode the quest for consensus and social harmony.

So when Court retired early in 1982—faithful to the dictum of his mentor Sir Robert Menzies that a man should get out of politics after his seventieth birthday—he left an ambiguous legacy. None could deny that he stood in the tradition of the great developers of Western Australia. Granted that Western

Australia's economic growth depended on its capacity to attract an abnormally large and consistent influx of overseas capital, Court had been an effective steward of the State's opportunities. Granted that most Western Australians sought economic growth for their State (and resented the legacies of the past which had left the south-east of Australia ahead in wealth and numbers) he reflected their wishes ably and selflessly. But in seeking to provide a strong leadership he maintained an autocratic tradition which, as Western Australia grew bigger, institutionalised itself through the apparatus of the State. Observers brought up in the Westminster tradition were somewhat startled to note that at the 150th anniversary ceremony for the Legislative Council (planned under Court, though occurring after his resignation) the Commissioner of Police shared with the heads of the three armed services the role of symbolising the power of government. Some felt that with the prosperity achieved in Court's time there had also come a lessening sense of tolerance with dissent and unorthodoxy and economic failure. Suppression was commoner, persuasion and agreement less usual. Noonkanbah could be seen as a portent.

Court had been a strong leader, but always in the partisan courses of his party and his State. On early indications his successors were reverting to a concept of politics which saw the protection of minorities and the brokering of conflicting interests as being no less important than an image of resolute leadership. In this process of healing there was still room for Court to play his part as an elder statesman, discarding partisanship and showing a talent for reconciliation and the acceptance of diversity as a necessary condition of the late 20th century Western Australia which he had done so much to influence.

### South-East Asian and Australian Literature Seminar

A seminar on Southeast Asian and Australian Literature took place at the University of Western Australia from 23-25 September 1982. The theme of the seminar was "The Writer's Sense of the Contemporary". The seminar was the first event organized by the new Centre for Studies in Australian Literature in the English Department at The University of Western Australia. Participants in the seminar included Lloyd Fernando (Malaysia), Lucila Hosillos (Philippines), Shirley Lim (New York), Kirpal Singh (Papua New Guinea), Ghulam-Sarwa Yousof (Malaysia). Papers were also given by Harry Aveling (Melbourne), Yasmine Gooneratne (Sydney), Syd Harrex (Adelaide) and Bruce Bennett, Veronica Brady, Ee Tiang Hong, Basil Sansom, Ron Shepherd and Phillip Thomas (Western Australia).

### Association for The Study of Australian Literature Conference

The annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature will be held at the University of Western Australia from 22-26 August 1983. The theme of the conference is "New Connections in Australian Literature and Theatre". Australian drama, music and art will be featured in this "Oz Fest" week in Perth. A number of overseas visitors will participate in the conference. Inquiries should be made to the convenors, Bruce Bennett and Veronica Brady, English Department, The University of Western Australia, Nedlands, W.A. 6009.

## BOOKS

Barbara Hanrahan, *Dove*, University of Queensland Press, 1982.

After the substantially autobiographical works, *The Scent of Eucalyptus* (1973) and *Sea Green* (1974), Barbara Hanrahan wrote the astonishing novel *The Albatross Muff* (1977). The unusual blend of 19th Century setting, extravagant imagery, sophisticated naivety and fearless leaping between hallucination and reality disconcerted the reader. The book was described as "a sinister fairy tale" by one critic, and "as if Count Dracula had mistakenly dropped in on Alice in Wonderland" by another.

*Dove*, her seventh book, is lent support by the works published since then. The oddness now proves to be neither freak nor literary game, but a highly personal style.

The story in outline is once again fairy-tale or novelette. About 1870, Daisy Nelson, pretty and impressionable, marries itinerant hell-fire preacher and drunkard Ebenezer Sparks, and leaves the security of idyllic Appleton—somewhere in South Australia. Many years and mis-carriages later they return, Daisy's health ruined. After some peaceful years they set off again, despite Daisy's advanced pregnancy, with their two surviving daughters, Rosa and Crystal. On the journey, the third daughter, Dove, is born. The birth takes place in the precincts of Arden House, a sinister mansion inhabited by a mad rich old lady and her supernaturally evil young ward, Valentine. Even though the family leaves Arden House soon after, its implications haunt the three sisters ever after, eventually even extending to Dove's daughter, Clare. After a number of unsatisfactory relationships, adventures and marriages, there is a gathering together of the surviving characters master-minded by the evil Valentine, and a symbolic and spectacular destruction of a second version of the fateful Arden House.

Despite the convolutions, the story is of relatively minor importance. It is a background on which to hang a collection of embroideries and enamels—landscapes, historical scenes, and the smaller genre-paintings of social life from

the late nineteenth century to the Depression of the 1930s. Although Crystal, Dove and Clare are separate characters, their responses to the world around them seem so similar that they might be the same person in different situations.

Hanrahan's concern clearly is not with creation and development of characters and their specific problems, but rather with patterns of experience.

Reviewing the book in *The Australian*, the English novelist Fay Weldon dismissed it as "too safe" and too much "at the wrong end of the scale" of what women's literature ought to be about.

Hanrahan's predilection for the trappings of the gothic romance, and the resulting unfashionable heroines invites this initial reaction, though one should not be deceived by the historical fancy dress.

Beneath the ornamented surface, with its contradictory textures, there is a more serious and timeless layer of concern.

Throughout the book there runs a fascination with incongruity, with the co-existence of seemingly irreconcilable opposites. Dreams turn into nightmares, smooth exteriors hide corruption, people are charmers and monsters both. The danger of reaching total absurdity with these often grotesque elaborations is neatly sidestepped by the introduction of touches of irony, and a balance, however precarious, is maintained.

Compare the treatment of Ebenezer Sparks, first as his daughter Crystal sees him, then as seen by the Appleton ladies, and finally the scene of his death:

[He was] somehow more animal than man. It was his skin being rough, the fierceness of his beard, the hairs that bristled from his nostrils and hung in small tassels from his ears and crept out from under his shirt cuffs—it was something cowed about him. Though that was absurd—Papa was fierce . . .

It was a favourite topic at tea-parties—how Daisy Sparks could bear him near her. The ladies cocked their fingers and dunked their ginger-nuts genteelly as they thought it over. It was delicious to ponder—too horrid: how she could bear to submit. He was a brute . . .

He was a ghost, a dying man, but it was the adventure when he tramped on forever. Trees assumed fantastic shapes, there were

merciless suns. The kangaroos were black, of great size and strength; there were masses of sharp-edged rocks, the hills were wild and tangled. It was a country so terribly stony but suddenly it was the Garden of Eden . . . He was as strong as an angel and he heard the prayers of the saints. He saw the bloody moon and the white horse, the red horse, the black horse, the pale horse. And his name was Death.

The incongruity of Ebenezer, half animal, half visionary, is one of many. There is old Mrs Arden who looks like one of her collection of little dolls; evil Valentine, who looks like Little Lord Fauntleroy; Arden Valley is first seen as an idyllic scene, then invaded by a smell "with a hint of cess-pit" which eventually turns out to be part of the wine-making process of this Barossa-like area.

The discrepancy between expectation and reality extends to all the human relationships explored, and here the difference between the heroine as treated by sentimentalising "romantic" writers, and Hanrahan's women is glaringly obvious. Their relationships are almost invariably founded on fantasy. Daisy marries Ebenezer after being swept off her feet by a sermon, Dove marries Travice on the strength of a momentary exultation at a football match and the web of fantasies she builds up about him during their separation. When his brother George, whom she didn't like in life, is killed in the war, she transfers her fantasies to him, because reality can no longer contradict them. Crystal, whose dreams are of smart society, invents a complete marriage, and forces her unfortunate daughter (sired by a comparative stranger) to live up to the standards of her make-believe aristocratic father.

The real concern of the book is with the dilemma of marriage, especially with the traditional Australian marriage with its accentuation of the strict division into male and female realms. Men and women are shown to be inevitably incompatible in this society. Those of the women who are dreamers, sensitive and imaginative, are bruised or disillusioned by their mates, chosen, as we have seen, for the wrong reasons in the first place. There is, however, another option: the women can so yearn for the "finer" things that they become monsters who destroy their men or drive them away.

Dove herself falls into both categories at once. She marries a fantasy, her childhood friend Travice, deprives him of his background, drives him away, is side-tracked into a fancy for the vicar, and finally ends in the clutches of the ominous Valentine.

Dove's flirtation with Mr Lovibond, the vicar, provides one of the comic highlights of the book. Mr Lovibond, who had been to King's College, Cambridge, and had a scholar's forehead, fascinates Dove, despite his crusty, scaly skin:

But his cultivated voice was a thing of beauty, and it was thrilling being with it alone, knowing that it talked just for her. His elbow brushed hers, and she could see the church turrets poking up past the apple trees, and her apron was such a burning shade of Belgian red. The green lawn glowed, trees glittered fuzzily as he squeezed her waist by the crested moss rose. The kiss came by the hybrid perpetuals.

At times one feels some uneasiness about the author's fascination with the trivia of historical background material. Details are so lovingly collected and collated, that here and there they threaten to overwhelm the text. At their best, they are vivid evocations of the past, as for example this picture of the 'flu epidemic following World War I—

After the Huns there was the 'flu fiend (had it come because the world was travelling too fast and encountering cosmic gases?). Some people gargled peroxide of hydrogen and rubbed it into their nostrils, others wore masks to avoid infection. Camphor bags were sold for slipping inside one's blouse to ward off germs. . . .

Elsewhere the author gets carried away by the wealth of the material she has discovered, and occasionally loses sight of her characters for pages at a time. In the earlier, chronologically more remote passages of the book there seems to be a more successful blending of research and imagination, yet the closer we come to our own time (the book ends during the 30's) the more the seams show.

With a book as idiosyncratic as this one, there is an inevitable ambivalence in response. It fascinates, it surprises, it is part freak-show part serious social commentary, imaginative and always visually memorable. There is a luminous quality about the descriptions that

cannot fail to remind the reader that Hanrahan is a painter as well as a writer. The aspect of her achievement that deserves further thought, is her particular solution to the problem of writing about Australia, which combines and transcends the "straight" treatments both historical and contemporary, as well as the contemporary male-oriented fantasies. She is different. She is a true original.

*MARGOT LUKE*

Elizabeth Jolley, *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1981), 132 pp., \$8.00 p.b., \$20.00 h.b.

James Legasse, *The Same Old Story* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1982), 103 pp., \$6.50.

Julie Lewis, *Double Exposure* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1981), 108 pp., \$5.75.

Nastasya has usurped Weekly's place on the cover of Elizabeth Jolley's new novel, *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*. That seems all wrong at first. What's a distinctly secondary character like that eccentric old Russian refugee doing on a cover which by rights should belong to Weekly, the cleaning woman who gossips her way from house to house along Claremont Street and gives the book its title and its focus? Suddenly, light dawns! Of course! Nastasya is lounging on the cover, smoking a cigarette and calling out to Weekly for food because she also wants to sit centre-stage in the novel, in Weekly's world, and that is precisely the problem which has plagued the Newspaper all her life. Before Nastasya, it was her brother Victor. He disappeared years ago, and now Weekly must find a way of banishing Nastasya if dreams are to come true. Weekly must somehow get herself to that moment when she can look at "a curious earth covered mound about the size of a man bent double" and say to her neighbour, "I should like this left as it is . . ." This mound and a dance around a pear tree will be the finale of Elizabeth Jolley's tale of revenge and gratification.

The dance around the pear tree is something utterly new for Weekly. Never once until this day following her retirement has she danced. Hers has been a life of poverty, thrift, work, and patience. Her mother took Weekly—or

rather Margie, as she was then—into service in a large house when the girl was young:

House cleaning was the only work they knew. Between them, on swollen feet, they waited on Victor, cherishing him, because they knew no other way. And Victor, as he grew older, made his own life which they were obliged to hold in reverence because they did not understand it.

Elizabeth Jolley treats sympathetically this mother and sister's bondage to the thoroughly unlikeable Victor. The women lead such narrow lives, catering for other people's needs and cleaning up other people's messes. Victor, too, is alert to the needs of others, but in a totally different way. There is in him none of the women's subservience.

When Victor supplies services, it is for a real price, not for the piddling wages of a cleaning lady. Neither Weekly nor the reader ever finds out just what services Victor offers. Whatever they are, they are sordid and so is Victor. Eventually he is trapped, and it is his devoted sister Margie who unwittingly betrays him to his enemies. Years later she still suffers from the guilt and shame of that betrayal, even though Victor always used her for his own needs with absolutely no regard for hers. She suffers because she loved her brother, and never in her life did she love anyone else. Nobody else came along.

*The Newspaper of Claremont Street* might easily have been a pathetic tale, asking the reader to shed a quiet tear for the impoverished life of a badly used cleaning woman. It is nothing of the sort. There is Elizabeth Jolley's prose, for one thing, cool and detached in its rendering of the narrow life of work and solitude. Then, there is the character of Weekly herself. Pity is not the proper response to this figure. She might have been outrageously exploited by her sinister brother, but that was years ago, and in the novel's present time she is busily exploiting other people, the people she works for, who not only pay her wages, but also give her clothes and bus fare (although she too lives on Claremont Street and walks to work). Eventually they find themselves offering up a car, its repairs, and driving lessons. Weekly has developed her own miniature system of blackmail. No household on the street can resist her requests. To do so would

be to invite calumny, for their cleaning woman is neither naïve nor silent:

The Newspaper of Claremont Street knew everything and talked all the time in the places where she worked. She even knew how often the people changed their sheets and underwear. She could not help knowing things like that. It was not for nothing that she was called Newspaper or Weekly.

Weekly can help *publishing* the things she knows of course. She can select her items of news, after all. She is not without power.

Weekly has used her power single-mindedly. Her aim is to gather a collection of savings bank books. This sounds crudely materialistic and it would be, except for one thing. Weekly, like Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, is a dreamer whose imagination transforms money into beauty. Every day as she calculates the latest addition to her savings account, the figures undergo a metamorphosis into silver in her mind. To this woman born amidst the coal-mines and slag heaps of England's "Black Country", a hand full of bank books becomes a lovely mountain resort:

Sometimes the thought of the silver cone brought a fresh breeze, laden with the scent of pine forests and cold clean air from the shining surface of a clear fast flowing river. Things Weekly had never seen, but her money seemed to smell of them.

Weekly wants more than a dream. She wants to own and live on her piece of Wordsworthian Nature. Elizabeth Jolley has a splendid gift for writing lyrically about landscapes in much the way the Romantic poets did. Throughout her short stories one comes across passages evoking natural beauty in a context which expresses a deeply felt psychological need for stillness and tranquility. Any impulse towards sentimentality is held carefully in check. The same is true in this novel. Weekly's aspirations for the future, revealed little by little as the reader learns about her present and her past, are thoroughly believable and really quite touching, and yet even here, Elizabeth Jolley won't let us feel anything too soft about her character. She complicates Weekly's dreams by introducing Nastasya.

Nastasya and her husband are European exotics who make a welcome change from the tedium of Australian life along Claremont Street. This must account for the unexpectedly

imaginative cleaning woman's decision to make an exception of them. Theirs is the only flat she ever deigns to clean. They are demanding people, and as stingy as they are colourful. When old Mr Torben dies, his aristocratic wife needs someone else to answer her calls, and she insidiously manoeuvres her way straight into Weekly's room and life. Nastasya becomes the sort of burden Weekly has lived without ever since her brother disappeared. Nastasya's need for her is genuine, and that makes Weekly vulnerable. The fear of failing someone she likes (and she does like the strange creature) is very strong: "It seemed to her that not failing people was what counted in her life and in the lives of others." That is conventional morality, familiar to us all and rather old-hat, however touching. What we do not anticipate is Weekly's move beyond this tie. No one would have expected the full grotesquerie of that moment when Weekly dances round the pear tree on her newly acquired farm and Nastasya—who had taken over the planting of the tree and thereby spoiled the occasion just as she threatens to spoil Weekly's dream-world—is left stuck in the mud, wearing the gum boots she ordered Weekly to take off and give her, and now unable to pull her large swollen feet out of those boots. Nastasya can cry and cry for Weekly's help, but the Newspaper has left Claremont Street and the demands of other people, and her last human burden is about to disappear beneath a mound of earth in her lonely and peaceful landscape.

*The Newspaper of Claremont Street* is a skilfully wrought novel by one of Australia's most talented short story writers. It is good to see that Elizabeth Jolley, whose first novel, *Palomino*, was more adventurous than successful, has overcome her earlier problems with structure and evenness of tone in an extended piece of fiction.

By far the best of Julie Lewis' stories in *Double Exposure* are about middle-aged women under pressure. Like Elizabeth Jolley, Julie Lewis resists the tug towards cliché and sentimentality in the best of this fiction. Al Chambers, in "Flotsam", is a gaunt, bony widow with her "grey hair squashed under an old Fishing hat". During the winter months when the holiday makers have deserted the

beach, she lives in contented solitude with her dog and half a dozen cats abandoned by their owners. She does not think of herself as a sentimental woman, and neither does the reader until the day when a sailor Al has rescued from his wished-for drowning asks her questions which are either brutally honest or sardonically cruel. The alternatives are left open. The story is spare, dramatic; the turn it seems to take against the woman is unexpected.

"Flotsam" raises a disconcerting question: when does caring become sentimentality? That same question lies hidden within the craft of other stories. The writer seems to feel quite personally the dilemma given shape by the story of Al Chambers. She wants her readers involved with the characters, yet doesn't want that involvement to be sentimental. Setting herself a challenge, Julie Lewis takes for her subjects women who seem to cry out for pity. There is Marg in "Dry Season", stuck in the heat and dust of a caravan park, discarded by her husband, humiliated by the young man she wants to seduce. There is the unnamed wife in "The Hedge" who becomes increasingly withdrawn as her husband's cherished hedge grows up around the house and wraps them in a cocoon of his making and her terror. There is Maudie in "Late Summer", whose mind has never grown beyond childhood, and Maudie's mother, trapped in country poverty with only her idiot middle-aged daughter, who nobody else wants to look at or give a ride to. There is old Mrs Gudgeon in "A Thing of Beauty", scavenging in the tip for "some kind of solace in other people's cast-offs". Extracting these women from the stories makes Julie Lewis sound like a cataloguer of woes. She is much more than that because like Elizabeth Jolley, she writes a detached prose which refuses the wallowing emotions. The narratives are short, indeed abrupt, so that the emotional impact is usually focussed on one brief moment of intensity and is not self-indulgently drawn out. The stories are highly polished without being artificial.

Unfortunately the same cannot be said of the other nine stories. Although "Take Over" belongs in subject matter to the group I've just been discussing, it shows up weaknesses in the collection rather than strengths. A middle-aged woman has gone to her family's seaside cottage for a break from ordinary routines and respon-

sibilities. She returns from a walk to find a hippy couple with baby ensconced in the house. They "take over" by making themselves at home quite literally and without invitation. The problem with the story is that although the situation is an intriguing idea, it just doesn't come off. The intruders are stereotypes, and far too much depends on the situation, which is only momentarily intriguing. There is a peculiar kind of correctness about the working out of the plot, almost as though the story were an exercise tackled for the purpose of developing the writer's skills as a craftsman who can turn her hand to any topic offered for writing. The effect is rather cold and deadening.

Unfortunately, much the same criticism must be levelled against James Legasse's fiction in *The Same Old Story*. As an American living in Australia, Legasse might have illuminated that connection which Frank Moorhouse made so much of in *The Americans, Baby!* He doesn't. Only the dimmest of lights shines through Legasse's collection, perhaps because Joe Wilmot (the narrator who is almost always present even if not always named) is such a lack-lustre character—decent, well-meaning and dull. America for him is just exactly what one would expect in "Plain City, a turn-of-the-century Ohio town". Joe Wilmot is predictably bored, and turns his back on "the city square, Main Street, Sunday morning walks to church, breakfast at the pancake house after mass". He congratulates himself on his escape: "He had given all that up when he had 'liberated' himself from his family and his 'cultural conditioning'—when he was nineteen, ten years ago."

The "liberated" Joe gives up "Plain City", U.S.A., for Perth, Western Australia. Some unkind souls might ask what sort of liberation that's supposed to be. Joe does not pretend that Perth ever implied adventure, however: "... I had left America to take a job, the only one offered me that first year after I got my divorce and doctorate." In Australia he discovers that "a new context, however back-to-front ... is not a New World". For Joe, even the context does not seem to be disturbingly new. He is an academic after all, and universities are comfortingly similar throughout the

English-speaking world. Moreover, he can occupy his mind with the same sorts of literary questions he would have posed for himself in "Plain City, Ohio". It isn't the same as coming from a medical practice in Saigon to work on an assembly line in Melbourne. Joe's problems of adjustment seem superficial. Those of his girlfriend Vickie seem even more so, although we are told that she doesn't really fit in and that we are not to be surprised when she goes back to America. She has learned to call a painting "real beaut" and to use other phrases which her social and intellectual counterparts in Australia are highly unlikely to indulge in. There is no real evidence for seeing these gestures as ironic and basically stupid, although they seem so to me.

Few of the important people in Joe's life are Australians. Still, he does not escape the exotic altogether. In the collection's longest and best story, "An Unframed Portrait", he rents an apartment from Gudrin Schliemann, a majestically imperious European who "is approaching ninety, though she claims to be seventy-three". Although she does not take over his life as thoroughly as Nastasya does Weekly's, she does penetrate the bland caution to liven things up a bit. After the neutral language of narrator as academic critic, Gudrin's vivid outbursts are most welcome. Not for her the talk of acquiring a "new context" without a "New World". No, she is blunt and emotional. When she arrived, "Perth was a village". It was not a place for sophisticates:

'Once I rescued Shaw from ze Perth society. . . . Bertrand Russell, too, at a Perth party, was grateful that he at least could talk to me. Social affairs were boring. I was thought to be "too fast", because I sought the company of men. Perth women deserve to be kept in the kitchen vit babies in ze oven.'

If Legasse ventured as much of himself in his language as Gudrin does in hers, these stories would be more memorable. It's not a matter of being highly emotional (although emotions are strangely chilled even when they are obviously at work, as they are in the stories having to do with Vickie). It is more a problem of venturing enough to create a distinctive voice if the same narrator is to appear time and again. Otherwise, the prose simply won't be interesting enough to hold a reader's attention. This

collection lives up to the blandness of its title: *The Same Old Story* is sadly without flair.

LUCY FROST

John McLaren, *Xavier Herbert's "Capricornia" & "Poor Fellow My Country"*, Shillington House, Melbourne, 1981, 48 pp., \$3.90.

John McLaren begins this study of Xavier Herbert's chief novels by comparing Herbert with Katharine Susannah Prichard, Tom Ronan, Brian Penton, and Joseph Furphy. In McLaren's view, these other writers "are all, to an extent, professional writers" whose involvement "is with their book, with the rendering of their subject into art". Herbert, by contrast, is "in the truest sense of the word, an amateur" who "writes out of a committed love for the country of his birth". It may be hard to accept this implicit judgement of Furphy, but the comparison supports McLaren's claim that Herbert is unique among Australian writers.

Yet it is difficult to locate what is valuable in Herbert's work, especially if one honestly acknowledges his many glaring faults as a writer. The critical response to *Capricornia* has for years been dominated by Vincent Buckley's view that Herbert's vision is essentially anarchic and that "the total impression of the book is one of great creative energy battling against a universe of appalling waste and, being unable to master that waste, coming to terms with it through a comic mode". Brian Kiernan has more recently toned down Buckley's pronouncement, arguing that "the energizing principle of [Herbert's] world is its destructiveness, and at the end we are left with the sense only of this world continuing in its tragicomic way . . .". McLaren, however, observes succinctly that there are scenes in the novel which go beyond Buckley's anarchy and Kiernan's destructiveness, suggesting that the most appropriate term might be "complete nihilism". (McLaren cites the death of Tocky and her baby as proof of this, but an even more telling example would be the incident involving the removal of an ingrown horn from a hapless steer.) But McLaren goes on to undercut his own thesis, for he concedes that "nature is redeemed by moments of splendour", and he confesses that the novel's "energy" and its

"delight in the human comedy" are such that "the ultimate feeling is one of optimism". So much for nihilism.

But who is at fault here? Is Herbert too complex for his critics, or does their confusion mirror discrepancies in Herbert's vision?

To answer these questions, McLaren offers close scrutiny of selected passages, and his comments are concise and sensible. However, he does not seem to have applied his skills at close reading in all cases. The long set-piece speeches by Andy McRandy and Pete Differ are seen as examples of "the positive side of Herbert's case", whereas a close scrutiny of both speeches would reveal significant flaws in their logic and call for more limited endorsement. The death of Tim O'Cannon is another example. McLaren shows, rightly, that Tim O'Cannon is one of the more likeable and less offensive characters in the novel, and he is led on to espouse the conventional critical view that O'Cannon's death is a savage irony wrought by the operation of "a capricious fate". On the surface this seems true, for O'Cannon dies because his feet become entangled in Christmas presents he is taking home to his family, and he is thus unable to leap clear of the train which runs him down. However, the tangling of O'Cannon's feet is surely nothing more than a matter of brute mechanics, and if "fate" is to be blamed for the incident it must be possible to link "fate" with the unexpected arrival of the train. Yet Herbert is quite explicit about that fact that Tim's death is due to human error, since Christmas revels leave the railway signalmen so drunk that train timetables are mismanaged. Far from being an example of the operation of "capricious fate", it seems likely that O'Cannon's death exemplifies man's capricious refusal to accept responsibility for his own actions. Unfortunately, McLaren fails to perceive this.

Writing on *Capricornia* in *The Broad Stream*, Douglas Stewart comments: "It is magnificent, but Heaven knows what it is about." (p. 171). Given that the novel is so engrossingly teasing, it is hardly proper to become irate about McLaren's oversights. (At worst they merely point to the need for closer, more rigorous textual analysis of this novel.) His essay will serve to renew interest in *Capricornia* (and indeed, recent issues of *Southerly*

and *Australian Literary Studies* have seen further work published) and it helps to draw attention to the gaps in Vincent Buckley's view of the novel.

*Poor Fellow My Country* is a more straightforward novel, and McLaren's account of it is more assured and perceptive. Though its pace is slower than that of *Capricornia*, and though its narrative is less episodic, *Poor Fellow* has much in common with the earlier novel: there is an array of characters with comic names, the same concern about the destruction of nature, the same energetic prose style. Yet McLaren rightly perceives the difference between the two novels:

[*Poor Fellow*] is very much an old man's book, a work into which he has poured everything he has to say after a long, crowded and passionate life. (p. 15)

He also avoids the danger of seeing *Poor Fellow* as too straightforward, and takes pains to spell out the potential complexities:

We may be tempted to read it as disguised autobiography, with Jeremy Delacy standing for the author. We may look on it as a treatise on the Aborigines, their myths and legends and their tribal customs; or as a study of the impact of white civilization on this culture. We may see it as a political pamphlet about nationalism and competing ideologies, or as a study of modes of political action. We may see it as a history of the Northern Territory in the years before and during the 1939-1945 war, or as a study of Australia's international relations during this period. (p. 15)

McLaren discusses the novel in terms of its three "constituent elements"—the people in their setting; the political events in which they become involved, the life of the Aborigines—and he then considers the form which Herbert has used to impose unity on these elements. He provides a particularly good discussion of the grounds for identifying Herbert with Delacy (showing, quite sensibly, that it is a mistake to draw too close a parallel), and he offers the provocative observation that the character in Australian fiction whom Jeremy most resembles is Patrick White's Stan Parker (for both men seek "to belong, to find something permanent"). Discussing the role of the Aborigines, McLaren contends that their function is threefold—"as mythology, as his-

tory and as society" (p. 35). Then, in a masterly exercise of critical acumen, he cites a description in which Herbert speaks of the Aborigines "in a way the most racist enemy of the blacks would find familiar" (drawing attention to dirt, flies, nudity, futility) and shows how such a passage conveys Herbert's deepest insights:

In this scene, Herbert permanently eclipses D. H. Lawrence's otherwise true observation that men are not equal, but different. Herbert demonstrates . . . that the basis of humane quality is difference. (p. 39)

Critics of Australian literature should welcome this Shillington House "Essays in Australian Literature" series, and especially McLaren's provocative assessment of a provocative writer.

VAN IKIN

Rodney Hall, *Just Relations*, King Penguin, 1982, 502 pp., \$7.95.

The nicely placed stick of gelignite remains for most of us strictly in the realms of wishful thinking. No matter how exasperated we are with pious bureaucratic belief in the synonymy of progress and improvement, no matter how sorely we are tempted, we are far too moral and much too cowardly to confront the march of bulldozers with a blunderbuss or even Uncle Herbie's elephant gun. How then could Rodney Hall fail of success when his motley crowd of intransigent geriatrics pop their loose false teeth into safe pockets and let fly with the hoarded trophies of forgotten wars! And how could we fail to be thrilled when, foiled in their efforts to prevent a second gold rush overwhelming their precious dilapidated township, they exit on crutches and wheelbarrows leaving the world economic system to founder in a glut of gold?

The United Nations Organization closed its doors while the experts rewrite classical economics. . . . And the Law of Diminishing Returns is made to embrace a rider that when labour is concentrated on land yielding pure gold rather than crops, the ignorant swine who dig it unbalance the delicate mechanism of sophisticated argument. In other words, the law no longer operates. Growth economics are at an end. (p. 475)

Magnificent stuff, this, in days when the astronomical rise in interest rates must be causing the merchant of Venice to spin enviously in his grave.

But the liberation of this kind of fantasy is not all that *Just Relations* has to offer. Not so much a story as an experience too rich to be more than waved at in a review, the novel charts the intermingled social and interior lives of four generations of gold miners turned dairy farmers who live in Whitey's Fall, a remote N.S.W. ghost town. In the time of 1974 Whitey's Fall is an enclosed and apparently stagnant society. It is under threat from dissensions within and because the young generation, a plague of boy children, is leaving, and under threat from without by the discovery of its potential tourist value as a quaint relic of the Historic Past. Nearly all of the residents are themselves quaint relics whose memories encompass the entire history of the town, a fact which prompts me to find an analogy with Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Although very different in style (if one may guess at this in a translation) and in narrative technique, both books treat fantasy as fact; in both, a matron holds sway, through the function of memory, over groups of delightful eccentrics; in each, incest, plague, economic booms, man's relationship with the entropic tendencies of nature, and the lessons of history are central themes. In each book too, the history of the rise, decline and fall of a town presents the temptation of allegory. As Humphrey McQueen states on the back cover of *Just Relations*, "Through the pinhole of Whitey's Fall we glimpse an image of the whole world's history". It might be an interesting exercise to ask why two widely divergent cultures have brought into being novels with the similar impulse of an assessment of their respective civilizations, and especially why the Australian book is essentially optimistic whereas in the Latin American book there is no beginning after the end.

In a recent interview<sup>1</sup> Rodney Hall is quoted as seeing the characters of Whitey's Fall as "Australia's first white Aborigines". Their nearly telepathic tribal loyalties, their tribal justice, both more forgiving and more severe than the Australian legal system, their relationship to the land on which they have spent their lives and their relationship to time, in which

the past with its literal and metaphoric ghosts is not cut off from the present, are indeed in sharp contrast to our frequently bemoaned alienation of urban existence. But although the harshness and lack of privacy of tribal life are never issues to be avoided in this novel, the voice of realism is in constant tension with the romantic hope of a poet's vision. In the end, for instance, the future of the community virtually depends on just one unborn child, the product of four generations of inbreeding, but the force of Hall's description wants to convince us despite opposite convictions.

You watch him curve his hand to her belly, so that everyone can tell he is proud, feeling the new life stir. Their heads are in the sunlight, which also pours steadily on the mountain. They live on the food of that land and it's hard to tell them among the flowering trees. (pp. 501-2)

And it is a bitter fact of this fictive world as of ours that the new generation will frequently betray the values of its parents. It seems to me that in spite of the undeniable brilliance of *Just Relations*, its optimism is willed upon it as often as it is intrinsic to it, perhaps partly because it is demanded of Australian artists that they should create myths uniquely fitted to express the Australian identity. For some such reason the novel also reminds me of paintings by the Boyd-Drysdale-Nolan generation, in which a harsh grotesquery of subject matter is as it were suspended in a lyrical harmony of vision and style.

As well as to the admired values of the aboriginal Australian traditions, the romanticism of *Just Relations* points back at least as strongly to, for instance, Wordsworth and Coleridge of the *Lyrical Ballads*:

Whitey's Fall perches halfway up a mountainside, the mountain the people created. Year by year they accumulated the knowledge, the experience. They have the words so they know how to live with it. By their toughness they survived to heap up its bluffs, by scepticism they etched its creekbeds. They've lived and spoken every part of this mountain, they've dreamed it and cursed it, looked to it for salvation and penance. Its outcrops of granite are the very ones the people named, quarried and picnicked on before you could say there really was a mountain in this place at all. And the forest covering tells of its secrecy. p. 19)

To the Romantics, the world is not merely out there, inertly separate from us: we give it shape through what we half create and half perceive (to quote Wordsworth) and therefore the individual's identity is closely bound up with his natural environment, which provides continuity and coherence by means of retained associations. In Whitey's Fall the residents are divided between those who have reached an intuitive understanding of this relationship and those who have not. A central episode tells of the wanton felling of one of the last two remaining tallow wood trees by George Swan, grandfather of the yet to be born baby. The action serves to alienate George from most of his relatives and expresses, amongst other things, his sympathy with "progress", or in the novel's terms, with the exploiters from the city. Significantly, George as a character is not granted by his author a fraction of the substantiality given to his ninety year old father, called Uncle by everyone in Whitey's Fall. Uncle, sharp as a pin, is an unforgettable achievement of characterization; his anarchic cackle of approval, "Winnin' form!" underscores all the desired values of the novel.

Apart from Uncle, who is caught out at one stage sniffing the clothes of his grandson's girlfriend just because it's probably his last chance, there are a dozen or so other considerable eccentrics. Here Rodney Hall's characters represent a great advance on Wordsworth's rural figures, who exemplify but do not articulate and perhaps could never understand the poet's sophisticated interpretation of the significance of their lives. Some of the Whitey's Fallers, if not verbally articulate, are themselves artists, like the Romantic poets either visionaries or inspired by the pain of their lives.

In the first category is Sebastian Brinsmead, who recreates day by day in his head a bit more of the complex tapestry of God's design for man. His vision protects him against the pagan clairvoyance of his sister Felicity, the local shopkeeper and unofficial priestess of the cult of "remembering" which takes place in the pub. In these gatherings individuals are able to re-experience episodes from their earlier lives, so that the boundaries between past and present are removed and the past comments on the present. Old Ian McTaggart is another artist in this category. His life's work is a garden of concentric circles expressive of the

relationships of the town and perhaps the universe.

The most memorable of those whose pain has forced them into creative expression is Bertha McAloon, estranged wife of Uncle. Many years ago denied the love of her husband and son, she has set out to recreate her world with the major talent at her disposal, knitting. In one of the most poignantly comic scenes of the novel, artist and audience (Mr Simon Harper-Richards, Crafts Consultant of the Australian Historic and Aesthetic Resources Commission) fail to confront one another:

—That tallow-tree is the only new thing I've begun to knit. See who can work the fastest, me or the moth. They cut down my old tree, you see.

—And so you began knitting another one? We must save it. The concept. A fallen tree. A knitted tree. A triumph of the imagination. Priceless.

(That lump of sobbing in place of a life, in place of the years of happiness I hoped to have, let the moth eat it, the rot inside here, my heart.)

Who has done this. To me? Who?

—Please, please, Miss McAloon you mustn't cry. You'll be famous I promise you that. What more can you want? (p. 372)

Rodney Hall's dice are heavily loaded: rarely does the materialistic voice of the modern world sound more miserably inept.

Two other artists are Rupert Ping, a Chinese acrobat turned mechanic, and young Tony McTaggart his apprentice. Mr Ping's life-long narcissism is more or less responsible for the death of his wife, whose ancient truck crashes off the narrow mountain road after he has refused to help her save the life of her cow Alice. In expiation he carves his skin into patterned ribbons and stuffs the dead cow, which he exhibits perched on the hoist of his cathedral-like welding shop. The inarticulate Tony, unable to find a successful place in the community and made to realize his sexual inadequacy, finally loses his sense of identity altogether. He becomes a channel for the spirit of the mountain forest, giving voice in bursts of magnificent song recognized by Uncle as sacred:

Our forest, Uncle will say. With its bell-birds and lizards, well that's the forest has

got inside Tony's skull. Inside Tony is a forest a cockatoos that he's listenin to and flowers that he's touchin and smellin. He was looking for this, lookin and lookin, Uncle will say. He was feelin lost all them years, but now he's found it, if you ask me, and singin like that he's singin to us out from among his trees. (p. 499)

It is perhaps here that the source of Hall's need for optimism might finally be located. More than giving shape to the myths which might define the Australian identity (an Australia from which artists have often felt the need to escape), *Just Relations* presents us with a strange and vital Australian Utopia. It is a society in which the artist, no longer an outsider, might have a real place, where even in isolation he is understood and accepted. So at the people's exodus from Whitey's Fall Rupert Ping finally receives acceptance when he takes up his real vocation of acrobat, and the ghost of his wife Mercy rides along in forgiveness. So Bertha McAloon, abandoning her knitted house when she senses Uncle asking if she has come along, floats erratically behind the procession because at eighty-nine she is too old to walk. So the violin playing Annie Lang, long self-exiled in England, has given her violin to the orphaned Vivian, sending her back to Whitey's Fall as a gift of reunion and to find her identity. It is Vivian who bears the child.

Since, as Uncle tells us, a bit of the forest is in us all to be heard when we are not trying, who would not like to join these first white aborigines as they leave the rest of the world to scramble in greed for the gold which has always been the downfall of Whitey? However, for the sake of the anthropologists who will excavate the old site of this magical society, it is to be hoped that the next edition might contain genealogical tables for those who would like to know facts like Mum Collins's place in the concentric circles of Swans, Buddalls, Collinses, Halls, McTaggarts and McAloons. She, poor earth mother, always ready with a cuppa, the answer to every Australian misery, dies by dissolving of grief in a vast pool of tears which blots out the life-denying signatures of bureaucratic compromise.

—Winnin form!

JAN PRITCHARD

1. By Alison Broinowski, *The National Times*, June 6-12, 1982, p. 19.

Alan Alexander, *Scarpdancer*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1982, 68 pp., \$5.50.

Fay Zwicky (ed.), *Journeys*. Sisters Publishing Ltd., Melbourne, 1982, 59 pp.

Alan Alexander's second collection of poetry, illustrated by Ian Wroth, is an elegant publication. Gentle, simple lyrics, Alexander's poems evoke mood rather than ask questions or make statements. Often concerned with Western Australia as the poet's adopted world, the poetry creates an intense feeling for place, responding to the land, the city, and the minutiae of lives easily lived. In the title poem, the poet is the Scarpdancer, celebrating the vintage in the Swan Valley, where vines "Opened green lungs on/That enchantment, Scarpspace". But the danger of this enchantment is recognised in "Interim". The poet makes his blue world, where "The city stands off, beautiful,/Sheeted in its own reflection" then turns away from it to remember the moment of his capitulation, to

Pluck the morning of that day  
When he said Yes to his seduction,  
Not knowing, in the interim,  
Beauty would hatch such anxiety.

A balance in this poem between description and emotion, and the reaction to these things that depends on and extends from them makes it more rewarding than some, where words seem to be used for their own sake rather than for any referential value. "Limestone at Margaret River" is a lovely sonnet, beginning with an exploration of the paradoxical juxtaposition of natural differences:

There is something eternal about limestone  
Because it gives way; as if land and sea  
Companioned intensely.

But difficulties of meaning arise as the limestone, personified perhaps as a lady, gives its message, "Be Porous", and the final lines, "When Freycinet, D'Entrecasteaux/Shut their spyglasses and turned away" have at best a tenuous connection with the rest of the poem. The surface of Alexander's lyrics is as seductive as the places and moments of life they depict. Occasionally, too, they promise a greater challenge, one that hopefully will be fulfilled as Alexander gains poetic maturity.

Fay Zwicky's intelligent introduction to her edition of a small range of the work of four

well-known Australian women poets—Judith Wright, Rosemary Dobson, Gwen Harwood and Dorothy Hewett—suggests the purpose of her sensitive editorship. The selection, she hopes, will "reflect some process of development", enabling readers to "discover thematic connections" and "interpret more fruitfully present preoccupations in the light of the past". This belief is more than borne out by a reading of the volume: its constant sense of renewal, and of increase of poetic promise underlines the significance of the title.

An apprehension of the inheritance of women is central to many of the poems. In a witty exploration of the basis of traditional role playing, Judith Wright as "Eve to her Daughters" rewrites the "whole elaborate fable". Eve adapts to her "punishment": "Where Adam went I was fairly contented to go." But Adam, "brooding over the insult", works complainingly to make a new Eden, "with multiplied opportunities for safe investment". Eve, unlike Adam, acknowledges the inescapable logic of "faults of character", which her daughters must inherit: "you are submissive, following Adam".

If women's lives are characterised, as they are in *Journeys*, by submission, stasis and pain, they are also redeemed in these poems by recognition of the power of love; by an energetic emotional response to life which never slips into sentimentality. Rosemary Dobson's identification of her mother's feeling in "Visiting" is inclusive: "Some rage simmers in all of us all the time" and belies outward acceptance of the arbitrariness of this typically female life, which has "compliantly/Deferred to accident, event, and time". The "hungering gentleness" of the touch of a blood-coloured sea anemone in Gwen Harwood's sonnet, "The Sea Anemones" becomes a metaphor for female need. It recalls "A newborn child's lips . . . at my breast", a further, connected memory: "I woke once with my palm across your mouth", and finally, the poet's need, for a word, is poignantly recovered through her experience: "The word is: ever."

A sense of generations, of memory and continuity, of giving, and above all of acceptance infuses these poems. Each of the lyric voices is concerned with kinds of love, with birth and death, with human relationships and with learning. Dorothy Hewett's concerns are those

of the other poets, but her work is idiosyncratically less formal, typically more dramatic, and oddly more personal than theirs. In her "Father and Daughter", events in the world jostle ironically with the maturing female child's subjective experience: "Hinkler fell into the sea . . . you carry me up the path between the fig trees." Singing her "Legend of the Green Country", Hewett recreates the life and the land of her grandparents and parents, and makes of it her own: "Here I will eat their salt and speak my truth."

Current critical interest in the 'difference' of writing by women is professed, in specifically Australian terms, in the introduction to *Journeys*. In an assertively masculine culture, "women have been more free to express their awareness". So the response to life generated by the collective voices in this volume is positively romantic, denying that emptiness, that rejection of the importance of imaginative life which is peculiar to much Australian literature. *Journeys* provides both a moving celebration of the meaning of women's lives, and an inspiration for the next generation.

DELYS BIRD

David J. Lake, *The Man Who Loved Morlocks*, Hyland House, Melbourne, \$13.95.

A few years ago I began to write a sequel to H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. It would, I planned, tell the story of the Time Traveller's second visit to the world of the Eloi and the Morlocks, since this was obviously his destination when the narrator saw him setting forth for the last time.

I thought it plain that his return to that nightmare garden of a world would be a mission to regenerate the Eloi, and rouse in them some old spark of human vigour and will to defend themselves against the vile Morlocks (since Wells, though a prophet of Free Will in many ways, seems to have also dedicated his life to a belief in Historical Determinism, I am not sure that he would have felt this way about it, but, after all, his character was not he, and could fairly claim a life and volition of his own. I wrote about 15,000 words achieving, I think, a pretty fair recreation of Wells's style), and then, quite unlike Wells, ran out of ideas. The failing was fundamental:

basically, it seemed to me that the Eloi were too stupid to do much with as literary characters. Then another, somehow slightly incompatible, idea came to me: tell the story from the Morlocks' point of view. Wells's own Time Traveller had admitted that his hypothesis—that the Morlocks had gradually come to breed the Eloi, once their masters, for food—might be quite wrong. Perhaps this story would show just how wrong (the world of 802,701 can become very real and involving): the Morlocks were actually themselves attempting to regenerate the Eloi, from benevolent motives. I wrote about 1,500 words from the journal of a Morlock leader, when my life changed and the manuscript went into a bottom drawer.

But I have been punished for my procrastination. Another writer, David J. Lake, has published *The Man Who Loved Morlocks*, and I am too late. I picked up his book with a queer mixture of envy, regret, resentment and fascination.

The resentment was not justified, though the fascination was. *The Man Who Loved Morlocks* is a very clever book and a fine piece of writing. Further, I believe that the two books, considered together, offer grounds for rewarding consideration not only of literary Utopias, but Utopian thought in general, and in particular the Utopian thought of H. G. Wells, whose work has probably been of major influence in helping to form the ideas of many of this century's public intellectuals.

I read *The Man Who Loved Morlocks*, as I first read the great original, in a single sitting, though inevitably it is less tightly plotted than its predecessor. Obviously, like David J. Lake, I think *The Time Machine* a very great story, with images that can haunt a lifetime, superb descriptive force, and an overall quality that partakes of myth.

I know of no other story that captures the atmosphere of a certain type of nightmare so well: an atmosphere of a world of beauty with some lurking but at first unsuspected mystery, whose each intimation becomes more inhumanly menacing, with an ending of ultimate, cosmic desolation. But the poor ghost of my own still-born idea gives Lake's sequel a peculiar fascination for me. I find it specially interesting (and the point may possibly be of interest to other writers) that he appears to have struck the same problem that stopped me, and

to have triumphed over it: the Eloi, playing and singing in the sunlight, cowering in terror in the Morlock-haunted night-hours, are indeed not complex enough to remain very interesting, and are hardly mentioned. But further into the future still, beyond the World of the Eloi and the Morlocks, lies another world, where both races are indeed re-discovering humanity. The descendants of the Morlocks, now once again able to live in daylight, have built a tough vigorous society like that of Homeric Greece, while the descendants of the Eloi live happily enough as "Wood-Gods". The cause of this regeneration, ironically, seems to be the cold germs the Time Traveller brought on his first visit, which caused an epidemic sufficient to kill off the weaker specimens of the two human races and social dislocation sufficient to shake the survivors out of what was perceived as lethargic decline. Wells's Time Traveller, contemplating the degenerate garden-world and the mindless Eloi of his experience, dancing and helpless, had mused: "We are kept keen on the grindstone of pain and necessity, and here was that hateful grindstone broken at last!"

In Lake's sequel, pain and necessity were what the Time Traveller had unwittingly brought back into the world. Because previous civilizations had exhausted the metal, there would be millions of years for regenerate humanity before the softening and corrupting influences of a new technological civilization would return, and perhaps in the meantime the fatal paradox that ease brought deterioration could at last be overcome (the means of achieving this being more than a little vague).

For telling a rousing tale with a thoroughly and refreshingly cheerful ending (unlike the gruesome despair that is such a strong undercurrent below the surface of Wells's writings), Lake has to be commended unreservedly. But I wonder if he has really solved this paradox that *The Time Machine* so brilliantly and despairingly states. His regenerate post-technological world is perhaps too good to be believable: the regenerate post-Morlocks fight desperate battles among themselves with spears for the carving out of petty kingdoms and the acquisition of slaves, yet treat the partially regenerate but still weak and silly post-Eloi with kindness and care. This looks like wanting the best of both worlds: the toughness and effi-

ciency of the warrior and the gentleness of the welfare State. The point of *The Time Machine*, true or false, was that these two sorts of virtues were *not* compatible, and perhaps the whole process was inevitably degenerative<sup>1</sup>: toughness and initiative led to the conquering of pain and necessity and with the establishment of the Welfare State the whole organism ran down (there are probably a few Colonel Blimps who would agree, even adding the qualification that Wells over-estimated the length of the process in Britain by more than 800,000 years). Put another way, the Eloi had lost mind and strength, but they had also lost cruelty and aggression (and yesterday's flower-power sub-culture might well have agreed it worth the price). Perhaps the whole thing was a tragic confusion of ends and means, a confusion about the desire for achievement and daring, and the desire for comfort and security: a paradox, if it is not simply a question of false alternatives, at the heart of the mystery of the nature of human happiness and perhaps of the purpose of human existence.

Lake's story closes with a final vision of the most distant future: not, like Wells's, of the sun dying over a desolate, twilight beach, with some last jellyfish-like thing flopping fitfully in the weltering blood-red water, but of the human race growing up at last: possibly he looks to two apparently conflicting parts of human desire—for heroic achievement and for comfort—being held in creative tension by the long non-technological period.

But this is not quite the end of the story. I mentioned above my feeling that it was difficult to tell the story of the regeneration of the garden-world through heroism and striving, and at the same time to give the original, unregenerate, night-dwelling, machine-tending Morlocks the sympathetic treatment they seemed to be asking for. Lake attempts to do this, and his device—a series of reports from Morlock leaders—seems the best way to do it within the structure of the book. From these reports, added as a post-script, we learn that the garden-world of 802,701 was, as I always rather suspected, a special reservation for the care of the Eloi, beyond whose borders the Morlocks maintained a world-wide civilization that was stable, prosperous, and kindly. It may be a subtle but pertinent criticism of Wells himself that his scientist-hero is shown

to have behaved like a panic-stricken maniac, seeing as monsters and cannibals those who would befriend him. The Eloi were not being bred to be carried away at night and eaten—the Morlocks had plenty of farms in the rest of the world (of course, in both *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* Wells made London and the Home Counties the centre of events. The Time Traveller had shown no curiosity about the rest of the world.). Lake's Morlocks are paragons of virtue—gentle and humane, but with keen intelligence and a highly scientific and technological civilization. The vision of the possibility of such a state is a radical alternative to Wells's cosmic pessimism, and, indeed, to the earlier part of *The Man Who Loved Morlocks*. Like *The Time Machine*, most of *The Man Who Loved Morlocks* states the impossibility of a Utopia that satisfies all human needs. The "vigour" of the regenerate post-garden world is expressed in War. Slavery flourishes presumably not only for its own sake, but because, as before the Industrial Revolution, the non-existence of a "debilitating" machine-culture makes slavery economically inescapable.

And while it is a mistake to necessarily ascribe to any author the values of their fictional heroes, that seems to show up the paradox that neither Lake nor Wells, nor in a sense the human race at large, can resolve: for the purpose of regenerating the distant future, human comfort and human initiative must be shown in the long run to be incompatible; for the purpose of showing the Morlocks sympathetically, the two must be shown to be not only compatible but even interdependent: impulses which combine together to make up human happiness and human civilization.

It is perhaps part of the paradox that *The Time Machine*, which can be read as the most ferocious attack on the long-term effects of the welfare state, was written by a pioneer thinker of British socialism and a leading light of the Fabian Society.<sup>2</sup> It is a ghastly warning against the degenerative comfort only high scientific technology could provide, written by the high priest of scientific romanticism who long looked to science as the social panacea.<sup>3</sup> It is the same paradox which is shown by the odd mixture of reactions one finds (even from the

same person in different moods) to the famous phrase: "Life wasn't meant to be easy."

Neither, perhaps, was the writing of novels of ideas meant to be easy. The paradox remains. But David Lake is not an unworthy successor to Wells as chronicler of The Time Traveller. He has given us a rattling good yarn, with plenty of intriguing and potentially rewarding problems to chew on afterwards, while finally, as a work of art, the story is quite charming and delightful. I wish I'd done it.

HAL COLEBATCH

NOTES

1. "Degenerate" is one of those words subject to incredible variations of usage (particularly in the vocabulary of social and literary critics, as is pointed out in Dr Tom Gibbons' excellent study *Rooms in the Darwin Hotel* (U.W.A., 1973). I trust its usage in the present context is sufficiently clear.
2. The cosmic pessimism of *The Time Machine* is at least matched by that of Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau*. While the latter lacks the "poetic" power of *The Time Machine* it remains a deeply depressing satire against Creation as a whole and the possibility of progress.
3. There is a striking, but as far as I know largely unremarked, similarity in the mental atmosphere of many of the short stories of the Socialist Wells and the Imperialist Kipling: both show a fascination with arcane knowledge, science and machine technology, both believed in types of civilizing missions for lesser breeds, and both contain persistent undertones of cruelty, sadism and fascination with war and power.

Tim Winton: *An Open Swimmer*, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1982. 173 pp. \$11.95.

The age limitation of thirty for authors entering for the Australian Vogel Literary Award has already had astonishingly rewarding results. In the first year of the award the runner-up to the prize-winner was Archie Weller, twenty-three-year-old author of *The Day of the Dog*,<sup>1</sup> an account of young people of the streets of Perth today which subsequently won the medal for prose writing given during the W.A. Week of June 1982. This year's Australian Vogel Award was shared between Tim Winton for his *An Open Swimmer*<sup>2</sup> and Christopher Matthews for his *Al Jazzar*. Tim Winton is twenty-two and already working on another full length novel of the Western Australian coastal waters.

In both Weller's and Winton's novels the principal characters belong to the around twenty age-groups although their experiences diverge widely. Indeed, in setting, status, personalities, and attitudes, the differences point up extreme contrasts in Western Australian life today. Only the vulnerable youth of the two central characters is the condition common to both. Weller's hero, Doug Dooligan, part aboriginal, is nineteen and he has spent the past precious eighteen months of his life in prison when his story opens. He is welcomed back to his former life by his 'two best friends of past days', another 'nyoongah' (part aboriginal) and a white boy whose 'mother must have had fine ideas for her only son. But he turned into a street person early in life, and the streets are a cruel and bitter place in which to grow up, for they love no-one: only the lights and the spiders and the rain and the sun. The streets gather up all the rubbish and all the stories and keep them close to their stony hearts forever.' (p. 5). And Doug is inevitably and destructively drawn back into the life of the streets and its associations. As he thinks while the parole officer gives him excellent and orthodox advice, 'Mates, girls, cars and drink: that is all you need to make life go around'. (p. 40). And that is all he does know until the circumstances of his life drive him inexorably on to the violent holocaust that closes the day of one lost boy. The strong narrative pulse of his story gives it something of a sense of tragic destiny that the passivity of the central character must deny. But undoubtedly his story's end lies in its beginning.

Tim Winton's account of Jerra Nilsam differs in every way: in intention, in attitude, in its overall impression of reverberating complexity. In outline, it may seem deceptively simple. In a brief prologue Jerra as a small boy, fishing with his father, hooks a large turrun and struggles with it in the boat until the fish surrenders to the oar pressed against its head. The boy refuses to cut up the fish to look for the legendary pearl to be found in its head and wishes 'that the fish would be alive again' (p. ix). Some years later, Jerra, a drop-out from the university after two years' study ('BA's aren't worth a piss in the river these days' (p. 62)), drives down to the South coast of Western Australia with his lifelong friend, his former 'blood brother Sean', for a

fishing holiday. They camp on an isolated beach where they invade the twenty-year-long solitude of an old man living in a beach shack after the wreck of his fishing boat and the death of his wife. The friends find their old relationship at an end: Sean has entered his father's business and adopted his standards while Kerra has lost the job on the fishing boats that followed his dropping out. The trip ends early as sympathy expires. In Part Two, Jerra takes a job in a corner delicatessen, gets into a savage fight with a bully, escapes from a young woman's determined seduction, almost a rape, and once again flees in his Veedub to the South coast. In the last section he returns alone to the isolated beach discovered the year before, although he hesitates in doing so:

He passed the turn-off and almost didn't go back. He braked, sliding off into the loose edge, sat for a moment, then reversed up. The dull gravel strip led down to the coastal hills. There was nowhere else. (p. 133)

There he finds the old man, swaps food and yarns with him, and almost drowns himself in killing a huge groper which emerges from a deep crack in a sunken boat. Instead of the old man's praise he earns his reproaches for purposely mutilating a fish and abandoning its carcase to the gulls. He endures days of winter storms and is dragged to shelter by the old man from under a fallen tree pinning both him and his smashed vehicle. The old man advises him that the pearl he sought is never to be found in the blind cave fish, only in the open swimmer. Nevertheless he should keep trying for 'It's how yer get it and what yer do with it, that's what counts'. (p. 170). When Kerra emerges into the storm-battered bush next day he finds the old man dead, caught in his own snare for kangaroos; his body is already mutilated by gulls. Kerra wraps him in canvas, buries him in the sea and then 'lit a match, smelling the dead breath of its smoke, dropped it into the fuel tank and ran'. (p. 173)

The apparently decisive final sentence may at first seem at odds with the ambiguity of Jerra's purposeful action: 'He knew what he would do.' (p. 172). For the reader is not told what is to follow two such conclusive events as sea-burial and funeral pyre. Where Kerra's experience is to take him next can only be understood, if my reading is correct, in the light of the whole complex and allusive novel.

There are many facets to this account of the turning point of a young man's life. At the simplest level Kerra's apparent shiftlessness may be seen as an example of the social difficulties faced by many young today. As he recalls the friends he once had in Albany: 'Most of them had either gone to the city, were in gaol for dope, or had died driving big cars.' (p.20). That way of life, resembling Weller's hero's, is no more for Kerra than is Sean's middle-class conformism. Nor is the way out taken by the young boy in the telephone box who yelled, 'Listen—listenlisten listen—and then blew his own head off'. (67). Yet even the job on the fishing boats disillusioned him; commercial fishing, 'hauling them in by the ton with a winch ... like ... mining' is no longer what he valued when man pitted himself against fish, 'diving for 'em on their own terms'. 'Nothing seems to be right,' says Kerra. (p.60).

For Kerra, like so many wetsuited young along our coast, is at home in the water, river, estuary and the long Western Australian coast: surf-boards and riding (p.8), snorkels and spearfishing (p.136), fishing from bank, boat, rock, and underwater: fish, he admits to the old man, are about all he knows. (p.17). Hunting under water with spear and knife provides some of the most evocative passages of this precise and poetic prose (pp.136-7) as well as the climactic struggle with the groper. It also inspires the recurrent nightmares of death and sexuality which haunt him.

This novel is particularly successful in recreating the boy's inner life which underlies the laconic, practical, athletic appearance. On the surface a monosyllabic speaker his emotional life is expressed in other language. In a representative passage, Jerra is profoundly disturbed by the sight of a dead seal on the beach, 'under a wreath of birds', (he) 'could not take his eyes from the slit of belly. He wondered how long his mind could remain numb. He pretended he was not pretending.' When Sean asks him how the sea is he replies 'Piss-poor'.

'Anything new?'

'A seal. Dead on the beach.'

'Goin' fishin?'

'Yeah. Some squid left.'

And, not without a rare touch of humour, Jerra observes: 'It was apathetic conversation even for them.' (p.26-7)

The disturbance caused by the sight and smell of the dead, rotting, ruptured seal seems natural enough in a boy whose sensitivity to the cruelties in nature and to death is everywhere manifest: in the child who refused to cut open the dead turrum for its pearl to the boy who laments a legless petrel on the beach (p.26); who cannot witness the 'rattle of limbs thrashing. Flesh. Boiling,' of crayfish being prepared for supper (p.45); who watches the death of the fisherman's tame pelican, caught in the net, with 'frightened croaks' and 'bag-throat ... quivering' until a 'bird-rag' and 'spreading feathers' float on the surface (p.83); who readily imagines the prolonged suffering of the snared kangaroo before death. With unspoken distress Kerra is as conscious of the darker aspects of sea and bush, indeed of life, as he is of its beauty. But the beached and mutilated seal does more than prove yet again the cruelty of nature; it 'triggers off all the memories' that form the central concern of the main character, his sexual relationship with Sean's mother which develops from his childish love for 'Auntie Jewell'; it continues through her travels, her many pregnancies and abortions, until her mental breakdown and hospitalization drive him to break the relationship and take to the fishing boats. That she ultimately dies, drunken, pregnant, and self-mutilated, after a Guy Fawkes night drinking party that wrecks her husband's new boat and is later washed up on the beach forms the nightmare memory Jerra denied then as he does now.

All of this extended experience, from childhood through adolescence to young manhood, is presented fragmentarily, in flashback scenes, in echoed lines of poetry Jewell and Kerra wrote together, in phrases from speech or letters that intersperse the forward-moving narrative of journeys and distasteful suburban job. By gradual revelation of situation and feeling they weave the whole poetically together.

While it might be said that Jewell's career is more sensational than need be (would a father farm out his son Sean to his best friend's family to shield him from knowledge of his mother's apparent nymphomania and recurrent abortions?), it is clearly vital to the design of the whole novel.

For the old man in the South shares a similar yet not identical experience. There is an immediate sympathy between him and Kerra

which Sean does not share; the rambling old man mysteriously greets him as:

'Son! Son! Aren't you gonna come back home an' see yer Mum? She'll be pleased, orright. Geez, you've grown. "Born of ... fire", eh.' (p. 48)

Sympathy and mutual care persist to the end. And Kerra hears the old man's confession of twenty-year old events: of the boat the childless couple cherished like a baby, of the wife he loved but couldn't satisfy sexually, of her pregnancy by another when she sank their boat (p. 149) so that he killed her and burned her body (p. 52). As he says, he had 'confessed a million bloody times, but no one's ever heard it ... Orready done me time, I 'ave' (p. 152); 'I take the punishment every day', he says (p. 149); let the outside world think them both drowned in the wrecked boat.

Such repetition, if not duplication of incident, of sex and pregnancy, drunkenness and destructiveness, water and fire, is curiously obsessive as is the sense of sin and guilt that darkens the two so different lives. It suggests an unresolved relationship with feminine sexuality which another reader might well pursue through the figure of the father who 'Got tired' (p. 61) and gave up trying to find a satisfying life: in Kerra's eyes, a 'greying man, the loose skin around his neck, the pitted palms he remembered gloved in pollard' (p. 62); and also through the water, fish, diving, dreams of ocean depths, those Jungian symbols of the unconscious which emerge from the story of an amphibious boy. Be that as it may (and such archetypal overtones may partly account for the haunting quality of this book), the similarity of incident reflects the mutual sympathy between the old and the young and leads on to the outcome of the catastrophe. As I understand it, Kerra literally steps into a dead man's shoes. He will take on the old man's way of living just as he puts on the old man's boots and finds them unexpectedly comfortable: 'rank but soft inside' (p. 173). Besides, his hut holds food, blankets and socks for the boots and the old man has already explained how he managed to survive.

Our judgement of this outcome may be ambivalent. In one way it may be considered to be running away (as Kerra's father says (p. 125)), a 'good hideout', as Kerra himself

thinks guiltily (p. 12) reproaching himself for immaturity, a natural choice for a boy nurtured on *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Swiss Family Robinson* and *The Old Man and the Sea* (p. 63). Both men see it this way themselves; as Kerra reproaches the old man: 'Lockin' yourself away here, isn't that runnin' away. Chuckin' it in?' His answer is a challenge: 'Not chuckin' it in. Any'ow look who's tellin' me.' (pp. 149-50). In another way the choice may be seen as freedom, a life as unconstricted as the open sea, the element in which the open swimmer, holding the pearl, has its admirable and desirable being. Evasion or liberation? No judgement is passed on the final action. What does come through though is profound disgust with predatory forces, creatural or human; the gulls which peck the bare ankles of the trapped old man laugh at Kerra with 'those red Sean-eyes, squinting, edging closer' (p. 173) until he defies them with the explosion of the wrecked VW.

*An Open Swimmer* is at once a vivid and precise description of the life of the coast and an experience poetically shaped by reminiscence and thematic chapter headings; but above all it is a disturbing evocation of a sensitive and vulnerable character, fully conscious of the hardships and suffering in nature yet unable to accept the cushioned life of the city. His rejection of city, of female sexuality, even in his contemporary, of human companionship, is so complete, so full of disgust that Kerra's poetic fragment seems, as it were, fleshed out by the whole novel's context:

All the severed men  
Clutching themselves  
Butchering  
—And the guilt. (p. 165)

The novel offers no easy resolution. But it may well lodge in the reader's mind, as it has in mine.

HELEN WATSON-WILLIAMS

1. Archie Weller, *The Day of the Dog*, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1981.
2. Tim Winton, *An Open Swimmer*, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1982. All page references come from this text.

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