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Vol. 32, No. 3, September 1987

## CONTENTS

### STORIES

From Ariadne's Yarn	65	Marion Campbell
The Hanged Man in the Garden	57	Marion Halligan
The Chrysoprase Plain	15	Pat Jacobs
The Clothes Line	71	Dennis Maxwell
The Nature of Cats	23	Chris McLeod

### POEMS

Michael Alexander	42	Jean Kent	68
David Buchanan	14	Peter Porter	5-13
John Griffin	28,44	Elizabeth Smither	41,78
Terry Harrington	74	Graeme Wilson	62

### ARTICLES

'Oh Don't You Remember Black Alice?' or How Many Mothers had Norman Shillingsworth?	29	Elizabeth Lawson
<i>Poor Fellow My Country:</i> A Question of Genre	45	Sean Monahan

### REVIEWS

Sally Morgan, <i>My Place</i>	79	Nene Gare
Audrey Longbottom, <i>The Solitary Islands</i>	84	Patricia Crawford
Shane McCauley, <i>Deep-Sea Diver</i>	85	Vera Newsom
Joan London, <i>Sister Ships</i>	86	Paul Hetherington
John Macgregor, <i>Propinquity</i>	88	Andrew Lynch
Graeme Turner, <i>National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative</i>	89	Veronica Brady
Tim Winton, <i>Minimum of Two</i>	93	Trudi Tate
Brother George Looks Over Biographers' Shoulders	75	Graeme Kinross Smith
Notes on Contributors	96	

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# WESTERLY

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# WESTERLY

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PETER PORTER

## The Ecstasy of Estuaries

It is the right time to come here visiting,  
Where villagers saved suicidal whales  
And sand is constituted white  
Beneath blue hulls — a time of times  
Precluding death and constantly ahead  
Of madness. Rest here that have no absolute.

What might rock sleep is breaking out at sea  
On reefs which bear the Southern Ocean;  
Up-river pelicans on posts applaud  
Such widening to island esplanades,  
A shallow onus of the tide, the whiting  
Sketching on the bottom their own shapes.

Nothing is curable but may still be endured.  
Voices wait near water for career,  
The karri are as various as signatures  
And people out of cars confess they find  
A fantasy in being what they are,  
Slaves to the ancient brightness of the area.

A magistracy of memory condemns:  
Give us your childhood reminiscences,  
Fan us awake with scholarship — was that  
The famous Ardath pack, the Sydney Silkie's bark,  
Were we the partners of those afternoons  
Which lounged about in bamboo concert-rooms?

Staunchness of land slipping into light,  
Of sandbanks drying from the ebbing tide  
Opens a thinking principality -  
It's always a thousand miles from where to where  
And will be Sunday by the railway clock,  
Apprenticeship to dying in the dark.

To scatter toast-crumbs to the gulping gulls  
And let the dinghy flutter on the tide,  
To be reliving what was hardly lived  
When years ago the boat came back at dusk,  
A father and a son, strange strangers, home,  
This is the storytelling of the blood.

A countryside of changes still unchanged  
Where no vielleicht will travel as perhaps,  
Remorseless movement that a wayward tune  
Has challenged into permanency,  
This ecstasy of estuaries prepares  
A tableland for time to wander in.

PETER PORTER

## Mappamondo

The production line from Europe's heart  
has never slowed. History and its  
rabid agents fade on the face of life  
and sink to polished tombs — there are always  
creatures of importance for averages  
to love, and high Miltonics break  
and starve the language. So we are piloted in.

Scenes on the palace walls are spectacles  
for gods and cleaners. How bold to pack  
the sum of everything on just one sphere  
which purrs with measurement.  
Seek the perspective called Creation -  
a human skull rolls through recorded nothing  
and maps the horror of its being there.

PETER PORTER

## Essay on Clouds

A complacent Gulliver, I lie  
in silent dripping Norfolk  
watching these flying islands  
with selfish unconcern -  
here are planetary worlds  
of silvered science,  
but I care only that they  
block the sun from signing my dull skin.

So far down, this temperate garden  
and such reefs above!  
Oceans floating over us  
but still we breathe the neophyte  
scent of disengaging pollen.  
The rug, my books, the cruising cat  
are drowned with me,  
we do not even seem to sleep  
in our afternoon pavilion.

The clouds address me:  
'you will never see us after this,  
though our obliging cousins  
will bring continuity,  
but we have marked you, flying over,  
the last one of the dynasty of self.'  
I can calmly wait  
for such archaeologists to find me.

Why is the sea in the air?  
It's only books which say it is the sea,  
the clouds abhor redundancy.  
Now a black stripe and then  
a pall of grey bring in  
tormenting voices.  
They are the sensitive ones  
whose ears can hear the million cries  
of animals in abbatoirs.  
The garden is sticky with their blood.

The sun comes out  
to purge exaggeration.  
The sun enjoys short sentences  
but clouds prefer  
a shifting Jamesian syntax.

Tea is brought out on the terrace.  
Once more the clouds reproach me:  
'because you are so incomplete  
you cannot think of us without  
dragging in yourself. You are fit  
for nothing better than for prophecy.'

I watch one cloud come visiting.  
In twenty minutes it disappears  
to keep an appointment in the Wash.  
I wave goodbye knowing I shall miss it  
less than the passing cyclist on the road.

Night awaits the upper wind.  
I decide I should not like to live  
in a universe kept up by love  
yet unequipped to tell a joke  
or contemplate the sources of its fear.

PETER PORTER

## Hand in Hand

They are always together, the two who travel  
but never know when they must separate,  
a gravely frowning pair in gloaming  
who cast such classic shadows that the beasts  
stir in their tiers (sweet macaronic pun)  
at this inviolable portage, that the rivers  
etch their banks to fine-drawn lines  
and music forms a gum upon the air.  
They are hand in hand, so no looking-back  
is necessary, but their fear is palpable -  
their Hermes is a harvest of remembering  
as if they had been born to gather in  
a future lived already: it must be this  
since tiredness was their starting-point  
and faith like sunlight faded in betrayal.  
The onwardness is strange; they grow old  
but won't believe in time; they are fed on words  
and every disappearing trick; an abbey  
is a schoolyard and a paysage  
with carrion birds reveals its toothy fright  
in pictures of a mother. Interchangeably  
the world subsides to sex, its surfaces  
all lust, its membranes history's odd halves.  
That hand's in this hand, so no-one sees  
their partnership is change, that love is like  
a signal passing which may startle air  
only by its after glow: is this a death,  
not of the one or other but of all?  
Huge horns stake mountains in their places,  
a damming rung of darkness widening  
until the sea itself withdraws to show  
the puny two still wearing eyes like hats.

One hand undid the swaddling wraps of pain,  
the next one vanished in a coffin's echoings,  
and yet one further bent down further to  
raise love to love, hydraulic vanity;  
the last hand and the best enskies the heart  
along this path grown Mannerist where gods  
quote from their memories. Dark and darkening  
are the Furies' tails, whip-lashing light  
on snow-tiled Erebus. Avert the eyes  
and do not glance aside to question who  
is there. The species is the soul on trial,  
its pilgrimage a handclasp from despair,  
walking with Hermes to the upper world.

PETER PORTER

## The Blazing Birds

With their wicker worry wok of claue and claim  
the birds play Scrabble on the air. Sky is stretched  
and naked nightmare's strung on fencing wire.

On a mat of pier, Australia's noisy birds  
are sucking anthems. So much suck comes out  
with lumps of sun it spells Magnificat.

Certainly it's a privilege to get up drunk  
and leave a note — I'm not inside my ears, I'm  
parleying with certain parrots of importance.

All at once and always changing gear  
the Sistine servers shriek. Perennial  
the praise and every liturgy a laugh.

Telephones are ringing on the wire  
but men are starved of epithets. Boiled words,  
the birds say, are as close as you will get.

The tirr-lirra parliament sits on.  
"Ugly old man with crocheted wobbly hair,  
you're wong, you're wong, your curry's doubly wong!"

Give them an inch and they'll take a worm.  
A team of locusts trains beside the Firsts,  
black cockatoos above a stand of fire.

I almost lose my way along similitudes.  
Bird cries may seam into our symphonies  
but in this garden only spiders spin.

The 'twenty-eight', the spangled drongo, kooka  
with its caco-credi, magpie mutts,  
what messages they drag across the sky!

Kings to fish for, larks to scent the air,  
a parlement of fowles refuelling,  
and Bib and Bub expelled from paradise.

## Capital and Interest

From the discovery of penicillin  
and development of the pill  
to the clinical diagnosis of AIDS,  
the world had two decades of safe sex.  
Such a wicked interregnum  
could not go unregarded.  
How appropriate, say those  
whose highs are power and money,  
that we should now be punished  
through our sensuality.

But consider it this way.  
The human urge to love  
can take no stricter path  
than through the sexual membranes.  
Who then could blame the virus  
for crossing to its future  
on such a perfect bridge?  
A text the New Right might discuss:  
Market forces pledge success  
to the best-equipped campaigner.

DAVID BUCHANAN

## There's No Old Men in Jazz?

(A Reply to a Poem by Eric Beach, *Westerly* June '87)

There's no old men in Jazz?  
(Tell that to Bill Evans!)  
Some 'well known' poet in Melbourne  
reckons jive doodads and mamas  
being bad is the get down razz —  
“yeah there's no old men in jazz”.

(But they say he played so delicately  
that his music *could* only be crushed  
by such a world where he survived  
ravaged by heroin in between those keys.  
I will not here, dare vex his ghost.  
His own notes breathe air enough.)

So what old men play jazz?  
Hey man, baby you was born that way;  
to be mocked in mock 8/16 timing,  
cos you was jiving to be *exclusive*  
(so your air poems could rarefy  
the eternity of such fragile fingertip presence.)

PAT JACOBS

## The Chrysoprase Plain\*

Beside her, he slept heavily, his body bare and uncovered, dark against the white sheets. The chill of the air-conditioning made her shiver and she tried to extract the sheet where it was entangled in his legs to cover herself. He stirred, half-turned and threw his arm across her. He didn't wake, but she stayed motionless until she was sure he was sleeping deeply. The faintest grey light was showing at the edge of the curtain. Slowly she began easing herself out from under his arm, sliding off the bed. She groped with careful movements for her clothes, dressing slowly. She knew her bag and the car keys were on the table and found them without error. The hard part would be opening the door. The Roadhouse was new. Incongruous and raw on the red ground. Maybe the door would stick and he'd wake up. Anxiety cramped her stomach. But she couldn't stay. Not there in the bed beside him. She had wondered how people reached the point of leaving. How they did it. Now she knew. The time came. Alternatives dropped away. She opened the door, pressing the lock down while she slipped through, pulling it behind her, careful not to snap the lock in case the sharp sound woke him.

The air was warm and still. As yet, there was no colour, only tones of grey, black smudges. In front of the rooms, utilities, battered four wheel drives and a few cars were lined up, caked with mud, stained with red dust. Somewhere a generator hummed. Everywhere there were signs of recent arrival: drums, building materials, piles of rubble. There was nothing growing. Just the red earth, rock-hard, or shaped into deep ruts where water settled briefly after rain. Next to the block of units was the fuel depot and dining room. She stood outside the door, thinking of what she had to do. She would have to use the cash she had to get fuel, fill the tank anyway. It would be no use filling the jerry-can, she couldn't lift it. She checked the time, four-thirty, no-one would be around for a few hours. She could just get in the car and start driving. No, it was too risky. The fuel gauge was unreliable and she didn't know how much petrol was

\* This story was awarded first prize in the inaugural Randolph Stow Short Story Awards, organized by Dickon Oxenburgh. Judges were Tim Winton and Wendy Jenkins. Prize-winning poems in this competition were published in *The West Australian*.

in the tank. The thought of being stranded somewhere on the road frightened her. She would have to wait, find out how far the next fuel stop was and work it out. She had to get to Hedland. And then, she'd need money for a flight back to the city. She imagined waking Charley, telling him she was going, asking him for enough money to get back to the city. He would look at her, uncomprehending. He wouldn't take her seriously. She would feel — like she always felt when she tried to confront him — insubstantial, not fully materialised. She pictured him, tossing aside the bed-clothes, his quick deft way of moving. He would say, to the wall, the ceiling: for Christ's sake! Or, he would look at her with the expression she couldn't name precisely. She thought, had been thinking for the past few days, that it was puzzlement. He really didn't know there was anything wrong. The certainty she had reached during the night returned. The necessity to act without thinking further. The necessity to wound him. To leave.

The grey tones were changing. There was a suggestion of colour, not red yet, but umber, soft, unspecific. She began to walk, past the closed buildings, the parked vehicles, out onto the road. Around her the spinifex plain stretched out, empty. She resisted an impulse to crouch, to hurry back, even to minimal safety of the verandah with a wall behind her. She stood on the road, doubtful how to proceed. The real point of crisis she saw was not behind her — leaving the room — it was now. What she did now that would matter. If she hesitated, stopped moving, the momentum would be lost. She began walking again towards the dark hills, remote and fantastic on the horizon. But they were real. Yesterday, they had travelled through them to reach this place. The walking was difficult, uneven. She stumbled on the stones and hard ground. Her awkwardness irritated her. She knew what it meant: she was out of place, there was no sense in what she was doing. No-one walked on this road. It was a means only of reaching another place. She saw the danger in it. It confirmed Charley's opinion of her: her inaptness in his life. If someone passed her now on the way in to the Roadhouse they'd talk about it: a woman, walking out on the road. She paused to look back. Even now, she had gone too far. If a truck or car came along, they would stop, ask her what she was doing? Was she alright? They would tell her it was dangerous to walk on the plain. They would ask her who she was. They would say she was mad. The first sunlight touched the crowns of the spinifex covering the plain, making them look soft and delicate. She bent to look more closely at the road edge. Pale green, glistening with what looked like moisture, she touched it, knowing in advance it was a deception. Hard fine spines, designed to repulse contact. She shook the hair back from her face. What a place to choose! Why hadn't she waited until they reached Hedland? Charley was probably still asleep. She could go back and lie beside him and the rift she had decided on would become the merest crack again. But she'd known it was there. A fault line, in increasing danger of slipping out of alignment. To go back seemed more hazardous than to go on. She looked at her watch, just after five. Soon she'd turn back, get the fuel and start driving, time it so she wasn't hanging around waiting. Already there was warmth in the sun, she swung her arms, loosening up, enjoying the rhythm and the sight of the red road disappearing under her feet with the energy of her own movement. Small birds fluttered at the verge. She watched an eagle climbing

up, lifting on the currents. If she had the glasses she could watch it, follow its path. It surprised her to find she was feeling better. Surely, not that simple?

The buff-coloured four wheel drive came to a stop beside her. Walking with her head down she hadn't heard it approaching. The passenger leaned out. Where're you off to? There's nothing out here. The expected made her smile. I'm sure you're right. The driver leaned forward to get a look at her. She recognized him, they'd had a drink with him before dinner last night. He'd been trying to probe Charley, find out what he was doing, where they'd come from. In these chance conversations her role was to look friendly and stay silent. Charley didn't trust her ability to ward off questions. He'd warned her: don't talk to anyone, don't trust anyone. It had added to her sense of isolation. You're with the geologist aren't you? The driver was sizing her up. That's right, she nodded. Where's Charley? He'll be along soon. The passenger, a boy, persisted. What are you out here for? Oh well, she thought, here we go. I'm a biologist. I'm doing some research in this terrain. Yeah? You can have it he said. There's nothing but spinifex out here. She doubted if the driver had believed her. He revved the engine and as they moved off she heard the crackle of the radio. He'd be calling the Roadhouse — There's a woman out here, a couple of miles out. She's with the geologist, you'd better check — the Manager would go and knock on Charley's door, finding it unlocked. There would be embarrassment, curiosity. How would Charley feel when he discovered the keys to the Landrover were gone? She eased herself onto the ground on the road edge, rueful about the dust stains on her last set of clean clothes. The sun's gentle but definite touch on her back was a reminder that in a few hours it would be drawing all moisture from everything. It had been a mistake to wait, she should have taken the risk. She wondered what Charley was doing. Anywhere else he could have ignored it, been casual. He couldn't do that here. He'd have to recover her as soon as possible. Then what? Discussion? Even that wasn't feasible, she'd seen that last night. They were too exposed. The only way was to get out quickly. She'd lost the chance of that. What was left? There wasn't much scope for choice. There were limitations — a series of limitations — like the monotonous cover of spinifex: an endless variation of the one form threatening a madness of irritation, constraint and boredom. The road defined it: on the road she was visible, classifiable, like one of Charley's specimens. She couldn't go anywhere, couldn't do anything. There was only so many permissible moves and this was an invalid one. 'Player will return to Roadhouse'. The irony was that surrounded by more space than most people could conceive of, she could only go back. Her position was worse than she'd realised. Come on Charley, she stood up, shaking the red dust from her trousers. Get it over with. What was holding him up. He'd probably decided to have breakfast first. He knew there was nowhere to go. Across the plain there was a scattering of anthills. The theory was they were roughly aligned with the magnetic north to minimise the heat; survival architecture. Yesterday, the spinifex cover had been a green blur, but now she saw there were gaps between the clumps, patches of ground were visible. She tried to work out how far away the anthills were. The flatness and the absence of familiar objects confused her sense of scale. From where and how soon did the *threat* materialise? Warnings were never specific. It was just said: 'you can't wander around out there'. Any minute Charley would come down

the road. There was no sense in just changing the point at which he would overtake her. The predictability of the outcome infuriated her. The geometric certainties would ensure it. Unless . . . she went in at a tangent. She'd have a bearing, pick out one of the anthills. She'd be heading north. It was a choice. She stepped off the road, flinching from contact with the spinifex, holding her arms out, like wading into water. She was in a pale green sea, the mythical space between the lines. She hoped the anthill would be a reliable guide, there was nothing else she could use. She tried to move quickly, to gain some distance from the road, but the spaces between the bushes were irregular. Each step had to be decided first. It was slow, her cotton pants were thin and each minor brush with the spines stung. It was going to be painful. She could hear the drone of a car engine, still distant. The ground was more uneven than she had expected, she had to keep making detours. In places, the round shapes swelled into masses, reaching past her waist. She was hemmed in, it would be easy to panic. She'd have to keep her head, watch the anthill. The car was getting closer. She crouched, listening to its approach. It didn't sound like Charley's car. If they'd seen her, they'd just drive in after her. It was travelling steadily, they'd be expecting to find her on the road. She waited until it passed and the sound receded. How far would they go before they realised . . .? It was done now.

In places it was easier, open patches where the stony surface became loose sand. She saw no traces of life. Everything would stay away from her she knew. They would feel or see her coming. The uniformity was a topographical illusion. There were outcrops of rock, declivities, the sandy breaks. On a rise, she paused. There were no traces of the road. It had merged into the terrain. Even the flat outline of the Roadhouse was indeterminate, easily lost from sight. There was nothing moving. No sign of Charley or anybody else. But he was there. She wondered how soon before he realised that it was a matter of elusion. She started again, keeping her course, watching the particular anthill. It was possible, she could see that she would be able to reach it. The flies had found her, attracted by the moisture on her skin. She tried to resist brushing them away constantly to conserve her energy, to move steadily and rhythmically, but she was uneasy. It was more than that she was afraid. It was the scale. Distance on a scale that distorted perspective. There were no counter measures. The emptiness threatened her poise. She realised that she was thinking of the anthill as a real goal — instead of an arbitrary marker. She must remember that. Stay clear about what she was doing. When she got there she'd search her bag, maybe she'd find some sweets. It was taking longer than she'd expected, after seven already. The ground had begun rising gently and ahead of her the red column stood out, the last bit would be easier. The thought occurred to her that it might still be inhabited. It was a problem. She had thought of it as abandoned, without the myriads that had constructed it. It was a mistake to make assumptions like that here. It sharpened her thinking. She couldn't afford to be aimless. What knowledge she had was shaped to the idea of hostility. The myth instilled fear: the unwary careless traveller died. It ran, like the subterranean water-courses, beneath the surface activity of life. She approached the perimeter cautiously, looking for signs, moving in closer. Nothing. She circled the base slowly. Before anything else she wanted to mark the direction from which she'd come, establish her orientation. She looked around for sticks, something to mark the ground,

but there was no litter, no rubble, only the rock-hard red ground and the tight spheres of the spinifex. She groped in her bag and used a pen, her comb, a pocket book to point a line, her own line back to the road, which was there but no longer visible. She sat, close to the base, half-expecting the appearance of insect life prepared to repel her. She leaned back, cautious about relaxing. The eagle was still there hovering. It would be trying to figure out what she was. Beside her she tipped out the contents of her bag: papers, coins, lipstick, a head scarf — and the roll of lemon drops. The sharp flavour was fresh in her mouth, making her salivate, soothing her throat. Breakfast on a jade-green plain! No, that wasn't right. Jade, rare and exotic, wasn't found here. This was the green of chrysoprase, impure quartz discoloured by nickel. It was chrysoprase that was found here. Charley had described this place yesterday: Proterozoic the oldest . . . archaic. Glacial deposits . . . too old for fossils! The irony of their present had not been lost on her. Isn't there anything around more relevant she'd asked, more recent? With fossils? Not until you get to the coast, it's only about four and a half thousand years old. His time scale mocked her. She'd been silent then.

She jerked upright. She'd fallen asleep. What had encroached on her? Had a *threat* materialised? It looked the same. She checked the time, nine-thirty. What was Charley doing? He couldn't wait for long. If he didn't act the others would act for him. They'd act on the assumption that she was disoriented, couldn't help herself. She unwrapped one of the lemon drops and let it dissolve slowly, savouring its tartness. She was glad she was on the *Proterozoic*, with glacial deposits, no fossils, no minefield of grotesque life-forms under her. It was neutral, unoccupied space. Her presence there was only a minor discontinuity, a chronological oddity. She knew where she was: about three miles in a direct line from the Roadhouse. They: the searchers, Charley, didn't know where she was. It was a crucial distinction. She scanned the sky, looking for the eagle. It might give her away, hovering like that, assessing her potential as quarry, the day's victim. It wasn't wholly wrong. They would search relentlessly until they found her. But she wouldn't be harried. It was Charley who would be drawn out. He would be thinking, applying his knowledge of her. She felt a brush of pain, like a faint tracery of fingers over her flesh, nerve-endings responding to stimuli. She was safe enough. He would go by the rules: layers of evidence accreting, recoverable, classifiable. She thought again of yesterday, the long silent drive through the barren country. She had wanted to provoke him, start an argument. You geologists have got a lot to answer for. You're really the ones responsible for the demise of God she'd said, half serious. Old Lyell and William Smith, figuring out how old the world was. Doesn't it move you Charley? Those old boys being forced to face the fact there was no hard evidence for the Act of Creation? No sign of a Prime Mover? How did they tell the people? But he wouldn't rise to the bait. Geology is physics, chemistry, biology, maths. Theology doesn't come in to it. It's an objective study of the earth, that's all. Charley, she'd said, you eliminate the mystery. There's no poetry in it. Charley was a rock man; a latter day explorer of the interior.

The sun was almost overhead, she had slept again. Her ankles were red and swollen from the spinifex. She could feel the embedded spines irritating her skin. The eagle was back. It would see everything with its swivel eye. If Charley

was alert, he would notice the eagle, returning, watching something. With the glasses he's be able to find her if he followed the eagle. He thought he had all the answers, or knew how to get them. But what about the cracks and crevices, the subterranean convolutions, the unexplainable interventions? That threw them. She'd listen to the talk. There were chasms you could fall into. Your bones calcified and the cavities and spaces that were your vital organs filled with dust. This bleak view of soft and vulnerable parts turned to stone chilled her, despite the heat of the sun. He'd never find her. Look in the spaces she told him.

She leaned back against the anthill, in the narrow shade it provided. She could feel her body becoming sluggish. In a few more hours she would have to think about going back. There was still time. She could wait a bit longer. She became aware that the silence had fragmented into various parts: something small moving in a spinifex bush, the rise and fall of her own breathing. The interplay of these sounds occupied her. Across the plain she saw the movement of a vehicle. They were searching off the road. She looked at the time, she'd been gone nearly six hours, long enough for what had been an absence, a displacement, to become something else . . . a loss? A problem in logistics? She watched carefully. There was only one, perhaps others were searching the other side of the road. They would be working in a grid. She sat up, inclined to laugh out loud at the image in her mind of the precisely mapped squares, filled with a multitude of round shapes; the certainty that each square must contain a number of spaces, gaps, in which she could be. They wouldn't necessarily find her using squares. It was a matter of roundness, round and round the spinifex bush. 'You could hide an army in the spinifex'. That was another part of the myth — she watched with interest to see how far they'd calculated she might get — if she were hiding an army in the spinifex she would use different sized men: small men behind the low spinifex, bigger men behind the bull spinifex, marching along the road they would look like a wedge, if the small men were in front. If the taller men were in front it would be as though they were marching backwards. The importance of shape was undeniable. She could distinguish the four wheel drive now. It wasn't Charley. If it had been Charley, on his own, she might have invited him onto the neutral ground. They could have discussed the merits of squares and circles, discussed the terms of a surrender. She moved out of the protection of the anthill, crouching, rounding her back, becoming just another pale green shape, lucky she was wearing her khaki shirt and pants. Shielded by the bulk of the anthill she moved down, merging, finding a patch of sand she'd noticed earlier, huddling her body against the sun, trying to keep her hands and legs from contact with the spines. She waited for them to complete the pass. They would come close. The signs were there to see. She had forgotten to pick up her markers: the pocket book, the comb . . . They passed on the other side of the anthill, only five or six metres from where she was. She stayed easing herself into a more comfortable position, watching for unpleasant insects, the black ants which were quick to gather. She watched the quick flick of a tiny lizard catching them, an ex-dinosaur from the Creaceous? There was more than one way to shape a survival. When the sound had receded she stood up, feeling the blood thin and hot in her head. She flexed her arms and legs, walked a few paces, gauging her store of energy. The Landrover had gone to the east of her, towards the fantastic dark hills, it had been easy to evade them. Almost

too easy. Was it an error of judgement? The one mistake that would alter the outcome? In the reconstructions of people lost, the unexplainable disappearances, there was always that proviso . . . 'if only . . .' You looked for it. That one error of judgement. It was the hottest part of the day, against the base of the anthill there was only a sliver of shade. Like everything around her she would have to wait. Weigh her resources against the passing of time. There was no sudden event to fear, the slow process of dessication was the danger.

The men would go back to the Roadhouse. Over cold beer and food in the airconditioned dining room they would re-plan their strategy. Charley would use other means now. He'd radio his partners, Constanza and Geoff Hill. He'd want to keep it quiet that he'd lost her up here, in his own province. He wouldn't find that easy. They'd probably use a plane or maybe borrow a helicopter. Someone might want to get Aboriginal trackers, but it wasn't likely. The nearest were at Nullagine and the old men there wouldn't talk to Charley, they didn't trust him. He'd want an aerial search, remote sensing, infra red. Find her by her body heat or her chemical composition as if she were another ore body: X aggregate of minerals in Y concentration equals the human form. If it were feasible Constanza would try it. He was in thrall to his new divining toys. They all were. Constanza would phone and Charley would throw a few things in his bag and go. But with Charley, it wasn't the money, it was finding it that mattered. Finding it first, claiming it . . . She was doing it again! Exonerating him, excusing him. Her life was no different from the other women in the cool beautiful houses by the river. Women who waited . . . Jo spent Geoff's money with the quiet ferocity of revenge. Lynda was like a moth in summer, aimless. Seeing the bar she'd had installed in her bedroom had been a shock. And herself? Lavishing tenderness on the azaleas, the orchids, in a cloister, light filtering through leaves, listening to Saite; a shadow existence. They were like bees in amber, the flow and movement of their lives congealed in an exotic entrapment. It was at Nullagine, in the pub, when Constanza and Geoff flew in, that she'd doubted Charley. They had something on . . . She had begun watching, looking for the signs that would confirm a minor betrayal: his casual use of her loneliness for his own ends.

She strained for the sound of another car, the pulse of a helicopter slicing the air. The stillness had a weight to it, pressing on her. She searched the sky, where was the eagle? It knew where she was. If she were the eagle's quarry the wait would be over. There would be the slash and tear of talons, the impact of flesh and bone. In the strong clear light she saw her body — the collection of minerals — as indistinguishable from the ground she was on. They wouldn't find her that way either. The cursor on the luminous screen would track aimlessly. She could claim victory now. It was the game of criss-crossing, journeys: seismic lines gridding the country; a line of small shocks to tell them what was there. Charley might mean to find her, but fail. The terrain would then . . . shape an outcome.

The silence sang with energy, almost tangible, almost accessible. But how could she use it? How was it done? There were no links, no connections. History ruled it out. She had no words. There were no chants, no songs, no rites of appeal. This country has no resident Gods. All she had were the numberless journeys; the short history of epic acts of futility. Drawn into the narrow strip

of shade, arms encircling her legs, she rested her head on her knees. In the hollow it created, the only sound was her own inhalation — exhalation. She concentrated on it. It was something she couldn't be excluded from. Everything breathed, it didn't matter what species. It was the old joke — if you stopped breathing you died. But it was a bond. She fixed on it, staying there, in the containment of the delicate link of air; sheltering its continuance.

She would go back. If she left it too late she would be caught by the sudden extinction of light, the cold that replaced the heat. The slow suspiration of the earth could be dangerous for the unprepared. She stood, the plain shimmering around her in the mid-afternoon light. To her right, she could see the glint of the Roadhouse roof. To her left, the dark fantastic hills, sprawling, animal-like, on the edge of the plain. Source of the current of cool air finding her along some unseen channel. She gathered her things, slinging her bag across her back to leave her arms free. She unwrapped the last of the lemon drops while she searched for a wayback through the spinifex. The naive explorer could be forgiven for finding the place empty. Nothing was hidden. It was the long adaptation towards a minimal order of existence that deceived them, the spare use of the capacity of renewal.

CHRIS McLEOD

## The Nature of Cats

My daughter lives with her fat mother in a house full of cats. She lives with my wife. My wife could not be described as tubby or chubby or plump or cuddly.

Only as fat.

Cakes and icecream and chocolate and bread are all things that will make you fat if you eat enough of them. If you have the disposition.

My daughter has the disposition.

And she eats to excess. Especially cakes. Black forest cakes, cream sponge cakes, cheesecakes . . . I could go on.

But I find it an unappealing subject.

My wife, on the other hand, finds it fascinating. Food as subject, food as object. She buys it, she cooks it, she talks about it, she eats it, she feeds it to my daughter.

My fat daughter.

It binds them together. A community of two. I worry.

My daughter already weighs twelve and a half stone. She is fourteen years old. Her name is Fleur.

At my daughter's expensive private school there is a teacher who tells me that my Fleur won't dance.

She says, I try to get her to join in but she refuses. She just won't do it.

I say, she's a shy girl.

She says, do you have any ideas why that is?

No, I say.

In the newspaper I read about a couple who want to adopt a child. But their application is unsuccessful. Why? Because they are too fat.

There is a photograph of two big, sad people.

They will try to lose weight. They can reapply in six months.

In the newspaper I read about a woman who died. Her doctor said she had a grossly obese and pendulous abdominal wall. It hung down to her upper thighs.

Think of that, a fatty stalactite.

\* This story was runner-up for the inaugural Randolph Stow Short Fiction award.

Her doctor said he could cut the fat away. He could excise the malignancy.  
But there was a risk.

Quite a risk, as it happened.

I worry a lot.

Cats move quietly across timber floors. But not silently. Sometimes, a claw  
scrapes a bare board.

Click.

My wife has eleven cats. They have the run of the house. Nothing is too much  
trouble. They eat raw mince.

Best quality.

My wife drops it onto the kitchen floor.

Splat!

The cats swarm. They have their own rules.

But you would have to be a cat to know them.

I know this: Three of the cats eat approximately 70% of the mince. That means  
that eight of the cats are underfed.

My wife is a cat lover.

But not so fond of people.

She has created a community of two and polices it grimly. Reluctantly, she  
releases my daughter into the world.

My fat daughter.

But only into approved sections of it. My wife does the approving.

She approves, for instance, of my daughter learning the cello. Insists on it.

My fat daughter and her lookalike cello.

My fat wife and her lookalike daughter.

A community of two.

She approves, for instance, of my daughter's school.

It's worth the money, worth the long drive, she tells my daughter.

It's a good school, she tells my daughter. Girls only.

Boys, she tells my daughter, are unnecessary.

Appearances, she tells my daughter, are unimportant.

Does my fat daughter believe that?

Probably not.

At my daughter's school there is a teacher who tells me that my Fleur has  
low self esteem.

I ask what can be done.

She should learn to dance, I am told.

My daughter has a routine.

On school days, she is woken at 6.30 and does half an hour of cello practice.  
Notes scrape into the air.

Breakfast is at 7 o'clock. My wife has no time for cornflakes. Eggs are  
favoured, so are bacon and fried bread. So is porridge.

My daughter is not fond of porridge. I find it regurgitated on the toilet floor.  
Sometimes it clogs the bathroom handbasin.

It looks much the same after being swallowed as before.

Perhaps a little more stuck together.

My wife and daughter leave at 7.40. The trip to my daughter's school takes fifty minutes through the city traffic. My wife makes the same trip in the afternoon to pick her up. Another fifty minutes to get home. In the meantime, my wife will have returned to prepare the evening meal. On the way she will have done some shopping, mainly for food.

Two trips to school every day. Two hundred minutes.

This routine is sacred.

My wife is very dedicated.

Does she have a vision, a fat lady's dream; a grand design for my daughter?

Probably.

Fleur. Fleur the flower.

My daughter doesn't care for porridge but will eat almost anything else. Particularly cakes.

When she gets home after school, I hear her ask what is for afternoon tea.

It's always cake.

Another sacred routine.

Weekends are when the community of two functions best.

The drawbridge is up.

The seal is in place.

There are no callers. No friends.

And what do they do, these two heavyweight isolates?

They cook.

They cook and they eat.

They eat and they eat and they eat.

Years ago, I dug a cellar under my wife's house.

A fortress beneath the fortress.

It was to have been a wine cellar. Or something.

My daughter has never been down there. My wife has forgotten about it.

They have both forgotten about me.

I was easy to forget.

For my wife, my usefulness ended with my daughter's conception. After that, I found that I was no longer welcome in the marriage bed.

Freeze out.

Previously, my wife had kept a chart and thermometer. On certain days of the month, my assistance was required. Demanded.

I did my duty. A speck, a mountaineer on the sheer face of her body. A dangerous ascent through blizzards, through rockfalls.

Finally, the summit was attained. My duty was over.

The female black widow spider has an alarming proclivity. Alarming, that is, if you happen to be a male.

After mating, sometimes during it, she will eat the male spider.

A depressing prospect.

My fate, however, was not so exotic. But just as depressing. I was more like an unwanted pet.

Gradually, I withered from lack of attention, lack of affection.  
My wife refused not only to sleep with me, but to cook for me as well.  
She would not touch me. She would not feed me.  
Finally, I slunk away.

It's cool down here, even though it's summer at the moment. The space is quite large, extending under most of the house, which is set on raised stumps.

The timber floor is just above my head. I hear the mince hit it.

Splat!

I hear my wife in bed. A lardy presence, she covers me like a feeding jellyfish.  
But my cellar, my fortress, protects me.

She occupies the bed heavily, just inches away.

She farts. The smell reaches me, an ill wind. Poisons drift down.

Then other noises, swamp noises. The rising rasp of her breathing, the fat woman panting up the slope of her orgasm. Then a cry of release.

She farts again.

Sated, she sleeps.

The noises that tell me it's morning: a thump of footsteps, a tinkle of pissing, a scrabble of cats, a sound of mince hitting the floor.

Splat!

When I hear the car drive away, I come up into the house. The cats scatter at first, but soon return to disregard me.

Eleven cats. Their main interest is in feeding.

But some are more successful at it than others.

The cupboards are bulging with food. I help myself. My wife will not notice any difference — there is so much.

And most days she brings more.

My daughter has a photograph album. She keeps it in a drawer. It is a record of her fourteen years.

I see the changes: the thickening thighs, the lumpy arms, the retreat behind walls of fat. Piggy eyes look out.

Sadly, I think.

Will her prince come — tall and lean and blond?

I think not.

I come and go. Only the cats notice.

And they are not interested.

I go to my daughter's expensive private school. I make enquiries. Just like any estranged father.

I'm re-establishing contact, I say.

I'm making up for lost time, I say.

I want to be involved, I say.

I'm worried, I say.

Tell me about her, I say.

And what is the distilled essence of wisdom that I have obtained?

It is that she should learn to dance.

This morning I am conducting an experiment.

I have mixed rat poison with the mince. It is old rat poison. I put it down in the cellar many years ago when there was a rat problem. A packet remained unopened.

The mince is fresh.

Does rat poison work after fifteen years?

I don't know.

That's part of the experiment.

The mince hits the kitchen floor.

Splat!

The cats swarm. They have their own rules.

Here is the distilled essence of wisdom that I have obtained from the cat experiment:

1. Rat poison does still work after fifteen years.
2. The dominant cats eat more than the submissive cats and are consequently fatter.
3. The more rat poison a cat ingests, the more severe the effects.
4. The effects range from death, in the case of the largest, most dominant cats, through to mild discomfort in the case of the least successful cats. Success, of course, being measured by the amount of food the cat is able to consume in the given time.

My daughter is first through the door.

The cats . . . , she says.

I hear my wife stomp into the room.

The music is coming from my daughter's room. I creep towards it.

It's a waltz.

One two three

One two three.

And the footsteps. Heavy. Two people. Circling the room. Dancing behind the music. But dancing.

One two three

One two three.

JOHN GRIFFIN

## Valentino

1.

If you are dead, and your press-agent  
is still on the job, it is his hand,  
behind the potted palm, that moves  
the curtain as if your spirit lurks.  
And it is his eye that can see  
that a Madonna placed just so,  
white and out of focus, will suffice  
for props. Don't belittle dolorous robes  
of stone, or mock the folds of piety.  
A man's death is cold and full of worm,  
but lying-in-state on Broadway brings  
the annual roses, and the legend starts.

2.

After fifty years, there were women still,  
two or three of them, mockeries of time  
who lifted themselves like crumbling shells  
out of taxis annually, who laid  
their roses on memory's stone. A dead mouth  
is full of dust, it cannot shout against  
the dreams in the minds of women in black,  
where he outlives all the lovers unremembered,  
where he is hauled nightly in the mind  
(impotent still) into the grasp of crepe,  
into the frail webs of ancient arms.

ELIZABETH LAWSON

## ‘Oh Don’t You Remember Black Alice?’ or How Many Mothers had Norman Shillingsworth?

*Beside the undrunken grog they lay, Black Velvet in their arms.*

*I said I’m the biggest gin-rooter around the country myself. The only thing, I was more observant than the other blokes.*

Xavier Herbert’s *Capricornia*<sup>1</sup> works, at one level, through the conventional structure of quest narrative. In his book, *Xavier Herbert*,<sup>2</sup> Harry Heseltine puts the view that *Capricornia* charts its hero’s ‘search for a father’, Herbert here being seen as working through early childhood traumas in a projected fictional quest. Father-figures, responsible and irresponsible, loom large as a recurrent motif of *Capricornia* and, in his naively credulous way, Norman does search out a wandering father, the picaresque narrative line endorsing this search at least until it is overtaken by the even more conventional but less sentimental search for a fortune.

*Capricornia* is centrally about a half-caste race, its exploitation and victimisation by a white colonial race. It is thematically significant that the novel’s hero and anti-hero, Norman, as ‘normal man’, represents, not the white race, but that half-caste race, the satiric point being that he can achieve anything remotely approaching normal life only at the cost of the assumption of a false ‘white’ identity and the concomitant denial of half his racial identity.

Attention to the details of Norman’s upbringing in Batman (Melbourne) and return to Capricornia shows his search to be rather carefully and progressively defined, *not* as the search for a father, but as a search to recognise and accept that full racial identity. Careful definition emerges, for instance, from the detail of the circumstances of Norman’s southern education as Oscar Shillingsworth’s son, from the pointed descriptions of his progressive discomfort on board ship as he returns to the north, and in the early stages of his strained re-assimilation into Capricornian society; also, and perhaps most vividly, in his dramatic experience with his ‘aboriginality’ in the Golden Beetle episode and his subsequent betrayal of it. That Norman’s quest is for a racial identity and recognition, not just a father, is further pointed by accounts of the Shillingsworth familial clinging to the fantastical tale of Norman’s Javanese Princess mother, by Marigold’s scarce-concealed embarrassments at Norman’s

coloured presence, by the ironically mocking and eventually murderous presence of Norman's alter-ego, Ket, by Ket's hunted malice, and by the emotionally infantile shambles at the Red Ochre house-party. These narrational elements ensure that Norman's delayed rediscovery of his white father, however much this is presented as simple 'story', forms a symbolic enactment of but *half a racial quest*. That quest, unlike the simple personal meeting of Norman and his father, Mark, has absolute relevance to the novel's central subject, the half-caste race and its cultural viability and victimisation. If this is so, it is clear that there is potentially another half of Norman's journey to self-recognition; that both the racial theme and the narrational focussing on Norman's 'search' for Mark presuppose a *complementary search for a mother*.

### Marowallua

Such a search as a conscious activity in the novel is, like its object, most striking for its absence (however much that absence may carry its own satiric edge). The text's suppression of that search for a mother and the recurrent nagging presence of various substitutes for her, suggest considerable textual anxiety on the point. For instance, the ballad title of the crucial chapter where Norman and Mark finally re-meet, 'Oh Don't You Remember Black Alice?', would seem at first to dispel such anxiety in a poignant irony about Norman's mother, but a reading of that chapter (with other passages) suggests, on the contrary, an equivocal shifting in the textual meaning of her representation such that the ballad title of this crucial chapter 'forgets' as it remembers 'Black Alice'.

There will be perhaps a few readers who by this late stage in the novel do in fact still remember the girl, Marowallua, of *Capricornia's* third chapter. Marowallua receives summary treatment at the hands of both Norman's father and Herbert: by Mark, with the exploitative arrogance, hypocrisy and ignorance imbibed from his white culture (and his friend Ned Krater) (p.22); by Herbert, with a characteristically troubling ambiguity.

On p.22, Marowallua is abused, exploited and abandoned:

The lubra he selected was a young girl named Marowallua, who, after he had wasted much time in trying to teach her to keep house to suit his finicky taste, he found was with child. He sent her away, refusing to believe that the child was his, and took another girl.

On p.24, Marowallua is found in a post-natal condition 'lying on bark and shivery as with cold'. Half a page later, she is arrogantly cautioned by the proudly irresponsible father against infanticide.<sup>3</sup> The novel's third and final direct reference to Marowallua has significantly lost her name, interest deflected in a literal manner characteristic of the novel, to the male hero, her son. Thus on p.40, we learn merely that 'Little Naw-nim's mother was dead'.

With this sentence, clearly, Herbert writes a major problem into his text, cancels a term vital to a theme which, as I have argued, logically requires Norman's confrontation with the black maternal, as well as the white paternal, side of his racial inheritance. At the crucial point later in the text where Norman

should logically confront his black mother, the meeting with blacks at the close of the famous 'Golden Beetle' chapter, he meets rather a black male, the jocular Bootpolish, who with the possible exception of his irony, is little more than a caricature of the 'white man's black'. Amongst the tribal delights Bootpolish offers Norman at this putative homecoming, along with 'plenty yam' and 'goose' is 'plenty lubra', words which form a perhaps succinct, perhaps ironic, but for this novel, a characteristically degraded remembrance of Norman's mother. In this way, a fully human Marowallua is not only as 'dead' as Herbert's instinct for social realism may have demanded, but is here transmuted into the *mere language* of a shared male jesting with its nastily characteristic identification of women with food; that is, her remembrance is deflected into a resurgent, vital male presence and 'masculine' discourse (though we can note that Bootpolish is demonstrably offering Norman here what with good reason he deems especially desirable to non-black males).

From the point of view of the quest narrative, the novel's loss of Marowallua, makes an impressive silence. A *wholly* ironic reading could see this silence as a social-realist attempt to mirror the historical silences of that majority of women whose history requires that, like Marowallua, they suffer and be still; that is, as a silence written into the text, not by a quiescent Marowallua, but her creator. Working against this social-realist possibility, however, is the fact that such silences in *Capricornia*, as in the 'plenty lubra' case, invariably become the pregnantly anxious half-silences, which surround, mutely threaten, but finally succumb before a noisily voiced, endemically depraved, 'masculine' reference. Further, other textual elements, consorting with that of Marowallua's silence and absence, make for an equivocal presence of disturbed meaning in the novel which, though equivocal, insists on its own focus.

This disturbance appears perhaps at its clearest in the chapter, 'Oh Don't You Remember Black Alice?'. The action of this chapter takes place nearly two decades in time and three hundred pages after the name, Marowallua, slips from the text, but its clear reference to her is confirmed by our remembrance that at least once Mark anglicises her name to 'Mary Alice' (p.25). Behind a rather dense thicket of other material, this chapter shows a negligent, criminal father sentimentally rediscovered and an exploited, abandoned and dead mother not 'remembered' as the title exhorts, but both misremembered and forgotten.

Even as 'Black Alice', Marowallua is perhaps fortunate to be named at all, since even half-castes — in white eyes both a step above and a step below full-blooded Aborigines — are undeserving of names. Norman's name is built from the tag 'No Name' that denies him the humanity he is only to acquire as he attaches himself to a white family and its name:

the natives called him Naw-nim, which was their way of saying No-name . . . The name No-name was one usually given by the natives to dogs which they had not the heart to kill or lose. It was often given to half-castes as well. (p.40)

The idea of an institutionalised, normalised namelessness with its implicit potent denial of humanity seems to be used with particular satiric force and personal bitterness in *Capricornia*. As the following early passage of 'Oh Don't You Remember Black Alice?' makes clear, 'namelessness' is part of the meaning of the contemptuous term 'Black Velvet'.<sup>4</sup>

## Here Norman and his host:

ate alone . . . at a table laden with the best food and drink, attended by a smiling young lubra . . . As the lubra went off after her first appearance, old Andy, . . . winked a twinkling eye at Norman, and hissed behind a leathery hand, "My missus!" Norman, guessing that a compliment was sought, looked after the girl, who glanced back as she entered the kitchen, *and giggled prettily into a slim black hand*. He turned back to the eager Andy grinning, and said, "You're got a peach all right."

"Plum!" hissed Andy. "Sugary black plum. A damson — Ha!" He attacked his food with zest.

*He ate swiftly for a while, then looked up and said, "I call her Velvet. Lovely name, aint it. I call 'em all that. Lovely creatures." He returned to his plate.*

*. . . I mean I call 'em all that in rotation . . ."*

(p.313, my italics)

So densely stereotypical of the attitudes of racist sexism are these sentences that they would seem to demand a sharply satiric reading, to align themselves with the conscious satiric dimension of the narrational voice. Certainly out of context the passage seems to condemn its speaker and fill the reader with horror. The nameless woman of the sketch and her mute predecessors lost to time as well as namelessness are accorded no humanity here, other than that learned passivity before an unjust lot which is seen to be complicit with abuse ('glanced back as she entered the kitchen'). Behind Black Velvet's evidence *signified*, fruit or sexual goods, stand the unnamed 'gins' and lubras of an intercultural trade; behind these stand unrecognised women. Why then are our sympathies pushed toward Norman here and why is the character of Andy exalted through the rest of the chapter?

The Andy McRandys of *Capricornia* have names: they conduct themselves as this passage shows, but also succeed in driving a wedge of unsureness into our reading: isn't the male rib-nudging here projected outward to include the reader? Isn't the satiric loading of the passage deflected by this narrational titillation? Isn't Black Velvet, then, made something of the 'damson plum' for the reader that it is for Andy and, more nervously, Norman? The narrational voice, '*observant*' as ever, seems finally to indulge the 'gin-rooter' ('giggled prettily into a slim black hand') at the expense of that observant eye, a pattern sustained through the chapter. The 'damson plum' woman is nothing more than a Black Velvet nymph stereotype, she is not observed as a person at all. Thus, while the apparently suggestively poignant title, 'Oh Don't You Remember Black Alice?', sharpens our sense of ironic possibility, of a perhaps undivided sympathetic attention accruing to Norman's mother, the promised indictment of the actions of those who 'fail to remember', or who, like Andy, patently fail even to 'observe', never appears. Moreover, the chapter sustains this ambivalence with respect to its intriguing memories of Marowallua, the effect again and again being to shake our sense of the text's satiric or ironic force.

The ostensible core of 'Oh Don't You Remember Black Alice?', Norman's delayed meeting with his father in the guise of the wanderer Jack Ramble, is handled with overt sentimentality but technical subtlety. Presented as casually fortuitous, the meeting is made the delicately oblique centre of an Aussie-bushman's campfire, drink-up and singsong, a full-scale nationalistic 'masculine' set-piece. It makes suggestive use of the pathos of the one-sidedness

of its central recognition scene, Norman's habitual incurious innocence confronting Mark's speculatively sentimental musing on the (after all) not unsurprising fact of a physically mature son.

This ostensible narrative core, the campfire meeting of men, their long-winded yarning as evening falls, their drunkenness and singing, shapes the chapter and dominates our reading at a primary level. Thus, a meandering action and garrulous surface comedy seem to endorse a finally light-hearted attitude to human outcomes (Norman can and does come and go) however much these are mediated here by an alcoholic melancholy. The following analysis of elements in the chapter which subvert such primary effects should thus not be allowed to cancel our sense that they dominate. Two interweaving but opposing currents of meaning are sustained together so as to leave an anxious, unresolved ambivalence. While a wholly ironic reading could resolve these currents, incorporating both and holding them together, other textual patterns invariably obtrude to militate against such reading.

The subversive current running behind the stock campfire action of 'Oh Don't You Remember Black Alice?' has, then, to do with more than the text's dominant characteristically Herbertian ironies about racism in general. Rather, it derives from an ambiguous handling of important segments of material. The chapter is, for instance, marked by a peroration on liberal ideas about Australia in general and the Aboriginal race in particular (a speech readers have commonly seen as embodying the presumable imported ideas of Herbert himself). In its fictional context, however, this speech is more interesting for its uneasy relationship to its deliverer and to the central action, Norman's meeting with his father. First, it is delivered by the wholly unlikely candidate Andy McRandy, whose lack of qualification for the role has been so equivocally sketched a few passages earlier in the 'damson plum' episode. Secondly, its delivery has the effect of making Norman's long-awaited meeting with his white father take place in the context of an hortatory exposure of the destructiveness of white civilisation and a sustained idealistic appeal to the value of Norman's black maternal heritage. Thus, oblique and always muted reminders of the mother seem fairly systematically to counterpoint Norman's access to a father, the main action being subverted in this way.

Further, its title echoing ironically in the mind, the chapter is fraught with other oblique reminders — some to an opaquely unresponsive hero — that he has in fact once 'had' a mother who may be worth wondering about. Most forceful, perhaps, is the bitter reminder of Marowallua through the contemptible 'damson plum' passage where the speaker's automatic inclusion of Norman, who fails to protest, in what McRandy might term the Black Velvet stakes, hardly bears cogent contemplation. A few passages later, Norman is reminded that Heather Poundamore, Mark's long-term white girl-friend, 'Might easy've been your Ma'. The reader too is reminded explicitly at the chapter's beginning of Norman's first removal from his mother's tribe to Oscar:

Thus Norman completed the journey on which, clad only in spotted blue print pants, he had set out seventeen years before.  
(p.55)

The blue pants, significantly, were made for Norman by his first Marowallua-mother substitute, Fat Anna.

This whole complex interweaving of veiled reference to Marowallua with the overt father-search narrative is further complicated by an again mutedly ambiguous play with the words and values of famous ballads in the campfire singsong that sentimentally concludes the father-son meeting, the evening, and the chapter. Here, the general force of McRandy's sermon on the blacks (and of its reference, therefore to Marowallua), delivered under a haze of alcohol in a pastiche of conventional bushman's 'blarney', is dispersed in a mistily sentimental response from Norman (itself in turn exploded by the first sentence of the following chapter: 'Norman remained proud of his Aboriginal heritage for several weeks . . .') and in the equally sentimental campfire balladry. It is replaced, however, with an ambiguous play about the value of the ballads and especially with the seemingly pointed substitution of one for the other, of 'Oh Don't You Remember Black Alice?'<sup>25</sup> for 'Waltzing Matilda'.

Here, on the primary level, we witness merely some chummily jocular comment on the value of 'Waltzing Matilda', its definition for the young Norman as the 'Spirit of the Land', and the solemn singing through of every one of its melancholy stanzas. But many details of the chapter suggest that the ballad holds ironic relevance to the immediate situation. The singers, Mark and Jo, are two 'sick stockrider'-swagmen, clearly types of the famous Australian martyred male wanderer of 'Waltzing Matilda'. From our first meeting with him, Mark has been a rambler (his *alias* is Jack Ramble) on the run from the law, a 'bluey' toting swagman who leaves Marowallua for dead and his white girlfriend moping on the sidelines. Mark's early escapades, moreover, had culminated in his retreat from 'civilisation' in a sea-going lugger named (with linguistic idiocy and, I hope, ironic intent) 'The Spirit of the Land'. In the light of these fairly overt parallels, the ballad-singing seems most to remind us of Mark's abandonment of his son's mother: and, as if to confirm the ballad archetype, Mark clearly has substituted escape-lugger, then swaggy's 'bluey', for his female companion; on a more radical reading perhaps, for the 'female' in himself.

The kind of ironic reading seemingly required here would further suggest that Mark's naming of the escape-lugger and his subsequent conduct as romantic wanderer and law-evader, imply by themselves that the 'spirit' of this land might rest in some life other than Mark's stereotypically male Australian fantasy. Further, the drunkenly sentimental identification of the Waltzing Matilda ballad with the 'Spirit of the Land' which the men seem to accept is (wholly, by this convention) discredited for us by its attribution to an 'English professor of music'. (p.230) Even more significant is that Mark's friend, Jo, ironically contemplating the presence of Mark's son, eventually turns the campfire-singing of this famous ballad to that of 'Oh Don't You Remember Black Alice?', this title thus implicitly 'answering' 'Waltzing Matilda's' notorious romanticisation of the 'bluey'. This undercurrent of meaning seems in its context of multiple suggestive but muted reminders, not least the obliviousness to it of the chapter's male actors, unavoidable. The whole episode, thus, seems capable of parodic reading — as parodying the suppression of 'female' narrative by 'male'.

However, for all such significances seem unavoidable, they also seem jostled aside by others which are both contrary to them and more vibrantly obtrusive. This pattern is particularly evident here. As Norman departs, Jo's guitar takes up the ballad words which conclude the chapter:

Oh don't you remember Black Alice, Ben Bolt,  
Black Alice so dusky and dark,  
That Warrego gin with a stick through her nose,  
And teeth like a Moreton Bay shark -

In a chapter so fraught with oblique, ostensibly poignant reference to Norman's mother, this final asserted 'memory' is clearly not of a woman at all, but rather of a sexual fantasy and a 'male' jesting about it; it has a famous counterpart in Gloucester's early response to Kent in *King Lear*:

though this knave came something saucily to the world before he was sent for, yet  
was his mother fair; there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must  
be acknowledged

*Lear* 112

For all his modern removed setting, Norman shares with Edmund a late-in-the-day acknowledgement which declines even any reference to parental neglect or obligation. Like the Gloucester passage, the Black Alice stanza similarly deflects the sense of the chief life-giving act and the idea of 'mother' into a debased masculine jesting which degrades as it obliterates the significance of that act and person ('whoreson'). Any of the memories stirred by the title of this chapter or by its Aboriginal references, memories of Marowallua and of the thousands of women forgotten in the name 'Black Alice', are, then, at the chapter's conclusion once again 'forgotten' in its apparently jocular reassertion of the 'value' of Black Velvet in its racist, sexist sense. In the 'damson plum' passage, 'Black Velvet' seemed to appear briefly as a construct posed for bitingly satirical criticism, but this impression has evaporated in our sense of the ensuing inclusiveness of a male jesting. At the chapter's close, more dampeningly, a romantically sentimental mood, reinforced by Jo's sympathetic irony (about a 'bastard' son?) enfolds the concluding ballad stanza, sweeping away its satiric possibility in another lubricious 'damson plum' image ('Black Alice so dusky and dark') and, as if to make sure of the value of the jest and the contempt it carries, in a crudely vicious racist elaboration ('Warrego shark'). In the softening charm of the campfire glow can we effectively hold these particular ballad lines as part of a *wholly* ironic reading? As the chapter ends, do we remember most vividly Marowallua, the meaning of her life, suffering and death? Or are such memories overwhelmed by this concluding access of 'masculine' sentiment, fellow feeling and the soothing blank of the space between chapters?

Like much of *Capricornia*, this chapter presents relatively simple material (father meets son, nationalistic campfire scene) compromised by overt sallies of irony and further subverted in the relatively complex ways I have elaborated. Thus the task of reading depends precariously on the reader's capacity to ingest and elaborate ironies which, as in the present case, are puzzlingly abandoned

and silenced at crucial junctures. Just as Marowallua's fictional life was abruptly cut off early in the text, so the interest in her here, muted, poignant, tantalizing, is finally overwhelmed by the crude noises of a masculine heartiness, a masculine social comedy the general sweep of the narrative seems to endorse in a simple way. Just as, in the novel's famous concluding image, Tocky becomes a skeleton, so Marowallua becomes a ghost wandering through Norman's story, and *haunting most pointedly the profane sites of those attitudes which destroyed her*. But it seems that just as female ghosts and skeletons stir too forcefully in *Capricornia*, so they are cancelled, either by the bitterness of Herbert's social-realist conviction, or by *the irrepressibility of a boisterous delight in the 'masculine' world which persecutes them*. A novel whose centre is an attack on racism and whose account of the lives of women seems often tenderly sympathetic in this way seems in a final analysis sadly sexist. While *Capricornia* can at one (careful) level be read as a lament for women, it is never their defence; while it never quite forgets the women behind Black Velvet, it continues to mis- and dis-remember them.

### The Mothers of *Capricornia*

While Norman's 'anxiety' reveals itself in his failure to grasp and honour his Aboriginal blood, the 'anxiety' of *Capricornia* about Marowallua has more to do with her role as female and mother than as Aboriginal — Herbert is always bitterly straightforward about the Aboriginal blood of his half-caste race.

The kind of 'anxiety' about Marowallua I have detailed is corroborated in the repeated eruption and as often repeated suppression in the text of substitute Marowallua-mother-figures for Norman. The most obvious (and the only substitute 'mother' figure *sustained* in the narrative) is, of course, that of a 'father', Oscar Shillingsworth: this most simple fact of the story line illustrates the text's seemingly instinctive deflection of female narrative possibility onto male. The establishment of loyal father-figures, of male-hero saviours of the black, coloured or child victims of the plot is elaborated most suggestively in the character, Tim O'Canon, who is the theatrically moral hero-rescuer of both Constance and her daughter, Tocky, and whose domestic life is devoted to a dourly Dickensian defense of his family of daughters in a home-built garrison. Tim has no illusions about the fate of coloured females in Capricornian society and his demise predictably marks their destruction. While the novel clearly does not share Tim's small opinion of his wife, Blossom, she too is pushed aside whenever she threatens to command, in her garrison home, attention.

More suggestive of the novel's only half-conscious fascination with mothers is a series of Marowallua-substitutes and mock-substitutes: Fat Anna, the Javanese Princess, Jasmine and Heather Poundamore. With the exception of Heather, who survives and transcends this role as she gains the desired 'pounds' of wealth, all of these, like Marowallua, erupt summarily in the text only to drop out of it as their usefulness to the 'male romance' narrative is surpassed. The appearance of each, however, is instructive.

Fat Anna is perhaps most impressively memorable, being closest in time and nature to Norman's real mother: she is generous, indulgent, comforting, large and bosomy, and at least half-black. She is also interesting as a female character because she is a vigorous and self-reliant actor in the community and before the law. Significantly, it is *only as a mother* that Anna is caricatured: she hugged him 'to her ample breast', bathed him with 'the scent of sweets', 'dressed his sores', 'cropped his hair' . . . (p.55), and it is this *caricatured* representation, as well as her later reduction to a mere plot functionary of the male story-line, that reveals again a narrational nervousness about the handling of the idea of motherhood.

After Anna, the Javanese Princess. Conceived and bred by Oscar in the genteel world of Batman, Norman's fantasy 'mother' is an absurdly floated belief of Norman's. Her overt role in the novel is to highlight the moral hypocrisy and racist fetishism of honorary 'white' parentage where 'white' most vitally means 'non-Aboriginal'. She exists then to deny Norman's aboriginality, to deny Marowallua herself. It is evident, however, that the ludicrous nature of the exotic comic fantasy of the Princess, while it obliterates memories of Marowallua in the minds of *characters*, reactivates as it cancels *reader* memories of her. Thus, through the apparently merely comic play of the Princess, shines once again the haunting ghost of Norman's black mother: Marowallua is the true negative of the false print of the Princess.

Jasmine Poundamore, as Oscar's wife and the mother of Marigold, is logically a potential mother for his adopted son, Norman. However, Jasmine is notable chiefly for her representation as absconding mother (of Marigold). Deserting Oscar and the children, Jasmine, disgraced and degraded, is jettisoned from the text in a matter of a few pages. She draws our attention to the fact that *Capricornia* is devoid of 'good' or even 'able' mothers, those we meet 'failing' either through physical collapse and death, Jasmine-like negligence or authorial 'writing off' as caricature. The novel's only female character, apart from Blossom, whose role as mother is primary and also sustained as a point of interest throughout the entire book, Mrs McLash, is consistently caricatured expressly for her overtly stereotypical 'motherly' characteristics: her sustained devotion to her patently unworthy son, Frank, is mercilessly pursued for its comic value throughout the text.

At a late stage in the novel, Jasmine's sister, Heather, is allowed to fill in the beginnings of a mother-son relationship with Norman ('She might easy've been your Ma'). However, once again, while there is fairly ample reference made to this potential aspect of Heather's relationship with Norman, there is absolutely no development of it; the concluding stages of the novel peremptorily abandon the interest, Heather finally joining Marowallua, Anna and the Javanese Princess as a mere agent of Norman's 'search for a father/fortune' narrative. Thus, while each of these women characters 'ghosts' Marowallua in her role (and with her potential value) as 'mother', they become finally and significantly agents to reveal a father, and later, in Heather's case, co-conspirator in the race for material wealth.

The pattern of this shadow-play mother-son saga is played out fully when the son, Norman, wholly socialised as a Capricornian 'white' male, repeats his father's absconding role in respect to Tocky. This pattern thus precipitates, not

simply the 'anxious' eruption and re-eruption in the text of the maternal figure, but also the opportunity for its repeated denigration or cancellation. The depressing picture is filled in by the death of Constance, the comic denigration of Tim's wife, Blossom, and the caricatured presentation of Mrs McLash.

The great subject of *Capricornia*, the half-caste race, cannot exist, its narrator knows, without the mothers. From a wholly ironic viewpoint, moving as it does from the childbirth death of Marowallua to the childbirth death of Tocky, the novel can be read as their lament. Readers of *Capricornia* have been especially sensitive to the novel's conclusion in the pathos of Tocky's death, but few have noticed that she dies, primarily as and because she becomes, a juvenile mother. It seems no accident that this long rumbustiously 'masculine' novel ends with the image of a kind of dead 'pieta', an image surely of what is most dead in the projected 'life' of Capricornia.

### Tocky

Since she is half-caste, Tocky is not strictly speaking the victim of the Black Velvet practice. The theme of the abuse of black and coloured women in *Capricornia* is incorporated into the main story through the stories of Constance and her daughter Tocky, the first by its contrast with the early fate of Marowallua, and the second by the relationship between Tocky and Norman.

The story of the abuse of Constance, sexual and economic, is developed with considerable sensitivity. However, Constance becomes the victim of Humbert Lace<sup>6</sup> as a direct result of her father's death and short-sighted instruction and Oscar's failure to intervene. This shifts emphasis from Constance herself and any positive rights she might aspire to, to the negative sense that she lacks the intervening protection of a white father-figure. As I have suggested, much in *Capricornia* and Norman's history in particular, makes clear that such paternalistic protection is the only resort of this society's black and coloured victims. Only Norman, Ket, and Tocky actively oppose their victimisation. Of these, Tocky's struggle is especially interesting in that she faces not only the general racist persecution she shares with Norman and Ket, but sexual persecution as well: to the burden of her quarter-caste race is added the handicap of her sex and gender. It is significant, to the feminist reader at least, that while Tocky is in fact 'whiter' than Norman, as a male he clearly holds a status above her: it is easy, especially in view of Herbert's denial to this 'daughter' of Tim O'Cannon of the use of fluent English (?), to think of Tocky as a necessary victim of the half-caste system. That is, we are unsurprised by her use as Norman's sexual partner and domestic, so thoroughly has the novel, like the society it depicts, 'naturalised' its pervasive expectation of the low status of women generally.

However, true to her 'garrison' upbringing, Tocky shows a generously presented courage and resilience before her societal affliction. Unlike Ket and Norman, with whose blunderingly disastrous wilderness treks, her own is implicitly compared, she is plucky, resourceful, knowledgeable and highly competent. So resourceful is Tocky that, especially in 'Arcady' (ch. 28), whose

Edenic 'snakes' for her are clearly the marauding male characters (including Norman), it is almost possible, especially when she shoots dead her most feared male molester, to read her sojourning as a feminist tract. Indeed the killing of Frank McLash could be read as *Capricornia's* symbolic purgation of its systematised white male violence. However, as with earlier examples of such readings, other elements assert themselves in ways that collapse and absorb them uneasily into contrary prevailing currents.

Thus, stalward against Frank, Tocky nonetheless succumbs to Norman's open and more successful exploitation and is finally made dependent — for her reputation at least, this being all the book allows her — on the legal protection of the white male, Bightit. Further, like her predecessor, Marowallua, and her mother, Constance, the novel leaves her dead while Norman lives and prospers. Moreover, it is clear that Norman prospers at Tocky's expense, that she is bartered by Norman's negligence for his final good fortune. Is it possible to see the two concluding images of the novel, that of the laughing prosperous Norman and that of the dead Tocky as decisively filling out the novel's final judgement that Capricornian prosperity is at the cost not simply of the coloured race, but of female people in particular and of the female and maternal character within the human?

Historically, Herbert must have known that the system of Black Velvet was maintained *so that* Northern Territorian stations could be productive.<sup>7</sup> A *purely* ironic reading of the novel might show this overtly 'masculine' novel as graphically defining the disastrous social results of the destruction within the human of its female quality. However, as in the other instances I have elaborated in this essay, the last brilliantly focussed image of the dead mother, Tocky, with her dead infant combines with the silence at the end of the novel to read most clearly as a merely bitter aside to Norman's immediate life and fortune and, like the cawing of its crows, as a merely cynical comment on human fortunes in general. Thus Tocky's fictional life seems expended on an unspecific cosmic bitterness which evades and evaporates the significance of her own fate. Her life becomes image, image finally turned to the service of a male life, seen, for all its tarnish, as more viable (and more valuable?).

A wholly ironic reading of *Capricornia* might see the novel as detailing the suppression of the Aboriginal and half-caste races and of women in particular in favour of the economic exploitation of a land by the white race. In arguing that a wholly ironic reading of the novel is not tenable, this essay implies, however, that *Capricornia* itself both symbolises and illustrates a self-renewing pattern of repression of the female and maternal value, that the novel's die was cast on its fortieth page with the death of Marowallua.

## NOTES

1. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1973, pp. 11-13.
2. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1981 (1938). Hereafter all references to *Capricornia* are to this edition and given in parentheses.
3. It seems that the practice of infanticide was erratic rather than common in the Northern Territory. The historian, Lyndall Ryan, expert on Aboriginal-European relationships, and author, notably, of *The Tasmanian Aborigines* (University of Queensland Press, 1982), told me in conversation that it may have been practised by white fathers more commonly than by black mothers, a suggestion which is made at least feasible by Ann McGrath's account of the social stigma felt by white men who formed relationships with black women. See McGrath's "Black Velvet": Aboriginal women and their relations with white men in the Northern Territory, 1910-40', in *So Much Hard Work*, ed. Kay Daniels, Sydney, Fontana/Collins, c. 1984, pp. 233-281. McGrath terms this white syndrome, tartly, the 'sexual and racial paranoia of white society' (pp. 238-239).
4. Laurie Clancy misdefines 'Black Velvet' as the 'name whites gave to sexual dealings with Aborigines' (*Xavier Herbert*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981, p.35). McGrath (op. cit. p.233), sensitive to the sexual exploitation, male of female, implicit in the term, sees 'Black Velvet' as 'the term used to describe Aboriginal women with whom white men had sexual intercourse'.
5. 'Oh Don't You Remember Black Alice?' parodies the ballad pot-boiler, 'Ben Bolt' (1843) by the American, Thomas Dunn English (1819-1902). 'Ben Bolt' is a maudlin piece which swept through England and America on a wave of lucrative popularity in the mid-nineteenth century. Having higher literary ambitions, however, English came to wish he had remained anonymous. See *Famous Single Poems*, Burton E. Stevenson, London, Harrap, 1924, pp. 161-172. I am grateful to my ex-colleague, R.J. Dingley, for this reference.
6. Vincent Buckley is surely wrong to applaud Lace's hypocritical self-censure after he has safely rid himself of the pregnant Constance. (*Cap.*, p.143). See Buckley's article 'Capricornia', *Meanjin*, *XIX*, 1960, 24-5.
7. See McGrath, p.256.

ELIZABETH SMITHER

## Nine postcards on a wall

Balancing on Mrs James Cook's bonnet  
Is Edouard Manet looking bored  
Colette with paper roses below the Magi  
Dickens' house beside the Delphi charioteer  
Turner beside a lady in a picadill  
And red buses going round the square.

Details when you list them can cross borders  
Into the next postcard; often they join  
In some kind of espérance, or forlorn  
Cast their looks towards each other in the mist.  
They could have quite a party in the house of Dickens  
All but the charioteer arriving by bus.

MICHAEL ALEXANDER

## To W.H. Auden in Heaven, with Apologies

'Excuse me!' (Americans must pardon  
This audenary beginning; with Englishmen  
It is safer to prithee at the outset of a parley  
And, when interrupting, correct.)

I would imagine you smoking there  
As at a solitary table in the Cadena Café,  
Cornmarket Street, Oxford, — Benson & Hedges, I  
remember.  
You were wearing a crumpled old sports jacket,  
You crumpled old sport, and finishing off  
The *Daily Telegraph* crossword.  
Thus the Professor of Poetry.

Yet even in truth-seeking and -frequenting youth,  
Expecting oracles from all, I could see  
That this making yourself available,  
Even to undergraduates, was awfully decent.

You had lectured on the Hero in Modern Poetry  
(Eliot, Lawrence and Graves).  
'What about Ezra Pound?' I demanded, sitting down.  
'One can't fit everyone in,' you observed,  
Spoke of 'the House', meaning Christchurch,  
And commended David Jones's *Anthemata*.

The Cadena had the best coffee,  
The *Telegraph* the best crossword,  
You reasonably explained, but  
Could this be a poet? Where were his flowing  
— And floating — eye and tie and hair?  
His roses and poses? I had not read much  
Of his verse, and did not know  
That for him the poet's quest  
Was an unrequested profession.

## Parenthesis

Over the tombstones wantonly sidling,  
Cats come to the sandwich  
Which I cannot finish. They ignore  
The plastic flowers blooming  
Over M. Durand (1868-1914).  
What will M. Durand have to say  
To Mr. Alexander on the Last Day?

JOHN GRIFFIN

## Stopping for Lunch

We have stopped to eat yesterday's cold chicken we bought in Doncaster, after a long drive all morning, west and south, into this green grid of farms. Nobody has been car-sick, yet. This is that rich country of ancient fires and we pass several old volcanoes, scenic and fenced in, like everything else. The ants in our parking place are eating cold chicken we bought in Doncaster. We've had three hours of our own company, and welcome the black ants who struggle with chicken skin, and don't know what to do with a bone but strip it bare.

A silver tanker of milk passes and toots its horn, and someone waves. The ants hurry into the grass with chicken fibres and a drift of crumbs. Above us, on a slope, a white track curves to an un-monastic monastery in red brick and conventional tile. There is such a freight of historical connotation round the simple name of monastery, on a fence in Western Victoria, in the sun of early September; reality's a somewhat windy farm above a road, facing across a valley one volcano silent for centuries, with a track that circles and circles to the crater, fenced in safe spirals to the top.

The ants think what they think for gratitude; the wind over the hill possibly breathes a prayer; and there, on the volcano, a white car drives upward, without awe. We pack up, and head now for the coast.

SEAN MONAHAN

## *Poor Fellow My Country* : A Question of Genre

Writers who work within unfashionable genres always risk being misinterpreted and undervalued: readers who recognise the conventions may find them uncongenial; readers who do not may judge the book according to inappropriate criteria. To understand Herbert's achievement in *Poor Fellow My Country* we must read it for what it is: one of the few serious works of romance produced in twentieth century Australia. It is unhelpful criticism to judge the book by standards appropriate to Austen, James and Forster when its atmosphere, setting, plot and characters all place it within the quite different tradition of Homer, *The Faerie Queen* and *Don Quixote*.

A great romancer should be examined in terms of the conventions he chose. William Morris should not be left on the side lines of prose fiction merely because the critic has not learned to take the romance form seriously . . . If Scott has any claims to be a romancer, it is not good criticism to deal only with his defects as a novelist.<sup>1</sup>

The term 'novel' becomes dangerous when it is used simultaneously in both a broad and a narrow sense; as a general term for all prose fiction and as a description of that type of prose fiction whose primary interest is detailed examination of character. When this happens, novels with quite different interests are either undervalued or, worse still, criticised for not doing well what they never intended to do in the first place. Aware of the problem, Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* developed a more precise set of terms which are particularly helpful in the study of books which lie outside mainstream novel writing. If we apply Frye's terminology to *Poor Fellow My Country* we find that, although it contains strong elements of both 'novel' and 'anatomy', more important than either to the book is the genre of 'romance'.

The settings of *Poor Fellow My Country* are the traditional settings of romance.

Full of Glades, shaded valleys, murmuring brooks, the moon and other images closely linked with the female or maternal aspect of sexual imagery. The heraldic colours are green and gold, traditionally the colors of vanishing youth . . . it is often a world of magic and desirable law . . .<sup>2</sup>

This is exactly the world of *Poor Fellow My Country*: ruled over by the great Earth Mother, Koonapippi; watched over by the mischievous moon, Igulgul, ever eager to encourage the subversive power of 'wrong side' love. Feminine images of the creative power of rivers and tides pervade the novel: both the hero Prindy and the heroine Rifkah are ritually reborn through water. The heraldic gold of youth recurs constantly: Prindy's hair flies 'golden in the summer breeze' (p.980); he is a 'golden child . . . specially favoured by Ol'Goomun Nature', a golden bird caught in Barbu's net.

The Australian bush of *Poor Fellow My Country* may differ in geographical detail from the 'shaded valleys and murmuring brooks' of European romances but it shares their idealised perfection. Herbert's description of the bush is full of the numinous presence of the land but not at all accurate to its day-to-day realities. It is not that Herbert was unaware of those realities; few Australian writers spent more time alone in the bush and he knew its unforgiving nature. He once told an interviewer, 'You've no idea how hard it is . . . to get a feed in this wilderness of ours, you've got to keep working all the time'<sup>3</sup> — but that was not the picture he chose to give in *Poor Fellow My Country*. The landscape he there describes in such sensuous detail is indeed the Australian bush he knew and loved, but with its harsh and unforgiving nature transmuted into an idyllic, pastoral environment that protects and cherishes his hero. When Prindy wanders through the storm a 'poor, bare, forked animal' it is man alone who threatens, not nature. The land gives bountifully of its riches: snakes vacate trees for him, bees offer honey, the river welcomes its son. For this is the world of pastoral magic where the gods look after their own and the miraculous becomes the expected. When Prindy is left alone in the bush after the death of Nellyeri, George and Queenie.

The parrots showed him the kapok trees he would otherwise have to hunt for. The crested bell-birds showed him where the grasshoppers were lurking, ringing their tiny bells of voices. Crested wedge-bills, delighting in his mimicry of their sweet song . . . showed him pods opening to shed seeds that made good nutty munching. Red quandong cherries were the spotted bower-birds offering.<sup>4</sup>

The description moves into the world of Jung as Prindy is joined by a mysterious white dingo. Alfie Candlemass and Sydney are worlds away!

Dingoes like to attach themselves to solitary humans, and apparently without ulterior motive, since it has never been recorded that one has broken such a truce. He stayed with Prindy for quite a while . . . They shared the bustards, the wallabies that one or the other brought down, this being better country. They shared their watering, which White Wanjin found. They camped together. At night Prindy would see the red eyes glowing like coals, reflecting the light of his fire. He would talk to him, sing to him. Wanjin never answered. Perhaps he expected Prindy to read his mind, too. Legend has it that the original Wanjin learnt to read others' minds from the Ol'Goomun, whose dog he was, of course . . .

It may have been . . . Full Moon and a gathering of his clan for one of those dismal concerts they so love to indulge in when Igulgul is at his fullness; or the simple fact that he had done his bit in bringing this golden child who seemed to be specially favoured by Ol'Goomun Nature through the wilderness for delivery to his destiny; but the night of the Full Moon he slipped away. (p.466)

This is Herbert at his best: description in which the mysterious and the mundane are held in fine balance. It slips easily between scientific statement and Dreamtime legend. The dingo is simultaneously a dog obeying normal biological drives and White Wanjin fulfilling the behests of Koonapippi. The magical world of romance and the everyday world of the Australian bush co-exist here without strain. In just this way does Aboriginal thought hold the Dreamtime in easy relationship with present reality. In just this way does Delacy school himself to accept both natural and supernatural explanations of Bobwirridirridi's disappearing tricks for to do otherwise is to be trapped in Kuttabah or Whiteman Logic. Blackfellow Logic is at ease with the marvellous; Kuttabah Logic excludes it — and that, for Herbert, is the great tragedy of white Australia. The genre of romance enabled him, in passages such as the above, to create for white Australia a living sense of the wonder in life that Kuttabah Logic denies; such passages are Blackfellow Logic made manifest, are in a sense a more powerful political manifesto than any mouthed by Jeremy Delacy in the meeting halls of Sydney.

As the section continues, romance motifs become stronger. Deserted by Wanjin, Prindy is watched over by a golden moon and welcomed into her warmth by the great Earth Mother.

Within a short while there was his other friend of the long nights, Igulgul; or at least to begin with the Shade of him, gliding the higher tree-tops beyond the water-hole. Prindy sighed again, watched the gliding turn to silver, saw more and more of the trees and then the stony way light up as a stage for the dancing black shadows of the windblown bushes on the rise. Prindy, naked as he was born, cuddled into the dusty warmth of his Mother Earth. (p.467)

Drawn like Shakespeare's Ferdinand by 'Musics' blown on the wind, the golden boy is finally caught in a net set for the Golden Finch. His captor, Barbu, seeing 'the golden head, so golden to the magic touch of Igulgul' accepts him as 'a god from Paradise . . . a lil golden god' (p.470). It is left to his prosaic little daughter, a character who refuses to live in the charmed world of romance, to identify Prindy as a runaway halfcaste and mock her father's 'jitty' Indian fantasy. Barbu rejects such Kuttabah Logic.

He stared and stared. So god-like was the figure in its slender beauty, all shiny gold of skin and towelled hair, so luminous of eye, so calm. He persisted, 'But if you are just colour poy . . . how come you 'ere . . . from desert . . . from nowhere?'  
The little girl answered in that same dry tone, 'He runned away from Compound . . .'  
'But t'at Compound two hunneret miles from 'ere . . . and t'e vild, vild desert and t'e mountain in betweens. How vone lil poy . . . if he not a god . . . if a god don't 'elp him . . . Ho' Barbu became all excitement again: 'I haf it . . . Mother Shasti, Goddess of Children, haf bring him for you, my daughter!' . . .  
'Jitty Indian talk.' (p.472)

Here again is Herbert's marvellous ability to hold real and fabulous worlds in delicate balance. With one part of the mind we see Barbu as Savitra sees him and 'Jitty Indian talk' earths a mood that might otherwise slip into sentimentality. With another part we see the golden god Barbu sees, god of the Dreamtime, god of Hindus, god of all Australia. Choice is unnecessary. The real world is indeed real and it is indeed marvellous; only Kuttabah logic

demands it must be one or the other. It is this sense of the marvellous that is the life force of *Poor Fellow My Country*; whenever Herbert deserts the world of romance for too long the book begins to sag.

The genre of *Poor Fellow My Country* is nowhere more clearly seen than in its characterisation. Three of its four main characters are so clearly stock figures of traditional romance it is surprising that little critical attention has been directed towards the fact. Perhaps it is because Prindy, Rifkah and Bobwirridirridi are taken less seriously than they deserve: their power is generally acknowledged but it is Delacy who absorbs critical attention — no doubt because he lives in the world of the novel, a genre the twentieth century takes more seriously than romance. Unfortunately the concentration on Delacy gives a distorted picture of the book. His importance is as subordinate character not hero. He is Sancho Panza to Quixote, negative to Prindy's positive, doomed like the lame boy of Hamelin to have the door to the marvellous world of romance shut in his face: never quite accepted into Rifkah's magical world of Judaism, nor into Bobwirridirridi's magical world of Aboriginality, nor even, except through death, into Prindy's magical world of Terra Australis del Espiritu Santo.

Prindy is the true traditional hero of this romance. Like other such heroes he is 'superior in degree both to other men and to his environment'.<sup>5</sup> His power becomes evident when, with grown men chained to each wrist, he is dashed against a submerged rock with all the force of a river in flood, waits without discomfort while the river drags the two corpses from him and then walks back unscathed to dry land. The Mowgli elements in his career are equally traditional. The hero nurtured in the forest by animals was a common event in medieval romance<sup>6</sup> and 'much of the hero's life is spent with animals, or at any rate the animals that are incurable romantics such as horses, dogs and falcons'.<sup>7</sup> One thinks of the scene in which Prindy is found 'playing on his bamboo flute to a packed semi-circle of donkeys whose attitudes left no doubt about their enchantment'. (p.590)

Rifkah is the equally traditional heroine of romance: a mother/wife figure, associated with earth and moon, waiting to succour the hero after his quest.<sup>8</sup> She is both Rifkah the Jewess and Koonapippi the mother goddess. Prindy accepts her as his 'mumma' and ritually sucks her breast beside the waters of the Rainbow Pool but he also claims her as his beloved, jealous of the right to protect her when his older and impotent rival Delacy has failed to do so. Herbert at one stage planned a scene in which Prindy and Rifkah 'lie together under blankets in the sand, arms about each other, mother and son, lover and lover'.<sup>9</sup> Rifkah is also a Miranda figure: an innocent maiden who exclaims of Australia, 'Oh brave new world that has such freedom in it' but soon learns that racist Calibans are not confined to Hitler's Reich; who turns with innocent passion to Delacy but finds her true love only when she is delivered by the sea 'most strangely' into the arms of a celibate on an enchanted island.

The third character, Bobwirridirridi, is perhaps most traditional of all. He matches each detail of Frye's 'old wise man' of romance: often magicians, such men sometimes paid in mutilation or physical handicap for their unusual powers.<sup>10</sup> Early in *Poor Fellow My Country* we learn of Bobwirridirridi's near death from arsenical poisoning. Then it was that 'Tchamala . . . took him away

up into the sky to where he lives . . . and there gave him the powers of Boss Snake Man'. (p.32) As if to emphasise the connection between mutilation and magic power, Herbert adds 'so he was left, miraculously alive though with his stomach so eaten away that he could never eat solid food again and accepted, from that time forth, by all aboriginals as a man of magic and power'. (p.32)

Turning to the plot of *Poor Fellow My Country* we find it is the traditional romance plot of the Quest. Prindy's many journeys all form part of the quest for his 'Rown Road', his destiny, his initiation; towards this he travels with unswerving tenacity through all the vicissitudes of his short, tempestuous career. Frye describes three traditional stages of Quest plots: 'the perilous journey', 'the struggle with evil' and 'the exaltation of the hero' (11). All are evident in Prindy's story.

The journey is indeed a journey perilous. Prindy regularly faces the fury of the elements: wild sea journeys, storms, rivers in flood. For the most part he is a fugitive, constantly harried by the police. Each stage of the quest brings death to his companions: Ah Loy, Nellie, George, Queenie, Savitra, Delacy. His quest is also a journey of enlightenment: the truck that takes him round Palmerston, the plane that shows him the land Tchamala made, the ship that takes him to see the realities of empire alive still in the Australian navy, all broaden his knowledge of Australia. In traditional fashion he is accompanied on the journey by a wise old guide who assumes different guises to reflect Australia's cultural diversity. First Aboriginal Bobwirridirridi, like an Old Testament prophet, takes Prindy to a 'high place' near the sea so that 'the novice should see how their master, Tchamala, had begun the wondrous thing they had sung of' (p.181). Next Indian Barbu 'during the long days of jogging . . . related the Hindu myths and legends to the boy's evident fascination'. (p.477) Finally Whiteman Brew offers 'intellectual communion' that was 'long luxurious indulgence' to both 'preceptor and proselyte' (p.594).

Prindy's struggle with evil takes various forms. There are the obvious dragons whom he fights and, with Tchamala's aid, kills: first tracker Treacle, then Sergeant Bugsby and finally the hitherto invincible Cahoon and Jinbull. There are also subtler foes to overcome. As Circe traps Odysseus in the sweet witchcraft of love, so Savitra weaves 'charada' love magic to hold Prindy in silken bonds. He must resist her attempts to divert him as earlier he resisted the fierce possessiveness of Nelyerri's mother love. Almost everyone he meets on the quest, in fact, casts lures in Prindy's way: Knowles offers a home, Hanahan communist training, Marazyk the priesthood, Dickey artistic fame and Alfie political power. Throughout it all Prindy remains unswerving in his allegiance to Bobwirridirridi: Savitra apart, temptation is not so much rejected as simply never noticed.

At a deeper level, and underlying Prindy's trials, the book is full of the traditional mythic significance of Quest romance: the myth of a divine saviour, incarnation variously of spring, youth, dawn, order and fertility struggling with winter, darkness, chaos, sterility and old age. This myth lies at the heart of *Poor Fellow My Country*: it is this that gives the book its visionary power; it is this that offers hope for Australia even when no rational grounds for hope appear in the events the book describes; through myth Herbert was able to transcend reason while remaining true to reality. The practical politics of Alfie, Delacy

and Ferris lead nowhere; it is Prindy's death and rebirth that offers mystic promise of renewal.

The myth appears most clearly in the recurring descriptions of trial by water. These contain a rich intermingling of three versions of the myth: the life-bringing death by water of European spring rituals; the descent into water to defeat a sea monster of Beowulf and Jonah; and the descent into hell of Odysseus and Jesus. The central trial begins when Prindy is cornered by police near the 'great slabs of rock' where Tchamala promised Bobwirridirridi 'he could destroy the dookyangana' (p.204). He hears

the muffled thunder of the great water . . . sweeping to the suck of that mighty yellow serpent, the river. Prindy rose as if the roar was a voice calling him, and ran straight towards it . . . heading for that point where the Pookarakka had tried to deliver himself into the hands of the Master . . . just down there was a kind of hill of water, sloping down to a wall of it . . . it could be taken for a great sucking mouth — the smooth slope the tongue, the leaping watery wall the upper lip . . . The tongue caught the two bobbing heads . . . The maw opened to them. They vanished. (p.610)

The sloping wall of water down which Prindy falls is precursor to the sloping concrete wall down which Jeremy falls in Sydney and the one down which Hanahan falls in the final scene. Unlike Jeremy and Hanahan, Prindy is a willing sacrifice, preferring Tchamala's dark kingdom to the world of Cahoon and McCuskie. With 'the maw opened' Herbert deftly links that kingdom to European traditions of Hell. It is, significantly, Christmas day when Prindy descends into the depths and 'dawn on New Year's Day' when he rises again. The promise of renewal given by the saviour figure's rebirth is reflected in Herbert's description of 'a dawn so bright that the birds seemed to be waking with especial joy to it'. Like Mary visiting the tomb of Jesus, Delacy goes sorrowfully to the Rainbow Pool and there finds

A skeleton almost, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish in which, prone, it struggled feebly in striving towards the approaching man, skinny reaching arms, a death's head with gaping blackened mouth, but life in the deep eye sockets, life blazing as the sockets raised themselves . . . Pus oozed from a score of lacerations . . . Even the marsh flies left the thing alone. (p.624)

This is an amazing piece of writing, full of rich ambiguity, drawing upon a variety of historical allusions and moving subtly between allegory and myth. Allegorically Prindy is 'the oppressed aboriginal', a Poor Tom figure reaching out to the whiteman who brought him to this 'basest and most poorest shape'; but he is also, and paradoxically, 'the aboriginal proud and dauntless' for it is no coincidence that 'death's head', 'blackened mouth' and eyes 'blazing' in 'deep eye sockets' all bring to mind the repeated formulaic description of his defiant master Bobwirridirridi. And below the allegory lie the deeper mythological meanings. Prindy is Australia reborn, the risen saviour, back from the depths where for seven days he has been tested beyond the strength of ordinary men. Like Christ his body is torn and broken. Like Job even the flies shun his company. Yet from death cometh life: for in this death's head life 'blazes' as he strives towards the approaching Delacy.

Prindy's is the central ordeal but it is reflected in Rifkah's two shipwrecks: the first when she escapes from Clancy; the second when she is torn from Prindy

as their boat beaches on Leopold Island. On both occasions Herbert's description overtly links her with the suffering saviour of myth. Her red hair and ivory skin put the Aborigines in mind of Koonapippi while her position reminds Glasscock of 'his hanged god'. Images of the descent into hell, present in the first incident where the sea threatens to 'drag (her) down into luminescent chaos' (p.947) become more insistent in the later passage with its 'black stream downhill', 'blackest cloud', 'grey void' and 'grey chaos'. Herbert stresses the link between Rifkah's and Prindy's experiences through repeated images of 'mouth' and 'lip' and repeated personification of river and sea as hissing, roaring monsters.

The monster advancing upon them (was) now so close that the waters could be seen boiling beneath it. The tide flowing from it seemed . . . to be pouring in a black stream downhill . . . Then a vibrant humming that in a moment became a mighty roar. What looked like a monstrous gaping mouth was bearing down on them, its top lip a great curl of blackest cloud, the boiling sea its gnashing teeth, its throat a grey void from which icy breath soon smote them . . . Another wave struck the craft . . . sucked it back. Rifkah still clinging to the thwart, goggling, saw the beach vanish, was back in grey choas, alone — alone. (p.1321)

So Rifkah, like Prindy before her, is dragged into the void by Tchamala master of chaos. Next comes an incident full of strange resonances.

(Rifkah was) not alone. A great grey eye on a black stick popped up to stare in the wide hazel eyes — an eye on a stick that was like the scabbard of a sword and that cut the water like a sword — and vanished, with the hint of a black mass under the seething water. Still the chill rain and the feathery blankets of warm breaking sea — but with the wildness abating . . . but still the grey chaos — and again the eye, caught by that blob of copper-red in the grey, cutting the water at a different angle this time . . .  
The grey eye appeared once more, so close as fairly to stare into the soul of the other seer. It went straight down. A hammer-head shark, more renowned for the curiosity that had caused Nature to endow it so monstrously than for savagery.

For all the rational explanation, Herbert's hammerhead is no more an ordinary shark than Moby Dick is an ordinary whale. It rises like Excalibur from the lake. It stares into the soul. Like the mystic crocodile of the final page, it is a beast from the Dreamtime. The complexity of Herbert's quest myth is nowhere more evident than in the way it incorporates the central dragon killing theme of the tradition. Traditionally the dragon or the sea monster is unequivocally the enemy, is the evil blight on the land which the hero must kill.<sup>12</sup> But Prindy sees the Rainbow Serpent and his earthly forms (sea, river, shark and crocodile) as master not adversary and Herbert presents Tchamala in one and the same breath as negative evil — and as a powerfully invigorating and necessary counterweight to the benevolence of Koonapippi. It is a vision William Blake would have understood and is one of the richest strands in the complex vision of Australia presented through Herbert's myth. It demands far deeper analysis than space here allows.

The mysterious visitation over, Rifkah's journey into chaos is nearly at an end as she glimpses the paradise she is to win.

Glimpse of an island, emerald glimpses above the heaving jade. But alone — alone.  
She cried again to glimpses of blue above, 'Lieber Gott . . . Lieber Gott!'

The island came close — within quarter of a mile — in glimpses of greenery and snowy sand — then fell away. Her head sank on the thwart. Her shoulders shook to her lonely misery.

A bump. She looked up quickly, gasped, 'Gevalt!'

Peering at her were blue eyes under a shock of dark hair, above a spray-sparkling wind-parted fuzz of bronzy beard. (p.1321)

Glasscock here is more Norse god than Christian priest. For the second time Rifkah is delivered to him naked from the sea and this time she is accepted as 'angel', her love as 'Paradise'.

Delacy's struggle in Sydney harbour functions as a deliberate contrast to the ordeals of Prindy and Rifkah. Theirs take place in a world where myth is possible; his in a world that denies the numinous. Its many similarities of detail only emphasise its great difference. In white urban Australia there is no mystery left; this ordeal is merely sordid. The stress is on the rubbish that clogs the bay, the dirty water, the slimy rocks. 'A grey head floating among rotten cabbages and broken fruit cases'. Sharks are no longer Tchamala's emissaries; in Sydney they are merely contemptible for the 'waters (had) become too befouled . . . to support any life but that which subsisted on filth.' Once only are the great Australian deities mentioned and then only to draw attention to their absence. 'Had he his wits about him, (Delacy) could have told the time by the glittering heavens. The Ol'Goomun-Ol'Goomun was abeam to northward'. (p.1192) The miraculous cycle of death unto life is absent: here is only death unto death — deadness all around. Jeremy emerges from the water into the final death of his hopes for Australia. The treatment he receives on Garden Island proves that arrogant colonial power is stronger than the spirit of Australian independence — and he can do nothing about it.

Delacy's ordeal is a nightmarish parody of those that have gone before and prepares us for the ending it resembles so closely. In both scenes a woman attracts the anger of a mob mouthing alien political catchcries. In both her protector is thrown into the water where he is hampered by a disabled limb. If the final scene is less depressing, it is only because the mystery, the magic, 'the moah' is back and because, in the world of romance at least, Prindy/Australia is not dead. Bobwirridirridi has taken his body 'long o' dat one Rainbow Pool' for the final stage of the Quest, 'the exaltation of the hero', metamorphosed, as so often in the tradition of romance, into a star.

'From dere me-t'ree-feller go hon-top.'

(Rifkah) murmured, 'Hon-top?'

Now he jerked his lips to the southward sailing clouds. 'Long o' sky.' The giggle came into the cackle again: 'T'ree-feller star. Spone night time you look up, might-be you look-see . . .' (p.1448)

So it is that, in the final scene, though Rifkah's body is destroyed by the crocodile, the spirit of Rifkah/Koonapippi lives on, taken lovingly into the belly of the mystic water monster that is her lover/son's latest incarnation. But no one sees. No one understands. No one cares! And therein lies for Herbert the great tragedy of Australia.

(Rifkah saw) a strange sight — a quadrageminal pattern of four bubbles. She stared, stopped swimming, swept on.

Were the great eyes behind the flared nostrils really intense grey, or only appeared to be so upon the racing white water? Her mouth opened wide, to give forth a cry that rang to the very tops of the few remaining river trees: 'Prindy . . . Prindy . . . Ngoornberri . . . ngungah . . . ngungah!' Down went the pattern of bubbles. Down went the copper head that looked like a bubble of blood. Nothing else for the gaping world to see. Only the Moah of the river to be sensed, by those with senses not yet too blunted by the jack-hammer logic of the kuttabah as still to be aware of the all-pervading mahraghi of this ancient land, Terra Australis del Espiritu Santo. *Poor Fellow My Country* (p.1463)

Herbert chose the genre of romance because it was the natural form for a writer such as himself: one who was more interested in ideas than people; one whose whole life was passionately and obsessively dedicated to teaching 'the truth' about Australia to his fellow countrymen. Romance tends naturally to the didactic: it 'remakes the world in the image of desire'<sup>13</sup> and 'the pastoral easily shifts into the political, for a fair landscape implies good government and peace while a ravaged land shows the decay of order and civilization'.<sup>14</sup> Herbert, like the Elizabethans before him, found it natural to comment on the disorder of society by showing its correspondences in the world of nature.

What had been done to the country they had passed through, by pigs and cattle, was nothing compared with what the gold miners of forty or fifty years before had done to the region they now entered . . . Not a creek but its banks had been stripped to rock, the detritus and humus gathered over a millenium put through the cradle and the dry-blower, washed away, blown away, its rock split with dynamite, its trees torn down for building and firewood, seeds and seedlings dead for ever for want of earth to root in . . . Not a quartz-topped hill, some obvious symbol of the wonders of the Dreamtime which originally must have flashed to Sun and Moon like jewelled giants, but had been blasted into heaps of graveyard gravel for the gold in their hearts. The heart-stuff had been taken and ground to powder under the stamps of batteries now lying in rusty iron tangles amidst harsh thickets of whiteman's and Chinaman's weeds . . . (pp.428-30)

Against this picture of a land misused, romance offers the ideal of pastoral order. Romance characters frequently retreat from imperfect societies to a place where they defend 'the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of experience'. 'A central image in this phase of romance is that of the beleaguered castle',<sup>15</sup> an image powerfully present in Herbert's finest writing from the beginning. We find it first in the O'Cannon 'fortress' of Black Adder and in Norman's Red Ochre, next in Seven Emus station<sup>16</sup> and finally in Delacy's Lily Lagoons. All are stations run by a mixture of races. All champion halfcastes in a world that oppresses them. All attempt to create a racially harmonious oasis amidst a desert of prejudice. Lily Lagoons' aim is overtly stated: it is 'to stand as an example to the Nation of how honesty and wisdom could correct the hitherto accepted ravaging of the land and savaging of its owners'. For a charmed time it achieves the same harmonious synthesis between body and spirit and between culture and culture achieved by Norman and Cho Sek Ching at Red Ochre. For a brief time in the earlier novel Herbert shows Chinese and halfcaste living together in perfect harmony: a harmony symbolised by the Christmas party at which Cho mixes music and food so cunningly 'that the borderline between the tastes of Orient and Occident was not perceivable . . . and thus the twain were brought together for once at least'.<sup>17</sup> At Lily Lagoons too, food and music take on a sacramental quality as Jew and Gentile, white

and black share together the simple ceremonials of daily life. Rifkah prepared for the Shabbos fried fish in 'a state of religious ecstasy' while Prindy accepts the Jewish meal as 'a new way to commune with Old Tchamala'. (p.712)

Romance's most powerful expression of harmony is the love idyll, a traditional motif that occurs in *Poor Fellow My Country* four times; first in the strange interlude between Nugget Knowles and Nelyerri. Nugget functions like the mechanicals in *Midsummer Night's Dream*: he apes the actions of his betters. Like Delacy later, Nugget feels he is living in an enchanted world. Like him he takes a lovely maiden for long walks in the moonlight. Unlike Delacy's, his idealising is made to appear ridiculous with a bemused Nelyerri calling him 'Calico Cock' and the author, who has watched Delacy do the same thing ten times over without adverse comment, now remarking wryly 'Such walking and talking would make anyone tired in a mile'. (p.407) Nevertheless, as with Bottom and his friends, this interlude, comic though its pretensions may appear, is a wholly well-meaning reflection of the ideal world of romance and Nugget becomes, for a short time, one of the most attractive characters in the book.<sup>18</sup>

The enchanted time between Delacy and Rifkah at Lily Lagoons provides the first taste of what perfection might be. Here, as later on Leopold Island, there is a sense that time has stopped, a sense of magic in the air, of beautiful harmony in an ideal world.

Jeremy talked of the Aborigines, of their customs, their mythology, the perfection of their lives as children of Nature, not of the frightful reality of their dispossession . . . Why the idealization of everything? Was it because they had found each other in complete despair of the realization of anything but disillusion? The walks usually lasted about an hour, perhaps as long as perfection can last . . . a fortnight of this idyllic condition . . . walking at night playing a game of love, while the outside world was climaxing to madness . . . (p.704-707)

Delacy's faith is too weak ultimately for the world of romance: he has lived too long with failure, is too deeply negative. Having failed Rifkah, he passes her feebly to his son (just as later, having failed Australia, he passes her to Fergus Ferris). Clancy takes Rifkah to Palmerston where the third idyll begins, another parody but no longer a genial one. At first Clancy behaves exactly like Knowles: babbling excited plans, desperate to win an unwilling bride, afraid the dream will disappear. But he becomes impatient and the magic turns sinister as love turns to lust. A strangely disturbing Dionysian Bachanal by Greek fishermen is prelude to Clancy's attempted rape and Rifkah's flight into the sea, preferring the power of Rainbow Serpent to the force of bestial man.

And so it is left to the last and strangest idyll of all to bring full perfection. Rifkah and Prindy, the hero and heroine, take Glasscock and Savitra into an Arcadian world where the ideal at last and all too briefly becomes the actual and the link with earlier traditions is, for the first time, overtly stated.

So idyllic was the situation there during those weeks of rain, rain, rain, with nothing much else to do but love, love, love, that it might be said the place fairly cried out for comparison with some Happy Land of Legend. Yet where, in all legendry, was ever such a place of undiminishing love-enchantment? Even Avalon, that Ocean Island of medieval romance, said to be located, Not Far This Side of Paradise, suffered disillusion, bitterly. (p.1325)

Romance was perhaps the only non-nihilistic way Herbert could express the tragic vision of Australia presented in his final novel. His hopes for Australia had been so high: his bitterness, scorn and pessimism as he wrote *Poor Fellow My Country* were so profound — matching, surely, Delacy's feelings as he travels the streets of Sydney and samples opinions on the ferries. Feeling as he did about the betrayal of the magnificent dream that had been Australia's, Herbert could easily have turned to bitter satire or fierce polemic in his last novel. There is, of course, plenty of the latter in the book but the prevailing mood is more complex and more benign. Even though he now felt sure that Australia's failure was by any rational analysis irremediable, through mixing the genres of romance and novel he was able to record simultaneously an irreversible historical failure alongside a mystic and emotionally exhilarating solution to that failure. Eliot once wrote

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.  
What might have been is an abstraction  
Remaining a perpetual possibility  
Only in a world of speculation.<sup>19</sup>

On one level, it is all too clear in *Poor Fellow My Country* that the 'time present' of Cobbity, Coote and McCusky and the 'time past' of Pat Delacy and the Vaiseys will inevitably be 'present' in the 'time future' (our present) of the final depressing pages of the novel. But romance allowed Herbert an escape from the historical tyranny of the novel and enabled him to give powerful life to the 'world of speculation' through his myth of Prindy, Rafka and Bobwirridirridi. For as Levi-Strauss has argued,

Myth is the means by which a people succeed in moving themselves from a world of irreversible time into a synchronic world of ritual in which time is annihilated.<sup>20</sup>

*Poor Fellow My Country* is the making of a myth. Through the mixed conventions of romance and novel Herbert was able powerfully and movingly to show Australians 'what might have been' alongside what was and is; 'what might still be' alongside what perhaps must always be. To explore the precise nature of the visionary Australia Herbert created in his last great novel one must examine in much greater detail than has so far been attempted the three central characters of the myth: Bobwirridirridi, Rafka and above all the true centre of the book, the golden boy Prindy Delacy.

## NOTES

1. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) p.305.
2. *Ibid.* p.200.
3. Playboy Interview, *Xavier Herbert*, p.38.
4. Xavier Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country* (Sydney: Collins, 1975) p.465. All references are to this edition.
5. Frye, *op.cit.* p.34.
6. *Ibid.* p.198.
7. *Ibid.* p.36.
8. *Ibid.* p.193 and 195.
9. In a letter from Herbert to his wife Sadie headed '4/9/68 01:15 Wed'. In another letter headed 'Innisfail 1.30 Mon 21/10/68' the same intention is evident as he writes 'This strange enchanted boy (Prindy) has her (Rifkah) in his power. He has taken possession of her as his wife -- mother'. Both letters in the Sadie Herbert Collection, Fryer Library, Qld. University.
10. Frye, *op.cit.* p.193 and 195.
11. *Ibid.* p.187.
12. *Ibid.* pp. 189-90.
13. Gillian Beer, *The Romance* (London: Methuen, 1970) p.79.
14. *Ibid.* p.35.
15. Frye, *op.cit.* p.201.
16. Black Adder and Red Ochre stations in *Capricornia*, Seven Emus station in *Seven Emus*.
17. Xavier Herbert, *Capricornia* (Australia: Angus and Robertson Australian Classics, 1971) p.408.
18. Interestingly, this is one of the few occasions in the book where Herbert is inconsistent in characterisation. The sour, mean-spirited Nugget Knowles of the race scenes is a different person altogether from the Nugget Knowles who loves Nelyeri honourably and courageously regardless of his family's prejudices. This Knowles is a character in the line of Tim O'Connell and Andy McRandy.
19. T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944) p.13.
20. Quoted in M.E. Novak, *Realism, Myth and history in Defoe's fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983) p.43.

MARION HALLIGAN

## The Hanged Man in the Garden

“... the artificial paradise garden, nature tamed, formalised, patterned to the highest degree of artifice and comfort.”

Robert Hughes  
*The Shock of the New*

### I Eyes

Construct a gibbet. Use a tree, a tree is just the thing. One with a smooth tall trunk well-rooted in the ground, with a high strong branch at the right angle. Loop over it a rope, and there you have a gibbet for a Hanged Man. Not a pretty thing for a garden, you say, but you'd be wrong. For the Hanged Man dangles gallantly by one foot and turned upside down observes the world. Its powers cannot harm him, he sees it clearly and afresh, all new. He is an individual. And he has a halo round his head.

How does Martha know this? Her son Jimmy who is twelve years old has just told her so. She and Richard are sitting in the garden drinking wine and he excited has come to tell them about the book he is reading on Tarot cards. It's not what you'd think, mum, he says. The Hanged Man does not suffer. He is fortunate.

She would like to have a gibbet in the garden; to hang from it by one foot with a halo round her head, and see the world from a different angle. All new.

See the garden. The walled garden of Paradise, eighties suburban incarnation, enclosed by grey paling fences almost hidden under honeysuckle and wisteria and ivy, occasionally heightened with trellises of wood and wire to give scope to clematis and jasmine and climbing roses, and to hide the neighbours' tin sheds. See it with naive Rousseau eyes: the glossy camellias with carefully limned leaves perfect enough to be man-made, the slender pointed leaves of the bog gum, and those of the oak pale green and dentate.

Or medieval eyes: the herbs in formal squares in their sun-dialled bed, the carpets of violets purple-starred. Or Monet's, when the roses will haze into shapes of light; or Matisse's, which make a garden of the mind which reassembles objects by its own logic.

It's the eye of the mind that's important. You need a good strong mind, with excellent imaginative eyesight, to make a garden in the first place. To suppose that a clay paddock, feet deep in builders' rubble, trickily outcropped in shale and long time home to subterranean clover, would ever produce anything taller or greener than a paspalum stalk. Now, only a decade or two later, it's another room to the house, sunny and sheltered in frosty winters, damp and cool in scorching summers. It belongs to its creators. They could become minor-scale Monets painting what they own.

Martha and Richard are no longer the people they were, in the free frolicking days before Garden. It's changed them. At first they bitterly resented it, the barrenness, the toil, the ugly fences and the small flat space. They longed for the irresponsibility of flat life. We are intellectuals, they said. This manual work wastes our time. And then the trees grew, the bushes flourished, the lawn greened. It became a grown-up garden, and seduced them.

We actually *enjoy* working in it, they say now. It does us good to get dirty and physically tired, such a change from our clean and sedentary lives. To actually see concrete results, instead of hoping for abstract ones. They take walks about it, like Jane Austens in a shrubbery. Look: the snowdrops; the first violets. Listen: parrots in the pyracantha, friarbirds in the mulberry. Smell: how lovely is the scent of daphne in the bleakness of winter.

Every year Martha removes the caterpillars from a small cumquat in a tub and rehouses them on the large lemon tree. In summer they are rewarded by dozens of enormous citrus butterflies dancing vertical pavenes just for them.

## II Black Cat

Martha might wish for a gibbet for she has the next best thing, an upstairs. She has to remain right way up, she is not safe from the powers of evil, nor does she have a halo, but she can see the world afresh. Looking down on the garden is quite different from being in it; she is distanced, perceives shapes and patterns, can look at the tops of the trees and through them at the mountain, subtle and time-smudged.

This morning, Sunday and no hurry, she stood at the upstairs window watching the fat black cat walk about the garden. Shining and portly he surveys his estate. Pauses at the cat-mint. Glides around the sundial. Pretends briefly a leaf is a mouse. Gives his claws a momentary sharpen on the trunk of an oak, long-shadowed in the slanting sun. But really he is just pottering about, feeling the morning, enjoying the pleasant places of his world before finding the warmest spot to sleep the day away.

There were blackbirds tossing the leaves about, hopping and pecking at the food underneath, but they have had the sense to leave before the cat comes. They are building a nest in the thicket in the corner.

Martha watches all this from above. She can of course go downstairs and into the garden whenever she wishes. Can the Hanged Man stop dangling by the ankle or is he forever condemned to see the world afresh?

### III The Brie Incident

In the extra room of the garden, enjoying the annual surprise of spring and learning about the Hanged Man, sit Martha and Richard drinking wine. They've finished lunch, a typical poly-ethnic, multicultural Canberra lunch: Italian coppa with melon, Greek salad of cucumber and fetta with a power of garlic — fortunately they've all eaten it and so cannot smell one another — and French cheeses. Martha made a pilgrimage to a satellite town, to a loathsome plastic-atmosphered shopping mall, to attain them. She doesn't let the family forget her sacrifice. I think it would be easier to walk up a mountain on your knees than run the gauntlet of shopping maddened mums out there, and then wait your turn at The Laughing Cow, she says.

The cheese might not be so good, says Richard.

At The Laughing Cow the customers eye one another, and the purchases. The cognoscenti despise the buyer of fruit cheese. No madam, we don't sell processed sandwich squares, try Woolworths.

The man ahead of Martha leans over the counter. "I'm very embarrassed," he says. "I'm afraid I'll have to bring this cheese back. I've eaten Brie all over the world, I'm a traveller, I know it very well. This Brie tastes of grass. A good Brie should taste of clay."

Such gourmandise dazzles the shop woman, who gives him his money back.

Martha buys some Brie, some fresh goat cheese, and some blue de Bresse. All this costs a great deal of money, but she consoles herself that good cheese is her only real extravagance in the food line. It isn't but she's a good liar.

The Brie which they've eaten for lunch doesn't taste of clay, or of grass either. It tastes of Brie, says Harriet. It tastes of its feel, says Jimmy. Itself, inimitable and inviolate, says Richard.

In coming to these conclusions they have eaten it all, there is none left on the plate to abandon itself, like a Toulouse Lautrec woman letting herself go, the runny flesh oozing from the corset crust.

Martha thinks that there is nothing like a good Brie, tasting of grass or clay or whatever, and as much wine as you want in your own garden in spring with interesting conversation, to make you feel smug about the pleasures of existence. She thinks smug but she means happy; smug may placate through irony, happy could tempt fate.

### IV An Interior, with Food, and a Fortune

Yet Martha often thinks of herself as happy; perhaps at these times she imagines that gratitude will earn her more of the same. Despite discontent, despair, dismay, depression, happiness exists. She sees a *bon mot* in a magazine: Happiness is always remembered; at the time we are never aware of it.

Nonsense, she says. We are happy, basically, generally happy. Wouldn't you say, Richard? Richard, wouldn't you say we are happy?

She takes pleasure in the rituals of domesticity and the objects associated. Martha desires objects, she likes to touch them, to hold them, to possess them. Blue and white Victorian meatplates. A worn silver cruet that her aunt gave

her because none of her own children would be interested. A Swedish stainless steel platter, terrifyingly plain. Faience dishes with naive patterns. Her sister has the same predilection. Must be a family thing, they say. Martha can defend herself with quotations. "Things are the sons of heaven," said Doctor Johnson. "Words are the daughters of earth."

On a Saturday night she sensuously sets her table for dinner. The food is ready. A dessert of pears, oranges, prunes, walnuts, stewed in red wine with cinnamon, cloves and bay leaves. A very medieval smell. The main course is *aillaide d'agneau*, lamb with garlic, three bulbs of it, sixty cloves — a dish only for friends. Or people frightened of vampires. To begin with she has a lot of small prawns, bought cheap at the fishmonger; she'll pile them up on a tall green majolica dish and the guests will have to do the peeling. There'll be quarters of sweet lemon from the caterpillar tree, but their treat is the leaves, not the fruit, and brown bread and butter, and white wine tasting of the Hunter Valley. She can see the party in her mind's eye, that strong and clever eye; see the round table, the guests with long throats laughing, uttering brilliant words in between mouthing glittering wine glasses, and the kindly candlelight and the warmth of the fire enclosing them in a long moment of pleasure. If it is a successful dinner party this is what will happen, otherwise the prawns will irritate, the light's sharp edges will cut across eyeballs and the conversation will limp sideways.

But Martha does not fear *otherwise*. She takes out the knives and forks and polishes them with a linen cloth, placing them precisely, making minute adjustments so that the patterns are perfect. She sets plates for the prawns, lays napkins across them, puts glasses by each plate. The centrepiece is a small green pot of violets, their scent too delicate to disturb the wine. The colours are all greens, milky or bright, with white and transparency and this one little purple note. She stands back, admires the softness, the sharpness, the shine, of all these objects on the polished table. This is the apotheosis of housewifery. It's very fine, it's a work of art, minor but pleasing. Impermanent; soon it will be mussed, the napkins stained, the glasses greasy, the prawns debris, but that doesn't matter. It is better for a minor work of art to be ephemeral, then it can be created again like a song played on the piano by a talented but amateur musician.

She raises her eyes to the window, looks out into the garden and wonders who said that standing in a comfortable room looking out into a benevolent garden was the bourgeois idea of paradise.

Richard is there, chopping some kindling, enjoying being energetic. The late spring days are warm but the nights cold. It has been a bad winter, harsh and dry; bad for the garden — a may bush at the front has died, and the hardenburgia is very sickly — and bad for people, with epidemics of flu and old people dying. But brilliant for sunsets; tonight the sky flames with all the colours of fire and blood. The whole room is lurid with this dreadful red light; the white walls and plates, the pictures, the glasses, are all stained crimson.

But Martha has no premonitions, carelessly perhaps she does not think of danger or suffering, simply enjoys the pyrotechnics. In a moment the sky will fade, she will pull the curtains, Richard will come in and light the fire. For the moment it is beautiful; she stands and watches. Until the light drains from

the earth and she draws the curtains over its bleakness. When the garden outside is no longer benevolent you can shut it out.

She goes upstairs, has a shower, sprays herself with Arpège, and puts on her new earrings. She comes down to the fire burning and Richard squatting in front of it, waiting until it is well enough alight to be left.

Jimmy is there too, and Harriet, polite children who will greet the guests and go to bed. Jimmy is trying to tell his father's fortune by the Tarot cards; he has been studying the art ever since last Sunday when he told them about the Hanged Man who dangles by the ankle and sees the world all new. The fortunate man who made Martha think of making an oak tree gibbet in her own backyard.

Now Jimmy speaks of the Tower, the Lovers, the Fool. Martha stares into the fire and thinks, the Lovers, that's me and Richard, and tries to catch his eye. But he stares at the fire too. Their child chatters on, excited by these powerful archetypes; he is young and just beginning to perceive the wonder of ideas.

There is a sudden chill wind, perhaps even a gale that will blast through the room drawing out the fire's smoke in thick fouling eddies. Tugging the curtains away from the windows. Ruining the table; green majolica is fragile, lies in shards of broken prawn flesh and the malicious glitter of knife-edged glasses. But even as Martha looks up in alarm she is reassured; the wind is no more than a cold breath from the door that Richard has left open in order to carry in more logs.

GRAEME WILSON

## A Selection of Japanese Verse

### Master Fall

A Sunday morning. And a black umbrella  
Of the thinnest silk, a slender thing  
Whose bits and bobs are all bright silver,  
Silver struts and a sliding ring  
All silver-shining; and underneath  
That black umbrella, featly fat,  
FALL trips by on tippity toes  
In a blue serge suit and a summer hat.

With clean new cuffs and a spruce white collar  
How smart a figure this young man cuts  
As he trips along with his shoe-tips flashing  
Down to the beach by the bathing-huts:  
How neat and modest and all alone  
He trips along like a Western beau  
To add his toes to the beach-parade  
Of the bright young men from Tokyo.

At ten o'clock on a Sunday morning  
Sunlight oxidised the sea  
To blues more blue than a Hiroshige  
Indigo could dare to be,  
And the water-surface like a platinum plate,  
Like iridescent insect-shell,  
Flashed back dark blues against that beach  
Where FALL tripped by to share the smell,  
The light-blue smell, the cold light-blue  
Salt-charged smell of the gentle breeze  
Under his elegant black umbrella  
With the dandy sons of the town's grandees.

On a Sunday morning, with the Sunday paper  
- How fresh that morning paper smells -  
Neatly tucked in his blue serge pocket  
FALL trips by like a ring of bells.  
At the edge of the sea where the wave-crests crumble  
To sighing silver on wetted sand  
FALL trips by with his black umbrella,  
Its sliding ring and its silver band.

Ah, what an elegant black umbrella!

His shoe-tips flashed like living things  
As FALL tripped by on the squeaking sand  
With a sound like the shrilling of insect-wings.

Kitahara Hakushu (1885-1942)

## Subway

Everyday, with strangers,  
I get into my box.

I get into my coffin  
With automatic locks,  
Automatic silences  
And automatic drive.

And am driven to the city  
To be buried there alive.

Sakamoto Etsuro (1906-1969)

GRAEME WILSON

## Hands

In the Algerian desert, sweltering,  
A rebel strips machine-guns in the sun:  
My hands have never done one single thing  
With such intelligence as his have done.

Brief-bearded like a saint, with gentle eyes,  
An antelope, dog-close, beside him stands  
Watching his fingers move. No beast so wise  
Has ever stood to wonder at my hands.

At midnight when I spread these palms out wide  
Against the desk-lamp's fluorescent light  
I see, in that translucence, veins inside:  
These are, alas, my own two hands all right.

Ono Tosaburo (1903- )

MARION CAMPBELL

## From Ariadne's Yarn

### Abandonment

ARIADNE, daughter of Minos, was abandoned on the island of Naxos by Theseus during their voyage to Athens after Theseus had, with her assistance, overcome the Minotaur in Crete.

Robert E. Bell *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*

### I. A FOR ABANDONMENT

I finger the shell. It's like an ear the snake visits with prophesies, only revered in retrospect. I finger it again, calling it ammonite, recoiling into being. Am Ariadne beached in the sway between am/am not. In the breach between Pasiphae and Phaedra? The ammonite lisps to me to attend to the wake of the tidal pulse. What poise I have on this lip of history. My endless migrations have brought me here at the antipodes of Naxos, when they would have me fixed in a star. What a career. You see me rocking slightly but this is my poise. This is my particular emergence. I still drip from the grottos, from the tunnelling caverns. I have travelled too far, too slowly, in the wings of their theatre, listening for a break, queuing with the other understudies. The plays have been mainly about bankers, soldiers, explorers and sexual athletes. The only entries I've made so far have been into their dictionaries. I found one under A for Abandonment. Some entry into being. Before I am named, the waves suck at my toes. My itch enjoys the grit of shells.

Theseus? I gave him a break all right, supplied him with his birthstring. He can visit Minos now he plays judge down there in Hades. Theseus does without the psychopomp, he has this diplomatic immunity. Well, with a little help from Heracles, he gets away with it. Charon-ferried, he clenches his bankcard between his teeth. As usual, he has the passport, garlanded with visa stamps, the torch, pencil slim, in his pocket. The unseen they call obscene, everything off-stage, he says he's mapped it all. He demonstrates it clearly: the torch, its everready batteries pole-to-pole, peeling back the dark. Still in dreams I feel the tiny disc

of light inspect my flesh. See, it's okay, there's nothing there, nothing at all, he calls. And the monster, what of it? A minor tor in the hopscotch he played on the thresh-hold of manhood, never letting the cracks get to him. That's why they despise puns, they upset their *curricula vitae*.

I'm not going to be mythtaken, fixed in a constellation. Their tidying up jobs afterwards. I'll underpun their purpose, sound the lisp as a way of saying, whisper monstrosities, but I'll come to that later.

Minos built a great reputation for Just Lawmaking. Like Theseus his son-in-law. And what of his annual conscription of Athenean youth? It was just to school them in underground tactics. He sent them back enlightened all right, a fact that Athens didn't always have the grace to acknowledge. Father and son-in-law are immune to my knowing lisp which would trouble their neatspeak, wobble their scales. Theseus folded his map and shouted from the deck: this is what you wanted. This is a new start I'm giving you girl. May your vision be well-compassed, he laughed. I saw his teeth blaze through the foam.

Of course he helped Minos clear his name: minus the minotaur that haunted his reputation. The one Pasiphae visited upon him, mother to energies beyond him. It's true she could at one stage invent new contours for her sensuality. If she was a sculptor, she was an actor too, taking on the painfilled udder, the moist muzzle and the silky lashes she blinked through to him. He stared in steady horror.

I gave Theseus his birthstring so that he could shut them up about the mystery. What he found and if he slayed, he didn't have to tell. He let the rumours elaborate his story. There was a kind of murder. What he overcame was an idea of a boy, left behind this kind of initiation. Only a boy fingering the tunnelling bas-relief he sculpted through his adolescence. A boy who heard nothing of Just Heroes, who swam in the undercurrents, his flesh water withered. On his reappearance, Theseus let the crowd applaud. He simply held up his sword, the fake blood clotting. Did they even speak? There was a terrible certainty in his eyes, as if nothing would elude his torch now. In the boat afterwards, I saw him against the black sail. I saw the sinews knotting in his neck. I watched him pull and flex his fingers systematically, joint after joint. I knew there could be no meeting for our bodies, unless like Pasiphae . . . I longed for my mother's fingers unthreading my braids. I let the salt wind shred them instead. I cried no. I cried no to the bludgeoning of his loins that night, anchored in the cove at Naxos. That's when he said it: I suppose it runs in the family. Well, if bullying is what you want . . . I'm not joking, he said. He wasn't. As if giving me the yarn wasn't a come-on. Or have you been in another story all along? It was you, you hussie who came to me and drugged the guards.

I remember a sculpture my mother did of her face. Eyeless. She was blowing the pan flute. She was blown and bulging, pucker-stitching like a pickled person. But this was then, in granite. I found the fissures with my fingers, I was sightless in reply. My fingers searched the mouth but it was fused with the music being played, the pipes grew out of it. I found the swelling in her throat. Before Minos, way before. I set this huge memory on the beach. Theseus' boat was just a minor flaw on the horizon. I bathed in the shadow to the left of the nose. To the right, the way was parched. Then the sands rippled a confusion, violet swayed with

lemon. Music liquified the idea of stone. The head was something they never found when they ransacked her studio, after the minotaur.

## II                    A for Ariadne

if I amaze  
it's just that I drag  
my retardation  
my longing winding sheet  
covered with the black vowel  
never finding any consonant

never finding any consonant  
the labyrinth echoes

inspect behind  
before and under for  
my face among you  
my unruly hair hisses  
with reminders  
my stony eyes only  
return your fear

I — like Pasiphae —  
built a cowshape  
but — that's skill for you —  
I made him come as bull  
and belly forth my own desire  
(keep it in the dark)

Minos who saw the light  
called up his captive craftsman  
the rest you know  
or does another knowledge sway you  
I never mothered minotaur  
I still am Pasiphae  
eluding  
Minos' law.

JEAN KENT

## Returning from Holidays, Alone

1.

In the afternoon, banksias coned light above sand.  
A backdrop of waves lulled me.  
Drawn through the night in a train travelling  
hellbent to tomorrow, I watched my reflection  
put me to sleep. I woke:  
buildings punched the sky.

Still sea colours sit in the corners of my eyes.  
After a week with a skyblue tent for walls,  
this house is solid, inescapable.  
I bump into chairs, tables, your absence.  
Sounds which had become lost within me  
resurrect themselves. Trains I had thought off the map  
shunt closer, complaining      collapsing like thunder  
a lightning strike above my sleep.

Relearning old rituals, I watch the landlord's  
afghan galumph across the yard, shattering birds  
like surf to the sky.  
When she passes my door      she is doused  
with the dubious scent of jasmine.  
She stares at me in shock. Was I really gone  
a lifetime? Not just a week?

Returning from holidays      alone      all that I see now  
tacks into the day like embroidery  
hemming a wall hanging.  
Drawn through the night, a small knot  
passed into the long needle of travel . . .

Have I come too far too quickly? I wonder  
wandering back: Did I lose myself  
on the way? From this unfamiliar  
mourning shade, I stare into the moment's  
dark telescopic eye:  
the distance does not unravel.

2.

I come back alone to the turtledove.  
Pecking, up-down up-down  
like a machine stitching patterns of hunger  
in the sandy pile of seed.

Under the lemon tree the pregnant patchwork cat  
licks her paws. She sits only temporarily  
like that moment within the perfect curve of a wave,  
waiting to break.

Alone, I feed the turtledove. And the over-ripe pear  
which I have chopped (as you did)  
into lozenges of light waits still  
on the ledge for bulbuls.

They return at last, red vents flashing like sold stickers  
on art gallery walls. *Pity who? Pity who?* they cry  
as those urban guerillas, the sparrows,  
hijack the last flight of sun.

I come back alone to the turtledove.  
Up-down, up-down, over your absence  
I darn birdcalls and falls of seedy light.  
Patterns of hunger tack my feet home.

JEAN KENT

## Chrysanthemum

The chrysanthemum has spilled its petals  
straight from the heart.

Into a little lemon heap on the floor,  
tender as flesh, not resisting  
the inevitable pursuing rain from the shaken  
cool mirror curve  
of abandoned vase  
or that fall from grace one week after picking  
of the asparagus fern no longer green  
as laurel wreaths but neat still  
as clippings of hair: short, black  
Japanese.

They took no notice of wars  
inflation or Eye Witness News  
the chrysanthemum and the fern they simply  
turned like faces into sleep, so softly  
I almost missed their leaving  
silently slipping scent  
after air.

Straight from the glass, candid as confessions  
they fell. Their shapes now  
are spread on the floor. Irretrievable.  
Shattered reflections. Not even the palest  
lemon finger trembles  
as my bare hands, like worshippers  
who have lost their temple  
approach.

DENNIS MAXWELL

## The Clothes Line

She drops the heavy basket on the uncut grass. The washing is a steaming knot of tangled fabrics, limp, nondescript. The galvanized wire hangs slackly between the wide spread posts. She ties the peg-bag on and bends down to unscramble the puzzle.

Danielle's blouse emerges, crumpled, forlorn. She no longer lives at home but brings her dirty washing over each weekend and collects the neatly ironed and folded clothes from the week before. She never stays.

The wine stain hasn't come out. "Next time I'll put salt on it, Mum, if I can still see", she'd said, blushing. She drapes the blouse carefully over the rim of the white plastic basket. She'll wash it again.

A shirt. Tom's shirt. It is synthetic, creaseless, neat button-down collar, designer label. Abruptly she up-ends it and clips the pegs briskly onto the tail. The sleeves fill with wind. It struggles for a moment, then allows itself to hang.

A singlet, two pairs of Tom's underpants with faded, abstract motifs. One has a small tear in the crotch. She makes a mental note and decides which colour cotton she'll use. It won't match.

Christopher's tiny jeans, one leg shorter than the other. It hangs unevenly on the cold wire. She hangs his little checked shirt alongside it, to balance things a bit. His sheets, usually urine-stained, look fresh. The adds were right; the stains have gone. But the tiny animals look paler on the blue flannelette.

She moves the basket along, unravels her slacks. The ones she'd worn to the motel. "Don't be conspicuous", he'd said. As if she could. She quickly hangs them up, twisting one of the legs without noticing.

Danielle's tea towel. She'd bought it at a sale for her daughter's glory box. It has pictures of cheeses, carafes, bread. Made in Italy.

Italy. So long ago. Her rucksack covered with badges and filled with memories, hostel dorms, kitchens filled with foreign words, strange smells and shy boys, long grass sweet-smelling in the midday sun. Tom, all hard and boney. She touches the label for a moment.

Tom's jumper, paint-spattered from a careless palette since discarded or lost. Greens, purples, greys. The fish smell has gone, succumbing to the white powder.

Christopher's football sox, never muddied, used as slippers, the soles nearly through. His favourite team's colours, garish, they'd never won a final.

Danielle's tights, black, large. Once they'd been pink, tiny. On stage she'd looked like a fairy, cute, breakable. Standing ovation, in the hall since demolished.

Her dress, deep blue. "Like your eyes", he'd said. The heavy fabric feels starched. It swings more than hangs, pivoting around its padded shoulders, like a suit of armour.

A cat rubs itself against her shaven calf. She recoils, moving it away with her shoe. It lays on its back, spreading its legs, inviting intimacy.

Tom's track suit pants, racing green, washed twice, the elastic firm, after gripping the wobbling paunch and the lost desire.

Satin sheets, unmarked, cold, a pair of lemon, a pair of blue.

Tea cosy, her mother's, knitted with scraps, a chequered, flattened hive spinning from its bobble.

Sox, all colours and shapes. She bends the toes over the wire, opening the jaws that snap hungrily into the wet fabric. Seventeen. Danielle's striped one, hangs alone, shunned by the others. It flutters defiantly.

The postman's whistle. The peg-bag drops. She waits until the street is clear, then pushes her fingers into the dark space, searching. It is empty. Her thumb trails a piece of broken web like a kite tail.

She ties the bag on again. The basket is nearly empty. Two shirts. Danielle's or Tom's? She looks at them, her brow knotting, whose? She has to know. What if they belong to another, a stranger? Is someone watching?

She looks about. Paling fences, untidy shrubs, clouds float by. A crow watches from the shadows among the leaves, black, still.

She looks at the labels, bright, clear, new. No one has warned her. Had his belongings been accidentally stuffed into her little bag? She stands close to them, letting their fabric touch her cheek. It feels silky, warm. They're pale blue.

Danielle wears men's shirts. They must be hers.

"Hullo, hullo. No . . . Nothing's wrong. A meeting . . . I'm sorry. Did you have two shirts, blue, pale . . . I'm so silly . . . must be Tom's . . . Sorry. Dinner? . . . I understand . . . Bye".

She lets the screen door slam, feels perplexed, excited.

A bandage, long, thin. A coiled streamer under the calipers, no chafing, three more years, such sensitive skin for a boy.

A beanie, like a smaller version of the tea cosy. He gets colds so easily, can't keep him indoors.

Whose shirts are they?

The basket is empty. A breeze pushes past the clothes, curious, feeling and prying. They move, rippling and dancing, but she watches only the two shirts. For a moment their sleeves intertwine, then pull free. One is doing handstands.

She takes off the peg-bag and knots the ties around the line. It is hessian, brown, coarse, Danielle's embroidered duck still clings to the outside. Eight she was, so proud, happy birthday Mum. She'd sewn it right through the bag, had to do it all again.

The breeze stops, nothing moves except the blue shirts.

What was he wearing? She remembers his matted chest, the gold chain, his whisky-soaked breath, she feels his thick fingers everywhere. They were laughing, shame, shame, more, more! Dark suit or was it light? Black shoes, gold ring, mole on his neck.

The shirts are still.

The crow lands on the post, tilting its head, watching the smiling woman clinging to the wet shirts, wrapping their sleeves around her.

## **Forthcoming Seminar Celebrating Western Australian Writers**

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# TERRY HARRINGTON

## Prints

As we walk along the beach  
two sets of footprints stretch out before us.  
We try them out for size.

The angle & depth seem right  
when we are arm-in-arm.  
We believe they are lovers  
though there are flat spots  
on the balls of my feet  
which raise some doubt.

We imagine & laugh : we may meet them  
in the dune. Would we exchange  
words — the joke — our prints?

It is resolved. One hundred yards hence  
you lurch left as I sway to the right.  
We stop. It is a silly game  
we each agree, this footshadow fourstep,  
but we cannot agree which way is best,  
or to make fresh prints.  
We begin to draw in light & shade :  
what it must have been  
that, legless, came between.

## Brother George Looks Over Biographers' Shoulders\*

When I researched, wrote, submitted and read proofs of my recent article on George Johnston ('Coming Late into the Light — Our Brother George and the Johnston Story as Recent Australian History', *Westerly*, March 1987) I had not had the benefit of the publication of Garry Kinnane's biography (*George Johnston — A Biography*, Thomas Nelson, 1986) with its fulsome research and single-minded attention to Johnston's life and its relationship to his work as far as we can trace it.

Garry has since pointed out several places where our accounts, sometimes gleaned from different sources, differ in detail. We have conferred, retreated to our sources again, and reopened the can of worms that is the biographer's lot. This further work has made it clear that the following elucidations, corrections and conjectures should be raised. The exercise prompted again the interesting, sometimes infuriating, issue of fallibility of memory and attention to detail in attempting to get towards 'the truth.' The page references refer to the pages of my text in *Westerly* No 1, March 1987.

George Johnston's father was a maintenance worker, and engineer, and later, as Jack Johnston described it, 'foreman of the shed' at the Glenhuntly tram depot, rather than a tram driver (p.24), although in his interview of 1964 with Madame de Berg, George Johnston claims that he was the latter.

'Loch Ild' (p.24 and 26) has survived from a transcription error and should read 'Loch Ied' or 'Lochied.' Kinnane's sources, unstated, claim that this house name was bestowed when the family first moved in and that it was borrowed from the maternal line of the family. However, Jack and Pat Johnston are adamant that the house was originally called 'Avalon', that the name was later changed at the suggestion of George (with his founding interest in The

\* On publication of Graeme Kinross Smith's article, "Coming Late Into the Light — Our Brother George and the Johnston Story as Recent Australian History" in *Westerly*, No. 1, 1987, Garry Kinnane, author of *George Johnston: A Biography* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1986), contacted the editors to query some details of fact and of interpretation. In order to ensure the greatest possible accuracy about details of George Johnston's life, Graeme Kinross Smith offers this information as an addendum to his article.

Shiplovers Society) to 'Loch Ied' after the sailing ship which brought the Johnstons' forebears from the Old World (they suggest it sailed from Scotland) and that the name later reverted to 'Avalon'.

The *Morning Star* newspaper was owned by Victorian Newspapers Ltd and later The *Sun*, rather than the *Argus* (p.26). George Johnston's articles, despite the information of some sources to the contrary, began appearing first in *The Argus* and not the *Morning Post*, as far as can be established, the first with a byline appearing, Kinnane claims, in 1929 (p.26), although George Johnston in his interview with Madam de Berg of the National Library claims his first was published in *The Argus* in 1927, at the age of 15. Johnston's official cadetship as a journalist began in 1933 (p.27) although he had been publishing journalistic pieces for the *Argus* and other outlets in his late teens and the term "cadet" may have been used of this period by some sources to suggest an embryo journalist.

What position Norm McCance held when he influenced George Johnston to enter journalism is uncertain. He was not editor of *The Argus* (p.27). Research continues.

Despite sources claiming otherwise, George Johnston and Elsie Taylor were married in March 1938 (p.27).

It is hard to establish (p.28) when George Johnston first met Charmian Clift. Kinnane is adamant that it was in May 1945. Martin Johnston, however, avers that it was earlier than that — probably 1941 or 1942, and that they corresponded during the war. Charmian describes herself as having first served as a gunner on anti-aircraft batteries, and as having transferred later in the war to LHQ in Melbourne, where she had a commission (de Berg interview, June 1965).

Kinnane offers evidence that Johnston was in the USA during much of 1943, and that he did not visit Burma until the year following (p.28).

Despite bibliographical information to the contrary it seems conclusive that the following books of Johnston, or Clift, or both, were published in these years: *Skyscrapers In the Mist*, 1946 (p.28); *High Valley*, 1949 (p.30); *The Sponge Divers*, 1956 (p.31); *The Darkness Outside*, 1959 (p.31); *The Cyprian Woman*, 1954, (p.31). *Clean Straw for Nothing*, appeared a month, not a day, after Charmian Clift's suicide (pp.40-41, where day replaces month).

Kinnane does not believe that George Johnston met Mao Tse Tung and travelled with the Red Army during his wartime sojourn in China. Martin Johnston, however, in an interview with me in 1979, while claiming that his father sometimes made too much of it, insisted that he did meet both Mao and Chou En Lai (p.28) and travelled with the Red Army.

Kinnane insists that Johnston did not travel to America in 1946 (p.30). He also points out that the marriage certificate shows that Johnston and Clift were married in Sydney in August 1947 — this despite the fact that Martin Johnston in his aforementioned interview with me in 1979 said they were married in 'late 1946' and Charmian Clift in her interview with Madam de Berg for the National Library in 1965 also claims she was married in 1946 (p.30).

George Johnston describes himself as having resigned from the *Argus* and 'after that went to the Sydney *Sun* . . .' in his de Berg interview of March 1964 (p.30). But as Kinnane points out, he was not listed as being on its staff until

1947 or 1948. It seems clear that Charmian Clift did not join the *Sun* staff (p.30).

Again, although Johnston himself states (in the de Berg interview on his return) and most of the accounts written about his return to Australia in February 1964 state that he had been away from the country for 14 years, if one computes his time away, it amounts to 13 years (p.30).

The date of 1958 which I give for the diagnosis of Johnston's TB (p.31) in my account was gleaned, I think, from Kinnane's introduction to *Strong Man From Piraeus and Other Stories*, but Kinnane now notes that the diagnosis (or as Martin Johnston would say, 'misdiagnosis') was made in October 1959.

Kinnane doubts that Johnston had in mind even the germ of the notion of writing a book or long story centring on his brother as early as the 1950s (p.34 — "1980s" is a typographical error) and doubts the existence of the story I mention from that period in which, Martin Johnston attests, Johnston trialled some sections that later appeared in *My Brother Jack*, although Jack made minimal appearance in the piece. I see no reason to doubt Martin's evidence.

On p.34 appear literal errors for two names in China. They should read "Kwangsi Province" and "Liuchow railhead".

Perhaps these comments bring us closer to the truth we seek. But I hear Charles Olson intoning that there's no such thing as truth. And behind him I hear a rasping smoker's cough and detect the voice of George Johnston stating thinly, as he does, through David Meredith, in *Clean Straw For Nothing*:

It will all come together, I am sure, like the pieces of a mosaic or the scattered chips in a kaleidoscope. At the moment it's a mess. Ruptured syntax. This wild leaping around through time and space. First person one minute, third person the next. It doesn't matter. I am not trying to write, just setting things down to get them straight. After all, none of us is first person all the time; we can be third person, too, and sometimes no person at all, only a space filled around by other people: we can no more claim a consistency of identity in the Greek sense than we can really believe we are a part of a sustained and forward-flowing chronology.

So, although sometimes I think brother George wonders that we seldom get it right, I conclude ultimately that maybe he hopes against hope that we won't, that the mystery remains.

Graeme Kinross Smith

ELIZABETH SMITHER

## The apple tree net

The apple playing its own tennis  
The serving machine coming to an end  
The last hits against the garage wall.

Each attempt of the snake to get to Adam  
With no Eve. Eve in a crinoline.  
Each returned ball with no innuendo.

How many resolutions have fallen out of the apple  
So many good deeds: the way you served  
A customer or did up a parcel.

A smile landing on the net, an encouragement  
The hand on the back of a shoulder  
This weakness will go no further.

Nothing will spread out from it except this net  
There will be no consequence but a score  
A statistic of resistance.

## BOOKS

### SALLY MORGAN'S *MY PLACE* — TWO VIEWS

Sally Morgan, *My Place*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987, 358pp., \$15.

#### I

Sister Tremearne was covering the north of Western Australia for Trachoma suspects and she took me with her on one of her tours. When we drove into the Blood's place on the Murchison Joyce left me to make enquiries at the homestead and I got out of the utility to talk to two slow moving soft spoken pure blood old ones, perhaps eighty years apiece, the woman more assured because she still had her hearing. I told them my name. Gare. Across the woman's face flowed a warmth. She leaned over to her brother/husband. 'You know. That man boss of all us feller.'

I wanted to disclaim, repudiate, thrust away the shamefulness of such an indiction — until instinct alerted me — the shame was only mine. Not for this old woman the ridiculous layers of our one-upmanship. She and her kind lived as they always had, by the sun. In peace. And if peace were to continue the newcomers must be humoured. You used the names they assumed for themselves but the names were something else altogether from what went on in the people's heads. Dreamtime, that was the most of it. Sit in the sun and dream and wait.

It is this tranquillity, this utter quiet which is at the heart of the aboriginal Australian which is the quality which comes through so strongly in Sally Morgan's book *My Place*. I am so glad, so thankful to have it there at last for the strangers in their land to read and understand. This is the quality we have reviled and despised and done our best to destroy and never once thought worth

emulating. The one most precious thing they had to give to us, more important even than their knowledge and care of their land.

I believe their serenity reaches deep in this land. They know it — feel it. The dignity of the American Indian is similarly rooted. Here is the reason neither race has bent the knee to their conquerors. Pity the African negroes. Separated from their spirit land, witnesses to the most fearful and humiliating practices, nothing left to them but the breath in their bodies. Dead and alive still.

Land is blood and bone and spirit and thousands of years of living. By what thousandth century do present Australians believe this land will be truly theirs?

Professor Elkin came thousands of miles to interview my two old people — some of the last of their tribe who spoke the language. Sally Morgan years later followed suit — searching the north for members of her family; finding them at last. They welcomed her with love. She discovered she meant as much to them as they to her. The most tender passage in the whole book is the account of Sally's meeting with relatives so distant there are no more than a few drops of kindred blood to unite them. But the love is still there. Unbelievable. Touching and tender. The kindness. Unbelievable. Have they cornered the market in kindness, these people? I envy them their abundance. I wish for some of it to come our way. Would love beget love? Or is it too late?

I am not a professional reviewer, as Max Harris and the A.B.C. found to their dismay when I forgot the names of characters. I write as books affect me emotionally and these are the emotions fired to blazing by Sally Morgan's *My Place*.

She has left the tales of Arthur, of Nan and of Gladys exactly as they were told to her. So the truth of them digs deep. I wish that we and some of those others whose Aboriginal blood has been diluted, could share their lovely untouchable dignity.

Sally's story begins with a quest for identity. Are brothers and sisters, mother, grandmother and great-uncle, all? Other families own networks of relations. Why not she?

In her teens she discovers her forebears are not Indian, as she has been told, but Australian Aboriginal. That's okay with Sally but why the lies? Gregarious Sally is outraged to find her mother and grandmother united in a scheme to protect her and her brothers and sisters from persecution — for possessing some of the pure blood of the original owners of her country. But the thought of possible persecution cannot deflect her from her obstinate search for close relatives and in her search she finds a supporter in great-uncle Arthur. Patience and tenacity are needed to get Arthur's story then it is used as a wedge to force more confidences from grandmother Nan and mother Gladys.

What a story! Whatever the hardships of Albert Facey, his skin was white and he was given a fair go for the most part. More or less, his characteristics were the same as those of other white folk. He was understood. The Australian Aboriginal has never received understanding. He has been told, fit in or get out. With thousands of years of a different culture behind him he has been ridiculed, despised, given names usually bestowed on animals, and used like an animal. The nearest he came to adopting the style of life forced upon him by white land takers was to open up the limitless north for sheep and cattle farming and that was because the work came naturally to him. As Arthur says 'The blackfellers made the stations, not the white man. And before the white man came we didn't use insecticides, killing the birds. That's why the blackfeller want their own land, with no white man about destroyin it. White men

went out shootin blackfellers for sport, as if they were animals'.

Aboriginal workers accepted that they worked for their tucker and a new pair of pants when the old ones wore out.

The lack of bitterness in Arthur's account of his life is incredible but part of his make up. His sadness is for his being part-white. Being part-white meant he was wrenched from his mother at a very early age and sent to a mission where it was thought natural that his life should henceforth be one of hard labour with precious few spaces for idleness or enjoyment. Imagine yourself to be Arthur. Imagine yourself right into his life. Work from sunup until dark and fall asleep in a few chaffbags spread over the hay in the hayshed. Get right into that life. Don't just read this at a distance, comfortably. Get in there and work until you're staggering and take a few blows into the bargain.

Arthur says 'There's so much the whitefellas don't understand. They want us to be assimilated into the white but we don't want to be. They complain about our land rights but they don't understand the way we want to live. They say we shouldn't get the land but the white man's had land rights since this country was invaded, our land rights. The government is like a big dog with a bone with no meat on it. They don't want to live on that land themselves but they don't want the black man to get it either. The black man don't want to live like the white man, ownin this, ownin that. They just want to live their lives free. They don't need the white man's law — they got their own. They don't need the white man to put them in goal, they can do their own punishment.'

The tie that binds the black man to his land is almost tangible. They believe. Arthur explains 'They don't have to hunt too hard — the spirit can bring birds to them, they do a rainsong and fill up the places they want, if it's cold they can bring the warm weather like the wind. Say they want a wild turkey, that turkey will come along, go past them and they can spear it. Kangaroos too. They don't

kill unless they're hungry; the white man's the one who kills for sport.'

Sometimes, among poorer white folk, those who do not look to possess more than is enough, one comes across this delicacy of feeling. Generosity, a dislike of owning something denied to others, an instinct to share, to be unable to grasp that most important attribute of all civilised life, the mine and your principle. But how they stand condemned — these poorer ones.

Going back to the barter system might be the answer.

Nan, who was Daisy, has a tale that is just as soul-destroying. But it did not destroy Nan's soul. She took what was dished out even when it meant twice being cast out of the household which she had served faithfully all of her life. To make her own way. Well, she did make her own way, only to be recalled to take care of one of the older persons of the household who had fallen on helpless times.

Arthur's and Daisy's mother Annie was shared as was the custom by the owner of the station. The offspring were never acknowledged. The children knew but were careful not to speak of their parentage where white folk could hear. They knew their place, knew they must not be so cheeky. Again, place yourself in that situation, feel the pain as you are torn away from your black mother and sent far away to some place where the arrogant white man believes you will be better off. Feel the heartbreak, the scared loneliness, the utter helplessness. You do not even speak your own language. You pretend to forget it. It is something for shame.

Daisy, in Perth, and when it suits them, is treated patronisingly as one of the family. Which in fact, she is. She bears a child, Gladys. As Daisy records, without self-pity 'They get you down on the floor and won't let you get up.' Now Daisy has inside herself a core of content. Someone of her own. Gladys, her daughter; even though Gladys is sent away to the Parkerville Children's Home. At the Home Gladys finds Christ. There is no mother, no father, no family. Just

Christ. Until I had ready Sally's book I had not truly understood why the mission children I met were so fervently religious.

Gladys marries — a returned soldier from the second world war. She has made a sad bargain. The war has wrecked Bill Milroy mentally and physically and he becomes an alcoholic. The four children learn to deal with the inevitable. Sally's father dies. Gladys goes out to work to support her four little ones and Nan (Daisy) cares for the family. She is still servant but now she works for her own flesh and blood. She is part — truly a part — of a family. Her own.

I said over the air and I repeat here. This book should, at long last, penetrate the thick skin of all Australians, settlers and suburbanites. It should bring home to them — to us — all who are living comfortably and contentedly on their land — how miserably we have failed the original settlers.

## Nene Gare

### II

"Can't you leave the past buried?", the question Sally Morgan's mother put to her, expresses a common attitude to uncomfortable aspects of Australian history. As the Commonwealth Government has decided to celebrate the Bicentenary of European colonisation, some of the disturbing themes in our past are swept away by this choice of chronological perspective. The date of 1788 and the consequent idea of "two hundred years of history" puts many stories outside consideration. It is not deliberate exclusion: simply that other histories do not fit in. The authors of the official Bicentennial histories have shown awareness of the difficulties by choosing to focus on particular "slices" of the past. But the history of Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal people is not best told by a concentration on the last two hundred years, for, just as Aboriginal people have been marginalised by white society, so their history is made peripheral.

How to write a history which raises questions about Aboriginal past is difficult. Since the discipline of history depends upon documentation, and Aboriginal people's records do not come in the same form as documents of settlement and colonisation, then the exclusion of them from historical narratives in the past seemed to require little explanation. However, Henry Reynolds and other historians have recently shown how much useful evidence, even from the white perspective, remains, and they have demonstrated how a sensitive and imaginative approach can reveal more of the Aboriginal past than was expected.

But even here, something eludes us, for it is the conquerors telling the story. They cannot tell the story with the perspective of the Aboriginal people themselves. The past does not haunt their memories nor govern their daily lives in the same way. They do not have to keep a low profile in Australian society, terrified lest any attention might lead to the removal of their children from the family, and the consequent separation of brothers and sisters. As Mrs Morgan observed, "I've met people who were taken away in the sixties." The discipline of history offers too short a plumb line for the depths of those experiences.

Sally Morgan's book is a history, but one freed from the constraints of academic history. Told as a series of stories, it interweaves between past and present, showing how the unacknowledged past continues to shape the present. And it succeeds brilliantly in putting important questions on everyone's mental agenda about the meaning of white colonisation for Aboriginal people and those of part-Aboriginal descent in a way which historians can only admire.

If we approach the past in a linear fashion, starting with the idea that Australia was "settled" in 1788, then the narrative of events takes over. But the past isn't like that. It is part of our present, and Sally Morgan presents it as layer upon layer of a living daily

life. The past is glimpsed over the years of the young Sally's life. Where is my place? and where do I belong? are the questions which structure her book. At the end, the reader, like Mrs Morgan, has a clearer sense of her past, but the questions remain open, and we recognise with her that, in the end, a complete history eludes us. As her grandmother tells her, "there are some things I just can't talk 'bout" (p.351).

The problem of providing a framework to understand the stories of the past she wants to tell leads Mrs Morgan to an innovative methodology. She uses the device familiar to writers and readers of fiction, the story of a quest for personal identity. Learning about herself is the strong narrative thread through this book: so compelling, in fact, that it is hard to stop reading. We share with her a gradual process of discovery, learning to live with partial glimpses. The early chapters of the book read relatively straightforwardly. They give an account of a childhood in the Perth suburbs in the 1950s and 60s. As the child becomes an adolescent, so the answers which her mother had offered about her ancestry become less satisfying. She realises that she is not of Indian descent, but is part-Aboriginal. The quest for her mother's and her grandmother's past becomes all-absorbing, but her love for her mother and grandmother make some questions hard to ask. In the end, it is her love which gives her empathy. The autobiography of her grandmother, while it is the shortest of the three, can be recognised as a tribute to Sally, the grand-daughter whose love enabled her grandmother to come to terms with some aspects of her own incredibly painful past. Her grandmother, who once wanted to be white, came to acknowledge her Aboriginal heritage and her personal identity: "At least we not owned any more". Even Gladys, Sally's mother, came to feel embarrassed that "once, I wanted to be white" and to feel pride in what her Aboriginal heritage has to offer (p.306).

Mrs Morgan said, at the launching of her

book, that she had tried to write without bitterness. It cannot have been easy, and in an interview with Mary Wright, she admitted that her first motivation was anger. But although she began writing out of outrage at injustice — “Somebody should put this down, people should know about these things” — she found that “it’s better to just put something simply and let it tell its own story”. In this she has succeeded, for her stories do speak for themselves. Her narrative shows that the experience of colonisation was not a once-off experience. It was not just about white men having sexual relations with Aboriginal women. It was about a continued and continuing relationship in which the humanity of Aboriginal people was denied. Her grandmother, Daisy, became a household servant to the station-owner’s family in Perth. Away from her own people, she was not allowed to keep her daughter, Gladys, but was forced to put her in the Parkerville Children’s Home. Her employers made it difficult for her to see her daughter — she was not allowed much time off on the Sundays, and the public transport was not conducive to speedy journeys — and eventually even in school holidays she was not allowed to have Gladys with her. While there is a theme of class, of contrasting wealth and poverty in the pastoralist and Aboriginal worlds, far stronger is the theme of inhumanity and exploitation of “family” feeling.

Women feature strongly in this history of part-Aboriginal people. Sally’s grandmother, Daisy Corunna, who clearly suffered most, nevertheless emerges as a woman with a powerful compassion for others, giving food to the unemployed whites who were around suburbia in Perth in the 1930s. Yet earlier colonisation had deprived her of her name and confused her identity. “My name is Daisy Corunna, I’m Arthur’s sister. My Aboriginal name is Talahue”. On the station she went under the name of Daisy Brockman, and later took the name Corunna. Various myths about her father were offered her, on which she comments “Aah, you see, that’s the

trouble with us blackfellas, we don’t know who we belong to, no one’ll own up”. In the end, Daisy, her daughter Gladys and her grand-daughter Sally all do know that they belong to each other, as a family group. They find a kinship network and a warm welcome from their Aboriginal relatives which they never found from their white “family”. Being “family” to the Drake-Brockmans meant that although Daisy worked for them, she didn’t get wages and she didn’t need holidays. “How can you be family when you’re a servant?” By contrast her next employers give her days off and annual leave.

Class, ethnicity and gender all play a part in structuring the daily lives of this part-Aboriginal family. Again, there are traditions of historical writing in Australia which make it difficult to raise some of these issues. Stories of mateship and nationalism direct attention away from racism, the family and from women. Mrs Morgan’s story remains woman focused. Male relatives were supportive “but they just couldn’t cope with the emotion”.

Historians, too, have trouble with “the emotion”. Trained in a discipline, they are critical of the intrusion of feelings. Is this why some work fails to capture any response from readers, why so many school students say they find history boring? Mrs Morgan deliberately chose to avoid a social historical frame of reference and to write in a different historical tradition, that of Aboriginal storytelling. In terms of making the past alive, meaningful and accessible, there is no question that the Aboriginal tradition wins hands down. Perhaps it is time for those located in academic history departments to respond to a different historiography, and to be more open to innovation and experiments in ways of writing about the past.

Making the past visible is a beginning. Only by acknowledgement and understanding have we any hope of coming to terms with the ways in which we, as beneficiaries of a colonising exercise, continue to enjoy a lifestyle which depends upon the oppression

of others. Sally Morgan's voice is one which many people will be able to hear. She writes well, with the art which conceals art, so that a series of narratives becomes a complex exploration of the meaning of the past. And as Nene Gare has written, Sally Morgan shows how Australian people have been impoverished by their inability to come to terms with what they have done to the original settlers, the Aboriginal people.

### Patricia Crawford

Audrey Longbottom, *The Solitary Islands*  
Oliff Publishing Company, Sydney. \$7.00

Audrey Longbottom's poetry displays the gift of clarity. But behind this easy, skilful writing more is being said than is apparent at first glance. Her sense of humour, sometimes tart and penetrating, is based on the discrepancy between the bland surface of the mundane and an underlying reality. "Clown" proceeds from the low key statement "The man across the street is laughing again" through details of the laughter with which he greets every detail of his daily life to the final:

... His laughter drums through silent  
streets  
where fading echoes mock, thin to a  
scream.

The reader may experience irritation, rising almost to a scream before the realization comes that the man's laughter is really a cry of despair.

Another poem, "Pop Concert in Hyde Park", makes a tart statement about the hysteria of teen-age fans. "A swoon of teen-age nymphs / juicing moans at flexing thighs" parallels the situation of Actaeon turned into a stag and torn to pieces by his hounds — reminiscent, too, of the maenads "tearing the Thracian singer in their rage". The poem is an accomplished sonnet in the classical tradition, yet very much "with it" in terms of

modern life. The primitive in human nature does not change.

More biting again is "Psittacosis", a poem that presents a lecturer as a parrot, "rostrum perched, her cage the lecture room / and captive class". The lecturer preens herself to such an extent as she dismembers the text she is explicating that psittacosis could be a new form of human disease. In a similar way "Cereal Rites" and "Mouse Trap" make skilful use of comparison, though their comment is more predictable.

Not all the poems are satirical or witty. There is humour in most, but it is often very human even compassionate. "Sheen" introduces anecdotes typical of an extended family. They are touched on while casual visitors, house guests, ailing relations from the city join their hostess in the ritual act of polishing the silver. The poem concludes:

Companion to the end, it met division  
in a generation without memory of ritual  
or time's rub of love and living:  
where wisdom shone like silver.

Recollection features in many poems, but in all of them there is comment, stated or implied. In linking past and present the poems value tradition and the sense of continuity that most people seek in their own lives. One gem of recollection is "The Colour Man". "The Indian hawker my mother called him / because of his turban". Here the child's imagination is stirred to "dreams ribboning / through flounces of silk and lace". Later when, too poor to buy, they locked the house, the hawker pounded on doors and windows. The child thought, at first, it was "fun, an adult hide-and-seek / until (she) understood (her) mother's trembling". In "Watering the Children" the galvanised dipper filled at the rainwater tank becomes "an unlikely chalice", a ritual vessel that nightly "waters" the children at bedtime: "No other vessel carried such assurance / such blessed libation".

However, the poet is aware that some things remain "unlisted in the catalogue of years". "One Man School" (a poem that won

the Henry Lawson Award for Verse in 1981) conveys a sense of transience. The poet walking with a friend comes suddenly on the old school, "clinging to a hill remembered mountain size". "We could have missed it altogether". A flood of recollection follows, but the flood is as transitory as human life:

wings of memory are unpinned  
flutter among the stubble of autumn.

Audrey Longbottom's poetry is rarely personal but when it is, she presents painful experience without sentimentality. This is one of the strengths of the sequence "The Solitary Islands" that gives its title to the book. Here she writes about a failed relationship with a restrained depth of feeling and a refusal to blame, falsify or alleviate:

But our travels mapped no sharing,  
no island of return. On a coastline  
tacked with settlement we stand alone:  
so close and yet forever distant.

After her first book, *Relatives and Reliques*, Audrey Longbottom extended her range and applied her formidable technique with greater ease and fluency. Her poems are often close to the bone, satirical or gently wry, her wit the sign of an alert mind. It is tragic that her death in April of last year cut short the extension of imaginative scope so clearly indicated in the sequence "The Solitary Islands". Poets and friends lost, too, a warm and lively companion and a teacher and colleague devoted to sound craftsmanship and the development of an individual style.

**Vera Newsom**

Shane McCauley, *Deep-Sea Diver*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1987. 88pp. \$12.00.

Joan London, *Sister Ships*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1986. 124pp. \$12.00.

*Deep-Sea Diver* is the second book of Shane McCauley's poetry published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press. The first, *The Chinese Feast*, published in 1984, was a small book of only twenty-six poems. McCauley's new book is much longer but, like the first, many of the poems it contains are about historical figures and their ideas, observed people and events and places visited. Simply looking at the titles of poems tells one a good deal: "Chin Shen' tan's Happy Moments", "Bartok", "James K. Baxter", "Poles in a Pub", "Luddites", "Circus Fire, Athens", "To Trakl at Grodek".

McCauley's tendency to remain at a distance from much of what he writes about probably constitutes both the main strength and the main weakness of his poetry. Many of his poems contemplate how people make meaning in their lives, and considerable detachment is appropriate to such poems. For example, McCauley's long poem about the Chinese philosopher Mencius, though at times lapsing into a rather slack discursiveness, contains some beautiful lines, notable for what one might call the author's dispassionate involvement with his material:

Loved the symbolism of daylight,  
The aching white flight of heron,  
Perfect calligraphy against  
Pale skies, signature to clouds,  
Saw in such delicate effortlessness  
An extremism of things without  
Attendant dangers ("Mencius")

In another poem, "Back Streets", the carefully placed descriptive detail is very fine:

On this balcony are reniform leaves, larders  
Of pollen, a quiet jerking bird  
Feet on the geraniums, bulge-eyed  
At tennis shoes left out for air  
Near bright marigolds in a black bucket.

Here the alliteration of “balcony”, “bird”, “bulge-eyed”, “bright”, “black” and “bucket” is very well judged, while the detail “reniform leaves” introduces early into these lines an appropriate sense of a keen and articulate observer, caught up in what he sees, yet also somewhat detached and contemplative. With such economical and arresting presentation of detail McCauley convinces one that, as he has claimed earlier in the poem, “Pale bird twittering September evening” is in him “now as, well long ago”.

On the other hand, “Vietnam Reminiscence” is one of a number of poems in McCauley’s book which seem contrived. At no stage is one convinced that the words which are meant to carry the emotional weight of this poem are more than gestures at an experience which the poet is either not familiar with, or has not come to terms with.

... The boy on the bank was  
Green with trembling at the foreign animals  
Infiltrating his territories. The bullets hit  
His legs first, worked their way up  
like a famished lover with ripping fingers  
Until his heart was quite plucked out.

Here “foreign animals” is clichéd and “Infiltrating his territories” wordy. As well, the extravagant and rather theatrical metaphor of the boy’s heart being “quite plucked out”, though appropriate to the image of the “famished lover”, is inappropriate to a description of a boy being machine-gunned. And a later line, “The Australian soldier, ancient at eighteen”, relies almost solely upon received notions about the effect of war upon its participants.

Other, largely successful, poems are flawed by intrusively sententious statements. At the end of “Lighthouse Keeper”, for instance, McCauley writes, “Loneliness is, after all, only / A form of lightlessness”, a dubious assertion. Similarly, in “Huskisson” McCauley asserts “That homelessness is a / Simple state of mind”, and in “To Trakl at Grodek” occurs the following:

War is, after all, a way of  
Making people feel less lonely,  
For there’s no worse despair than  
Not having a cause.

Such statements are simply not true.

“Poles in a Pub” is another poem which is a mixture of good and bad. The opening lines are witty and nicely dispassionate:

There is fine solidarity here, noisy  
And passionate: the freedom to shout  
Is transferable — talk, if not beer, is free.

Later in the poem, however, McCauley again cannot resist trying to sum up the people he writes about: “Here / Where the bored barmaid pours the beers / They’re guilty at their lack of guilt”. This is patronizing, and so is the poem “The Australian Walrus” in which McCauley writes “For such an ignorant man, he knows a lot”.

It would be misleading, however, to dwell too long on the less successful aspects of McCauley’s work. “Second Symphony, Sibelius” is an intimate and moving poem:

My grandfather died just before the season  
Of wildflowers; at the bleak cremation  
My family was silent in thought of his  
Long illness and the desperate smell of  
Hospitals, reason’s chemical subjugation.

This is impressive writing indeed. Restraint and a sense of deep personal involvement are here brought beautifully together. Though the poem is tonally subdued, McCauley’s language is rhythmical and dynamic; the phrase “the bleak cremation” is both simple and telling and even the indeterminate ending of the poem’s third line is perfectly appropriate to its context.

*Deep-Sea Diver* is a flawed but interesting collection of poetry, at times overly earnest and sententious but at other times rewardingly intricate and sensitive.

Joan London’s *Sister Ships* contains eight probing, eddying short stories all of which explore the boundaries which define and

locate the self in, and apart from, society. Though this book is London's first collection of stories it is a considerable achievement, not only for its author but also for Western Australian writing. It is rare to find contemporary stories which have the multidimensionality, the subtlety and the humanity these works display.

The excellent story "Travelling" won the 1984 Patricia Hackett Prize, but is not superior to other stories in the collection. "Lilies", "First Night" and the title story "Sister Ships" are all at least as impressive and other readers will undoubtedly like even more "The Girls Love Each Other" and "Enough Rope" — both stories which explore the nature of intimacy and some of the frustrating complexities of love and desire.

Indeed, the difficulties of mediating between desire and the urge to be free from desire is one of the chief preoccupations of this collection as a whole. Yet a hallmark of the collection is the restraint with which London presents her themes. Despite the brevity of the stories the characters are both fully drawn and yet elusive, which is to say that one always feels one is reading about real people. As well, the author never tries to insist that the reader come to any one conclusion about what she depicts. She writes with a precision which layers meaning upon meaning.

Perhaps "Lilies" is the real *tour de force* in the collection. This story presents a mother-daughter relationship, exploring the relationship from both the daughter's and the mother's point of view. It is a triumph because London presents "ordinary" people in an "ordinary" situation in a sympathetic and utterly convincing way while also — apparently effortlessly — getting her story to transcend its particularities. The story begins,

When Christine Hollins came home she knew what she wanted to do. Find a place in the bush somewhere and talk, properly, with her mother. Then at the airport, in the flat white light she had forgotten, she saw her parents shrunken, aged,

looking anxiously in the wrong direction, and she paused. She felt it was another person who was approaching them.

This is matter-of-fact, succinct and authentic. There is no undue portentousness or excessive elaboration. Yet by the time the story nears its close one has been carried into quite a different world, the rich inner world of the character Violet Hollins, quite different from the conspicuous ordinariness of her outward existence:

No, it had left her terrified at where the dreams might take you, the lack of substance they revealed. She would never dare to look again into a shimmer, to follow her own voice again. She was unformed somewhere, a child. Rightness was a conspiracy that others knew about, better to follow the path marked out by John and Gran. If it was narrow, it was clear, forget about the light and shade on either side. And when reminders came that these might still exist, panic closed her eyes.

The title story, "Sister Ships" which begins the collection, relates the experiences of three young women not long out of school sharing a cabin on a voyage on an ocean liner. The title is significant on a number of different levels. On a literal level, the ship the women are on passes its Sister Ship during the voyage:

I can feel our own pace now as the Sister Ship takes shape, slides her long glittering flank beside us. The two ships snort at one another like animals from the same litter, mournful bellows across the frothing wakes. Rockets spray out from between the answering sets of funnels.

The detail here is telling. The "long, glittering flank", the snorting "like animals from the same litter" and the rockets which "spray out" all emphasise what is animal and sexual, while the funnels in this context are clearly phallic. It is largely through such means; through the subtle use of powerful images, that London creates in this story a pervasive sense of potent, if largely unresolved, sexual tension. It is this tension which gives the story's somewhat enigmatic resolution great

force as its narrator moves towards an important sexual encounter.

The story's title is also symbolic of the clash between what is conventional and respectable and what is not conventional or respectable:

Sometimes I think about the trip as my mother planned it. It is like another ship travelling alongside this one, with all its passengers on deck waving in a friendly sort of way . . . the animal throb and grind of this ship is leaving them behind.

Finally, the idea of Sister Ships comes to mean even more than this. As the story ends one is aware that just as the three young women in the same cabin are like sisters together on a voyage towards adulthood and the loss of innocence, so everybody on board the ship is also implicated in this voyage; and that for many of the passengers this is a voyage amongst the uncertainties and longing which come with separation from what is known and secure.

There is no space to dwell in any detail on the other stories in this volume. It is worth remarking, however, that London displays a fine sense of irony in her work, and a well-developed sense of humour. These qualities are hard to demonstrate through quotation, but are implicit in the following excerpt from "Burning Off":

'He's been working really hard at the garage', I said. My mother smiled at him, nodding. 'It's a wonderful chance to learn a trade'.

Then my father did something surprising. He uncoiled his hand from his elbow where it had seemed to be holding him contained. He stretched it across the table, his red, whorl-jointed hand, part of my former life, and picked up Wes's restless fingers.

'These aren't mechanic's hands', he said. He put Wes's hand down gently. He didn't look at anybody. He cleared his throat in a business-like way.

This is superbly controlled and preeminently articulate writing, a model of its kind and a good example of the standard of this collection as a whole.

**Paul Hetherington**

John Macgregor, *Propinquity*, Delta Books, Adelaide, 1986, 273pp, \$12.95.

John Macgregor's first novel is a mixed bag. Part *bildungsroman*, part 'spiritual' fable, *Propinquity* chronicles the path of young 'Clive Lean' from Corio to Byron Bay, via Melbourne, Oxford and London. Its loose structure may suggest the picaresque, but the book's early satirical mode is largely abandoned in favour of a more earnest interest in its central story. This concerns the raising to life of 'Queen Berengaria', who has lain dry-chilled beneath Westminster Abbey since the twelfth century. Using a Haitian potion, Clive and his friends remove and reawaken the queen, anxious to set her Gnostic vision against institutional Christianity. But the outcome is muted. Berengaria refuses a public role, put off by the personal deficiencies she finds in most of Clive's group, including him. Marginalised, and in police trouble over his past as a fraudulent company director, Clive is left to put it all down to experience.

As a narrative, *Propinquity* probably spends too long on the story of Berengaria's resurrection, given that so little comes of it. Nevertheless, these chapters have a straightforward, technical-thriller interest; if they seem more redundant than they should it's because the novel fails to create a context (beyond imagined media sensation) for its major event. Nothing in the story of Clive's early life provides one, and his understanding remains terribly vague to the end: " 'Like there's another dimension . . . that all the politicians and priests and geniuses never guessed at . . . That *I* never guessed at.' " (p.250) His friend Samantha gets a lot closer to the queen because she has studied with "one of the three other people in England fluent in Old French". (p.217) But she is vague too: " 'it's like something you see from the corner of your eye. Once you try to look at it, it's gone.' . . . 'It's bloody fantastic. Hard work sometimes, but really — the first thing I thought afterwards was, Jesus, this is what

it's like to be happy. How simple.' ” (p.272)  
As these quotations may suggest, *Propinquity's* uncertain style underlies its problems as a critique of Australian spiritual emptiness. For a sometimes lordly attack on middle-class banality, it displays its own banality too often to get the target in focus. There are many sentences as humdrum or overfraught (or both) as the following:

It seemed I had enough science subjects to do Medicine. Some complex form filling and fee paying saw me enrolled in the Melbourne University Medical Faculty. (p.9)

By the time they'd emerged from the exuberant plantlife flanking the river, the day's heat had reached its zenith. They endured a searing walk back to the bungalow in silence. (p.28)

Ill-fitting second-hand clothes seemed the order of the day. (p.29)

A series of ambiguous signs led the whole planeload of us down two long, dead-end corridors, then back again. After fifteen minutes we did find our customs gates, and slowly went through, but into another bay, with more gates at the end of it. I was wondering when my knees would buckle when I saw a door labelled UK VISAS. (p.61)

Although that mad, primal impulse was stamping and breathing somewhere, there'd be no falling in love, I told myself. (p.140)

There were other, more muted sighs, and her small personal cataclysm subsided. Then I climaxed, noiselessly as usual. And it was over. (p.252)

Such a mish-mash of styles doesn't allow *Propinquity* the satirical stance it seems to want, so the arraignment of Melbourne materialism loses energy. The unusual central plot is enjoyable, but encumbered by a lot of slacker, diaristic prose, forming almost a separate narrative. 'Clive Lean' is certainly an unpleasant character — a morose snob and a fraud. Yet as the very prosaic narrator and

commentator of these adventures he holds a dominant position, obscuring the spiritual light he's looking for.

### Andrew Lynch

Graeme Turner, *National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986, \$14.95.

Literary critics are human beings, and human beings tend to resist change. For this reason, *National Fictions* is a significant work. Graeme Turner's initial training was as a literary critic, but in this book he throws down a challenge:

The most adventurous studies in recent times have been discussions of particular texts or writers, or contributions to the general field of the relationship between literature and history — enlarging and complicating the context within which literary studies situates its subject matter. In important ways, this present study is a contribution to this latter area.

Aiming to widen the field of literary discussion, he argues that the patterns which dominate the Australian literary tradition also shape Australian films. From there he moves to discuss the pattern itself, setting up in effect a tradition — though he insists it is not the, not even a, Great Tradition — of Australian film, thus establishing a canon for critical discussion. Finally — and this is the crucial point of the study — he makes connections with historical and social issues. The kinds of meanings which are preferred in the films he studies, the forms in which they are articulated, he argues, point to an ideological function. Australian films, like Australian fiction generally, are “ways of seeing”, and ways of seeing point to assumptions, values and definitions of purpose and value, crucial shaping factors of any culture.

In a sense there is something traditional, even old-fashioned about all this. Turner is

interested in that elusive, much abused word, "Australian", and in the attempt to define it. To some this attempt will seem unnecessary, an aberration from the proper world of scholarship; at worst merely political, at best provincial, a tribute to the past in a world in which nationalism is only one of the many ways in which history insists on repeating itself as farce. What, for instance, if the concept of "Australianness" were a form of what Said calls Orientalism, of Europe's image of the other, part of the distribution of geo-political awareness which confirms the power of the European centre?

But in another sense *National Fictions* is very much to the point. In the world in which we live, a world of superhighways and supermarkets, synthetic fertilizers and artificial hearts, computers and t.v. sets, most things seem to be representation, the product of human minds. We do not so much live in a world that is given — there before we set our imprint on it, raw, unprocessed — but in a world that has been fabricated, produced by technology. This is especially true in Australia where we newcomers have imposed ourselves on the land without any reference to its original inhabitants and their culture and remade it to our own image. But our ultimate and definitive product is perhaps meaning itself. As Turner announces in the second sentence of his introduction, "narratives are ultimately produced by the culture; thus they generate meanings, take on significances, and assume forms that are *articulations* of the values, beliefs — the ideology — of the culture."

This assumption gives the study of narrative a profoundly political significance. Chapter 2 argues that Euro-Australian attitudes to the land, the perceived split between rural innocence and urban corruption, the binary pattern which informs much of a tradition, cinematic and literary as well as social, is the product of ideology, of the "dominant system of meaning which installs people in imaginary relationships to the actual situation in which they live". Moreover

this ideology is conservative in its implications. If nature is dominant, necessity, "the inevitable and disinterested processes of the natural order of things", prevails. This removes thought of change — you cannot change nature, so defined.

Seeing the Australian context in terms of a hostile and intransigent nature, therefore, does allow social discontent to be displaced, to be projected on to a set of conditions in which the individual is 'naturally' impotent . . . This transformed history then becomes a powerful controlling fiction, one which prescribes the range of meanings that . . . can be seen as Australian.

Similarly, chapter 3 discusses representations of the individual, concluding that "the Australian myth accomodates us to the inevitability of subjection", and to meaninglessness and a sense of exile, of being somehow alienated, even outcast, from the "real" world which goes on its way elsewhere — all of which also make for acquiescence. Invoking Gramsci's theory of hegemony, his account of the ways in which subjected peoples can be influenced by persuasion from within to assent to their subjection, Turner draws the conclusion that representations of nature which not only displace society but become a substitute for it institutionalise a sense of alienation. It also makes for the sense of loss and defeat which resonates throughout our national fiction — John Docker's "gloom thesis." But this pessimism is "not simply a temperamental or metaphysical position." Assuming society is the product of its representations, he argues that,

it is also a political one, operating to naturalise an ideological view of the power relations between self and society which proposes the futility of individual action against the status quo.

So the characters in film and fiction tend to be faceless, their lives without inwardness. "Realism" prevails, people give way to objects, the careful documentation of appearances and the individual is submerged in

history, determined by it, a victim of some authority elsewhere which is undefined and unfeeling. At best, people define themselves in terms of a nationalist myth, of the Australian as the underdog, the battler who is always defeated, the larrikin whose energies are ultimately pointless, cockily defiant in a pitiless world. The only comfort lies in being part of this definition, having found a place in the world that is flamboyant but also pathetically out dated in a post-modernist, technological world.

*National Fictions*, then, has important things to say, and the connections it makes between imaginative patterns and cultural and political issues should revitalise the study of both. But it does leave some unanswered questions. Most notable is the relationship between literature and film, a question absolutely central to his thesis, which Turner leaves more or less unexamined. This, I think, is a serious omission because it allows the book's central assumption also to go unchallenged, the assumption that ideas generally and stories in particular are rooted in and produced by the material conditions of social life. This is a classic Marxist position, of course, and one with a long tradition of intellectual argument behind it. But in my view it needs qualification, especially in the discussion of literature — that is, of language used in a particular, non-institutional way, a way which challenges the myth-making, conditioning force of language in its everyday use. It is at least arguable, for instance, that works like *For The Term of His Natural Life* and *Such Is Life* in their day ran counter to, indeed were subversive of, the prevailing ideology, challenged the interpretations of the world and institutions of power it generated. So, too, with recent writers as different as Patrick White and Peter Carey. It is a different matter with film, it is true. Where the language of literature insists on itself, moves in the direction of symbol towards the realization of another, more intensely personal order of reference, which points to other aspects of experience or being

which cannot be disclosed in a directly descriptive way, Patrick White calls “what you do not know but know”, film insists on the reality of unreality, of socially constituted stories and images, and thus makes for bemusement rather than enlightenment. Moreover, the practice of film is collective, a process in which the audience is more or less passively shaped by what it sees, by consciously manufactured and conventional images. In contrast the process of reading is individual and active. The cinematic mode, J. Christian Metz argues, is a “mode of presence”, a kind of machine which both draws on and creates collective fantasies. In this way it transforms the “real” into what is unreal.

The power of unreality in film derives from the fact that the unreal seems to have been realized. Unfolding before our eyes as if it were the flow of common occurrence, not the plausible illustration of some extraordinary process conceived only in the mind.<sup>1</sup>

Film thus represents a kind of social force, a means of insertion into the prevailing ideology — Metz calls it the “cinema-machine”, the “institution of cinema”, “institution” being taken in a wider sense to include the “interior machine” of the psychology of the spectator, “the social regulation of spectatorial metapsychology” and involves a “technique of the imaginary” — the money involved in production, of course, intensifies this drift towards the fashionable and instantly appealing.

This is not necessarily to denigrate film — popular taste is not necessarily synonymous with poor taste. But it is to suggest that the cultural evidence it offers is of a different kind from that offered by literature. At best it is probably reactive, symptomatic, gives access to the patterns of collective fantasy. The interpretation of film thus involves what Eco calls the concept of diegesis:

The reality we experience in film does not depend on the presence of the actor but on

a low degree of existence posed by ghostly creatures moving on the screen which are therefore unable to resist our constant impulse to invest them with reality (the concept of diegesis), reality that comes only from within us, form the projections and identifications that are mixed in with our perception. Film is like a vacuum which dreams readily fill.<sup>2</sup>

To be fair, *National Fictions* points in this direction. But had Turner explicitly developed what was implicit he might have led us deeper into what Jameson calls the “political unconscious”<sup>3</sup> in Australia. On the other hand, if he had looked more closely at the opposite effects of the language of literature, he might have been able to point to some possibilities of renewal or at least of interrogation of the ideology he describes, an ideology of defeat and submission. It might then appear that the conjunction between film and novel, the strongly literary flavour of Australian films, may be something also to be looked at critically. The significant question, as Benjamin insisted, is not so much the position of a work vis à vis the productive relations of its time, but its position within them. Film, it seems to me, belongs within current modes of economic production — witness *Crocodile Dundee* — whereas literature does not.

In this way the argument of *National Fictions* in the end is reductive. The attempt to describe a particular way of seeing and to suggest that it is the product of social, economic and political factions, in the long run rests on premises not fully examined. Instead of arguing with the view that literary texts are somehow different, special even — as John Docker does, for instance — Turner ignores it, arguing that “literary production proceeds from sources within the culture that are related to those which generate other kinds of cultural production.” True, he does admit that “literary fiction is formed in different ways and asks for different kinds of reception.” But this qualification disappears in the conclusion that “its relation to the culture is no less direct, no less mediated by historical forces outside the author’s control.”

This is to ignore the work of thinkers as different as Barthes, Ricoeur and Derrida, all of whom argue, though in very different ways, that there is a certain kind of “writerly” language and that it has its own kind of existence, which relates it obliquely, even perhaps antithetically, to the general level of discourse. The literary text in this sense is dynamic rather than static, works on rather than merely reflects the impulsion of its culture. This dynamism lies in the direction of the thought its language opens up, language which foregrounds itself rather than points beyond what is already existing and in this foregrounding offers possible new ways of seeing and thus of being. Its reference is thus not to things but possibilities. It tends not to confirm the status quo but interrogate it — as an example, Turner might have compared the film *Gallipoli*, with the novel, *1915*. The one asserts the Anzac legend, the other questions it.

Ignoring this distinction, *National Fictions* offers no way out from the pessimistic view it offers of Australian culture as conservative, conformist, timid and ultimately colonial in the worst sense of the word, imaginatively as well as politically in thrall to imperial masters. But if it is true that, in contrast with the “film machine” which makes for conformity, literary fiction leads to the self-interpretation of the subject, who becomes a new self in front of the text, then some transformative power remains — however few people are in fact transformed in this way. Nor is this mere platitudinous humanism. It arises out of the nature of language itself, the ways in which it can be made to work. To ignore these ways is perhaps to sell the pass to the determinists. It was the Marxist critic, Walter Benjamin, after all, who pointed out that the view that all human activities and relationships within the capitalist system are reduced to the mere function of exchanging commodities is itself part of the problem since it denies the possibility of any change, provides no point of leverage outside the system.

It is perhaps ungenerous to say of a book that is stimulating as it is enlightening that it has perhaps missed the real point — though it is also a tribute to its stimulation. But it seems to me that the real point is not so much to describe the ideology revealed by a study of Australian films, to describe, that is, what they represent, but to question the nature of film itself, its social force and place within the system of power. As with the study of literary texts, the crux lies in the interaction between the texts and its contexts, its audience and their situation in the system of power. By definition film calls for and creates a mass audience, taken out of their own context to be played upon by images and thus inserted into a new and fantastic kind of time and space. Film can thus be seen as part of the larger game in which images are manipulated by the few as a means to wealth and — indirectly at least — social controls. In this view Turner's picture of the Australian may not be so much a reflection of what is there but what has been manufactured by the cinematic machine — which is part of the larger system of dream machinery, T.V., advertising, radio, computers, and so on. Looked at historically, this is part of the move to a world in which nature is no longer something given but “a model of simulation, a digest of signs of nature put back into circulation”.<sup>4</sup> The task for intellectuals is not so much to describe this world as to change it.

**Veronica Brady**

#### NOTES

1. Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*. New York, 1974, p. 5.
2. Metz, p. 23.
3. Frederick Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act*, Methuen, 1981, p. 38.
4. Metz, p. 10.

Tim Winton, *Minimum of Two*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1987, 153p, \$7.95.

Tim Winton's writing is often praised for its simplicity and clarity. At its best, it is very powerful indeed. This latest collection of short stories, *Minimum of Two*, contains 14 stories, the last of which is entitled 'Blood and Water'. In it, a bloody and protracted childbirth is graphically enacted and the characters emerge partially triumphant from a process which makes them feel at once helpless and defiled. The story is both moving and disturbing, despite — or perhaps because of — its almost naively optimistic ending. It is by far the best story in the collection.

'Blood and Water' is one of six stories which deal with the characters Jerra Nilsam, his wife Rachel and their son Sam. (The names are interesting to consider: are the Nilsams somehow incomplete until their son Sam is born?) The Nilsam stories are scattered throughout the text, fragments which are arranged out of chronological order to prevent them stabilising into a kind of novel. The other eight stories deal with a number of different topics: friendship between men, turning 30, swimming, coping with the death of a father. They draw upon a wide range of characters, some of whom will be familiar to Winton's readers from his novels.

The Nilsams, like the other characters in this collection, are beset with minor but often dangerous problems. Rachel has an acute asthma attack and Jerra is nearly blinded by an exploding Ventolin canister in 'Forest Winter'. In 'The Strong One', Jerra's childhood friend Sean seems to have been killed in a car accident (though this is carefully understated) and in 'More', Jerra cuts his finger badly, Sam eats rat poison and Rachel realises that her husband has had an affair with someone else. In 'No Memory Comes', the nameless narrator accidentally stabs himself in the groin with a can opener. Perhaps there is a little too much excitement

and danger here for this kind of story. Life, death and mutilation writ large in 10 pages, even in Winton's easy dry style sometimes edges towards the absurd. This is particularly the case in 'Minimum of Two', which, despite its sociologically important subject matter (the effect of a rape upon two people in a marriage, notably the husband), is probably the most awkward and least successful of the stories. The high melodrama of the young husband's resolve to kill the rapist and the odd parody of detective fiction in its ending ("And in that moment I knew that I had lost my life. I was a dead man.") are simply too exaggerated for the crisp short story form Winton often employs so well.

This makes me wonder about the title of the book. Why has it been named after the least convincing story? Much better to have called it *Blood and Water* as there is a great deal of both in many of the stories. And it would be an appropriately ironic comment upon the text's obsession with family relationships.

Readers of Winton's novels will be interested to find familiar characters and actions reappear in these stories. Queenie and Cleve from *Shallows*, for example, return to the whaling town to reclaim part of their earlier lives. This is expressed as is again familiar to Winton's readers, through the act of swimming in the ocean, in 'Laps'.

Memory and nostalgia are recurring themes in Winton's work and perhaps partly account for his popularity. Yet there is some self-consciousness about memory as a form of self-indulgence in these stories. As Rachel tells Jerra in 'The Strong One', nostalgia "makes you pathetic. You do it like an old man who can't handle the present. It makes me despise you." Some readers may agree. For at times Winton's writing seems to invoke a still, greyish Australia in which it is always imaginatively about 1973 and nothing is ever likely to happen. This is despite Jerra's angry remark in 'Gravity' that "It's 1985, for God's sake." The characters often feel dull and directionless, with "a big emptiness" ('Forest

Winter'). The boy in 'No Memory Comes' feels "a hole open in him" (soon to be parodied in the incident with the can opener). In 'Gravity', Jerra feels both "heaviness" and "a hole in him" while the girl in 'The Water was Dark and it went Forever Down' wants to be dehumanised into "an engine" and a "swimming machine". Though the characters reach a kind of catharsis (in childbirth, in death or in a reaffirmation of family life), the reader is often left feeling dissatisfied. Why?

Perhaps what Winton offers us here is not history in any public sense, but reminiscence and nostalgia. One of Thomas Hardy's narrators, in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, suggests that "it may be argued with great plausibility that reminiscence is less an endowment than a disease." (p.219) This is perhaps a little harsh, but there is a sense in these stories that the large physical environment of Western Australian forests, beaches and even suburbia seems to shrink to a tiny world populated by a handful of people, beset by minor domestic of existential crises, which, though often solved, leave the reader with a feeling of emptiness and desolation. Certainly this is how some people feel about living in the most isolated city in the world, but readers might feel that personal reminiscence is simply not enough. The retreat into the individual and the nuclear family (problematic notions as these are) actually *reinforces* the sense of individual isolation. The world beyond ceases to exist and even the community of Western Australia itself, which is in fact quite large and has a complex history, disappears behind the solipsistic individual. For me, Winton's writing, despite its powerful sense of personal history, represses real history and offers instead a yearning for the innocence of (masculine) adolescence. Many of the characters in these stories long for a mythical lost youth, for the freedom and innocence of a time before women and sexuality caused them to fall.

Perhaps this is a profound insight on Winton's part into a society whose cultural mythology is one of eternal male youthful-

ness, desired if not attained. We are yet to see, however, what his writing will offer in place of this myth which is here showing signs of considerable anxiety. Apart from active fatherhood (which in these stories is yet another form of yearning for one's one childhood — or rather, *boyhood*), alternatives to a wholly masculine culture are as yet absent. Women may be wise in *Minimum of Two*, like Jerra's mother who tells the child Sam that "One day . . . you and

your kind'll have to carry yourselves", but they still give birth in agony to a large pair of balls in a grotesque enactment of Freud's theory of penis envy. For some readers this is not enough. But I think Winton's many devoted readers will read this collection of stories with enjoyment and will watch the new direction of his fiction with great interest.

**Trudi Tate**

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## IDENTITY CRISIS?

is the title of the winning entry (by Rowan Cahill) in the Overland competition for an extract from *The Collected Verse of R.J.L. Hawke*. But no identity crisis about this issue (107) of *Overland*: one of Frank Moorhouse's greatest stories, "Ex-Wife Re-Wed"; stories by Beth Yarp and Kevin Brophy; Michael Costigan on Charles Osborne and John Sendy on Jean Devanny; poetry by Kate Lilley, Robert Drummond, Rod Moran, John A. Scott, Rae Desmond Jones and many others.

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WESTERLY, No. 3, SEPTEMBER, 1987

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