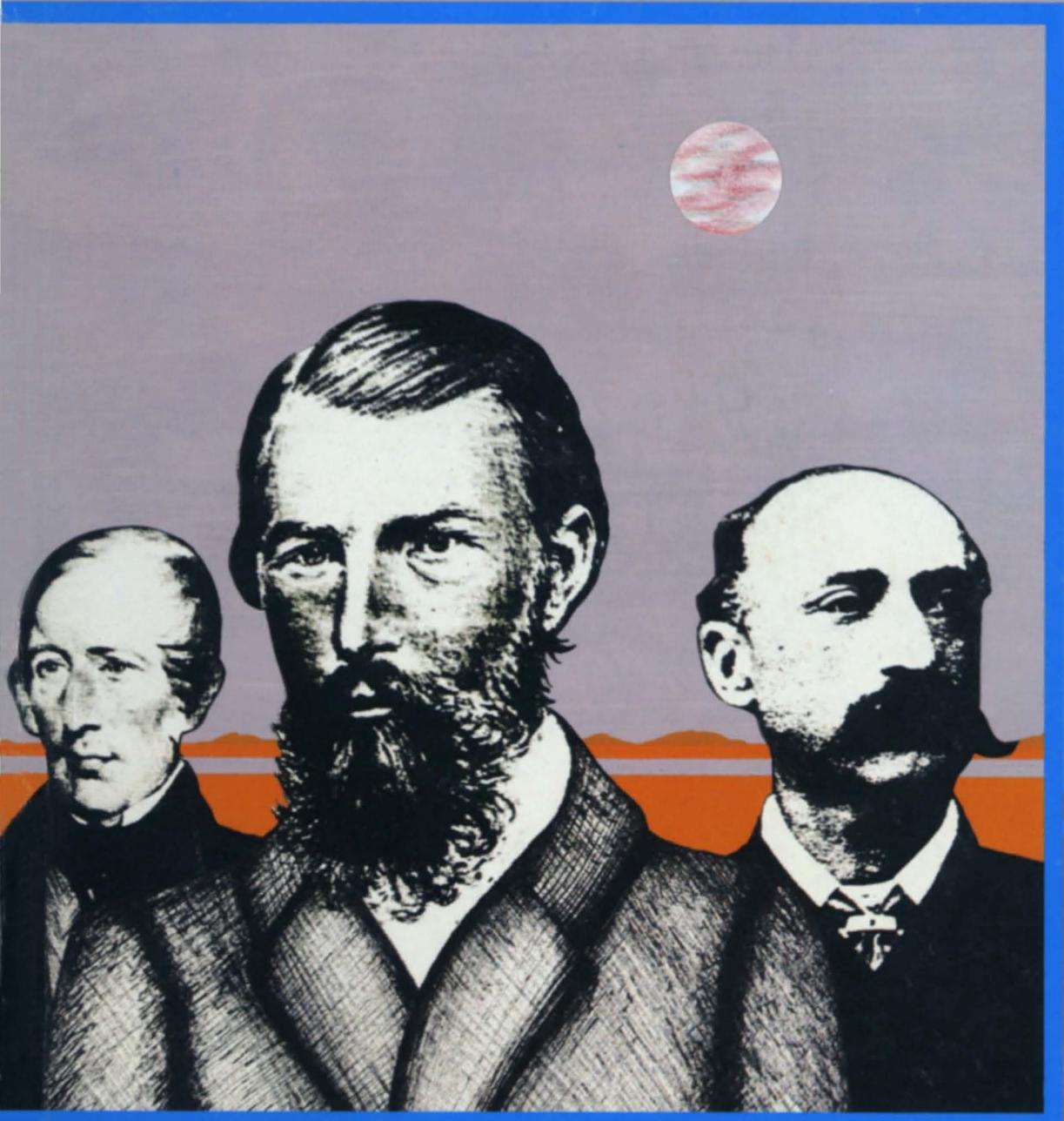


# WESTERLY

STORIES • POEMS • ARTICLES • REVIEWS



DECEMBER 1988 NUMBER 4 \$5.00



# WESTERLY

The National Quarterly  
from the West

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# WESTERLY

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Two *Westerly* Indexes, 1956-77 and 1978-83, are available at \$8.00 from the above address.



## **OBITUARY**

*Westerly* notes with sadness the death of Vincent Buckley who was to have been a key participant in the 1989 Festival of Perth. As poet, critic, autobiographer and social commentator he was for three decades one of Australia's leading writers.

## Girl on a Swing\*

He's out there again, the old fool. I can hear the axe: THWOP. THWOP. THWOP.

He's sending me a message: THWOP. Listen old woman, wife of mine. THWOP. Listen, my girl on a swing. THWOP. This is for you.

All day he's at it. Rough-sawn splintery old fool.

Me, I'm rotting away. My tits have gone, I don't feel like a woman any more, my body doesn't remember. Once I had juices, fruit on new wood, but now my body talks only of winter and I move like dry leaves in a gutter. He says I'm still his pretty girl, still his girl on a swing. I tell him he's an idiot.

I'll go first, he says. You'll last, he says.

Why would I want to last?

\*

THWOP. THWOP. THWOP.

and

THWOP. THWOP. THWOP.

Yes, I can hear it (if you must know, it sounds like certain pain: dull, relentless). Sometimes, a ripping noise: SCHPLITT. But mainly: THWOP.

That's him. Dogged. Hammering at me.

\*

Piles of it. Wood mountain. Splintery sides soar into the poor shattered sky. God knows what lives in it (the wood pile or the sky). It's stacked so neatly, like geometry. Foot blocks. Fat blocks. Mill ends.

Enough, I tell him. No more.

It's for you, he says.

Old fool, I say.

\*

Our backyard. Once my pride, in the days when I flowered (you're more beautiful each year, like a rose, he tells me. Fool, I cackle, examine a rose. Apply time to it. Use your idiot eyes). Before they pushed over my fence, raped my garden, rolled through my green music with diesel discord. All gone. My caring years of care. All gone.

They.

Big yellow-black juggernaut, unstoppable as age, walked through my pretty palings (I was still juicy then, tits like melons. Juicy but not young). They violated my violets, rode roughshod over my rhododendrons, crushed my camelias. They stood on flat track tractor toes and laughed at me. That day. When they killed my green music.

\*This story received first prize for the 1988 Randolph Stow (prose) award.

They. High up behind tinted glass the driver waved to me. Too high, too tinted.  
Could have been anyone.

All over in ten minutes. Thirty years trampled, rough-pruned. All gone, all my  
green music.

\*

THWOP. THWOP. THWOP.

I hear you, I hear you. Old fool.

We are no pretty pair: him dogged, splintery; me titleless, dry.

We cling together though. For the warmth.

\*

I think the sky is dying. Jets rip it to shreds, it's full of poison and crackles with  
lies (just turn on your television, you'll see). There is a triangle above: force lines,  
flight lines, and us their centre. The air is charged, malicious.

They.

They overlook us: the Cathedral, the Baby Hospital, the Town Hall. I think they're  
at war with us. The sky is dying.

They surround us.

The triangle sky sings with malice.

\*

There's a job to be done, he said, some rearranging. We'll have a wood garden,  
a beautiful barky wall of warmth. We'll come through stronger, show the bastards,  
whoever has done this. We'll fight back. And when I'm gone, something for you.

Old fool, I said. Nothing can replace my green heart.

What his chainsaw said: AAAAIEEE.

What his axe said: THWOP.

Wood-for-brains, I said.

But he's a dogged old fool, trimmed away all the leaves and small branches, then  
he was at the limbs and trunks. Sawed and chopped, sawed and chopped.

This will keep you warm, he said. After I'm gone. When there's no warmth. I'll  
not have my girl on a swing cold.

Sawdust-head, I said.

But he kept at it, the dogged old fool. He sawed and chopped, sawed and chopped,  
sawed and chopped. Fat blocks, foot blocks, high stacked. He started stacking in  
the back corner, where the jacaranda used to be, filled the long length of the back  
fence with fat blocks, foot blocks. That was where I'd had the wattles, their green-  
grey feathers and in spring their yellow burst buds.

He changed it to a wood wall. New cut, sap spilling.

Then he brought mill ends. Big trucks in the night. The dull tumble of falling  
wood.

Mill ends. Fat blocks. Foot blocks.

THWOP. THWOP. THWOP. He cut and stacked. Cut. Stacked. Dogged old fool.  
My tits fell off.

\*

I was angry, crazy, angry. No one, no yellow-back bulldozer was going to walk  
laughing through *my* garden. And I was going to tell them that, whoever they were.

They.

I was an angry, juicy old witch and I wanted blood to spill.

It had been a municipal monster, I felt sure. Unleashed in error by some misguided  
servant of the public, some fumbling boy, some pimple-faced paper clip. He would  
be sorry.

At the Town Hall, a frosted glass girl, custodian of the counter, keeper of the civic flame.

We'll send the Representatives, she said.  
My juices boiled. Boiled on frosted glass.

\*

Silly old man. He sees me freezing in the night and him gone from our back-to-back. We have each other now, you see, for the warmth.

It takes juice to freeze juice, I tell him.  
When I'm gone, he says. When I'm gone.  
Quiet, old fool, I tell him.  
On. He hammers on. When I'm gone, he says.  
Yes yes, when you're gone. But first me. First me. First me. I hammer back at him.  
You'll last, he says, and the wood will warm your cold bones.  
Old fool.

\*

We have a Policy on the Aged. The Representatives will explain.  
Don't give me any shit about policies, Girly, I boiled (a nasty hag who used bad language in a public place). Just let me at the blackhead responsible for my garden.  
It's all in the Policy, Madam, the frosted glass girl smiled.  
Her teeth were perfect.

\*

Icecream and blood: cream shirts, red trousers, cream shoes and socks. Soft knock in the morning.

One speaks. Softly. Smiles and smiles: You want pills? Samples? Calendars? Can we make an appointment?

Who the hell are you?  
Pills, whatever you want. We can leave samples. Something to help you through the twilight years perhaps? Your reward. The Town Hall thought you might be interested.

The Town Hall sent you? You know about my garden?  
All about that, oh yes. You want pills? Samples? Calendars?  
Bugger off, I boiled, biley green.

Sure, sure. We'll just leave some samples, for the pain. There's a lot of pain in being old.

They were right about that.

\*

In my old head, a finger nail scraped on glass. SCREEEEEEEE. Unstoppable as age.

There *was* a lot of pain. Perhaps the pills *would* help.

\*

THWOP. THWOP. THWOP.

He's still at it, his wood pile covers most of what used to be my garden and still the wood trucks come in the night with their mill ends THWOP fat blocks SCHPLITT foot blocks THWOP.

Still at me, hammering at me.

At night we lie under a thin blanket, back to back for the warmth. Hear the thrum and roar of engines, the dull cascade tumble of wood.

I'll warm you, the old fool says. He turns to drape a splintery hand across my washboard chest.

\*

At the Baby Hospital they display the Baby of the Week in a glass case, back-lit, shown to advantage on a black velvet cushion. Mothers compete for the honour and substitution attempts are not unknown. But the case is kept locked at all times.

The Representatives warned me. There just *may* be side-effects (small price for a miracle).

But they were vague on details.

I started to feel like a creek bed in summer. And my tits were sore.

At the Baby Hospital the frosted glass girl told me that they couldn't treat *old* people. But the Church might be able to help me.

\*

The sky crackles with malice. I feel it so strong, so real that I could climb up into it, stepping on holes torn out by jets and electronic lies. On the television, a head tells me the news again.

It's bad, worse than ever.

Don't worry, the old fool says, at least we're warm.

A fire crouches, leers, in the black grate.

It's talking to me.

\*

He still has the photograph. It shows a girl on a swing, white in a green garden. White lace girl on a swing.

He says it is me. I can't remember.

You're still the same, he says. Or like a rose, more beautiful each year.

Old fool, I scold. Silly old man. I place his splintery hand on my washboard chest.

Still the same, he says.

\*

I felt young again, I felt green. The Representatives had promised spring and I burst with it, an explosion of buds, juices.

Throbbed, coursed with it.

More appointments? Pills? Samples? Calendars?

Sure, sure.

Out in the desert behind the back door a wood mountain grew. THWOP. THWOP. THWOP. I could hear the old fool. At night he was too old, too tired for my juices.

A green-again wife and a brown splintery man. My garden gone but green music swelling, sap spilling.

The graft took. I burst with the vigour of it.

\*

I need a *doctor*, not a damn priest, I told the frosted glass girl at the Baby Hospital.

I'm sorry madam, but our medical services are unavailable to the aged.

I'm telling you my tits are hurting and I'm splintery dry as seasoned jarrah.

Try the Church.

The Baby of the Week started crying, opened its perfect pink mouth and howled. Behind the glass it sounded a long way off. Mothers looked pleased, hopeful. Nurses rushed with medication and guards unlocked the cabinet. The Baby of the Week was removed.

Mothers surged, tearing from tits perfect pink mouths, holding aloft blue bundles, pink bundles. Choose this one! This one!

\*

When I'm gone, the old fool tells me, burn this wood, for the warmth. There's enough for years. And years.

He's right. Foot blocks, fat blocks, mill ends spill up. I don't look at the sky, but I can feel it.

Years. But why would I want years?

\*

Green music danced, burst, in old flesh. I felt light and young and grateful. The sky still shrieked, the news was still bad, probably worse. But it didn't matter.

Why worry? What could I do about it?

The Representatives brought brochures for the LAZY DAZE RETIREMENT VILLAGE. It's the next stage, they said. Perhaps we could make an appointment, talk to your husband?

Don't worry about him, I told them. But leave the brochures.

THWOP. THWOP. THWOP. He wouldn't fit. Too old, too splintery-brown. The brochure for the LAZY DAZE RETIREMENT VILLAGE showed smooth skinned senior citizens enjoying the convenience of the on-site bingo hall, communal dining area and excellent medical facilities. YOU'VE EARNED IT! the brochure promised. NOW YOU CAN ENJOY IT!

We could make all the arrangements, the Representatives said in their soft voices, their perfect clothes (icecream never so creamy, blood never so rich). So much for you both to enjoy. It's the next stage. Can we talk to your husband?

He's a stubborn old goat, I told them.

Perhaps some samples? Some pills for him? Be a shame to miss out. Can't keep your place forever.

I'll talk to him, I told them. I'll talk to the wood-for-brains termite infested old fool.

\*

What the fire said: Yes, yes, yes.

\*

At the Baby Hospital, my tits surged like up-blown paper bags, suddenly huge soaring pain in them, air in them. Then fist slammed, whammed, hammered at, deflated; sounds like two gun shots and the trickle of juice, of old milk. Crumpled down like dead balloons, like side-effects.

Gone forever, my beauties.

A white charge of doctors, nurses. But past me. Carrying something swaddled, pink. The new Baby of the Week (it's a girl!) checked, chucked, fully installed. The new Baby of the Week smiling, smiling; its mother radiant, smug.

Hey! You can't stay there! The frosted glass girl talking to me. It appeared the Baby Hospital was no place for a titless prune.

You're leaking on the carpet, she said.

\*

I show the boney old goat: the well built units (*modern, tastefully decorated*); the restful gardens (*professionally maintained, you don't have to lift a finger*); the helpful, caring staff (*don't worry, you're in good hands here*); the appetising meals (*prepared for you in our hygienic kitchens*); the community lounge (*where you can*

*relax and chat with new friends); the bowling green (for those who still like a little sport); and the sky. I show him the perfect blue sky.*

Press my green-again wife's body into his splintery old side.

What do you think? I coo, still his girl on a swing.

I'd rather freeze in hell, or wherever we are now, the old goat butts.

Sawdust-head, I cuff.

\*

What the fire said: *Why not now?*

\*

The Church. Up the hill at last to the clear light singing Church, the hilltop solid standing Church, the last resort Church.

The last resort. At last, I climbed paper-dry, tinder-brown, creaking like dead wood in the wind. A mark for lightning or redemption.

Approaching, on that last hill, the Church flared from stone, brick, shingles. Ever clean, shining with the good of its holy self, fresh scrubbed by faith. I stopped with my tired old eyes to drink, replenish from this vision, this miracle of the light.

My tits quite gone.

\*

Gentle sometimes for a splintery rough-cut old goat. Still my girl, he tells me, still my girl on a swing (he's an insufferably sentimental old silvertongue). We'll stay. We'll stay here, our home. And when I'm gone, this wood will warm you. Enough now for years. Years.

For an old fool, he's sometimes splinter-sharp. What he says is real as the sky with its torn out holes and its malice. *This is our home.*

I throw down glossy pages of perfect blue sky. I know the sky better than that.

\*

Titleless, sapless at the shining door. The Church above, and far above the crackling sky.

I leaned leaf-dry weight on the door, it opened smoothly to light singing up to rafters, cold clean stones at my feet. My old body ached with the holiness of the place, perhaps I had climbed the last hill to redemption; these stones, this light would make me whole again.

Is anybody there? my voice fluttered out, hopeful, like a butterfly.

Only the light singing up and the cold, clean stones.

I shuffled forward towards the altar, drawn by what appeared to be an illuminated painting on the wall behind it, bright in this clean, holy light, shining bright as hope. Here then, respite for a tired, titleless old sinner; it would show visions, the way on.

I rustled closer, blown by what was surely a divine wind.

Rough stuck with sticky tape to stone: no painting but a poster, the focus of a single spotlight beneath. HEAVEN, it said, YOUR LAST RESORT. Palm trees, a blue pool and bluer sky. Empty deck chairs. RESERVE YOUR PLACE, WORSHIP HERE.

On the altar, a chalice and sign: DRINK OF THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB. I raised it to dusty old lips; it tasted of fresh killed flesh, sticky, sweet, warm.

\*

What the fire said: *This is home.*

\*

The only miracle: wet and warm on feet and stone, unexpected as flood in summer.  
I had disgraced the holy place, pissed on my feet, poor incontinent old witch that  
I was. Surely a miracle, a sign of juice, a green flow.

Reeking, joyous, I stumbled home.

\*

It's complete, my husband says. Ready for you now. My husband, that dogged  
old fool, rough-sawn splintery old goat. He takes my hand, strokes dry skin with  
dry skin. Still the same, he says, still my girl on a swing.

Wood soars up to a tattered sky. Foot blocks, fat blocks, mill ends. A perfect  
cube now, complete, the whole backyard tight-stacked.

I'm ready too, I tell him, squeeze his tough old hand. I'm ready now.

I strike the match; the flame flares, crouches, smiles up at us. I can see that my  
husband has heard it too. Yes, it says, yes, yes.

We walk up, hand in hand. Walking on murmuring fire, up, into the singing sky.

## Call\*

Wise after the event  
and grateful  
for her sister's reprieve,  
she replaces the phone.  
Surely when the boat rocks,  
that is the seventh wave.

Her little sister  
has ended her vigil  
in the operating theatre  
just in time to contemplate  
next week. Among  
the wrong diagnoses  
criss-crossing four days,  
something was growing.

A tube was never intended  
to accommodate life,  
could not contain that force —  
the bursting, drag  
of blood inside.  
No-one knew why so white  
she waited to be told.

Now the five years'  
difference is shrugged  
away with this crisis.  
Old roles shift  
as the younger tests  
the dark water ahead,  
she on land. The older,  
in her floating home,  
senses that even steel  
is a shell.

\* This poem received first prize for the 1988 Randolph Stow (poetry) award.

The phone is silent.  
Outside the sea is hard  
and still. Time runs  
and her sister too  
is cut along that line.

---

# STEPHEN HALL

---

## A Valediction\*

His letters continued for months  
after I received the news —  
like the light from a dead star.

He said in one, “eyes following  
me are the only sign of life  
in the wards, they stare

through ceilings at the sky, and  
through walls down footpaths to  
their huts, where dogs squat and

neighbours pilfer food.” Long after  
I knew the voice had gone, his  
words arrived “the Sickness

strews its victims on our  
floors, flies clustering at mouths,  
and now the roads are blocked.”

And then the letters stopped, and  
I felt them pulled-over and  
sent back into quarantine, or

dumped by drivers on the road,  
curling in the sun and turned  
over by an illiterate wind.

\* This poem received second prize for the 1988 Randolph Stow (poetry) award.

## On *The Road to Botany Bay*

Robert Hughes' foray into Australian history, *The Fatal Shore*<sup>1</sup>, made a splash with the media but was pretty much ignored by academies and the literary intelligentsia — although a lively essay, there was little in it that we had not met before in scholarly articles. Paul Carter's book, however, has created a mild stir. Critical response in the reviews has been highly diverse, or as 'Elizabeth Swanson' puts it in *The Australian*<sup>2</sup>:

Pity the poor book review reader. What should she think when reading these two reviews of Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* (Faber & Faber, \$29.95): "Australian history will never be the same after Paul Carter's brilliant, beautifully written book" (Barry Hill)<sup>3</sup>. "Whenever he eschews theorist jargon, Carter writes elegantly, but his 370 pages of exposition are the hardest jungle of words I have ever had to fight my way through" (Peter Porter)<sup>4</sup>.

The range of opinion says something about the current intellectual climate in Australia, so I shall review the reviews as well as the book.

Nearly everyone found it hard going, except two novelists, Barry Hill and David Malouf, who is quoted on the dustjacket (source not given) as finding that 'the writing has a lyrical passion in argument that I found irresistible. I couldn't put it down'. Almost everyone else could put it down fairly easily. 'This book is not an easy read' begins Manning Clark, in the most curmudgeonly of the reviews (*Sydney Morning Herald*)<sup>5</sup>. Christina Thompson (in *The Herald*)

It is by turns interesting and infuriating. At times, you think Carter is doggedly pursuing what he has already demonstrated to more than your satisfaction. At others, you wonder what the hell he's talking about. Sometimes the light clicks on, sometimes it doesn't; sometimes that's your fault, sometimes it's his.<sup>6</sup>

However, she also gives a clue as to why this is so:

As a book, *The Road to Botany Bay* is characterised by its preoccupation with language as a subject rather than a medium. It is also particularly susceptible to the aesthetic delights of the dialectic. Stylistically, it hovers somewhere between a kind of elegant belle lettrism and the more technical and less specific discursive practices of contemporary theoretical writing.

Even a sympathetic and perceptive reviewer, David Dolan (*The Canberra Times*), comes down hard on the style of the book:

In parts, *The Road to Botany Bay* does seem like a few pungent footnotes enormously bloated into a whole book. Nowhere in his 400-odd pages does Carter tell us clearly and succinctly what he is attempting to do, or why; but then he rarely puts anything succinctly. With its half-realised promise of new insights, this pioneering essay in "spatial history" looks suspiciously like a dead-end in itself: a good idea that fizzled.<sup>7</sup>

Two well known expatriate Australian men of letters, Peter Porter and Clive James, both give it stick. Porter says that the book

'might be described as a fantasy on one note, since 'space' and 'spatial' occur in almost every paragraph. Thirty pages in, I made a note for my later perusal, 'What is spatial history?' Three hundred pages later, I still didn't know'

and a little later,

'*The Road to Botany Bay* shows what happens when those who luxuriate in words dispense with the nimbus of common experience which words carry with them.'<sup>4</sup>

Clive James is more savage: he concludes a review (with the title 'Bullshit and Beyond') aphoristically:

'More briefly, bullshit is empty depth. Mr Carter feels obliged to deploy his chic vocabulary not because his big idea is new but because it is a truism.'<sup>5</sup>

So much for the writing. There is less agreement about the intellectual claims of the book. It bears the subtitle: 'An Essay in Spatial History', and this is where the trouble starts. Since time cannot be conceived without space, nor space without time, this subtitle does not make much sense, and the author does not help us, for we are never told directly what the phrase means to him. Nevertheless he sets it up as alternative, and superior, to what he calls 'traditional' or 'chronological' or 'imperial' or 'empirical' history — 'almost as though these terms were synonymous. Perhaps in his mind they are', says Russel Ward tartly (*The Weekend Australian*)<sup>6</sup>. His claims to be founding an entirely new kind of history are rejected out of hand by Russel Ward and Manning Clark — quite properly, I believe.

Yet Carter undoubtedly has something useful to say about the way our historians present history. In writing with hindsight, they falsify the experience of their subjects. Stuart McIntyre, one of the few historians who has taken the trouble to find out what Carter really achieves in the book, put the case against his colleagues' work thus:

'all of these efforts to write the history of exploration and settlement assume what they seek to explain. For all of them the country was there waiting to be found — (but) the assumption that historical space lay dormant waiting to be found robs it of its historical content.'

His (Carter's) own spatial history proceeds from the insight that the place was not there in advance. Rather, he insists, it was brought into being by the very act of exploring, travelling, settling, apprehending' (*Australian Society*)<sup>10</sup>.

Another way of putting it is to say that it is a book about the way in which space becomes humanised, brought within the realm of our culture, translated into place. Surely Carter is right in saying that school history falsifies this process. We all remember the maps in our text-books showing the routes taken by Sturt, Eyre, Burke & Wills. Their journeys are plotted on our own map of Australia, one that has now been two hundred years in the making. But for them it was never like that. What lay ahead each day was quite blank, wholly unknown. They unrolled the map with the day's journey. This is true not only of the explorers. Governor Philip could not know the consequences of moving from Botany Bay to Sydney Cove. Historians can, looking back, or at least they can try; they may attempt to link present consequences to early causes, in a long chain of events, selected and linked — interpreted — in hindsight. Thus, one might say, historians explain the present by falsifying the past, in that *their* past (that is, for example, their 1788) can never be that of the actors. But then surely we know before we begin to read a history book

that it is, to use Manning Clark's word, a *story*; one man's interpretation, a sequence of linked events; and, of course, retrospective. That *is* history.

*The Road to Botany Bay*, on the other hand, is not history, not a new way of writing history, and although it is in part an intellectual critique of history, there was really no need for Manning Clark to get upset. For Manning weighs in with heavy irony:

'How did Australian historians see the beginning of white settlement in Australia?' He (that is, Carter) knows the answer: for the historians, Australia was "a stage where history always occurred". History was "the playwright co-ordinating facts into a coloured sequence". The historian is "merely a copyist" and a selector, little more than an editor of the playwright's work. Exit previous historians. Enter Paul Carter to tell us what history really is' says Manning (*The Sydney Morning Herald*).<sup>5</sup>

Mind you, Manning was provoked. Clive James offers the comment

'that to call Manning Clark an imperialist historian is like saying that Bertolt Brecht had a crush on the Duchess of Windsor'.<sup>6</sup>

When criticising Clark's *History* in the introduction, Carter tells us that : 'It is not the historian who stages events, weaving them together to form a plot, but History itself'. But a little later, 'Clark's description does not simply reproduce the events: it narrates them, clarifies them and orders them'. Then on the next page: 'The historian does not order the facts, he conforms to them' Academics are used to marking down such inconsistencies in their undergraduate essays.

The book is full of self-contradictions, and it is mischievously provocative, but Manning Clark and Russel Ward were never seriously under threat. As David Dolan points out: 'Notwithstanding the occasional sniping shots at imperial and empirical history, *The Road to Botany Bay* is not a rival to the histories written by Crawford, Ward, Clark, Crowley or Serle' (*The Canberra Times*)<sup>7</sup>.

If the book is not a new way of writing history — as the subtitle claims — what then is it? I will give my own answer first, before those offered by some other reviewers. I believe that it belongs to a quite familiar category, applied in a somewhat novel way. It is what in English Departments around the land is known as Lit. Crit. — textual exegesis — but applied to primary historical sources such as the explorers' journals, rather than to more familiar literary works such as novels, poems or plays. Like almost all contemporary literary criticism, it is heavily influenced by structuralism and deconstruction, the theoretical positions and analytical approaches exemplified in the work of people like Jacques Derrida, approaches begun by anthropologists, elaborated in Paris, and now international in application in literary circles. 'Adorno, Ricoeur, Deleuze, Benjamin, Derrida: meet Manning Clark' says Christina Thompson (*The Herald*)<sup>8</sup>. 'Carter's own intellectual culture draws heavily upon French structuralism and deconstruction, which could drive our less intellectual and more provincial historians off their maps', says Barry Hill gleefully (*The Times on Sunday*)<sup>9</sup>: but I suspect that he overrated Paul Carter's knowledge of French social theory, and fails to appreciate that they nearly all talk like this in the Language Departments. David Dolan offers a more sober explanation of the differences in critical responses: 'If the historians reviewing *The Road to Botany Bay* have missed the point, it is not hard to see why the novelists have loved it. Suggestive, and subtly nuanced, it concentrates on individual human sensitivities, perceptions, and mental processes. It is not hard going at all unless the reader is determined to tie down every single statement into a progression of logical reasoning from a premise to a conclusion. It is not that sort of discourse. Better to press on, taking it as it comes, letting it add up in your mind' (*The Canberra Times*)<sup>10</sup>.

What are the rewards for pressing on (and on and on — for it *is* hard going, or I found it so)? First there are many insights about language itself. English is a European language, and it evolved in a northern environment. The available words did not fit this very different world. In time, streams become creeks, fields become paddocks, giving what were dialect words in English, a new currency with new associations, replacing the over-gentle English words. In the Shire of Wingecarribee near Bowral in New South Wales, one may still find the Medway Rivulet, which seems a quaint survival in a quasi-English countryside. But Sandy Creek, Boggy Creek and Dead Horse Creek are more familiar. These are my examples, not Carter's, who has others. This area of intellectual exploration is not new. There are two good books which explored, twelve and twenty one years ago, the way in which Australian writers have had to forge a new expressive language: Brian Elliott in *The Landscape of Australian Poetry*<sup>11</sup> and Coral Lansbury, *Arcady in Australia*<sup>12</sup>. Both prefigure Carter's concern for the intersection between words and place.

Paul Carter is, however, certainly original in the thoroughness with which he scrutinises the naming practices of the explorers, and this is one of the two most illuminating aspects of the book. He is also sometimes brilliantly successful in recreating their experience — the experience of all those facing a new and unknown world — unknown physically, mentally and psychologically — with adequate ways of knowing yet to be forged. This is not uniquely original, either — Greg Dening,<sup>13</sup> for example, has shown great insight into the nature of the contact experience between Pacific Islanders and Europeans in *Islands and Beaches*; a book which combines the experiential sensitivities of the anthropologist with the narrative skills of the historian by breaking the story with meditations. So Carter is not creating a new discipline, as a couple of his reviewers suggest, any more than he will replace conventional history with 'spatial history'. As Barry Hill points out (*The Times on Sunday*)<sup>14</sup> *The Naming of Australia* would have been a better subtitle, and it would have saved a good deal of fuss.

It is now time to take a few extended examples of Carter at work. Let us first take Major Mitchell, who is the subject of Chapter 4, *Triangles of Life*. Mitchell was a man with a method.

'As he had explained in his little book, *Outlines of Surveying*. 'The most essential operation, in taking a plan, consists in laying down points representing the true relationship of the most prominent objects on the face of the earth.'<sup>14</sup> In this definition of 'taking a plan', 'prominent objects' were not simply what is mapped: they were also the means of mapping. They not only provided the surveyor with worthwhile objects to plot: they also supplied him with indispensable points of view. The explorer might proceed like a ship at sea, but the surveyor had to tack between definite points of reference. Triangulation was essential to the surveyor's progress. (Carter p.102).

He was a good surveyor, as the testimony of his second-in-command, Stapylton, who did not like him, makes clear: 'Sur. Gl. makes capital way across the country, keeps his line wonderfully well and shows a complete knowledge of his subject.'<sup>15</sup>

But he seems to have made some serious mistakes, of which the best known is his discovery of the Victoria River, 'a river leading to India, "The nacimiento de la especeria" or region where spices grew: the grand goal, in short, of explorers by sea and land from Columbus downwards', (Mitchell, quoted on p.106). What this means is that he thought he had discovered a big river running to the Gulf of Carpentaria, if not quite to India, and the Portuguese phrase — which he had picked up during the Peninsula Wars, invokes the shades of Vasco da Gama, Henry the Navigator, and the poet Camões, whose epic the *Lusiadas* he had translated into English. The river so fancifully described was in fact the Barcoo, one of the tributaries of Coopers Creek, which grinds to a halt in the arid interior. Most of us would

see Mitchell's prose as an attempt to inflate the importance of his discoveries, but Carter wants to suggest that there is more to it. I shall quote him at length:

Mitchell's geographical fantasies were not embarrassing weaknesses, but were, in fact, essential to his notion of travelling. They were ways of rendering the country habitable — the grander project which distinguished the surveyor from the explorer and which justified Mitchell in taking his historical role so seriously. Indeed, rather than interpret Mitchell's geographical claims in psychological terms, it makes better sense to see them in terms of the distinction he himself insisted on — that between exploration and the survey. This not only has the advantage of accounting better for Mitchell's cantankerous independence of spirit: more importantly, it reveals his significance in Australia's spatial history.

One way of defining the difference between the explorer and the surveyor is to contrast the explorer's desire to constitute space as a track with the surveyor's interest in regionalizing it. If, for the explorer, mountains and rivers were both means of getting on, then, for the surveyor, they functioned primarily as natural boundaries. They were geographical givens which helped the surveyor bound a useful space, a space that was conceptually and trigonometrically consistent. As Mitchell wrote in his *Outlines*:

A ridge or chain of heights affords also the most favourable line for the boundary of a plan, or for joining two plans together. Mountains divide the sources of rivers, govern the direction of roads, and bound the visible horizon.

Where the explorer saw ranges as roads, the surveyor thought of them as bases. Where the explorer's space was two-dimensional, backwards and forwards, the space of the surveyor was triangular, extending in depth to either side (Carter p.108).

Mitchell's account of *Australia Felix* — south western Victoria — also came under attack as gross exaggeration. Charles Augustus Robinson was particularly scathing about the country around Avoca:

The Major's Line was through the sweep of this plain and he describes it in glowing terms, his usual practice. He came to a level plain resembling a park, hence he called it Major Mitchell's park. The banks of the river Loddon, which was on the E. side, are abrupt but covered with grass. And the river, he said, was north among some hills, probably to water a country of a fine and interesting character. Now this is all fudge. Better the Major had not published such nonsense as it has occasioned an expedition of time and money to numerous emancipists who have gone in search of this country of interesting character. The Major's Eden is another specimen of his puff: excellence not yet located. Eden though it be, the same fate extends to the greater part of his *Australia Felix*.<sup>16</sup>

But this fails to understand the function of Mitchell's rhetoric: 'These beautiful recesses of unpeopled earth could no longer remain unknown' says Mitchell. 'He framed a picturesque discourse designed to open up the country'. 'In short', says Carter in concluding,

'the character of exploration as a rhetorically consistent gesture, a strategic previsioning of occupation, is not to be construed as a personal idiosyncrasy of Mitchell's. He simply maintained a culturally coherent view of his spatial — and hence historical — responsibilities'. (Carter, p.134).

It is useful to be reminded that Mitchell was not alone. Captain James Stirling, and Charles Fraser, the Government Botanist of New South Wales, did the same for Swan River, with the same aim of seeing it settled, much as Estate Agents today describe houses with the aim of seeing them sold. On the whole I prefer Robinson's good eighteenth century word 'puffing' to Carter's 'rhetorically consistent gesture', but Carter's account puts Mitchell into cultural context, and it also reveals much by the way, especially the importance of hills, ranges, lakes and rivers, even insignificant hills and dry lakes, if one is to mark the land in a country with few landmarks. This makes sense of the names on our maps of the inland.

Some of Carter's major points will be the subject of debate in the journals for a year or so. His account of naming practices is nearly always interesting and stimulating, but I question some of it, particularly the contrast he makes in the early chapters between Cook's 'open' naming and Banks' 'closed' naming. Stephen Murray

Smith sums up Carter's position beautifully in a particularly perceptive review. Cook named 'The Three Brothers' for example, because they

"bore some resemblance to each other". 'The names were not arbitrary. They all had a point. But Cook was not trying to impose a world-view on the objects under his scrutiny. His names are not "definitive statements of arrival" so much as "points of departure". They are "metaphors of the journey". —'Experience, Carter explains, is *spatial*. Knowledge is many-sided, its linkages infinite. Banks, as a botanist, was interested above all in naming things to dispose of them as he poked them into his vasculum. To do this is to abort understanding and to deny life. Knowledge thus "loses all power to signify beyond itself, to suggest lines of development or the subtler influences of climate, ground and aspect". It is the difference between the aridity of *discovery* and the fruitful interaction of exploration. Banks, when he seeks to name things, does so to possess them by pretended objectivity. Cook's subjectivity, his ironic use of language, and in due course Flinders's too, is by contrast an "authentic mode of knowing", the creation of metaphors which symbolise rather than seek to possess. "Cook's place names were tools of travelling rather than fruits of travel." '(*The Age*)<sup>17</sup>

This is an arresting contrast, and an intellectually challenging one because Carter makes of it a remote, colonial playing-out of the great eighteenth century philosophical debate between Locke and Hume. This indeed is the excitement of *The Road to Botany Bay*. Cook and Banks, by those sandy shores at the world's edge, become centre stage in Carter's hands:

How, for instance, does exploration differ from that other great eighteenth-century naming discipline, botany? In answering this question, the conjunction of Cook and Banks on the Endeavour voyage is a particularly fortuitous one. Historically speaking, the distinction between botany's concern to reduce the variety of the world to a uniform and universally valid taxonomy and exploration's pursuit of a mode of knowing that was dynamic, concerned with the world as it appeared, went back, on the one hand, to the Enlightenment project of universal knowledge and, on the other, to the trenchant criticism of its empirical assumptions mounted by David Hume. But nowhere is this methodological distinction brought out more clearly than in the contrast between the specific practices of Banks and Cook. (Carter p.18).

And so the theme grows: 'For where Banks was preoccupied with the typical, Cook was concerned with the singular; where Banks tended to generalize, Cook tended to specify. And thus, indeed, was the difference between botany and geography as they were practised in the eighteenth century'(p.18). This argument is then developed more fully a few pages later:

A profounder distinction between botany and exploration now emerges. For the difference between the two was not simply a matter of methodology: it embodied, more fundamentally, a disagreement about the nature of language and its relationship to the world. For Banks, names enjoyed a simple, Linnaean relationship with the object they denoted. They gave the illusion of knowing under the guise of naming. Cook's names obey a different, more oblique logic, the logic of metaphor (Carter, p.29).

An extended quotation from Carter at his most illuminating rounds out this theme:

Figures of speech, place names among them, correspond symbolically to the scope of exploration itself: they are a means of making sinuous paths comprehensible, a means of recording the journey as it impresses itself on the consciousness. There may be nothing objective about this, but then, as the philosopher Paul Ricoeur has observed, 'There is no non-metaphorical standpoint from which we could look upon metaphor, and all the other figures for that matter, as if they were a game played before one's eyes.' Similarly, there is no non-directional, unimplicated point of view from which the traveller can describe the facts of the journey.

Cook's metaphorical mode of naming is not a peculiar whim of the namer: it represents an authentic mode of knowing, a travelling epistemology that recognizes that the translation of experience into texts is necessarily a process of symbolizing, a process of bringing invisible things into focus in the horizontal lines of the written page. So, where the metaphorical nature of Banks's discourse is suppressed, Cook feels under no such constraint. Names like 'Pigeon House Mountain' or 'Mount Dromedary' spectacularly

depend on the namer's point of view. They assert no literal likeness but are offspring of the paradoxical miniaturization of the magnified image in the telescope; framed and isolated, such features are brought close, made homely, domestic. They are grand enough to hang on a wall; small enough to fit into a pocket. But Cook's seaworthy metaphors do not in any way diminish the otherness they make so readily accessible. For implicitly in his metaphors is the figure of irony, a mode of description that passionately distances the observer from what he sees. If Banks's generalizations tend to belittle the coast, then the particularity of Cook's inventions suggests nothing so much as humility, a willingness to be dwarfed as well as to command (Carter pp. 30-31).

This is good stuff, the kind of writing that led David Malouf to talk about 'a lyrical passion in argument'. Bold, imaginative, exciting — yes — but will it quite do as argument? If Cook represents an 'authentic mode of knowing', Banks by implication does not. Moreover, they are dramatised 'stand-ins' for the experiential, the existential, against the generalising way of the classificatory sciences, struggling to discriminate likeness and difference through genus and species, to establish relationships, build upon objective knowledge of the world. The Artist is set against the Scientist, although the Artist is a product of the Romantic Revolution and not of the Eighteenth Century. Dr. Johnson was quite clear that it was *not* the business of the poet to number the streaks of the tulip.

The critique of the pretensions to objectivity of eighteenth century science — and indeed of all science — is proper and needful, but the case presented here is surely incomplete. Both modes of knowing have their achievements. Carter's contrast is incomplete in two ways. First, even though I accept his point that Banks' taxonomy seems stultifying, it was in the end, going somewhere, because it was part of a collective and continuing scientific endeavour, whereas Cook's geographical names were not.

Cook was naming places. Banks, in naming plants, was tied into a different linguistic system. Plants were named according to a hierarchy, the Linnean system of classification, and the names indicated presumed relationships. It was not possible to name without suggesting a slot in an ordered scheme, but the system was not closed. It evolved, and was steadily self-correcting in the way of science. Evolutionary theory came to underwrite and modify the Linnean scheme. Plate tectonics later explained some of the vagaries of distribution, such as the Proteaceae of Africa and Australia. 'Provisional' assignment to genera and families was often reassessed. The systematic Eurocentric biases inherent in a taxonomic system that evolved in temperate Europe were at length recognised. It has even become possible for a reputable Australian botanist (Dr Len Webb) to argue that the origin of the angiosperms may be reflected in North Queensland genera such as *Idiosperma*.

The naming of places is, by comparison, unfettered — one name would do as well as another, or near enough. Nothing much hangs on it. Why? Because the critical act is not the naming at all, but the recording of the geographical coordinates, for which the name is a vulgar mnemonic. There is no flexibility in giving the coordinates, however, and they are a kind of possession, and an imperial one in Cook's case (as he well knew them to be!). The parallels of latitude run from the equator to the poles, and they are a neutral division of space, but the meridians of longitude spread out from Greenwich, the nerve centre of the British Admiralty. Every place named by Cook was also plotted by him on this grid, knitted into the fabric that was woven by the world's then greatest naval power and thus tied to the Britain which he served.

Even so, Carter's book has set me to think about other acts of naming, which is never an innocent act. Most of Melbourne east of the Yarra sits on Ordovician mudstones. To say so is to be scientifically objective — but it is also to invoke much cultural history, and tie the land by words to the Welsh mountains, to Sir Roderick Murchison, Adam Sedgwick, and those remote Welsh tribes — the Ordovices, the

Silures, and Cambria itself, which gave its name to the first of these Palaeozoic sequences. The very sequences themselves have proved both a major tool and a major hindrance in understanding earth history — but once again science has proved self-correcting, and terms that look closed have proved not to be so.

Books that make us think are welcome, and I agree with those majority of critics who have found *The Road to Botany Bay* original, imaginative and stimulating, if also at times infuriating. It is also a substantial work of scholarship in that Carter is both widely and deeply read, with a very thorough knowledge of his primary texts. Stewart McIntyre (*Australian Society*) puts it thus:

‘This is not one of those modish attempts to throw a theoretical grid over commonplaces. The material is hard won by the author himself. His analytical grip on the material is sure.’<sup>19</sup>

That is high praise from an historian.

Yet even the favourable reviewers seem to find it difficult to come to grips with Carter’s central thesis — perhaps because they take it for granted, while the hostile ones reject it out of hand. There is also a difficulty that Carter imposes wilfully, by adorning his thesis with red herrings. There is, nevertheless, a central thesis, and one that is worth taking seriously. It is perhaps best approached through a passage quoted by Carter:

‘Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities. To the Enlightenment, that which does not reduce to numbers, and ultimately to the one, becomes illusion; modern positivism writes it off as literature’.<sup>20</sup>

But, Carter implies, literature is not ‘mere’ at all: it is an authentic mode of knowing, and indeed a better mode of knowing than the positivist mode, because it is truer to the fine texture of experience. Is this true, and does Carter substantiate his claim? My own answer, in brief, is that it is a complementary way of knowing, and that Carter illustrates that well. His approach yields many valuable insights — but, as I have already suggested in this review, I cannot accept that one way displaces the other. All history, all science, all writing, is a process of selection — selection made in two ways, the obvious one of putting some things in and leaving some things out, and the less obvious but more basic one imposed by the structure of the discourse in which one is working.

By ‘literature as a way of knowing’ Carter clearly means the literary intelligence, i.e. that of the writer and the literary critic conjointly, and he illustrates the workings of the literary intelligence again and again, above all in revealing the biases of selection imposed by historical discourse. What, for example, constitutes a primary source or ‘document’ for historians? Words. But whose words? The words of those who had the education and leisure to write; and in the early days of the settlement at Port Jackson this was a very small group, all, of course, drawn from the Establishment. Watkin Tench was one of the few early chroniclers, and he has been quoted ad nauseam by Australian historians.<sup>21</sup>

So Carter goes to work on Watkin Tench, who was critical of the convict use of thieves cant or ‘flash language’

‘Underworld cant, it is also the language of the roads, the language of illicit exchange, where objects change names as they pass from hand to hand. It is a language designed to baffle detection — and, significantly, Tench’s first argument against it is the difficulty it creates in courts of law. Significantly, too, Tench sees the practice of this language as an integral part of the convict’s physical practice: cant and crime, word and deed, cannot be separated. Predictably, Tench is of the opinion that ‘an abolition of this unnatural jargon would open the path to reformation’. Here we see the Enlightenment project of reducing the world to uniformity, replacing local difference with universal intelligibility. The path to reformation, like the road to Botany Bay, leads to prison’ (Carter pp. 317-318).

The reference to the 'Road to Botany Bay' needs explication, since it is Carter's title, one that he uses to carry a range of meanings. Beginning with the obvious one, the road to Botany Bay is the path to the exploration and settlement of Australia. Then, at a more conceptual level, that road must be pushed back into the world view of the Enlightenment, which established ways of proceeding. But there is a third sense, the one referred to here. Once the colony had moved from Botany Bay to Sydney Cove, the road back to Botany Bay became something like the freedom road for Southern slaves in the U.S.A.; it was seen by the convicts, and feared by the authorities, as a way of escape. That the attempts at escape — for example, to join the French ships anchored there for a time — had little success, was less important than the idea of a road, the idea of escape that it kept alive. For the same reason, it was not important, indeed a complex irony, that there was no road physically, at best an Aboriginal pathway or a way through the woods. For Carter is linking two themes: the underworld language of the convicts, from which The Establishment was locked out, and the way through the woods as an anti-road, also excluding authority. Yet, says Carter, neither the convict cant nor their road constitute documents nor settlement, and thus they have no voice! Only Watkin Tench has a voice. In reconstructing the idea of that 'road' Carter is giving the convict, and even the Aborigines, their voice. He does it with great ingenuity:

'In this sense, the convicts' recidivist habit of, in Collins's words, 'flying from labour into the woods'<sup>22</sup>, like their habit of retreating into an impenetrable argot, only served to bring home the urgency of clearing a space, of marking out conceptual, as well as physical, boundaries. For to call the road to Botany Bay a 'road', may have been a rhetorical means of suggesting the deceptiveness of appearances, but it also recognized the wood as the place of masked schemes, the place of highwaymen, unseen violence and strange translations (from white to black, from confinement to freedom), an environment predicated on the formalized and continuous transgression of fixed boundaries. So there is pathos in Tench's 'road' as well as irony: for while the convicts might prey on roads, in their own travelling they avoided them. Roads were for other people, for people who had an official destination in mind and were where they wanted to be at once. The more inconvenient they were for travellers, the better they suited the man of the road. For convicts, roads were proof that the fruits of travel were there for the taking, that roads bearing bullion distributed largesse. Roads were like laws, for crossing at night. But, confined to the high way of reason, how could Tench have acknowledged this? Only by settling it with roads of his own could Tench order Botany Bay's thieving spaces and deceptive meadows' (Carter p.319.)

Carter is exhibiting here one aspect of the literary intelligence, a sensibility to the shaping power of the written word. He reminds us, by quoting Adorno<sup>25</sup>, that 'History does not merely touch on language, but takes place in it' (p.325). History excludes all that is not quoted or written down, and thus it both reveals and *hides* our origins from us.

A second skill of the literary intelligence that Carter exhibits is the talent for the felicitous phrase. One example must serve. In describing the layout of Melbourne and most of our other towns and cities, we are told that 'Oriented towards the cardinal points of the compass, its grid was a container for real estate; its streets were conduits for auctioneers' (p.204). Evocative, highly suggestive of boom-town Melbourne — but the phrase also has the defect of such rich language. The meanings are not controlled or discriminated. Melbourne had wide, rectilinear streets, and it was a paradise for auctioneers — but is there a necessary connection? Prim and nonconformist Adelaide had equally wide, rectilinear streets. The plans of Melbourne and Adelaide have much in common when stripped of later overlays. But then so do Limerick in Ireland, and Delhi in India, all plantation cities imposed by the British. The initial function of the wide streets and grid favoured by colonial surveyors was that they made military control easier, and were well ventilated, at a time when disease was thought to be transferred by noxious vapours.

The third skill of the literary intelligence displayed by Carter, one we have noted already, is his flair for critical analysis. Some of his analyses are brilliant, while others succumb to the dangers of the method in being over-ingenuous. Much of his probing uses dialectical pairs, especially the light and the dark, and the horizontal and the vertical.

'The horizontal and the vertical, the light and the dark: these are the twinned dialectical properties that characterize the burning light. They are also fundamental modalities characterizing the intimate space of the first white Australian travellers and settlers.'

He fuses them by seeing pine trees as a dark flame:

'The pine trees marked a place of habitation. They stood at the focus of the road. They also stood for the inmates' verticality. They were like flames, green, aspiring, vital. They stood for stability, endurance. They externalized a growing depth of attachment — and perhaps their dark, bosky plumage assisted in suggesting their rootedness and antiquity.' (Carter p.272)

This image of the pines (including Norfolk Island pines and the Bunya-bunya pines, the indigenous *Araucaria* so commonly planted by nineteenth century homesteads) makes them an extension of the candle in the window, an observation that attempts to find the meaning of a very widespread item of environmental behaviour in our past. He also comments in passing on the profound change in our imaginative life that must have followed the replacement of the flickering flame of candle and lantern with the even and uniform light so easily there at the touch of a switch — whereas

'Moonlight and forest make visible to the traveller his own mythical origins, the jumble of gothic images that constitute his history. With the phantasmogoric clarity of a dream, they conjure up before him his own gods and keepers on the way.' (Carter p.266)

The tension between horizontal and vertical is explored in many ways, peculiarly apt in Australia, where Carter can talk of vertical deprivation and vertical longing, both among explorers looking for a vantage point and the dwellers in flat suburbia, where vertical deprivation may be acute.

The best sustained passage is part of an analysis of Matthew Flinders' journal recording his years on Mauritius (where he was held prisoner by the French). In 1805 he was given permission to lodge with a French family in the interior of the island. In the course of a journey through the mountains, he came to one of the island's spectacular waterfalls, and that gave rise to the following reflection:

'It appears to me that originally there had been only one great cascade or declivity at the mouth of the valley, but that the water draining through the crevices of the rock above caused pieces to fall down, forming another cascade. The same thing, happening further and further back in the course of time, has brought them to what we now find them; and it is still going on . . . thus nature proceeds in reducing all things to a level as well in the moral as the physical world . . . From reflections of this sort which I pursued much farther, I passed to the vicissitudes of my own life. I was born in the fens of Lincolnshire, where a hill is not to be seen for many miles, at a distance from the sea, and my family unconnected with the sea affairs, or any kind of enterprize or ambition. After many incidents of fortune and adventure, I found myself a commander in the Royal Navy, having been charged with an arduous expedition of discovery; have visited a great variety of countries, made three times the tour of the world; find my name known in more kingdoms than where I was born, with some degree of credit; and this moment a prisoner in a mountainous island in the Indian Ocean.'<sup>24</sup>

Carter's comment follows:

'It would be hard to imagine an autobiographical account that demonstrated more clearly how 'the centres of our fate', to borrow Gaston Bachelard's formulation, are located in

'the spaces of our intimacy'. For the profound tension between the horizontal and the vertical, which Flinders describes here, is not only a spatial opposition that goes back to his earliest memories of the Fens: it also expresses the ambiguity of Flinders's fate — where the ambition 'to get on' has led, despite himself, not only to horizontal, but also to vertical, advancement. But we notice that it is in the opposite, the threateningly vertical, environment of Mauritius that this process of reflection occurs. For much as the contemplation of the waterfall depresses Flinders, it also elates him. And this dialectical tension informs his recollection of home. If, in one mood, the flatness of the Fens, their open horizons, induces a delicious sense of retirement and refuge, in another, their unadventurous equilibrium provokes panic and revolt.

We begin to feel both the horror of the plains and their attraction, a tension that, perhaps, only the map-making mind can bring under control. For, if the horizontal is the realm of Flinders' childhood, unenclosed by hills, open in all directions, the place where all futures are possible, then it is also the focus of annihilation, the inescapable point of return, where all variety is reduced to a level. In this latter aspect, it signifies the waste of vital energies, the dissipation of promise, the oblivion of an imprisonment without walls. This is the double aspect of the plain: that it releases into nothingness. Directionless and equal, it inhibits motion, it resists exploration. The solution to the plain is the mountain. But this, too, has its ambiguous aspect. If, in the form of cascades, it encourages the current of associative thought, it also leads to the prospect of extinction. Obeying the vertical impulse of its nature, the cascade inexorably wears itself out, loses its nobility, in the vicissitudes of time grows perhaps serpentine. The hill Flinders once desired, perhaps, bounding the fen, a point of departure, grows in adulthood, into a coronet of mountains, symbolizing not release but enclosure. The variety of the world, fanned out by his arduous career, is closed up again in an island as round as the first horizon.' (Carter p.197)

This works brilliantly as literary analysis, deepening our awareness both of Flinders' use of language and of the quality of his experience, but I submit that it works so well because Flinders is himself exploiting a conventional literary trope, that of dialectical contrast, and that this coincides with Carter's dialectical preferences.

This is in contrast with passages in which the analysis does not work, such as the following, in which A.E. Howitt records a conversation with a shepherd near Bendigo, one of many whom the isolation of the bush had driven near to insanity:

'I asked him what books he had read. He said he had read Burns's Poems and the Bible. And had read some of Shakespeare. Two of Shakespeare's dramas that he had read were Hamilton and Macbeth. These were all he could remember. But he sometimes got a map to read, which was very amusing. To trace out the roads, and the places of market-towns, was very interesting. He complained much of the want of fruit in this country, and seemed to remember with a wonderful relish russet apples. "Oh! those russets! They are beautiful fruit. I remember eating them somewhere in England; I don't remember where, but they were beautiful."'<sup>25</sup>

Carter's analysis follows:

It is tempting to see in this poor man's obsession with maps a desire to find himself, to trace his own place in the world. As for the 'russets', so much bigger than the circles distinguishing 'market-towns' on the map, perhaps they represented the relish of roads, which, for all their strict linearity, implied the location of places, the roundedness of return. In the imaginary spaces of the map, he glimpsed perhaps a lost home; in the familiar names, a lost society.' (Carter p.229)

Some temptations are better withheld. That the maps represent a desire to find himself is at least plausible, although simple home-sickness would be my diagnosis. But in missing the apples, surely the poor man was doing no more than missing the apples. Richard Mahoney missed them too, although when he returned to England, he found himself missing Granny Smiths<sup>26</sup>. Henry Handel Richardson probably missed them herself, just as Australian housewives in America claim to miss Vegemite.

So I conclude that there is more than one way of knowing, with different claims on our attention. Paul Carter has made such claims, in this rich plum-pudding of a book. It is now in paper back, and you should buy it, both for itself, and to encourage Faber and Faber to publish more such intellectual explorations.

Peter Fuller tells us that Carter is proposing two more books.

'The second will deal with migrations: the third, centred on Venice, will seek to apply spatial history to European cities'. (*Canberra Times*)<sup>7</sup>

I hope he writes them, and I look forward to reading them, although I also share David Dolan's hope that

'if Carter and his spatial history are to fulfil their potential, they need a tough, sceptical editor for the next book' (*Canberra Times*)<sup>7</sup>.

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## Perfect Moment

It's not that I think you're lying,  
But I am not blind  
To the nature of men, to their hearts as things  
Of a naturally changeable kind.

If I die right now, I need not live  
To watch you change your mind.

Takashina no Kishi (-996)

## Moonlit Orchard

On this spring night  
The moon-beams leant  
Like ladders through the apple-boughs  
Seem downwards bent  
Not by the weight of flowers but by  
White apple-scent.

Fujiwara no Toshinari (1114-1204)

## Acacia Elongata on a Track to Nowhere

This morning swamp wattle  
spears fallen drops of sun. Marshland  
hugs its secrets under a haze of spring  
and over a shoulder of silence coal trucks roar,  
thundering at brightness and breaking bitumen.

Last night, rain renewed this world.  
So now the *acacia elongata* shivers through  
cellophane air, melting onto the morning  
a transfer as slight as any image of joy.  
Only earth choirs darkly  
its eisteddfod of men and minerals.

In a town nearby, into houses of tin,  
a little light splashes. A shift worker  
snatching time rules a stallion  
down footpaths where his family cannot follow.  
If understanding was not born where his fist  
left its birthmark, what other language can he try?

In a town built over emptiness,  
hollow men are lords. That is their power  
and their penance. They take their lives  
into the honeycombed dark under kitchens,  
homing blackly toward a winged glow of dollars,  
a sweet importance they will shed like pollen  
when they see air again.

Above the earth, no one mentions now  
how on a spring-light morning one of them  
(a man with nerve-ends not-quite-dead)  
flying as if to work was grounded by a pothole —

seeing as always the far-crumpled mountains,  
a cold blue quilt around the town,  
did he hear a rattle as loving  
as any in his baby's bed but back on earth  
quivering like a geiger counter  
shock only pills from his pocket?

Over his shoulder, trees like candles  
flickered beyond their bark. As he kept driving,  
driving, acacias  
and lost miners' lamps lit his way to sleep.

A car abandoned. A shell without a snail.  
In town, the hollow houses are slithery-tongued.  
Months later, timbergetters on a track to nowhere  
see some clothes propping up a tree.  
A hand-knitted cardigan, a birthday watch,  
time-sagged trousers of drill.

Cables and ribbing,  
hours tightened by wool. In some stranded moment  
before he reached here, someone's father subsided.  
Beneath the bones, marks of moths,  
like journeys under skin, tunnel the tree.

Now the marsh hugs its secrets.  
*Acacia elongata* spikes the sun. Silence this morning  
is the lord of mourning as past this track  
from nowhere, bees and coal trucks  
fume back to town.

## Stealing a Dance

A thwarted ballerina,  
cross-legged in bronze leotards,  
the ironing board bends at the waist  
extending its arms and importing  
new costumes.

Not at its conception, but later —  
when the spraypainter was unmasking  
knocking off for the day  
and colour like a cloud of tulle  
was drifting dry glitter  
through the factory air —

did this dancer with too-big feet always ready  
begin to hear the lack of clapping.  
It settled on concrete, planning moves:

a scissor-spin on ice, a knife-flick kick . . .

Still wet around the hinges, it learned about life  
a moment later cracked flat and jangling  
swept from the light dropped on a stack  
of dying swans all of them  
one in a million.

Chosen now for surprising solos,  
shouldn't any dancer be philosophical?  
Heartless, the ironing board  
flaunts hope on each ruffled sleeve.

Flounces as faded as harvested wheat fields  
around these shoulders spring up  
Fabulon-fresh. Crimped silk  
becomes a pool of light pirouetting.

Its spine is straight in a teacher's shirt  
but the next act beach-bleached batik  
fits it just as well.

Every part it is offered  
the ironing board accepts, tries for three minutes  
then rejects. Chosen now

by a woman who ritually wreathes it  
in hot hisses and whispers secretive sounds  
like the static of thoughts at night  
or a balloon fluttering in the small square  
of a room running out of air

the ironing board is patient. Balancing now  
before this most difficult dance,  
it guards into its beggar's arms  
auditioning dreams. Even hunchbacks —  
the ironing board knows —

long sometimes for a high kick.

## The fig tree and the neighbour

She has been telling her for years  
*I do not care.* Still the neighbour  
comes each autumn with her cloth sacks  
that will keep the figs from the birds.  
She is out there now, an old woman,  
arms like branches, struggling the wind  
with scraps of old rope, clambering  
fit to fracture something; making  
from a tree, a stupid, bandaged  
scarecrow. Give her the old black jays  
any day — stage villains leering  
upsidedown, orange-eyed behind masks,  
taunting through the window, tearing  
hooks through green to gulp at mauve flesh.

She drinks her tea, an ambivalent back  
towards the frame of her neighbour -  
thin in a flapping dress, skirting,  
binding the tree or herself, wrestling  
leaves like recalcitrant birds into sacks.  
*Terrible that fruit should waste!*  
The younger woman nods to her  
teacup, knowing how in a week  
or two, the fruit will have softened  
into pink and dropped. Too sweet.  
Like scrotum amongst dead leaves waiting  
to be untied in the cloth bags  
from the bony tree, sticky, rotten  
and a morbid wasp hovering.

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# DOREEN SULLIVAN

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## Kaepwah, 1979: Kaepwah, 1985

KAEPWAH, 1979.

DEFINITION: Lower-Socio-Economic neighbourhood. State Housing Commission neighbourhood.

RESIDENTS: Tough.

KAEPWAH, 1985.

DEFINITION: State Housing Commission. More potholes. More trucks. More truck drivers.

RESIDENTS: Still tough. Bad reputations.

### SISSY-PRUE MOVES TO KAEPWAH, 1979

DEFINITION of Sissy-Prue: Female. Blonde. Ten years old. Nice quiet girl. Always calls herself Prue. Doesn't talk to the kids across the road.

### THE KIDS ACROSS THE ROAD, 1979

DEFINITION: The kids across the road are not really kids. The kids across the road are all about thirteen, mainly male. Often play truant. They're all waiting until they're fifteen. Meanwhile they work on cars that are really only car bodies. Dean, with the dyed blonde hair, his roots showing through, notices Sissy-Prue, but doesn't talk to her. None of the kids pay much attention to Prue.

### PRUE RETURNS HOME FROM HER FIRST DAY AT THE NEW SCHOOL, 1979. THE DAY'S SPEECH FRAGMENTS GO THROUGH HER HEAD.

- What's "Kaepwah" mean? Abo word. Some reckon it's running water. Others reckon it's a dog doing y'know.
- She's bright red!
- If you give me half your icy-pole I'll be your best friend.
- Is she dumb? She's only said one thing all day.

### TWO MONTHS AFTER PRUE MOVES TO KAEPWAH, SHE GOES TADPOLE HUNTING IN THE CREEK:

The creek is really a sort of drainage system which splits Kaepwah down the middle. The slopes are covered in long, dry grass, and the kids grab hold of it as

they go down. At both ends of the creek are large concrete drainpipes. One end disappears under the road, and Sissy-Prue has been warned to keep away from there, especially in winter, to never walk through the drainpipe like some kids do. Prue's mother has visions of water flooding in a great wave, behind Prue's back if she walks along the drainpipe. She gets swept up, drowns. The other drainpipe isn't large enough to stand up in, but Dean with the blonde hair sometimes sits on top of it checking out the girls. He sits with his jeans rolled to his knees, his black tee-shirt, bare feet, and a cigarette. He looks at Prue. She is with Sharon, her best friend ever since they shared Prue's icy-pole.

"C'mon," says Sharon. She slides down the grass slopes on a piece of cardboard. "Bring the container." The cardboard sloshes into the water as soon as Sharon gets off it. "Drat." Prue sticks both containers in her shoulder bag and starts climbing down on all fours.

"Come on," says Sharon.

"I'm coming."

Prue catches lots of large tadpoles with her mother's colander. Sharon just catches them with her hands.

"Ooh! They tickle!"

"They tickle," Dean says to the girl who stands behind him on the pipe. She won't sit down because it's that tight she'll bust her skirt.

"Give me a fag," he says.

#### SISSY-PRUE RIDES HOME FROM TADPOLE HUNTING. HER CONTAINER IS FULL:

Dean steps out in front of Prue. "I love you," he says, glares at her. Prue rides on.

"Aren't I good enough for you?"

Prue rides on. Dean grabs the back of her bike.

"Are you deaf or something?"

"Get lost."

"La-di-da! Who do you think you are?"

"Let go of the bike."

"Not till you give me a kiss."

"Get lost."

Prue looks at Dean's face. He's an albino, almost, more so with the dark clothes he wears; his freckles stand out, it seems to Prue, and his eyes are red-rimmed, with sandy eye-lashes. Mean, she thinks.

"Get. Lost," she tells him, jerks his hand off the back of her bike, steps on the pedals, and rides home fast. All the tadpoles slosh against the top of the container. When she gets home she notices one of them squished against the lid. She peels it off and throws it in the garden. Three weeks later, when the tadpoles are frogs, Prue returns them all to the creek, but makes sure Sharon comes with her.

#### KAEPAWAH HIGH SCHOOL, 1982

**DEFINITION:** A screaming teacher. Female. Young. Sophisticated?

**Embarrassment:** **DEFINITION:** Prue. Prue wears a dark green uniform. She walks to the teacher's desk. She talks to her. There is a stain on the bottom half of her dress.

— Is it? It is . . . ? It is!

— Sissy-Prue has got the reds. Pass it on.

Prue feels uncomfortable. She can sense everyone looking at her. She has the hot flushes, she blushes up and down her skin. She won't turn to face the class. She doesn't know what exactly they're staring at. Across the base of her spine, and around her stomach, another pain, a cramp grips her, and seems to grip down the inside of her legs. She turns white. Teacher sends Prue outside for a glass of water. Prue visits the toilet too, and goes home. No one can see her, but she's bright red all the way home. Prue doesn't want to go to school on Monday, but her mother tells her not to be ridiculous.

#### DEAN, ACROSS THE ROAD, 1982

Dean works in a checkout sort of job. Gets covered with flour working around the bakery section. In and out of doors, hot and cold. Airconditioning. Cold, hot, cold, hot. Like Prue, hey? he thinks. She smiles at him when he smiles, but not much else: Doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, doesn't swear, doesn't get on with *anyone*. Dean takes time off to see her come home from school, to stir her up a bit. Loses his job. But who cares? he thinks. He's gonna work on his car and fix her up real good. Yeah, real good. He keeps the brother away from it. Once his brother, only eight, hopped in the car, let go the brake, swung it out the drive, and almost knocked over the kids skating in the street. Dean thinks how Prue only skates on the path now, and everyone knows that's no good, 'cos you've got all those cracks.

#### INSIDE PRUE'S HOUSE, 1982

- Thirteen is *not* too young to think of your future.
  - You don't want to turn out like one of young Dean's girlfriends, do you Prue?
  - Who said anything about Dean?
  - You just keep away from his type.
  - Yes Dad.
  - Well, what do you want to do?
  - How would I know?
  - Prue, don't speak to your father like that. You've got to think of your future.
- How many of Dean's girlfriends think of their future?
- Other than a moll, y'mean?

#### PRUE, 1983

Her mother's face: looks at her, with its little droopy lips. "Don't do that, Prue."

Her mother's face: white, mouth pursed, looks at Prue. Her mother smokes too much; there are a lot of lines around her mouth, like a thistle. She said to Prue: "Don't you talk to that Dean." He talks to Prue.

Prue's mother looks: at Prue's dad. She doesn't speak to him. "That Prue," she says finally.

"That Prue," he says, but with a smile.

Her mother's face, triumphant: Prue tells her, "Well *I* didn't want to move here anyway."

And her mother's face: peeking out behind the curtain each day. As if Prue couldn't see her. She makes sure Prue walks to school each day. She makes sure Prue doesn't get a bad reputation. When Dean's brother tripped Prue over, she rushes out with mecuarchrome. When asked how she knew Prue was hurt, she pressed her lips together. "Instinct!" she cried.

## DEAN, 1984

The sound of Dean's mum screaming. Prue's father says, "She's got a voice on her like a foghorn." The truck is still. Kids are roller-skating in the street, and a skate-board is going over the rough bitumen, chook-chook-chook. The sound of Dean's mother yelling her head off.

— Ken! Get your hands off my boy!

The sound of SLAPSLAPSLAP.

— He's pissed. He deserves it.

— Get in your truck. You'll be late.

— I'm gettin' in. I'm not coming back, you hear?

The sound of the engine gunning over: Ker-Clunk-clunk-clunk. VROOM. Whirr.

— I can look after myself Mum. You can just keep out of it.

— Don't you speak to me like that, Dean. Get your brother off the road before he gets himself run over.

## SISSY-PRUE AND DEAN GET TOGETHER IN THE DRAINPIPE, 1985.

This morning, Prue's mother went beserk. She's been living in Kaepwah for a while now. She yelled at Prue's dad. She told Prue to close all the windows.

I HATE THIS I HATE THIS I HATE LIVING HERE. I hate how no matter how much the wind blows, the cooking smells stay in the kitchen layer upon layer; I hate how one truck starts its engine at a quarter to four, the next at four-thirty, and the next at five. I hate coming home from work, and every kid in the street is sitting across our driveway, perched like bloody sparrows on wire. And I hate how I beep my horn at them, and they don't move. When I get out of the car, they all get up, and I have to start the car up again, and race into my own driveway, before they sit down again, because they all know I can't run them over. And I don't like you spending time with Dean, Prue.

— I don't spend time with Dean.

And I hate how you've gotten so impudent, answering me back, when I know if we'd stayed where we were, you'd still be such a good girl —

— She's growing up for Pete's sake! All girls are like Prue.

— Are they? Are they just, Dad? Maybe I'll go out and give you two something to think about, if you're going to think it anyway.

And I hate it how Prue's going out to cause trouble now.

Dean follows Prue down the street. "What's up with you?"

"Didn't you hear already?"

"Yeah. Come to the creek with me?"

"Guess so."

Dean walks toward the large drainpipe, and Prue thinks of getting drowned, and of rats, but it's summer time, so she follows. Inside is a blanket. The air is cold, and their voices echo.

"Dean?" asks Prue. Prue's cold, she can feel the curve of the cement drainpipe against her back, through her shirt. Dean puts his hand up her shirt, Prue tells him his hand is cold, Dean pulls a small flask out of his back pocket, drinks some, and Prue spills some down the front of her shirt. Dean takes his flask back. Dean leans into Prue, and presses her against the pipe: Prue thinks of when she was thirteen, in the class when it came, and Prue turns bright red, and Prue thinks of Sharon, Sharon comforting her days later, of Sharon's freckles, of Sharon's comforting arm, and how she could almost taste the freckles when they were together when young,

Sharon's head lightly touching Prue, her "s all right", and Dean's hand is getting warmer, and Sharon's face seems to be looming, like a moon, and Prue thinks: Prue never swears. All there is . . .

"Dean?" says Prue.

"Uh?" says Dean.

"Umm. Nothing," says Prue.

A truck drives over the top of the road: Ker-Clunk-clunk-whirr. And Prue's getting pins and needles in her thigh where Dean's resting his elbow.

Prue: DEFINITION: Unformed. Undefined. What's Prue doing in a drainpipe?

Dean: DEFINITION: Lower-Socio-Economic. No explanation needed.

Kaepwah: DEFINITION: A tough neighbourhood.

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## Mr Banford's Winter Departure

No one saw him at all  
in the main street that morning.  
The cat, it was said, was fed  
and let out by the lady  
who 'did' for him daily.  
The birds, it seemed, had not heard  
turning up as they usually did  
for the crumbs on the lawn  
before checking the Browns'.  
The blinds were not drawn  
and the stars shone  
perhaps a little more brightly  
than usual for the time of the year.  
Under its cover  
his bureau was bursting with living  
things one expects: debts and cheques,  
bills and brochures,  
when a child's wind-up beetle  
disconsolately fell from a shelf.  
Attached to the truncheon  
he kept at the base of the bookcase  
and the photos of Maldon  
there were sure to be stories.  
He'd not worn some shoes  
in the wardrobe  
and as was its custom  
a bow-fronted chest  
swelled with linen and shirts  
and varieties of ties,  
socks and collars in boxes.  
Only the coat hung more limply  
than normal from the Victorian  
stand in the hall.

O, what it is to be left  
with the loss of a cat,  
the anger of sparrows and a clock  
that has stopped on a strike;  
with the feeling of dully walking  
a street so abruptly emptied  
of stars, the neighbours tucked in  
to the safest of places  
behind their draped laces  
as if someone had suddenly died.

## Off The Record

In '42 our English Grandma  
recorded her voice on a 78 disc  
and shipped it to Melbourne  
registered parcel post.  
Grandma, heard and not seen;

her voice better than a letter,  
a light in Mum's eye  
in days when aunts were not aunts  
and uncles were missing  
or away at the war.

We listened, breath held  
on the tip of the silence.  
Grandma in the loungeroom  
sounded strangely familiar;  
we knew we belonged.

Post war we sailed *home*  
on Mum's savings  
counting days slow as mail  
from blood relatives, packed in  
with the thankyou's and news.

Waiting was the Grandma we knew  
off the record who'd spoken  
and broken off suddenly,  
the needle still in the groove:  
'I don't want to say anymore.'

## Thompson's Testimony

And so, I guess, after all the doubts and false starts, the time has come. I'm finally giving in to this temptation that's gnawed me for so long. The temptation, despite habits of reticence and secrecy, to commit myself to paper, to set down some record, some explanation, of what I did.

Yet, why? When no one will benefit. Just words . . . But now I've got hold of the idea, I can't rest, I can't be at peace until I have laid these thoughts down.

I could chant them to the empty room, I suppose, keeping beat with finger cymbals. I could whisper them into my conch shell. I could sit — lotus posture — and solemnly address my Buddha statuette. But it would be ridiculous! Like I was only fit for the funny farm. And so I write, which is little better, but more respectable and doesn't disturb the neighbours.

You see, I want to give a fuller impression, not of the event itself, which wasn't that remarkable though some people seemed to reckon it so, but of the thinking behind the event, the frame of mind that lent it logic and made it a turning point in my life. I'm an old man now, and I shall die soon. And it seems important, though pointless too in a way, to leave this testimony, to fold it and seal it in my silver cigar box that has the flowing, copperplate initials, and let it lie there until one day some curio seeker discovers it . . .

All life is a leaving. And a return. Already, I realise with a pang that I've grown used to this bare room: white walls, the brown-red smears of crushed mosquitoes; a small window on to the canal, one of the few (apart from the Klong of course) left; a dirty straw mat on the floor, a mattress and cover in the corner; a washroom of sorts off; a naked yellowish bulb burning in the middle of the ceiling. I sit on a boxwood stool, writing at the bamboo table. I raise my eyes from my exercise book and take in, in turn, the little brass Buddha, the gleaming cigar case, and the large curved shell.

The simplest things have become endlessly engaging, unfathomable enigmas. Hours pass by while I hold that shell in my hands, contemplating it, its conical shape, its pearly whiteness, its porcelain translucence. With my finger I trace the delicate groove that spirals from pointed tip to gaping entrance. I try to project myself into the consciousness of that pulpy creature that fashioned it from its own soft flesh and lived out its days on the sea-bed and was swayed by the tides. Its perfection of form humbles me in my gangly ugliness . . .

Every day I live more simply. When I first came to this room I brought many old habits with me, silken chains that bound me to the other life. I couldn't do without Singha beer or Cuban cigars. But I gave them up. I used to need a rich tasty meal a couple of times a week. Now, I live on simple food — raw vegetables, rice, fruit. I drink water, sometimes dried milk made up, maybe a little tea. I seek the clean, the plain, the clear and unadorned, for I want, above all, to remove myself from the suffocating clutter of the world.

Not that I'm in any way becoming more spiritual. I'm still grossly of the earth. My body and its smells and its functions loom large in this small room, and I've got to know my body in a direct way. I no longer care about the ageing that has lined the skin and stooped the frame. I'm free at last of that Yankee urge to improve it, to make it fitter, more athletic. (When I think of all the time I spent working out with weights and pounding round cinder tracks!) I look down dispassionately at my bare, bony torso and the thin shanks sticking out from my shorts. The cells are dying, the liver spots are spreading, and the tissues are sagging, and I am no longer either ashamed or proud.

But there's life in the old carcass yet. Noy visits in the afternoon once a fortnight, before she takes the half-hour bus-ride to Patpong and her dancing on the bar. She performs her service quickly, and takes her four-hundred baht (senior citizen rate), pressing her palms together and bowing her pretty head in a cute goodbye. She is never more than pleasant. I can't blame her. An old man getting his rocks off is not an exciting spectacle. Perhaps I ought to be in a monastery. Why not? I like it — the saffron robes, the chants, the tiny bells jingling in the breeze amongst the Wats, the teachings of the Buddha, learning from some of those masters. But . . . It would be kinda pretentious for me to become a monk, like acting out a role. The strange environment just wouldn't suit, would distract me in fact from what counts.

No, I prefer to live it all out within reach of the honking horns of the street, the revving trucks and buses and tuk-tuks, the play of children, the fiery rows of married neighbours, the stain of money and the sweat of sex, all around me here in this poor neighbourhood where they have the decency, amongst their urgent struggles, to ignore me.

I hope Noy finds a boyfriend. Somebody with tight Levis and heavy shades and a five-hundred-cc. Yamaha that he loves to gun down Rama Road. Somebody who cares for her, but not too much; who can give her an excitement she'll never forget; someone who is entirely himself — thoughtless and reckless and young, for so short a while. Then he too will lose it, slip from animal grace into the consciousness of time. And with that everything else that blights life — worrying about making ends meet, finding the rent, bringing up the kids, growing old, dying. All life is a leaving. And a return. We are bound on a wheel of fire, the Buddha teaches, condemned to suffer and to return until we attain nirvana, a blessed freedom from the flesh, pure, triumphant transcendence of the spirit . . .

I'm not afraid of death. When I was in the War (I must've been one hell of a tough guy once to make it into OSS, though I don't know how, looking down at these sticklike legs beneath the table and these trembling hands) I saw lots get theirs one way or another — sniper's bullet, shrapnel, or landmine. What being in Strategic Services taught me, and it never leaves you, is not how not to be afraid, because everybody is afraid, but how to be sure that *you* of anyone knows best how to handle the fear. You see, you have to acknowledge the demon, and then master him, not annihilate him, for he's a good demon when under control and he can save you. Also, you learn to handle that other fear that begins as a quiver in the pit of the stomach and seeps upwards into the back of the eyes in the early hours when sleep just won't come. Then, consciousness becomes an interrogator, an inquisitor, a torturer, turning you upon yourself with questions that have no answers, with the appalling anxiety that you've made a mistake, made many mistakes, taken wrong paths, out of blindness and wilfulness passed by chances for contentment, for love, for authentic being, for generosity, in order to achieve goals that, in the cynical accountancy of a very old man, now seem like so much small change . . .

Like the business I built up, and all the things I collected. For a while, a fever of accumulation was in me. I scuttled everywhere — Siam, Cambodia, Bali, Penang, Hong Kong — haggling over prices with cold-eyed dealers, hassling and bribing

customs officers and captains for quick shipment, anything to get the pieces that intrigued me, thrilled me, gave me an aesthetic energy and aroused a lust for possession. The collection in my assembled Thai houses on the Klong — the statues, figurines, pots, paintings, temple hangings — grew, and grew, and took over my life. It became the expression of my self, my delicate artistic self, as I liked to think, just as the silk factory and its output and profits was an expression of my practical, Yankee business self. It took on a life of its own, so that I walked as a ghost in my own house, and the accumulated *objets d'art* breathed and murmured, spoke of the centuries, of the lingering caresses down all the years of their dedicated, anonymous makers . . .

Then, at the end of one afternoon when the grey Bangkok sky was dimming and the cicadas were beginning to chirp in the palms, I stood on my terrace near the spirit house looking across the canal to the little houses opposite, to the washing hanging out and the children playing on the balconies over the murky water, and I knew I had lived out one skin. The collection had reached its flowering. It no longer needed me, its mere seed and then gardener. So, I walked out. Renunciation. That was it. All life is a leaving. I felt freer than ever before, filled with an exhilarating airiness of being that was like a drug.

But the, I didn't renounce it so much, as embrace something else, grow into another skin. So, I staged my disappearance in the Malay jungle, just snuck out the bungalow, and found my way by map and compass. I lived off the land and what I could shoot with my revolver, and one morning in the mist I crossed back over the border. Then, I returned to Bangkok. To have stayed in the jungle, or the provinces, or in the mountains would have brought a danger of harbouring a nostalgia for the past, to have made the renunciation purely geographical, and therefore, incomplete. To be complete I had to be able to stand outside the houses I had given away and feel a pure indifference of heart.

So, like a thief, strangely ashamed, I sneaked back into my city, this noisy, dirty, crazy mix of the sacred and profane. I disguised myself as a scruffy American tourist — a straw hat, black plastic shades, windcheater, sneakers — and after the cheap hotels took this bare room. At first, when my picture was in the Bangkok papers I had some near misses with people recognising, or at least, thinking they recognised, me. But the truth seemed so unlikely, so incomprehensible, that they passed on, or were convinced by a few words, and I was able to get away with it. People quickly forgot, as they do, and I began to feel safe from discovery, so much so that after some years I even went to visit my house on the Klong . . .

All life is a leaving. And a return. I walked down the side-street from the bus and there they were — the high, peaked gables, the coppery-red exterior, the trees. I paid my forty Baht to the girl at the desk and said I was a Canadian tourist. The gentle, courteous guide with the round, gold-framed spectacles waited a few moments to see if any other English-speaking tourist would arrive and then led me round the houses. Downstairs first, and then upstairs, we passed through the dark interior of gleaming teak. The sunlight filtered between the spread palm fronds into the still, soothing rooms. I listened patiently to her account of my thirteenth-century stone Buddha, of my temple hangings on the stairs, of the pottery, of the other statues, of my dining room, and of my (now embarrassing) installation of modern bathroom facilities.

I say "my", but that is only a trick of memory, a stale habit of language. For, even as I gazed at the pitted-stone Buddha lit in the recess — and indulged in a relation to it the earnest guide couldn't guess at — I knew it wasn't mine, never had been. Sure, I paid five hundred good US dollars for it to a fat, chain-smoking Singaporean in Penang back in the Fall of 1952, but it didn't make it mine. I was more of a stranger to it than any of the French of Japanese tourists chattering in parties behind

us. I was more aware of, more specialised in, you might say, the estrangement that lay between that icon, that curio on the travel-firm trail, and me, its legal, living, actually present owner.

I was a ghost a second time. I drifted among the furniture; I haunted my old rooms, appearing in reflections in glass, running my fingertips over the dining table and the bedcovers. But they weren't mine; weren't anybody's any more. Then the beauty of what I'd done struck me, and I chuckled at the success of my trick. I'd left these objects — works of art, mythic symbols, religious idols, what you will — in limbo, out of reach of the constricting, irrelevant claims of personal ownership. They weren't anybody's; they were truly their own. And in humility, while the guide politely waited, blinking through her lenses, I gazed around at them in their fulness, their sure solidity of being, and inwardly blushed at ever having thought I owned them. My tour came to an end and I lingered, to complete the picture, around the souvenir counter before I left. As I walked back up the street I looked back deliberately and felt the peace of indifference . . .

I'm nearly finished. I shall die soon, but I don't want to die in this room. I've grown fond of it, sentimentalised it with my continuous presence. It's become home, and so I've got to leave. I'm going to go to Phuket in the South. There, on Surin Beach, at the southern end, is a spirit house, perched high on rocks beneath a low cliff. About the size of a doll's house, painted black with little steep gables, it sits there. A glass of water, two dried oranges, stand before it and some faded mauve garlands flutter from its roof. It looks out across the bay, past the promontory of palms, to the open Andaman Sea. When the day's ending, the village boys come down and scamper over the rocks with fishing lines and plastic carrier bags to cast from outcrops further on. Their thin forms move like stick silhouettes against the setting sun. The waves wash against the rocks below and on the cliff just above the leaves rustle. All life is a leaving. I want to be by that spirit house, so far from any human house, and there leave this worn-out flesh. For a brief respite I'll be with the spirit of that place that overlooks the Andaman Sea, before I'm called again to return.

Written this night in Bangkok.

Jim Thompson\*

\* Thompson, a former American serviceman, became a silk entrepreneur and art collector in postwar Thailand. He gathered together several traditional Thai houses on the side of the Klong canal in Bangkok and built up a rare collection of antique South-East Asian art. In 1967 he mysteriously disappeared, believed dead, in the Cameron Highlands of West Malaysia. The Thai Government now administers his 'house' as a tourist attraction and museum.

## **Lily: The Very Shape and Image of Love**

Lily wanted to be the very shape and image of love. Lily wanted to be beautiful. Lily wanted to make love in slow motion with a knowing man, their silhouettes on the slower screen of night, her neck and shoulders forming the most lovely curve in all the world. Lily was, of course, silly, but Lily was in pain.

Lily haunted mirrors, but she was not vain. She stared, wide-eyed, at the multiple reflections. Toasters, teapots, glass doors, shop windows, an endless variety of shining surfaces spoke to her with one voice, measuring her fate. She heeded their call. She heard it at night while she lay flat, the chorus drumming her body into the mattress: 'Lily, you are not beautiful, no one will ever love you'.

In Lily's short life one or two men had professed to love her and she had believed them for a while. Sapping upon their admiration, glowing with pleasure, she had drunk from the daffodil trumpet of their devotion. But the sweet bartering of touch and word could never last long. Lily's mirrors showed her the lie. Her dedicated amours dwindled in the pages of her diary, nullified by cryptic, caustic allusions to loss, betrayal, failure. She yielded herself up to the painful knowledge that she could never give enough, never make another person truly happy. For Lily had nothing to give. Lily was articulate, Lily was interesting, Lily was clever. Some said Lily was pretty. To Lily, 'pretty' was a term of contempt. Lily wanted to enchant, tantalize, bewitch, disturb, enthrall.

Here is our Lily. She is sitting behind a big wooden table in a secondhand bookshop. This young woman who smiles and serves is honey-coloured, small and plump with precise hands and feet. Her feet peep out from under the table, they are shod in glossy black leather. Her hands, long-fingered, are writing out a book order for a delicate young man with birdlike movements. She speaks to him politely, edging her eyes past him to observe the other patrons as they bend and sway like drunks in their attempt to read the titles of tattered volumes that linger on the lower shelves. Lily likes her job. The shop has no mirrors and the books have a beautiful firmness which makes her body ache. All day long Lily examines her customers with an anatomist's skill and the guile of a poet. Her eyelids narrow as she undresses every person who, on a foolish whim, dares to browse, and pad along the aisles of her domain. They flicker in and out behind the shelves. Handle one book, disregard another, leap upon a first edition. Each customer is different, yet they are all the same. They are all made of flesh which encompasses and follows their every movement. To Lily's practised gaze, nearly every face or body has a compelling, redeeming beauty. Some of the young women have thick, firelike hair. Ripe, older women, have cunning, carmine lips that swell to conjure all fantasies. Slender men have slight collarbones and wrists which turn the heart. Older men have hazy eyes which probe too keenly. Teenagers have the lightest of limbs. Legs made for dangling over piers, and wrapping round heaving hips.

Lily moistens her lips with a gentle tongue. The young man is speaking to her. He is so very nearly beautiful. Lily's frail pulse skids and jolts, she is ashamed of her round face, her thin hair, her large breasts, her earthy hips, her sturdy legs. A mobile face, it twitches. He has a nervous tic just below the right eye. He blinks frequently. His eyes, his eyes are water-coloured, or is it storm-cloud blue? White-faced, fine-featured, slim, elegant, intense. The man speaks and Lily listens. He talks of books she has read but she does not even attempt to 'sparkle', she does not care to appear intelligent, or well-read, or even attentive. She just wants to be beautiful. The man soon leaves. The door is shut, the cash is counted, the books are balanced. Lily's bag is on her arm, the legs of the meditative woman prepare to carry her home to her house of reflective surfaces.

Hop-skipping, hurrying, behind her. It is the young man. Breathless. He says he has waited for her. Could he walk her home. Lily is perfectly capable of 'walking' herself home, yet she is embarrassed, charmed, awkward, quite stupidly pleased. The stranger has an eager lilt in his voice. It is nearly dark. When they reach her flat she pauses on the doorstep, turns to look at him. His face shines, his smile is so endearing, he is quite definitely the loveliest of men. Inside her room, the man falls to his knees and presses his palms hard against her, cupping the pinkness of her pain. Lily leans back against a table. She is aghast, horrified, enthralled, pulsating. Blind, clumsy, wonderfully inarticulate, she gasps, pulls away the offending clothing. All the while he drinks of her, the man is mumbling 'O god, you are so beautiful, so beautiful'. And Lily is beautiful, she hums to the tune of his seraphic voice, she is the very shape and image of love, it does not matter that she cannot see the knife.

## Cats

Mother walked out under the Japanese peppercorn. It was the summer she was dying and even the nights were hot.

The cats crisscrossed in a game, white shadows running and jumping. We only ever kept the white cats. They all ran wild in the long grass. The younger ones could only be approached with a handful of red meat.

A dog found a way in through the pickets. The mother cat leapt onto its back, her claws sinking in. The dog yelped and ran for the fence. We all laughed.

Weeds and plants had taken over. In some parts they were pushing down the fence.

Someone was stealing our knickers. Every now and then our pants would go. One morning Mother said at breakfast: I dreamt I caught the thief. It was our English neighbour. Next door to us was a duplex. Half was full of a young Italian family, the other half was the English guy. His girlfriend visited on weekends. That night Mother was standing under the peppercorn tree waiting for the morning. He climbed through a hole in the fence and walked towards the line. What are you doing here? she said as she had in her dream. He stammered and muttered. She told him to get back to his own side of the fence. In the morning Sylvie nailed some old wood across the hole.

A snowdropper, Rennie laughed. But what does he do with them? He can always climb over the fence, Sylvie said, but it would all fall down and make a horrible racket. But what does he do with them? Rennie repeated. The English have taken their concept of property all over the world and we cut this land up into little squares because of it and look at him, he transgresses the boundaries, Mother grumbled. We'll have him up for trespass next time. But what does he do with them? we giggled. The giggle became a roar. We all had tears running down our faces.

Mother's younger sister Lynn visited. She ran her finger across the china shelf.

You girls are managing quite well, she said reluctantly.

The garden was white with moonlight. Mother was sitting on the garden seat, facing where the sun would come up. It must look like this when it's snowing, I said. White everywhere.

Perhaps, Mother said.

A shooting star dropped behind the peppercorn. I wished the summer would never finish.

Paul kept ringing to ask me out. I told him I was too busy most of the time.

I listened to the interminable tap tap tap of the walking-stick across the lino. She rested in the doorway when she got to the other side. I let out my breath.

Paul fronted me up on the doorstep. My business is going downhill, I've got money worries, and you've got no time for me.

You dumb bastard, I said.

I've got a new boyfriend, Rennie said.

What sort of car has he got? Sylvie asked.  
You will be the first to marry, Mother said.  
And I will be the last, I said.

Rennie's new boyfriend stood at the door, a limp bunch of flowers in his hand. He blushed a lot. Everywhere he looked there were eyes looking back. He stared at the table.

Buffalo grass was finding its way between the asbestos panels into the back of the kitchen cupboards.

As the summer went on the pain got worse. She would lie out under the jacaranda moaning. I wondered if it bothered the neighbours.

She got a walking frame. There was a slow clunk clunk through the house.  
Stupid thing! She kicked it angrily.

We helped her, two of us. I grasped her arm and she shivered, thin and light like a leaf.

Don't be so rough you girls, she complained.

We went for a picnic in the park. We took Mother's cushions and her chair. The flower beds were in bloom. Brilliant reds and oranges and yellows. The colours made me feel dizzy. I was so glad to be alive I wanted to skip and somersault round the path.

The phone went. It's Dad, Rennie said. He wants to see you. Mother was lying under the jacaranda.

No, she said. It's too much bother now.

The smell of decay was strong in her room.

Mother's brother Patrick visited. He hesitated inside the bedroom door, tall and helpless, a polite smile on his face. After a while Rennie took him out to the kitchen for a cup of tea.

The summer was long and unbearably hot. I began to wish it would end.

Buffalo grass was pushing out onto the plates. The thin skin of the house seemed ready to fly away in the wind.

Each morning she sat on a chair in the bathroom and gave herself a sponge bath. One day she couldn't get up. She called me. Don't look at me, she ordered. I helped her dress, eyes averted as she cried.

The mother cat had had another litter. Nobody wanted the last runty female.

I'll do it, Rennie sighed. She got the bucket of water and held it under. It struggled violently, then suddenly stopped. I'll never do it again, Rennie said after we buried it.

After Mother died we let the cats into the house. They had litter after litter in the wardrobes. We girls went out a lot. One night I came home about four. I had my shoes off, my feet were sore from dancing. I tiptoed inside then stopped, caught by a peculiar humming sound. I switched the livingroom light on. There were cats everywhere, on every available space. On the floor, on shelves, on cupboards, tables, chairs. The humming was coming from the cats. They were all looking at me, every eye in the room, unblinking.

## **Song for the New Born (for Jessica Brooks)**

In the dark hours  
you bring myths  
to song

in a tongue sung  
before time  
where you have just been

Everytime you remember  
timelessness it slips  
away like a favourite song

You sing it back  
to dream's border  
but we stopper your mouth

Listen how  
your dawn birds  
sing

Now sing back

## Place

“We live in a place/that is not our own and much more, not ourselves/  
and hard it is in spite of blazoned days.”

— W. Stevens

Another day in a world  
that is  
and is not of ourselves  
I struggle with memories —  
disconnected signs of  
past like  
an old photograph album  
page after page  
you say  
who are those people?  
I don't recognize the one  
with my face.

Reading *Life Studies*  
and Dickinson  
trying to think  
about what poetry is  
my daughter yells  
from the cardboard  
box she sits in  
Good Morning!  
its already three P.M.  
In the garden  
shadows create new places  
I have to trace  
a different path  
to keep in the sun.

## Memories of Underdevelopment

they talk of the terrible days  
running from japanese soldiers  
hiding in wet jungles  
eating tapioca leaves  
and crawling things  
on the city walls  
down by saint paul's hill, decomposing  
chopped heads, genitals stuffed  
in their mouths

when i was born my father  
called me Peace believing  
in treaties and the good  
conduct of mankind

but i've seen houses burn  
smoke curl on hillsides  
in the pre-tornado quiet  
of curfew at dusk  
pummelled by policemen  
slashed with machetes  
situasi tegang  
djamila boupichan  
my lai massacre  
hiroshima mon amour  
you ask me to sing love songs  
but i'm still searching  
for a place to sort out  
some old memories

## Bali Song

there is no green  
    like this rice-sprout  
dazzle      mirroring  
  
sky  
  
    pools  
mirrored in pools  
    tiered  
    like pagodas    heavenly blue  
  
carved earth plots  
    to pool  
    sources    triple-yield  
miracles      mirroring  
    porcelain    sky-blue  
  
earth-carved pools  
    plots fecund      born  
        of piety    daily woven  
palm leaf  
    hibiscus  
                       smoking  
incense      and miracle  
    pelitar 36  
  
childless woman  
    snakes  
at breast      banned  
    from paradise

## Interview with Gwen Harwood

Gwen Harwood, b. Brisbane, Queensland, 1920. Lived in Tasmania since 1945. Poetry Collections include: *Poems* (1963); *Poems: Volume Two* (1968); *Selected Poems* (1975); *The Lion's Bride* (1981); anthologized in *Journeys*, ed. Fay Zwicky. Awards include Grace Levin Poetry Prize 1975, Robert Frost Award 1977 and Patrick White Award 1978. This interview took place in Adelaide, South Australia, during Writers' Week, Adelaide Festival of Arts, 8 March 1988.

*BW You've written movingly of your childhood. Would you describe your familial circumstances?*

GH My childhood was so happy that it's left me without ambition; it was a radiant, golden time. We lived in what was then country outside Brisbane. We had a horse, a cow, an orange orchard, vegetables. We had tank water; there was no radio. Along the dusty street lived families who were the world. My grandmother lived with us — mother, father, younger brother.

My father was English; to him England was "home" and I thought of England as the mother country — as in our school poems: "What can I do for you, England, my England?" — I'm speaking now of the early '20s . . . Queensland, by Queenslanders, was thought to be the most bright and beautiful of the states, said to be "crowned with the red blood of Gallipoli" — another of our school poems. For me, The Great War and its miseries were presented as a time of national glory. My father had been a stretcher-bearer at Gallipoli. To him, Australia was delightful for its warmth, ease of living. Once, I said to him: "Daddy, what would happen if you lost your money?" He said: "I would begin again . . . and do better." That cheered me; whatever happened, things would begin again, be better. That has given me a confidence in life.

*BW A wonderfully enriching childhood.*

GH Indeed. We had a great library; my grandfather, though dead, was present in his books: the standard English classics. And the house was always full of lively discussion. To go out at night, we simply harnessed the horse, lit the lamps, trotted off in the sulky down long country roads . . . .

*BW And your relationship with your brother?*

GH We were great companions. When we moved closer to town . . . we were given a handful of pennies . . . and allowed to ride the buses — the trams in those days. We felt safe, and were told that policemen were our friends.

*BW It seems that even in your earliest poems, "ripeness is all": of experience, of expression. Is this because you didn't start publishing until your mid-forties?*

GH The ripeness comes from my family circumstances. My great grandmother lived on until I was 12; my grandmother lived with us. I was the youngest in this long chain of women so I've never had any fear of growing old. A succession of women fulfilled and happy; now I have a daughter, a grand

daughter, other grandchildren. It's true I'm at the top of the list and The Grim Reaper is probably in the next paddock but I've always felt part of a long chain of independent women. They were active on committees.

*BW Socially active committees?*

GH Yes . . . working to raise money for servicemen and their families. If my father's dinner was late, he might murmur, but he knew that the women's lives were important. So I never had to become a feminist, I was born into a feminist family. In "The Old Wife's Tale" I was thinking of my great grandmother. Fay Zwicky said all poems are prophetic so, in a way, that poem speaks to me now across the decades of living into my old age.

I was a late publisher, but not a late writer. I gave myself wholeheartedly to my children. They need a wholehearted mother, not a half-hearted poet, in the house . . .

*BW You've said: "My life has not been eventful but all a poet needs is the long journey from innocence to experience. Love, friendship and music are my armour against fate". So it's emotional evenfulness that counts?*

GH For some poets; you can disperse yourself widely . . . or you can stay in one place and burn quietly. Poetry is a way from one mind to another . . . when the marvellous series of Penguin Modern Poets was published, I particularly loved Montale and Vasko Popo. The European poets were thus given into our hands; a great enriching journey for those who had never been out of Australia. I trembled with excitement when a new volume came out; I'd keep it to read when the children were asleep, then sit with it: utter bliss!

*BW Reading some of your poetry . . . had that effect on me. You yourself wrote: "What's grief but the after-blindness/of the spirit's dazzle of love?"*

GH . . . Yes, I'd say that's true of my own life. I've reached the age where irreplaceable friends are dying. The grief is unspeakable, but there's still the great dazzle of love; they have been part of the universe, of my life.

*BW It's a great comfort to have this poetic gift when experiencing loss of love . . . what you call: "the passionate patience of art" gives consolation, too.*

GH Yes, you have to wrestle with the grief itself . . . you bring them back into the world of light in a poem. As in my last poem for my mother: "I prayed you would live to see/Halley's comet a second time. The Sister said, When she died/she was folding a little towel". The world folded down to a little space . . . but it is still "a fabric of marvels".

*BW You've learned and suffered much during your experiences of love: familial, between friends, between man and woman: "the nature and the names of love" ("David's Harp").*

GH Including the love we don't recognize when we don't deserve it. Friendship above all I prize . . . one of the privileges of living on this planet. And the wonderful domestic love of husband, wife, children. I've been married for 42 years; we have children, grandchildren. "Ripeness", for us, is *all that*. Also, the purely tender, physical love for animals, the natural world. There's a lot of birds in my poems; Vincent Buckley said Australian poetry was full of birds, adding: "Once you start writing about the birds, you've had it!" I hope I've shown him to be wrong about that!

*BW Quite a few crow images, I remember.*

GH Crows in Tasmania are a species to themselves: "Corvus Tasmanicus", forest ravens, glossy, bright. I had a tame one at Oyster Cove — "Baron Corvo" — he had a bad leg. I could always pick him out with his leg down like an undercarriage improperly retracted. I'd see him when I was out fishing. I used to go out in my dinghy and drift . . . a tame convoy of birds round me:

- Dominican and Pacific gulls, silver gulls. I'd be there on the water, with friends and I often just wrote poems in my head.
- BW So it's a meditative, inspirational time on the water?*
- GH Yes, just trailing a handline. That incredible feeling of joy: some atavistic feeling that you're providing for the human race. I'm sure it's a blood sport but I carry it out. The main influence on my poetry has been philosophy, particularly Wittgenstein: struggles to find out limits of language . . . trying to enclose it more.
- BW You also acknowledge the "lesson learned" from natural philosophy: fishing, meditation, observation of nature ("Look and Learn", "Mid-Channel"), recognition of the importance of both logical and intuitive aspects of thinking.*
- GH My husband was a university lecturer; I was in a group that was keenly interested in modern philosophy, philosophy of the past, quantum physics and logic. We still meet . . . I keep in touch. I wish I were beginning my life now, the world is so enchanting, despite the ravages of our century.
- BW So you have a sense of hope, promise.*
- GH Well . . . you never know if tomorrow you may not be able to move freely in the world. I walk a great deal . . . miles every day, but perhaps I shan't always be able to do that. So I'm keeping many great philosophical books for my old age — as others in literature are keeping *Pamela* or *Clarissa*.
- BW You have a fine ability to deal with pain: physical and emotional. Is this intense experience of pain what you consider to be part of the poet's inventory?*
- GH Living through it, yes: "He that shall endure to the end, shall be saved". As James Dickey put it: "Only those who did, could have done it". I love Dickey. One of my favourite American poets, Berryman too. But my absolute favourite American poet is Robert Penn Warren; he's had such a long career and never written badly. At every stage of life, he's had a new flowering: an inspiration to me. I had the joy of hearing him on television; I could then fit the cadences of his voice into his own poems. That is one of the blessings of hearing a poet read. I myself wouldn't write anything grammatically elaborate unless I would say it in my ordinary speech.
- BW Fitting the voice to the poems, that's what we gain also from the Festival. I had not heard you read before; your voice is exactly as I expected it to be.*
- GH Oh, that's lovely. I'm glad the poems called it up.
- BW I loved your "evangelical" strain, too, yesterday!!*
- GH That was totally impromptu, being in the tent, seeing the upturned faces: shades of the tv evangelist! They are a strange phenomenon: something essentially private — the communication of something revealed is issued to tens of thousands in one, common voice. I remember the first time radio came to our small Mitchelton, my father was fascinated. He studied it and became a radio engineer. We had a crystal set with two headphones which we shared with neighbours. My father used to say: "You mark my words, radio will change the world!" He actually said "wireless"; wireless was what we called it.
- BW And what we called it in Britain where I grew up.*
- In a "Philosophical" poem to Edwin Tanner — I presume he's an artist . . .*
- GH Edwin Tanner is a painter. We were very close friends in Hobart. He went to live in Melbourne so we began a long correspondence, hundreds of letters which are now in various libraries. Beautiful letters, full of malicious gossip, life comments. Letters never meant to be read, but sometimes you have irreplaceable letters from friends; it's a wonderful way of preserving them so that others can read and share them. Edwin was in pain for most of his life.

- He was a great athlete when young then, in mid-life, was left with permanent pain in his painting arm. But he kept on painting to the end; when the pain was unbearable, he would get his arm into cold water until he could paint again.
- BW* “. . . pain flows through to your brush-tip / and there is changed”: through art and music and poetry, we can transform pain, ugliness. Tanner embodied this, then.
- GH* Indeed. Physical pain can’t be shared; emotional pain and grief can be shared if you “tell it from the heart” but, even then perhaps you make it more painful. Who can say? In another poem to Edwin Tanner, I say: “‘the image of pain is not a picture . . . is not the same/as anything we call a picture.’”<sup>2</sup> James McAuley, at the end of his life, said: “However great the pain is, if you have lived a full life, you can bear it.”
- BW* You seem to regard poetry as less effective, sometimes, than music or art in expressing “the unsayable”. Would you comment on the limits of language in this respect?
- GH* Music as language has limits too. There are places in your life when only music will do, or only painting, to comfort, or to express your own inexpressible joy. When I took my first child home to Fern Tree, on the mountain in Tasmania, I took him onto the balcony; snow started to fall. I stood with my child in a state of inexpressible joy. We had just got our first wireless; they were playing Beethoven’s “Pastoral Symphony”. It was too much: that marvellous Movement . . . the snow falling, the great tall gum trees and to hold my own child. Every time I hear that great flowing theme, I am back there with the child, in the snow.  
My memory is not verbal . . . every time I have nothing — I’m not working on a poem — music comes back and fills it. I generally work on a poem in my head. I can work on a 50-line poem without pencil and paper, a skill I developed when in domestic turmoil. Yesterday, a friend of my daughter said: “Your daughter told me she’d never seen you writing a poem.” That is true. I kept all that out of the way; a secret vice, like drinking with bottles in the wardrobe. I had my poems in odd places. Late at night, I’d take them out, or early in the morning, just in my head. I don’t think poetry is any one thing; nothing will define it for ever.
- BW* Your Professors Eisenbart and Krote are very effective creative voices to represent individuals who shut out the world of emotion, intimacy. You gave a momentary redemption to Krote through his uninhibited private response towards the baby Margaret, the “pearl” — wisdom?
- GH* Yes. Very early on, A.D. Hope said, of the Eisenbart poems: “It’s very rare for poets to create character”. There were poems also that existed as unravelled knots in my breast that then flowed naturally from Eisenbart into Professor Krote. My knowledge of music enabled me to work on the Krote poems easily. They gave me pleasure to write, which is not always the case. Sometimes you wrestle; it’s like being in the ring with Bulldog Brewer! You don’t know who’s going to win, you or the language! “I’m bruised; I’m bruised”.  
I could say through Krote and Eisenbart things I would not say openly. I could also be serious and funny at the same time.
- BW* I find this is characteristic of Australians. I was amazed by the ABC broadcast of the launching of John Forbes poetry book “The Stunned Mullet” on Sunday: just how sardonic, witty, the commentators were on live radio, rather than formal and “stuffy” (compared with the Canadian and British Broadcasting Corporations). The Australian self-mockery . . .

- CH Well, that comes from the State schools here. Nobody could survive in an Australian State school with any degree of pomposity or self-importance . . . they really tear you down. If you have deeper feelings, you learn to express them lightly. If you try to read soulfully, someone will say: "Can it, sister". When you go into the tavern, if you get your ears cut off, well, you should just mop up any blood. I never answer critics back. If people don't like it, I'll just have to write better so they've damn well got to like it!
- BW *Andrew Taylor, introducing you yesterday, remarked on how you had been isolated in Tasmania for many years. Was this a conscious, self-imposed isolation?*
- GH Tasmania is separated from the rest of Australia by the Bass Strait so you can't drive for the weekend to Sydney or Melbourne. I've always felt close to other poets simply by writing to them; writing letters is an absolute joy . . . so, I didn't feel isolated. I was immured, but happy to be so. I travelled around in the late '50s, early '60s. Then I retired to my rural retreat and wrestled with the earth. We transformed 5 acres from the bush into a kind of Tolstoyan estate. Those periods of silence are absolutely necessary. It's a bad idea to be perpetually on the literary circuit. Nissim Ezekiel said yesterday: "There are times when you need silence, you need to be empty". Anyway if you stay in Tasmania, everybody comes there; we have festivals. And I was delighted to be invited to Adelaide. It's a beautiful city, so full of light.
- BW *Other Australian cities are not like this?*
- GH Tasmania has its own light, so changing, about seven-tenths cloud all the time. A recent Tasmanian anthology is called *Effects of Light*. In Tasmania I also met the Tasmanian poets: Christopher Koch, Vivian Smith — both Tasmanians. And James McAuley lived there for many years. There are lots of young poets coming on, so that poetry is alive and well in Tasmania.
- BW *You've written of the confining limits of suburban housewives' existence, especially those with an impulse towards self-expression; for instance in "In the Park" . . .*
- GH But it begins: "She sits in the park. Her clothes are out of date". (Emphasis Harwood's during interview). My clothes are never out of date. Andrew Taylor has written a wonderful exposition of that poem in *Reading Australian Poetry*. I feel like getting his piece copied and handed out to the questioners who say: "Did you really love your children?"
- BW *Ah, well, my question goes on: But you have also in "An Impromptu for Ann Jennings" written of your and her contentment, knowing: "our children walk the earth".*
- GH They do, indeed; they've given us more than we could ever give them. Domesticity, I never grizzled about it . . . I used to prop up books of poetry over the sink; they'd get puffy with soap splashes, but I read and read. I never stopped listening, reading, learning, writing. I had such richness of experience in my childhood from the women of the household who always had time for me. What can you give a child better than to be with it, speak to it, give it the richness of the language: the stories, legends, rhymes? Simply to talk, that's what they need. I'm glad I had the poems so that I could give something back.
- BW *Would you comment on your current writing and future directions?*
- GH I can't say for poetry. When I'm writing poetry, I'm not thinking about it. But I also work with musicians — three composers — commissions for them. As a librettist, I'm their servant and happy to be so. If I'm not writing poetry — if the Muse has flapped off behind the mountain for a while — I don't worry; I have work to do, although basically I'm retired. I was a medical

secretary when the children were at school to help them with things they needed: music lessons, football boots, braces on their teeth. I loved the time at work; I met a continual stream of people and talked to them. My life seems to have given me everything I needed. In a sense, my journeys have all been made in one place, but they have been long journeys, just the same.

I hope that I'll go on writing to the end, that the last day — when I'm lying in my Eventide Home — a feeble hand will come out from under the sheet, grope for the pencil and write — possibly on the sheet, to Nurse's displeasure — the last words of the last poem. However, I might have a luckier death, I might be struck by lightning; I'd rather like that.

#### NOTES

1. At her Festival reading, Harwood suddenly smiled, saying: "This tent brings out the evangelist in me!" then continued: "Brethren, you will hear, this week, words that will change your lives!" She then resumed her reading.
2. Harwood is here quoting Wittgenstein in her poem.

## Interview with Philip Salom

Philip Salom, b. 1950, near Perth, Western Australia. Poetry collections: *The Silent Piano* (1980), winner of 1981 Commonwealth Poetry Prize for a first collection of poems; *The Projectionist* (1983); *Sky Poems* (1987), winner of 1987 Commonwealth Poetry Prize. Part-time tutor, largely writing full-time. This interview took place in Adelaide, South Australia, during Writers' Week, Adelaide Festival of Arts, 11 March, 1988.

*BW Can we begin with early childhood, schooling . . .*

PS I fit into an obvious Australian poetry category: farming or rural backgrounds. My first actual world was the farm; school was "visited", the first social world. So I lacked certain social graces. To be in crowds was very strange; it produced in me a sense of alone-ness. My world was natural, physical. I went away to high school in a country town, now a city. That was my divorce from the normal family area.

*BW Boarding school?*

PS No. I boarded in a hostel; this great freedom led me into mild juvenile delinquency — a fairly rebellious adolescent syndrome took fierce root. Later I went to agricultural college, then worked in a research station. I was attracted to genetics: a crucial interest. But I became disenchanted with that. I was hungry for intellectual stimulation . . . a gene for engagement with the world — exactly what I didn't have! In the city again, I eventually ended up painting. [Laughs]

*BW Art seems very important to you.*

PS Being involved in the world was through painting initially. An important influence was Patrick White's *The Vivisector* — a strange and *savage* book. Reading it convinced me such a lifestyle was quite acceptable. I ceased my agricultural science course to give myself time for painting. I went to New Zealand and in letters to people I knew — nearly all involved in literature — not practitioners, but students, tutors, I remember writing: "It's probably only a matter of time before I will begin writing". Back in Australia, I did creative writing at Western Australian Institute of Technology, now Curtin University of Technology.

*BW When did you come back to Australia?*

PS 1972. I went away in March and came back about July or August.

*BW When did you start writing poetry? Have you written in other genres? Did you start with poetry?*

PS In 1974 I was a student of literature for the first time. I didn't write poetry seriously until the end of '76 or early '77. The course had a very broad approach: essays, poetry, short stories, play scripts, radio scripts, film scripts. Nowadays students choose more selectively . . .

- BW Did you have a preferential leaning towards poetry?*
- PS Yes, by the end of second year. This sounds conceited — but, I found I could write fairly well in all genres. Obviously, I couldn't write in *all* of them; poetry rose above the others.
- I have just finished a novel. In Australia, poetry is the very poor literary relation. The question is: Why write poetry? [Laughs] It looks as if I have defected but I'm a writer as well as a poet. I think my novel is a poet's novel. A lot of the interesting writing being done in Australian fiction is being done by poets. Canada has Michael Ondaatje who is a very striking example. The same things are happening to me, in terms of shifts, shape; that mix. If my fictional writing turns out to be successful, I think it would tantalize my poetry.
- BW I've been talking about this to Rodney Hall — I interviewed him in Canada; he won the 1987 Canada-Australia Literary Prize. I said: "You're veering more towards fiction. Is poetry going to recede into the background?" He didn't think so; he's open to whichever one comes.*
- I'd like to concentrate on *The Projectionist* and *Sky Poems* textually. In *The Projectionist*, several themes, particularly struck me: relationships; the landscape — both graphically, evocatively presented. In "The Coast" and "After Rain", there's a very positive attitude towards landscape.
- PS My first world, my first friend. One of the curious things about my first book is that many of the poems in the first section about childhood don't have people in them.
- BW In The Projectionist the poems where humans came in didn't grip me as much as ones where landscape predominated.*
- PS A prevailing criticism was that I had raised expectations by calling it a sequence and establishing the characters; readers wanted to read more about them. I had never intended that. It's a thematic sequence, not narrative or dramatic. There's a very pantheistic element in me in terms of landscape. I understand the land totemic aspect of Aboriginal peoples. Yet I sometimes find Australian bush exceedingly ordinary, ugly and drab. But you walk another hundred yards and see something very striking, strange contradictions. As a child, I lived by the sea and again in New Zealand. The coast is an Australian motif: we all live on it; the pale, green strip: *us*.
- BW In Canada we almost all live along a strip, not coastal, bordered by the United States.*
- PS Our strip is backed by what a lot of people would say is nothing.
- BW In Canada we've got the wilderness, the bush, the Arctic. So there are similarities: you've got the dead, hot centre; we've got the cold, icy north. About Perth?*
- PS It's on the coast . . . Fremantle — the lower section, linked by continuous development — is the harbour. I live in the hills, several miles inland.
- BW When I asked John Tranter about his childhood, he also talked about loneliness . . . as one of his earliest memories, sitting "looking out on 50 million gum trees". You recall the loneliness, but also the landscape as your first friend.*
- PS I had very few people to play with during interminable summer holidays . . . seven weeks of farm work or doing nothing . . . the bush became both a symbol of aloneness *and* connection. Sitting around . . . makes one meditative, introspective. It puts down a strong layer of mental activity that is there to stay.
- BW In "Dream II", you say: ". . . I am alone this far . . . All that says I am alive is pain . . ."*

- PS One of the themes I wanted to work through was projection. I'd had strange experiences that retreat into the unconscious — not exactly as I have written them there; I've not been entirely artless. That poem is . . . the lowest point . . . darkness, furtherest encounter with the inanimate within us . . . We are still very primal; sophistication is really not my thing! [Laughs] At writers' organizations like this (Adelaide Festival of Arts Writers' Week) I feel the difference between my psyche and the way certain people operate. They're very smooth; I'm a rough person in day-to-day contact. I am attracted to roughness in other people; those edges . . . reveal a great deal about the person. In fact, I enjoy the sophistication, but it's often an effective shield . . . We all see things differently — with so many elements of refinement, which is the reverse of the rough; so: a rough human, a smooth soul!
- Sky Poems* is satirical: the slips, breakages, gaps between. I believe in intuition and mental communication. The Sufis interest me much; they are at the heart of *The Projectionist*.
- BW* *They have their ecstatic moments.*
- PS But the ecstatic moments are qualified. Ecstasy becomes seductive. A lot of ecstasies in the East and West have become stuck; they indulge themselves. I could become profane and call it masturbation — quite desperate, whirling interminably. Dervishes however use their exercises for mind movement. The component we call ecstasy is, in fact, not that; it's a shift in consciousness to give some other dimension, relationship.
- BW* *In "Packing", the final poem, you say: ". . . words, states/of mind . . . perform, after leaving, masquerades". "Perform", "masquerade" — there's a distancing, a shift.*
- PS Experiences stay alive; we love to embellish, alter; we offset this against our terrible tendencies to oppression and savagery. The mind has this great power to take up its own experiences, play games with them, but I think we're always in control of it; it's mischievous: the masquerade, pretence, veils, dramas; our own experiences . . . in relation to others.
- BW* *So this is where you get to in the Sky Poems?*
- PS Yes, I'd never really thought of it until you said that. Exactly; those games then take their own shape, the coming to fruition of things that don't normally do so. I, as the poet, am using ironic device. If I had gone straight from *The Projectionist* into that fictional world, it could have been a very different link — maybe I'll go back and do that; I'm going to write *Sky Poems 2!* [Laughs]
- BW* *Well, you're still young enough! Transmuting from The Projectionist to Sky Poems, your images: mirrors, reflections; the protagonist as one who is projecting onto the world, the photographer, poet, artist — Would you comment further on these?*
- PS It's fairly universal in both Western and Eastern literature: the perceiver, metaphors of perception, then translation. Protagonists become recurring images. So as a poet, a person, I receive, consider; I need devices to translate; it's the active role of creating reality through the poems. Also, realities are fluid, coalescent; the rough and the smooth again. As we go back out into language, we're making harder objects. So poems are hard objects that are smooth: sort of "soul-objects" — a terrible word! Poems have a definition on the page but operate like the flow of water, of ether, like movements of intuition, connections of association and thought . . . these themes are very similar to de-construction. Anything we create of understanding . . . falls into its parts, becomes a different version, comments upon its self and its origin: the projection's going out, but also back in . . . Students told me they studied

- things like that in literary theory, but I had not read those theorists then, you know, Derrida and so on.
- BW* *I had a few problems in Sky Poems: a world where all things are possible, yet there are hesitations, reservations. The sky world is not full of all possibilities, then?*
- PS* No, not at all.
- BW* *It's probably the satiric mode that I've not picked up then.*
- PS* Yes, I was told this was going to challenge readers . . . Initially Peter Porter said: ". . . I'm wondering where you're coming from". My intent is ironic: the old Arabic saying: "They are fortunate indeed who know their heart's desire" can mean lovely things; it also has an undercutting edge: when you know your desires, you may find them not as you expected . . . The sky then becomes a metaphor whereby *theoretically* we can have our ideal worlds. I don't think we're capable of them in most cases.
- BW* *Well, who wants the "ideal"? Could we manage it? No!*
- PS* My point exactly. People can change a certain way, but they bring back all the old obsessions, despairs. Further irony: some people thought I subscribed to the violence and atrocity in the poems — the very last thing I was doing. I'm passionately offended by that response. People want poets to refer to their own immediate world. A lyric impulse has taken over; in contrast I set up strange jarring effects for some readers. They say: "The 'I's don't sound the same in this collection". Well, of course, they're not . . . multiple personality is more a reflection of our experience.
- BW* *The artwork connection: you're using art by Koning in Sky Poems. It strikes me as apt: surrealistic and concrete. You chose not to illustrate it yourself, though you are a painter. Is Koning a living artist?*
- PS* Yes, about my age. He lives in Fremantle . . . I saw an exhibition — his works led me straight across the room: audacious, bold, brilliant, full of symbols and images. I'm going to open an exhibition of his paintings that are prompted by *Sky Poems*. It took a while to "connect" so I gave him a tape of me reading poems. You can't actually illustrate poems . . . you must go your own way, feel the essential link between themes and forms of the poems then move out into painting.
- BW* *Interesting that you chose to do this; it's a rare thing.*
- PS* I did my own illustrations for *The Silent Piano* . . . woodblocks . . . I'd have liked to illustrate *The Projectionist*; some drawings went in, but I didn't like them; I had no link with the artist . . . Illustrations that don't work are quite jarring.
- BW* *It's a risky venture.*
- PS* I'm a risk-taker.
- BW* *That's an area in which you remind me of John Tranter.*
- PS* Someone has actually mentioned that kind of connection. I'd never have thought of it myself and I don't suppose he would. About the risk, sometimes it's bigger for me than for others because I live on the West Coast; most people who are reading, reviewing, my work, live on the East Coast, so I'm not someone of whom they say: "Ah, Philip Salom, I see him at readings or conferences". I exist as a poet through my work, not myself; people are sometimes curiously less able to go with your work. You know: "I never used to like Such-and-Such's work but now we're friends and I do". A cognitive dissonance game; people . . . make mental shifts according to circumstances and when you're not known as a person very much you are more vulnerable to mis-reading, misunderstanding, even antagonism . . . Nearly every

- literary review I have had has been by someone who has not known me. With some writers it's the reverse.
- BW* *In Canada we have a very close — almost incestuous — relationship between writers, editors, reviewers. I had thought it was like that here, maybe it is in the East. In Canada it's concentrated mostly in Toronto; it's also a significant factor in contacts you make, how you get on in the writing world — partly because we're such a small writing community.*
- PS* Well, that has its good and bad points. The poems themselves: my last two collections have elements which are unexpected . . . the risks are big: the more predictable you are as an unknown, the more likely that people can come to terms with you. *The Projectionist* wasn't like *The Silent Piano*; *Sky Poems* is nothing like either of them. So I'm doing, in some ways, the very worst thing in terms of convenience of career; my impulses come purely out of my relationship with my art and myself which may also free me to do things that otherwise I might not do.
- BW* *Others might not want that freedom, you seem to thrive on it.*
- PS* Yes. It's bite, it's spark. The *Sky Poems* poems . . . are very sensory, enigmatic and have metaphoric surfaces to which I develop an undercurrent counterpoint. All these have thrown some readers — there's no reason why I can complain about this, but I do, of course! — but they have not brought sufficiently flexible reading approaches to them. When people know me, they know clearly how much gamesmanship is going on, complexity. I have been astonished by two different responses held by the same persons in relation to *Sky Poems*. I was deliberately trying to make it more accessible; the form opened up, lines got longer. People said that the poems are very, very difficult but also said: "However, they're also very accessible"! A woman had very strong feminist reservations about them, but said: "I knew what you were like; I knew how tricky your poems can be at times". So she read more and they clicked . . . So this is where language is such a delight and a despair.
- BW* *A singular mind; not everybody clicks into it straight away, your very individualist way of seeing the world.*
- PS* It's probably idiosyncratic . . . I suppose one is always worried about how many people you throw off.
- BW* *But you have the awards to prove that you are getting through on some significant levels. To return to . . . you and the work of John Tranter . . . I've always thought that there's going to be a poet who will challenge Tranter's position. It seems now to me that you are doing a lot of the kinds of things that he was doing, but in your own way. Do you see any similarities?*
- PS* No. I know Tranter's work and like it, but I wouldn't say I know it very well. He's a very good poet. You're only the second person who's made the comment — others may be thinking it. To me, because I didn't know his work well enough . . . the connection's not there. I find it astonishing that we might have ended up in a similar position. I don't know; you tell me.
- BW* *Mainly it's the images, the raciness, the dislocations of world, of language as well, in "Instructions for Living in the Sky" and "Through the Open Sky-Window", for instance. Not always an easy read, yet a really vibrant one. Jazzy, very contemporary. You're confronting reality, rather than dodging it . . . Tranter, it seems to me, is doing a lot of that but since it doesn't strike you . . .*
- PS* Well, if I'd been a Sydney poet, perhaps . . . Another thing — a terrible admission — but I don't read a lot of Australian poets. I'm familiar with their work here and there. My influences in *Sky Poems* were very clear to me:

South American fiction writers. By writing these poems, I have created within me the kind of poet that wrote those poems who wasn't there before.

*BW By doing, you become . . .*

PS But the impulse was those South American writers., Not just poets; I'm thinking of Borges and Marques — oh, Octavio Paz is certainly an influence. I read Borges when I was a student. I came to literature very late; most people I know had been involved in it since their teens, I . . . was about 24 or 25. I don't necessarily come up through the same developmental channels as others. So . . . Borges: the vividness, the edge . . . the perceiver . . . the clash between the magic and the brutal. There was a rawness, energy, truthfulness, *that* was what attracted me; it seemed to say: "This is the way to write!" It took me a while to actually get there. *The Projectionist* is a very bare book in comparison with *Sky Poems* — a meditation. In *Sky Poems*, the person is standing very differently to the projectionist. Some people will be drawn to one side of my work and not to the other.

I have another manuscript completed — different again, more poems. About the city and migrant intake into Western Australia in the '50s, postwar intellectuals coming to Australia. Once again it's extremes of experience — through them to comment upon our country — you see, I have become satirical, a commentator. I hadn't thought I would; I always thought I would have been a more lyric poet though who's to know? I am a bit pissed off with the force with which the lyric has taken. Australian poetry has become very conservative. The poetry's closing up on itself; it's a reaction to the '60s and '70s.

You see, I suppose you'd say there *is* a link with Tranter, but it's not Tranter, it's that time; so I'm now catching up on it too late. Even Tranter's starting to look quite conservative sometimes in his poetry. I'm not saying Tranter's work is any worse, just his style has shifted. He's a very good poet . . . The influence of Les Murray has been drawing Australian poetry towards a more conservative line, though lyric poets in Australia have always been dominant. The smaller poem, the magazine poem, has quite a grip: precisely chosen plain speech; distrust of the too brilliant, too audacious — a refining, which I find disappointing, at worst, boring. I'm not saying the poetry's no good, just the range is disappointing. I used to be very fond of some extremely performance-based work, as a poetry phenomenon it was terrific.

*BW What directions do you see for yourself and work in future? Are the awards going to make a big difference? The demands made on you by the external world?*

PS Yes, I was talking to Lauris Edmond (New Zealand Poet) about that British Airways Commonwealth Prize that we both won and its effects. It was a terrific pleasure to win an international prize and the reading tour of Britain but I never felt I was a better poet than other regional winners; you can't "beat" books. I was asked in BBC interviews: "Do you think of yourself as an Australian poet?" I said: "No, no, I see myself as a poet". I heard Peter Porter saying . . . he believed along with Ashbery and others that they were poets of the mind, the imagination. Their place was in language, the poem itself, not country or interconnection of countries. Well, I'm very much like that. Some Australian newspaper reports in my own state even wildly overstated the award level and its interpretation. In the rest of Australia, I really don't know. Only two other newspapers that I know of in all of Australia, mentioned it, so most people have never even heard that I won this award.

However, awards are good because they say: "Here I am; I'm a writer, too . . ." - signposts: "Here's another poet whose work is considered good by some kind

of assessment". But, the whole thing is fraught with complications, interruptions, even delusions. And expectations on two bases: one that you will write as well in your next work; the other: a lot of people may be willing to cut your throat! So, awards put a lot of pressure on you as a writer. It's a compliment, a pleasure and a threat to an artist, that kind of publicity. I think, now, it's settled down. Lauris was saying similar things. But with her in New Zealand — perhaps it's the same in Canada — she was well received.

*BW If it happened in Canada, I think it would be well noted.*

PS So, expectations would probably be worse on her.

*BW You've got another volume of poems completed now and a novel.*

PS Yes, some poems in the next collection were written before *Sky Poems*, and some are new; so again, it's not what will be expected.

*BW A good thing? If judged from a totally different point of view?*

PS Well, I had found it very hard to get down to writing again. There's a strange limbo when a book is completed, I sort of hang around until it's in print. I had two manuscripts in the ABC Bicentennial Awards, both short-listed: this next collection of poems and the novel. The novel is *not* complete; so all contributed to limbo. I've started — this last month — writing my latest work, influenced by two things: one, that the style I developed in *Sky Poems* is attractive to me; the other: in Britain, I heard black poets from Africa, the Caribbean . . . the sound was more lyrical than Australian poetry — rhythmically, musically, occasional repetitions. My poem: "The Stairs 1, 2, 3" — about Marilyn Monroe — has repetitions, cyclic, a more personal voice, too. I'm, trying to get back a bit of the voice that empowered my first two books. I'm very keen; I just want to immerse myself in it.

*BW Before we end, is there anything that hasn't come up that you'd like to deal with?*

PS To emphasize language as a device to further make — or break — our worlds.

*BW Sounds wonderfully tangled, endlessly creative.*

PS A paradox: hugely complex, hugely simple. I found very interesting — about *The Projectionist* — your comment about the people; relationships. That's one thing I haven't done yet but probably will in this next work. Coming late to poetry, I have some mistrust of art forms; it's also delusive. There's an interesting story about Rumi, the Sufi poet . . . an encounter with his Green Spirit who clutched a pile of Rumi's manuscripts, held them over a well and said: "Should I save these, or do you want to learn?" To learn, was to drop them. Rumi said: "I want to learn". The Green Spirit pulled them back; (obviously, he hadn't meant to drop them). Rumi thereafter said that poetry was simply one level of reality, so there are reservations about it; I have reservations. [Laughs]

*BW Thank you for the interview. I look forward to following more of what you produce.*

PS So do I! You write and finally think: "So that's what I was doing!" Art's full of paradoxes; paradox is the only thing that really sums up reality effectively. I have one line that says it: "wonder, itself, without any language, seems the only/thing to get us slightly less than wrong". Wonder: a very child-like element in us.

## Old Home

When they took her away there  
was no question of her ever coming back.  
But she wasn't dead not yet so  
they left her things, cleaning only  
the black mold from the dishes  
of her last meal, pulling up the  
tangled sheets still ripe with her  
last incontinence. The rest caught  
in the seconds between  
one old-age activity and another.  
They yelled at the kids who  
jammed open the windows, mucked among  
her things. They yelled "she's not dead  
yet you little rats". As though it  
mattered. As though the kids  
could understand a thing like that.

Years afterwards the weatherboard  
fitted the ground like a dead suit.  
Once it had been painted the non-colour  
green-grey of weatherboard houses,  
another time dolly-pink.  
They gave it the title "estate"  
and a relative from the city arrived  
and left, the last link, in a cheap suit.  
There was talk of money under  
the bed but exploration unearthed  
only a water-swollen paperback,  
a nest of morteined spiders,  
a dusty doiley, a bill from the plumber.  
That summer there blossomed weeds and  
wild flowers and an ageless, creeping  
geranium, rooted in the wood like a canker.

## Common Birds

In ferry-wake the seagulls purl  
and plain, taut and small-eyed. They  
shuttle back through the breeze, riding  
the slipstream a moment as they  
scavenge dirty foam with their eyes.  
Then forward again, or land to bob, their  
feathers propping into tiny sails while  
they watch each other with greedy eyes.  
Back on the beach they arch necks  
and beaks in frustration as the last cold  
chip swings through the air. If they could  
bomb, like magpies, they would, for  
scraps. You never see a dead seagull. Or  
perhaps they are gobbled by their mates  
even as the last karking cry  
escapes their querulous beaks

## The daily mirror

who could have thought the luminescent flesh  
the Morse of words could have become  
some sort of mirror a mission in green or amber  
a soft quiet friend who holds pieces bits of life  
in hands like an old country gentleman  
once a young rowdy holding his felt hat  
turning it slowly by the rim

next time you are out watch  
the hands the animals living nearest the face  
the wild hand things the face tries to hide  
the hand creeps up to stop the indiscretion  
of the mouth suppress the secret  
the smile shade the eyes

each delivery tells the truth  
that the words will not  
the green bands of sentence  
the hands denounce

## The Summer Before/The Seahorse

*Dedicated to the memory of Linda Cotton Vatskalis, my sister in spirit.*

The east wind blows.

A field of wheat stubble can seem noisy from a distance, the second daughter thinks. Full of lines, criss-cross yellow wheat stalks, the brown-earth edges of rows, the cloud-free sky, moistureless and pallid. But the flat horizon of the mallee country with its stunted trees, its lonely salmon gums, the dull landscape seen quickly through a moving pane of glass, can be mistaken for silence.

A story has many beginnings. The second daughter chooses one, since the storyteller has fallen silent.

*I am the second daughter of a second daughter. I came early into a circle of women and a matrilineage of storytellers continues. Traditionally, my father decides where we are driving to and my mother explains why we're going there.*

*She has always told us the stories. The last story I remember her telling is the story of the water babies. The hero, Tom the chimney sweep meets an Irish woman who lives by the sea.*

“And Tom asked her about the sea; and she told him how it rolled and roared over the rocks in winter nights, and lay still in the bright summer days, for the children to bathe and play in it; and many a story more, till Tom longed to go and see the sea, and bathe in it likewise.”

*My grandmother never learned to swim but in dreams, she told us, she would often fly, doing the breast-stroke through her dream-sky.*

*Now we, landlocked, fly over the road to the other side of nowhere where Tom the chimney sweep has been before us. We travel continually, arriving to tell our impossible story to circles of women.*

*But — “I have lost my way” says Tom the little chimney sweep.*

*The story has many beginnings. I choose one.*

The Second Beginning.

*The summer before, we went on a family holiday.*

*On Sundays if the weather should be fine, we would walk down to the flat, calm sea and watch the yachts with bright sails out on the water. Green and red and yellow sails.*

*The summer before, my mother watched us swimming down at the beach. My youngest sister played with a blow-up plastic duck. My mother, pregnant again and beautiful, I remember, stood on the beach with her black hair and a yellow dress that billowed in the afternoon wind.*

*My littlest sister's toy was caught up by the waves and my mother the strong swimmer dived, fully dressed, into the water to save her from crying. From a distance I see my mother floating buoyantly, bobbing up and down on the waves. She swims*

*a long way out and I'm afraid. But she comes back, finally, with the toy in her hands. The yellow dress is dripping and clinging and the five of us — her daughters — are waiting on the seashore. We run, laughing, to meet her.*

*We all smile. Our father has taken us on a day-trip in the middle of the holiday. We nag him to stop the car.*

— Mum, tell him to stop.

*It's a field of flowers. We've never seen anything like it.*

— Everlastings, my mother says from the roadside.

*Dad takes our picture. The five of us, from eight to sixteen years, dressed in bright t-shirts and hipster jeans.*

*We smile. I wear a purple t-shirt and a peace sign on a chain. My father arranges us to his satisfaction in the field of flowers.*

*The summer before, the music stopped.*

— A shame, my mother would sigh.

— On my next posting, our father would reply.

*I used to love the curly s shape of the treble clef. I took Sylvie as my new elegant name and the curly treble clef S as my insignia.*

— I vill haf to tell your father, threatens our Estonian music teacher.

*Darlink. I think you father maybe vaste his money on you. You zhust don't mak the same proggres as your sisters.*

*At home on the old piano with the candelabra, I improvise tunes and sing opera.*

— You will make a great soprano, my grandmother says, passing.

*The summer before, the treat at the end of the holiday was a visit to an oceanarium. We see fish in a tank but I love the Seahorse. A curly S shape — a treble clef — sailing up and down the tiny lines of an invisible music sheet.*

*The summer before, I wanted to be kissed by a boy.*

*Sometimes at night Elaine and I escaped the holiday house.*

— Fishing, we would say. Our mother would smile slowly and say, Yes.

*We walked up and down the mile-long jetty. Two boys followed us once.*

*He stroked my back as we leant against the jetty rail. The strength of my pleasure took me by surprise. I turned, as he tried to put his arms around me, and ran — as fast as I could — all the way back along the jetty with him running after me saying*

— She's a fast runner, and Elaine following behind, furious.

### The Third Beginning.

*The summer before, we baked ourselves golden brown on the sand. We would go to the new town with the best tan. If it could be called a town. Wheatbin, pub, shop, school. Pale blue weatherboard school-house on the edge of town. Unfriendly people.*

— You can't burn off at this time of year mate, a tall man in a hat tells our father. Not in this wind.

*Later someone else came. There's a curse on the town. The white folk laugh but an elder comes to tell our father the school master. They respect him. He is gentle with their children. They warn him. Then one Saturday the entire aboriginal population packs up and leaves. They never return.*

*Later the stories filter back. The man caught under a tractor. The boy who misfired a gun. The man whose daughter drowned.*

*The town has very little water.*

*On the new school bus the driver tells us to be quiet. I'm telling the story of our last town. The swimming pool. The shops. It's a mistake.*

— Why doncha go back there then? someone snickers.

*At midnight, Elaine, Jill and I explore the town dam. We swim, naked, in the freezing water under a pale moon. The town dam has white clay sides, a blue perimeter and a grey-green centre. Someone sees us.*

— Do you realize, our father frowns, you've been swimming in the town water supply?

*I pour a glass of chlorinated water from the tap.*

*I imagine I'm a treble clef-seahorse, two inches long, swimming in the drinking water. I hold the glass up to Jill and we try not to laugh.*

*The summer before the new town we swam. The swimming instructor taught us everything he knew about the techniques of lifesaving. How to rescue a struggling person. How to rescue someone who is drowning. I store up courage in readiness for rescues.*

*One day I find the other dam, hidden by bush. The dam is large and covered in rusty sheets of corrugated iron. I stand back. One sheet of iron has fallen away. The water beneath is black and deep. No-one ever tells me why the dam is covered. I can't ask. My youngest sister just turned eight, would love to walk over the tin. I catch her, all the time, shinning up too-high drain-pipes after things that are lost. I want to warn her about the dam but if I tell her, I know she'll go there specially.*

*I am saved. Our father says — Kids, don't poke around that old dam, will you? If you fell in, you'd drown. No-one would hear you. There's no way you could get out.*

*The tin sheets form a roof over the water. If you fell in . . . You'd be under a tunnel. You'd be going into a deep dark tunnel . . .*

*The summer before, I dream that I am the one who dies. I am caught under the black, brackish water of the hidden dam. I sink. I try to swim up through the darkness, knowing that I must breathe soon. There's nothing to hold onto but I swim, finally, into consciousness. Somehow at the last moment I am saved.*

#### The Fourth Beginning.

*We stop at a pub near a wheatbin. In the ladies' lounge, my father drinks a glass of beer and my mother feeds the baby with the baby's shawl draped over her breasts. We are given pink lemonade and striped straws. I take out the paper straw and hold the pink lemonade up to the light.*

*I'll never wear it again, says my mother, looking down at the yellow dress. She wore it to the funeral and we were left at home. A kind lady put her hands on our shoulders one by one and said Only God can help you now.*

*My mother gave birth to a son.*

*She keeps her silence to hold in the story of the east wind, the drive to the hospital, the journey too far.*

*We wake to death.*

— She's gone, says our father.

*We drive. Without my mother to explain why. Her arms stretch wide to hold us all. She doesn't know why.*

*The world spins fast/slow.*

*The car wheels turn but*

*I am still as a crane standing on one leg  
with one webbed foot on the floor of the sea.*

*I am a fish inside a tank,  
a boat without a sail,*

*I am a diver in a waterglass who can't tell where the sky is.*

— She doesn't suffer, says my father, behind the woodshed. He cuts the wood and there's a certain trick to it. You have to cut the mallee roots along their swirly lines. They make wonderful firewood. They burn to a fine white ash.

### The Fifth Beginning.

*The summer before, Sylvie wanted to be kissed by a boy.*

— I'll have no one to play with, says the second littlest sister.

*Her pyjamas are still in the wash.*

*No-one speaks her name.*

Can I drink this pink lemonade?

*Sh-sh! If we're good, maybe nothing else will happen.*

*Only GOD can help you now.*

*The summer before we saw a Seahorse. The summer before we walked down to the sea, the summer before . . .*

*We drive on to the next town with selves we no longer recognize.*

*We are cranes standing one-legged on the floor of the sea.*

*We are Seahorses gliding slowly between the lines of the invisible music sheet,*

*We are everlastings hung upside down to dry.*

*We are yellow ducks bobbing up and down on the waves,*

*We are divers in a waterglass who cannot find the sky.*

\* Several lines are taken from Charles Kingsley's "The Water Babies".

## Moet & Chandon

*Champagne Charlie was my name,  
Champagne drinking gain'd my fame,  
So as of old when on the spree  
Moet & Chandon's the one for me."*  
(George Leybourne, 1869)

Jane Hogan lives six blocks from my house, an uphill walk most of the way. We live in a quiet neighbourhood, at least, the houses appear quiet with their drawn curtains and shadowy gardens. I am told it is safe to walk the streets at night. I often do, and so do others I know.

I stand at the gate of Jane's house, holding a bottle of Moet & Chandon, the very last of my birthday collection.

Twice I have passed Jane's house and returned. I stand at the gate concealed in the shadow of the hedge. The verandah light is on. Does Jane expect a visitor? Does she think the light will keep her safe?

There is nothing to fear, I tell myself.

I enter the garden, and stand under a huge palm tree rustling with hidden birds. I lean against the rough trunk, feeling the diamond pattern of the bark. The tree feels strong and massive. My other hand holds the cool bottle, securely grasped by the neck.

I force myself to cross to the front door where I knock very softly.

Jane is surprised to see me. I give no explanation but she makes me welcome. We walk down the long corridor to the kitchen. Already I begin to feel detached, as if I am playing a role we have rehearsed.

Jane Hogan is pale with long dark hair that splits and curls half-way down her back. Her voice is soft and clear as a bell. She moves with consideration for objects, and for living things around her.

I am covered in bruises from table corners and doorways. Bruised legs are common in my family. Most of the time, we have no idea where the bruises come from.

Comparison is pointless.

"Do you feel like a drink, Jane?" I wave the Moet casually.

"Yes," she says. "I'd like that."

I stand to open the bottle, precise as a waiter. Jane brings me two unmatched wine glasses. At home, I drink from crystal flutes which break one by one in the washing-up. I set down the champagne, placing the cork on the table next to the bottle.

I watch Jane stirring a saucepan of milk on the stove. She sets out two mugs, and puts four tea-spoons of Milo in each one. I pour the champagne, watching the bubbles rise and subside in the glasses.

Jane puts the mugs on a tray with a plate of chocolate biscuits. She leaves the room, and I hear the stairs creak under her feet. I picture her daughters in flannel nightgowns. Are they watching T.V. or drawing with coloured pencils? Perhaps they are playing with Barbie dolls or having a Cabbage Patch tea-party. I decide they are having a Cabbage Patch tea-party with dolls wearing home-made dresses.

Waiting for Jane, I sip my drink with great control. I contemplate the seductive properties of Moet & Chandon.

The Moet & Chandon vineyards face south-east, warmed by the morning sun. The topsoil is shallow, and the sun's warmth is absorbed by the underlying chalk. The chalk reflects the rays of the sun back into the foliage of the vines, giving them a second helping of sunshine. The sun and the soil create a private warm climate which lasts through the evening and into the night.

Jane returns and we lift our glasses.

"What are we drinking to?" she says.

"The ecstasy of St. Theresa," I say.

"If you like." Jane laughs, a tinkle of Swiss bells.

I can't bear to be taken lightly.

Jane and I discuss her daughters. One of them is addicted to reading. As long as she is awake, she is reading.

"I was like that," I say. "I still am."

Jane looks doubtful.

On my second glass, I begin to tell Jane a roundabout story . . .

"You haven't seen my kitchen since I painted it. The walls are the colour of Van Gogh's sunflowers. I painted pink and grey bands around the stained-glass window frames; I used a half-inch brush. First I had to wash the walls — they were filthy.

"I wanted to make it beautiful, to make a beautiful home . . ."

Jane and I light cigarettes. I know I am staring at her. Her eyes are the exact blue of the eyes of the man I love. Deep ocean blue, I used to call it.

Jane waits without comment for me to continue.

"I'd just started washing the walls when Lisa appeared at the door looking pale and shaky. I was a bit suspicious, you know, because I hardly ever see her these days."

I look at Jane meaningfully, and she nods.

"Lisa wouldn't tell me why she'd come. Just said she felt depressed. I knew she'd come to tell me she was in love with Robert. So I made her help me wash the walls."

I feel tears of self-pity rising in my eyes.

Jane looks disturbed. She pushes back her chair, and goes to the kitchen bench where she stands with her back to me. I study her body. She looks small and slender. Although we are the same height, I feel much bigger.

I want to tackle her physically, to throw her to the ground and vanquish her.

She asks me if I'd like to hear some music, and I nod dumbly.

Jane puts on *Some Girls*. How long has she liked the Rolling Stones? I can't keep the sneer from my face.

I am drinking faster than Jane, which is a good thing. Every drop is precious. I empty the heavy green bottle into our fragile glasses.

Jane returns from the living room, and resumes her place at the table. Neither of us refer to the story I had been telling. For some reason, I want to talk about my birthday party. I want Jane to know what a fast and glamorous crowd we made. My sentences become rapid and nervous — I am thinking of Blanche du Bois.

"Robert told me about it." Jane stuns me into silence. "It sounded great. Lots of people and music. Great fun," she repeats, leaning back in her chair.

I am fixed by her eyes, and by the shadows around them. Her skin is pale and has a waxy surface, like a water-lily. Her skin makes strong contrast to her hair which is almost black. She makes no effort to disguise what grey there is.

Not a vain woman, obviously.

I repress the desire to laugh, and take a slow sip from my glass. The bubbles rise to the back of my nose. Moet & Chandon is good champagne.

I don't believe Jane could tell vintage from non-vintage. But she knows how to make a man feel at home.

Time is running out.

"Jane, did Robert come to visit you the night of my birthday?"

Jane sighs. "He came for a while," she says. "We watched T.V. I think he was feeling a bit tired."

"So you see him quite often, do you?" I say. I feel menace in the air. Jane doesn't appear to notice.

In fact, she laughs. "Oh, he comes around sometimes. He's a good friend, and he likes the children."

Jane draws a strand of hair back behind her ear. She reveals the side of her neck, pale and shadowy. I imagine I can smell her skin; it is warm, musky.

"I heard he was in love with you."

Jane shifts her eyes. Her voice has a jokey tone. "Where did you hear that?"

I take a deep breath. "I just heard it . . ."

I raise my glass, encouraged by her shy posture, her hair falling darkly around her face.

". . . and I had to know if it was true." I want to add "Forgive me" but pride will not allow it.

Jane gets up from the table, breaking the tension of our physical closeness. Once again, she moves to the sink, arranging the dishes that are waiting to be washed. Her hands move lightly.

"Robert hasn't said anything to me." Jane says with a little laugh.

I appreciate her repetition.

". . . He just comes round to visit, to relax . . . And I'm glad he does. We're good friends."

I sip the last of my drink, feeling warm. I decide to leave, having heard what I came to hear.

Jane drifts around the kitchen.

I am fixed in my chair.

The Moet & Chandon is empty. I know this but I tip the bottle automatically. Two more drops. I study my hand holding the stem of the glass. My hand is blanched of colour. The nails need filing. This neglect of grooming reminds me that I am wearing a faded Rolling Stones tee-shirt.

I feel the weight of my head in the palm of my hand. The pattern on the tablecloth begins to creep.

"Are you all right?" Jane says.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "I should go."

The doorbell rings, a piercing sound. I look at Jane. She is looking at me. Her eyes are dilated, her body tensed up as if she were going to spring.

I watch her leaving the room, smoothing her hands down over her hips.

I see myself standing at the blind end of an alley with my back to a wall. The tall figure of a man comes toward me. The sun is behind him, casting a shadow that covers me. There are no colours. I see it all in black and white.

I hear the tread of boots coming down the hall. Jane comes into the room, her laughter dying away.

I face Robert. He leans against the frame of the doorway, tall and casual, taking in the situation. I have to admire his stance.

"Celebrating?" he says. "Moet & Chandon! You have been celebrating."

Jane and I respond with Southern Belle laughter.

I watch Jane go to the fridge and take two bottles of Crown Lager from a six-pack. Jane doesn't drink beer, and neither do I.

Robert sits at the head of the table, relaxed, talkative. Everything I say is automatic and unheard by my own ears. I am a camera, silently taking pictures of Jane. Of Robert's mouth, his hands, his mouth. Without looking, I know the exact colour of his eyes.

Robert's hands are pale with raised blue veins. The veins run like twin rivers dividing again at the knuckles. Two white scars run from the base of his thumb round to the side of his wrist. I picture his hand going through glass in an act of violence.

When I look into his eyes, I am shocked by their depth and colour. I know this feeling well: the feeling of falling into ocean darkness.

I stand abruptly. Robert continues to talk. He is describing two classic cars, one complete and one in pieces in cardboard boxes. The cars are to be sold together.

"Goodbye," I say. "I'm going." I do not move.

Jane turns to me. She murmurs regret. Twice she thanks me for the champagne which she calls "beautiful".

"Keep the bottle as a trophy," I tell her. Her dark eyes widen.

Robert hastens to my side. He assists me into my red winter coat with jolly solicitude. He walks with his arm around me down the long corridor. He opens the door. I feel the fresh cold of the night, and turn to him.

He folds me against his chest, and I lean on him briefly.

"Goodnight." He bends to kiss my dry lips. "Take care of yourself."

I run from the circle of light into the shadows. Too fast to hear the door close. Out on the street, it is all I can do not to vomit. I crouch in the shadows for some time.

When I can walk, I reel home carelessly, bruising myself on this and that.

## Breathing up to heaven

No garden, clean windows, a nice place. They'd given me a key and it fitted smooth as oil in the first lock, but I pressed the intercom button just to be sure she wasn't home. She wasn't.

The carpet in the passage was smoky grey and clean, even up the stairs. There was no one about. At the top on the landing were three doors with neat gold numbers on them, and twelve was the far one. That lock was smooth too, and I shut the door behind me and dumped my bag on the couch.

A mess of course, and I might have known. I poked around a bit. A dinner party, apparently — big sticky roast pan in the kitchenette, and dishes and more dishes, and empty champagne bottles. I could see she wasn't used to being tidy.

Under a cushion in the loungeroom was a dress, and there was underwear. Then I found the diary. When I picked it up it opened at the last entry.

Ross says he can't help himself — I say he doesn't try.

Not that I mind, of course, and he *is* rather inventive.

But must he go on about his money and how happy he could make me? *I'm* not saying a word — let him wait.

Ho hum, I thought. Only two of them, making this much mess.

It was all going to take me more than the two hours, at any rate, and I started on the kitchenette. I could see out the window the postie dropping mail into the boxes, and I wondered if this Ross would be writing to her.

By the time I was in the loungeroom holding her underpants up, wondering what on earth I was supposed to do with them, the phone rang. I just ignored it of course, thinking it couldn't be for me. Then I started thinking, what if it's the agency, checking to see if I'm really here? So I grabbed it, just when I was sure it was about to stop ringing.

"Hello," I said, and I whipped the work card out of my apron for a look. "Sylvia Hoyle's residence."

There was a pause, then "Betty?"

"Who's that?" I said, but I knew. It was my sister. "That you, Sarah?"

"Yea."

"What are you doing, ringing me at work? Where'd you get this number? The agency?"

"Yes."

"I'm at someone's house. You can't ring me here."

"It's an emergency."

"Sarah, I can't talk on the phone. What's wrong?"

"There's ants all over everything. I think you'd better come home now. They're everywhere."

"Now look," I said, "have a nap. You know where the tablets are. Hop back into bed."

"But my bed's full of ants. And I drank some in my juice. I think they poisoned me. I feel sick."

"Nonsense. There's no ants, and I have to do my work. I'll see you later." And hung up.

A week later I looked at the loungeroom and said, so, Sylvia Hoyle's had another wild night. There was her underwear, and there were all the dirty dishes, and there was me, starting to clean the whole thing up.

I found the diary on top of the fridge.

Dear Ross cried when I said I had to think about it. He hardly looked at the roast lamb, just told me he couldn't bear not knowing. I know he's an important person and all that, but I couldn't help teasing him just a little when he said, was it because I had someone else? Of course it ended in the usual way, with me quite overcome in the middle of dinner. He's very persuasive.

I nearly didn't answer the phone when it rang, because I thought it's only Sarah again. She's got some silly idea and she wants to bother me. But of course I started imagining it was the agency, and that woman would be saying "She's not there — we can't have this", and I snatched the phone up.

"Betty I'm frightened."

I sighed. "Why are you frightened, Sarah?"

"It's the man again, and he's got a dog."

"Is the front door locked?"

"Yes, but I think he got in."

"Sarah, if you didn't let him in, and the door's locked, then he couldn't be inside, could he?"

"But I could hear the dog sniffing. I had to hide in the laundry and I got so scared I panted and panted and then I got dizzy and I thought I was floating up to heaven. I don't know what he did to me."

"Nothing. There's no one there, Sarah. Hop back into bed and turn the telly on, OK? Have something to eat. You know where the biscuits are. There's no one there, you'll be fine. Don't ring me again." I put the phone down, and in a minute I picked it up again. When I heard the dial tone I left the receiver off the hook and got on with my work.

I was a bit early the next week, and I looked for the diary straight away. Finally I found it under the bed, well hidden.

Letter today. He's making a mistake. I know he really loves me.

Of course, I had to find that letter, and there it was, folded into the back cover of the diary. It was funny looking at a letter he'd actually written. I realised then I'd been thinking this Ross didn't exist.

Sorry Sylvia,

But I won't have time to drop around tonight. I'm off interstate tomorrow and have a bit to do — thanks for asking me, though. Thought I'd take a

bit of a holiday while I'm away. Fact is, I'll probably be gone a while, but I'll be in touch when I get back.

Ross.

This was the bloke who couldn't resist her. I chuckled. I couldn't help it.

I knew it would only take me half the time that day. It seemed Miss Sylvia had been much more restrained lately -- no champagne, no roast, and not a piece of underwear in sight. I went into the kitchenette and stacked up what dishes there were. That was when I saw a trail of little black ants coming up from the floor and along the bench. I watched them for a while, watched them tap their feelers together, run along the column and tap their feelers. Then I squashed a few, and hunted out the spray.

It's funny, I thought, when I stood looking at her bedroom, she's really been very neat this week. I poked around a bit, and when the phone began to ring, I let it: it would only be Sarah. I counted sixteen rings while I looked through the drawers for the second time that day. By the time the ringing stopped I had decided that Miss Holyle had left to look for Ross.

I straightened the room up and lay on the bed. Pretty soon I was wondering what Sarah had wanted, and I just couldn't make up my mind whether to ring her back or not.

I didn't have to worry — she rang again, and this time it was some panic about the electricity going wrong and paralysing her, or something. I don't know.

I slipped into the flat and checked. Just as I thought — Sylvia hadn't been back all week. I pulled my suitcases in from the hall. It had been hard to get them past Sarah. She wouldn't stop talking, acted suspicious. In the end I tricked her. "That dog's in the backyard again," I said, and when she ran out to look I grabbed my cases from my room and left.

I made myself a cup of coffee, took the phone off the hook, and then sat in the loungeroom watching television. The reception was good, and I thought to myself "fine." When I was tired of that I pulled my suitcases into the bedroom and unpacked. I cleared out some drawers and put her things under the bed.

It was a comfortable bed and I was tempted to have a nap right away. But no, I had a few things to do. I took my bag of groceries from the suitcase into the kitchenette and put the champagne into the fridge. She had recipe books, thank goodness, so it was no trouble to make the stuffing, and I put the chicken in the oven on low. After I had prepared the vegetables I put the eggs, the chocolate and the beater on the bench and set about making mousse.

When it was setting in the fridge and the chicken was cooking in the oven, I took a bottle of champagne and a glass into the loungeroom.

"Here's to you, Betty," I said, and I raised my glass and I had to laugh.

The picture was on with no sound. There was a bloke in the movie — so handsome, and looking at me. I was touching myself. Gently, and looking at that handsome bloke and him looking at me and slipping undone my clothes and slipping inside my underwear, her best soft underwear . . .

I brought out the second bottle of champagne with the mousse and pushed aside the plate with bones on it. "Cheers, Betty my love," and one hand slipping and squeezing all over me I laughed out loud. Oh, I laughed out loud.

I did feel a bit sick, a bit unsteady, when I woke up. The loungeroom was in the same old mess — empty bottles, dirty plates, clothes and underwear scattered.

I turned the television picture off. It was someone jumping around inside a costume made to look like a big cat. Oh dear, I thought.

In the kitchenette the ants had come back. There was a trail from a different hole straight to the mousse bowl. I went and had a shower.

The flat was clean and beautiful. I watched from the kitchenette window as the postie dropped letters into all the slots. I was sure there was something for number twelve so I got my key and went downstairs.

There were three letters, and I brought them back up, sat on the couch and opened them with a little knife.

A letter from the council about a parking ticket, a leaflet from a health club, and a card from 'Aunty Joy' — "Dear Sylvia" etc, with a bit about the weather and a dying dog.

Nothing from young Ross, not that I expected anything. I wondered if she had found him yet, but I doubted it somehow. I knew he would make himself pretty hard for her to find.

I pulled the diary out and sat at the desk.

Ross was rather taken with dinner and I was rather taken with Ross. He poured me champagne until, I'm afraid to say, between the chicken and the mousse, I couldn't hold myself back any longer. I panted so hard I was breathing up to heaven, floating away . . .he wants me so badly — how long can I keep him waiting? I'll have to decide soon.

I watched a movie on television straight after lunch, then I nicked out for some shopping. When I got back I cleared the bench, but as I picked up the toaster to move it I got a hot charge up my arm, and dropped it. The thing was faulty, it must have been, but no real harm done. I began working on a pavlova, listening to the radio, and my arm ached a little.

I did wonder about Sarah, I did think of ringing her.

I also wondered about Ross. Perhaps I would hear from him tomorrow. Perhaps he would be back in town soon, and he'd come around here, not knowing Sylvia had gone after him. I chuckled. I supposed he'd be surprised to see me.

It was veal with special sauce that night, and I was getting up a good collection of dirty saucepans and dished when I noticed the ants blackening the bowl I'd mixed the pavlova in. Some of them were dead, drowned themselves in it. The rest died when I sprayed and sprayed and sprayed.

There was another man on the movie that night, watching me. The hand sliding up my thigh, slipping under my panties, softly pressing and sliding, and Ross kissing me and whispering, and then on the floor slowly pushing and me sighing and breathing. Ross.

Ross could hardly wait last night, licking the pavlova cream off his fingers, off mine, licking me. It's almost quaint how much he wants me. Begged me to marry him again. What can I do?

I closed the diary and put it away. The flat was spick and span. I'd cleaned the dishes, wiped away the dead ants, watched for the postie. Only one letter. "Dear

Ms Hoyle, thankyou for your interest in our superannuation package." Not a word from Ross.

I was lying on the bed wondering what to cook for dinner, feeling my arm still ache a little from the wretched toasted, when I heard the front door open. A man said "Got the cartons? We'll pack the books first, then take the shelf, let's see, couch, telly. Alright?"

Another man said "Yep", and I lay and listened to them packing the books into boxes. Every so often there was a thump and I thought they would be dumping the full boxes by the front door.

When they said "Righty-ho, let's get the shelf," I got out of bed and began to pack my suitcases. I would leave what food there was in the kitchen, I would leave my toothbrush in the bathroom.

I slipped out the front door of the flats while the men were sliding the shelf into their truck outside. One of them looked up at me as I came through the gate and said "Morning." I smiled at him and walked away from the flat. I rang Sarah from a phone box to tell her I was coming, and was halfway home when I realised I had forgotten my diary. It was too late to go back for it now.

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## STEPHEN HALL

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### Bartering

Having lost her to water  
I think of her arms  
rising easily in the heave  
of tide and the liquor  
of her eyes diluted into  
miles of shifting sea.

Some man's lost canoe,  
outrigger snapped by storm,  
meanders to this beach,  
I think she passed a few  
yards from it, cracking  
her lips around a cry.

The hollow knock of my  
knuckle on the wood, is  
the moment of his finger  
stroking a blistered line  
upon her cheek, foreign  
waves drawing over legs.

We exchange gifts; his  
long, smooth boat, tooth-  
marked by the hatchet; my  
lover, carved from the  
grain of my life, hair  
knotted in the black sand.

## Chook and Children

It never recovered from motherhood, the black hen.  
It went clucky, hoarded eggs, hatched chickens  
and turned vicious. Months later and still  
it fluffs to a fury and hurls itself at our legs.

A plump, feathered lance, it draws blood  
from our fatted calves. The children are afraid  
to collect the eggs. Terror roams the chook-run.  
Today, it hurtled at my son as he reached

into the feed-bin. He fended it off with the lid,  
held like a shield at his shins, until I arrived  
with a tomato stake to beat it back. It baulked,  
squawked and flapped a swift retreat. The children

rejoice. Oh-ho, father with justice in his fist!  
Ah-ha, the chicken-livered chook! Under the apple  
tree the fowl fluffs up, shakes off its fright.  
Looking on, my daughter says, 'Deserves him right!'

## The Chiffonier

Tad stood in the dark room, his feet close to the place where the old, proud cedar of the chiffonier met the linoleum mat. Mother had arranged it so that the damp could not creep up from the concrete and weaken and mustify this last relic of the comfortable life Dargans were said to have lived before the Depression.

He felt the darkness as his pale fingertips extended towards the carved face of the drawer and the deep mystery of the never-opened doors. His fingers made contact with the polished smoothness of the wood and he gently moved them to and fro and it seemed that the scent of beeswax lifted and wafted and overcame the cabbagey airlessness of the room. He moved his fingertips down the bosom of the wood until they reached the brass keyhole and the shape of the brass key which was never moved because Mother trusted in her fearful stories.

His small fingers touched the key and he pressed its shaft against his thumb. Only this. Inside the chiffonier the dread pterodactyl shuddered its wings and opened and shut its mouth on rows and rows of triangular teeth.

Tad dropped his hand to his side. He walked over to the doorway and sharply pulled down the light cord. When Mother came in, panting from the heat of the wood copper, he was kneeling in front of the bookcase.

— Remember, Tad, that we are lucky to have Aunt Jenny's books. Although the house.

She hovered.

— Read this one. *Jessica's First Prayer*. It's a lovely story. A Jew becomes convinced.

He ran his forefinger slowly over the spines of the books. *Doctor Adrian*, *Henry Esmond* in red binding, a spongy, puffy black book called *Tennyson* and a maroon *Mrs Browning* and a sea-green *Shelley*. Books dark and old as the room. The edges of the pages were brown and the paper cracked when a page was turned.

Mother sighed again.

— I've got to get the washing out.

Tad pulled down the light cord and left the books to another reader. The pterodactyl folded its wings and shut its mouth.

When Tad was tired of looking over the fence to next door, watching the Ashton twins building their tree house, he came inside and watched as Mother smoothed the cream tablecloth and put out the sherry.

— Where's your father? One of the twins had leered up at him.

— We're not allowed to play with you, the other one chanted smugly.

— Father Leary, Mother explained.

The lamb needed basting. Mother wiped her face and wrenched open the oven door.

Father Leary wiped the gravy from his dark-stubbled chin and sighed.

— Well, Mrs Dargan. Well, well! 'Tis hard t' find m'self a reliable altar boy these days.

Tad chewed carefully. The lamb was stringy. A fibre caught in a back tooth. He poked a finger into his mouth and tried to push his nail between the teeth and return his mouth to a state of comfort. Mother looked at him.

Tad followed Father Leary into the heavy air of the sacristy. In a little closet was a wardrobe of delicately laced cottas and tiny albs in the seasonal colours of the Church, and for festivals and funerals — white, red, green, purple, black. Tad touched the soft, lacy fabric of the cotta Father handed to him.

— Y'r mother always keeps these beautiful, he said.

— Y'can polish the sanctus bells, me boy, but the Chalice is holy.

Tad looked at the Chalice. Just a chink of silver was visible under the white linen folds. It was kept in a dark, holy place. Waiting for the Lord to come. And for Father Leary's lips, which touched lovingly.

Tad carefully wriggled into the red alb stiffened slightly and smelling of Mother's chalky starch. He looked at himself in the sacristy's long mirror and checked that no fold or crease was wrongly placed. Then he reached up for the cotta, still slightly warm from the iron, and carefully slid it from its hanger. Slowly, and with great care, he put his arms into the wide sleeves and lifted the garment so that it was upon him without the disturbance of a hair. Slowly, he turned in front of the mirror and the beauty of his appearance surprised him. His thick features seemed to have become finer. The purity, the delicacy, the grace of the garments had transformed him. He followed Father Leary and his shoes were not heavy as they crossed into the sanctuary.

Christ was born and betrayed and died and rose, and the Church wore green through the long season after Trinity. Mother puffed over the fuel copper. She asked Tad if he had heard the clothes prop man coming down the street. On the shelf, Jessica's prayer put on a grey coat and the pterodactyl shuffled in the cupboard once more.

The Ashton twins were hiding under the pine trees and flicking stones over the fence. Tad kicked at the scruffy remnants of Mother's pansies. He sidled over to the fat trunk of the palm tree and he picked up a sharp lump of gravel. Something the Ashtons had thrown yesterday.

He drew his arm back as far as he could and he curved himself into the shape of a famous fast bowler who had had his picture on the back page of *The Sun*. He threw the stone.

There was a crash and a tinkle as the front sunroom opened. A fern was felled. Tad put his back up against the palm tree and drew his legs up tightly. He was a ball ready to roll down a steep hill.

He heard Mrs Ashton's high heels on the path. He heard her loud voice and a funny gasp from Mother.

— The boy needs a *father's* discipline, Mrs Dargan.

The angry heels went past again and the gate clamped to. Tad sat quietly for awhile. When he arose, it was dusk and Mother was shelling peas. She opened her face brightly.

— A chop *and* a sausage tonight, Tad.

Tad said nothing. He walked into the dark sitting-room and stood in front of the chiffonier. He stood up very close to it and listened for the pterodactyl to scratch with its horrible claws and to bite at the air with its rows of teeth. There wasn't even a rattle.

Tad reached out and touched the key. It was cold. He quickly twisted it. There was a grinding and a click and he pulled at the key and the door eased open.

There was no pterodactyl. There *was* a brown box.

Tad knelt in front of the open door and he took the box out of its dark hole. There was a smell of paper and of age, but there was no dust. The box was as clean as if it had been put there yesterday.

Tad balanced the box upon his folded knees and he opened it. He drew the top carefully upwards and set it down on the floor.

Inside the box there was a wrapping of fine white tissue paper and there was something soft and white underneath. Tad gently put aside the tissue paper and it was as if he were opening a curtain on a miracle.

The fabric was crisp with lace and there were yards of white smooth-shiny stuff that Tad's hungry fingers caressed with a harsh swiftness. He pulled the stuff out of the box in a haste that made the whiteness tumble in a foam across the floor. There was another piece of fabric, filmy, translucent, and he pulled that out, too, wondering. He did not bother with the little bundle of paper, or with the little brooch.

He laid the fabric out and saw that it had a shape.

He lifted the folds of the garment. Slowly, and with great care, he tried to struggle into it so that nothing was spoilt or disarranged. The sleeves were long and narrow and he could not tell which was the front and which was the back and the yards of fabric tangled around his feet. He tried to arrange the yards in a graceful surge but his feet were too inexperienced and soon there was a long tear, and a dark stain of mud his shoe had collected under the palm tree gashed across the lace.

He heard Mother pull sharply on the light cord and he heard the button at the end of the cord slapping hard against the wall. His hands could not resist. He outlined the smooth tracings of the lace-edged sleeves. He followed the outline of his satin ribs and waist.

He heard Mother walk away and he heard the colander and the peas hitting the kitchen sink, heard the colander bounce tinnily on the floor, heard a hailstorm of peas.

Mother returned and stood and made little bubbling sounds. Again she pulled the light cord very hard. She left Tad standing in the dark.

## At Akroteri

Hammer-heads still peer from pumice,  
ready for stone or ship;  
the cracked walls gathered, put back,  
but the bags stayed packed.

Frescoed figures leap from the block,  
eyes over shoulders, too quick for  
the earth's camera, black ash hoods that blur  
human negatives in rock.

No creatures caught in love or envy  
or what they were ever about to say;  
no apocalyptic apathy  
postured in lava here. Not Pompeii.

But deserted places hoard their own hollowness;  
their absence from their deaths the main event,  
their almost instinct disappointment;  
as if sad they had waited all their lives for this,  
then missed it; had rehearsed and left before the play  
and might have run anywhere except away.

## The Lodger

You have let your hair run riot  
for the sheer joy of watching it grow  
It is left to sprawl like an unkept  
garden, to shape itself and take possession  
of whatever it chooses, an ear, a chin,  
an eye or two.

Besides, looking respectable is a vanity  
you gave up long ago  
That perished with the coming of relations  
and especially curious friends  
Those long, drawn out afternoons  
spent blubbering into the laps of the many  
while the pattering rain spoke of even greater farces  
How could they begin to understand  
the prisoner who threw away the key.

You require little in the still air  
of your present abode  
Hermetically sealed from the outside world  
you revel in your own suffocation  
It is more than a state of mind  
It is the gentle touch of an undemanding friend  
naive to your secret and dumb to the world.

## REVIEWS

Margaret Barbalet, Sara Dowse, Suzanne Edgar, Marian Eldridge, Marion Halligan, Dorothy Horsfield, Dorothy Johnston, *Canberra Tales*, Penguin Books, \$12.99.

Husbands and wives who live together for a long time eventually grow to look alike, so they say. Perhaps groups of writers, especially those who live in a cloistered environment like Canberra, undergo the same homogenizing process and begin to sound alike. With one or two exceptions and in spite of what the anonymous (collective?) voice in the Afterword may claim, the voices of the women in *Canberra Tales* are disconcertingly similar. Or is it because of the repetitiousness of the subject matter — Canberra? Whether low life in places like "Belladonna Gardens" (Marion Halligan) — 'There were beer cans and chip packets and plastic bags and faded wads of free advertising, and a number of condoms . . . Her foot pushed a tall tufted clump of dead weeds aside. There were two syringes, complete with needles.'; or the high life — "Volumptuous Ladies" (Suzanne Edgar) — 'The singer placed herself astride Colin's lap and supple as a dancer folded glittering silver legs around his shoulders. From his foolish smile, Colin might have received a trophy. Peacock feather hooked a slender wrist behind his neck, the other held the mike.' — there is a consistency about background, tone and style. Recurrent images dominate the stories as they do the landscape, whether natural (the Brindabellas), man-made (the new Parliament House or the High Court) or an artificial combination of the two (Lake Burley Griffin). After a while the effect becomes slightly claustrophobic. Perhaps this is the whole point.

There are some good stories in this collection; some very well crafted stories, although their well-craftedness sometimes edges towards contrivance; the compulsion for metaphor; for symbols; for frames in which to slot the narrative. Those more spontaneously told have the urgency of gossip: not malicious, but knowledge to be shared. Families split by death or desertion; the loneliness of a partner who remains, sometimes alone, sometimes with the additional pressures of children to care for. Some of these stories may be intended as cautionary tales ("Perilous Seas") others read like case histories ("Dog Bones" and "The

Division of Love"), though imagination lifts them beyond the files of the social worker or the police report.

Five stories stand out for special reasons. Dorothy Johnston in "The New Parliament House" probes beneath the superficial glitter/squalor of our nation's capital to expose the dilemma of the woman who opts to climb the male-dominated ladder to success — (if you are ambitious, it is possible also to have integrity? And anyway, where does it get you in the end?). Her more conservative sister sticks with marriage and children, and those particular tensions. This story confronts issues that are concerned with power — from maintaining the balance of power in the home to the equally disturbing shifts in the power struggles of the Press Gallery. The dichotomy of the roles each sister plays is nicely balanced and you feel that Johnston is a writer who allows her characters to BE. The result is more satisfying than if she had simply written ABOUT them.

Marion Halligan's "Most Mortal Enemy" is the compelling story of Mikelis, the once dispossessed Balt who now climbs his pole to photograph progress on the new Parliament House building. But the story is top heavy with symbols — the camera, the pole, the pieces of amber. Like Mikelis, stranded up his pole when the ladder falls, the story is also endangered. In spite of this, it is a complex story, a cerebral story, playing with the idea of power and lost opportunity, and has enough (just) emotional pull to make you feel for Mikelis, trapped as he is.

Marian Eldridge's readable and pacey "Capital Gains" reveals how family life can be fractured by the pressure imposed (or self-imposed) by life as a public servant, but the story is linear rather than lateral. The Skerrits, wide-eyed visitors to the city, seem to re-affirm the values of the average slightly ocker family, yet the tone is uncertain. How are we to react to the work-obsessed Richard Potter who takes himself so seriously? And is Ray and Joan Skerritt's naivety unfortunate or a saving grace? This slight ambiguity reinforces the vision of Canberra glimpsed against a mountain backdrop as a kind of Eden but leaves you wondering whether the city itself is the worm in the apple.

Sara Dowse's "My Cousin Paola" examines issues at the heart of Australian society, and

Canberra, logically, is the setting. In her story there is less preoccupation with details of the place — Simonetta's home could just as easily be in Noranda or a similar suburb in Sydney or Melbourne where European migrants who have made lots of money choose to live. Lisa, who tells this story of her cousin, offers some startling insights. She remembers her father saying, 'In Bologna you could be a worker, an artisan and still be a cultured man,' and how he discovered after coming to Australia that to be educated and a worker were two different things. Lisa, herself a student of chemistry, looking at an electron through a microscope (the microscope image may not be original, but it works quite well) discovers that 'you need the stain to see them [the cells] clearly differentiated'. The voice in this story is strong, the control of narrative impressive and the theme challenging, but the outcome is rather too predictable.

Hidden among all the social realism in this collection of stories is a short piece by Dorothy Johnston — "The Boatman of Lake Burley Griffin" — that lingers on in the mind with its perplexing images of water and the boatman. The unanswered questions are what make this story special and its resonances suggest a longing for things to return to the way they were — 'his mouth yawned open; as if to swallow the water and return the valley to its former shape'. There is an eerie, surreal quality about this story that demands more than one reading.

Overall I felt that the women who wrote these stories were onlookers, sharply observant, sometimes compassionate but only rarely able to tear at the bone and fibre of their characters. On the whole too nice, rather too well behaved — but perhaps this is the effect of living in a place like Canberra.

#### Julie Lewis

**Les A Murray, *The Daylight Moon*, Angus & Robertson, 1987, \$12.95.**

"The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever" is the poem that captures the mood of Les Murray's new volume *The Daylight Moon*. Pure escapism? Not entirely. It is a meditative, polemical poem, revealing important truths about shorts, scunge, bloomers and other such

unmentionables. Shorts turn out to be the mode of dress most suitable for a poet who has decided to drop out, or rather, drop back, to the central north coast of N.S.W. of his childhood. Murray says in his epistolary poem, "Extract from a Verse Letter to Dennis Haskell" it was "get out of Yippie City or go mad". In "The Dream", Murray, like a latter day hippy, or perhaps, more anciently and respectably, an Arcadian pastoralist, rediscovers the value of an alternative life style:

Scunge, which is real negligeé  
housework in a swim suit, pyjamas worn all day,  
is holiday, is freedom from ambition.  
Scunge makes you invisible  
to the world and yourself.

While there may perhaps be difficulties in envisaging Les A. Murray rendered invisible by any garb, let alone "scunge", the poet claims that there is a spirituality to be gained from such "freedom from ambition". This is refreshing in these days dominated by calls for increased competitiveness and something called "current economic circumstances":

shorts and their plain like  
are an angelic nudity,  
spirituality with pockets!  
A double updraft as you drop from branch to pool.

In such musings, there is a feeling of space, of capacity. In *The Daylight Moon*, there is, above all, a sense of temporal spread, of a time to contemplate, and come to terms with, the passing of time. There is depth in the pockets of Les Murray's spirituality as he explores fragments of the past of his own family (as one would expect from Les Murray), but more characteristically of this volume, there is a narrative concern to uncover the poetic significance of some aspects of the history of the northern rivers community, and thus celebrate a sense of community that city life has largely lost.

"Federation Style in the Northern Rivers", for example, takes a piece of local folklore and proceeds with an understated, country style of wry comment. The poem deftly controls the reporting of vernacular speech and precision of description in a taut and dramatic narrative line. A store owner, one J. Cornwall, turns out to be the local larrikin-hero. Using someone else's new Vauxhall, which is described with all the love of

a vintage car buff, he takes a visiting auditor — the aptly named Stickney — for a ride. Literally. It is the *style*, of Stickney's distraction that occupies the narrative's attention. But Cornwall deserves his folk-hero status because he saves the district's debtor population from ruin by ruining himself. The preoccupation with "style" turns out to be heroic because it is the facade that conceals the community's life and death struggle for survival. This only becomes apparent near the end. The consequences of Cornwall's actions are briefly outlined:

As the town declines through the mulberry years  
Cornwall will receive odd grateful sovereigns.  
The rebuilt store will be kept by a Hogan.

The poem is reminiscent of a Henry Lawson yarn. Yet there is an economy of description, and a richness of phrase that makes "Federation Style" distinctly poetry. Indeed, the poem has a sort of style to which the epithet "Federation" is totally appropriate. In this poem, the image of the vintage Vauxhall, the sense of something that already seems older than itself when it was new, decorates even as it intrinsically characterises the mentality of the actors and the atmosphere of the time and place.

Not all historical poems work quite as well. Sometimes, it is as if Murray has become too carried away with the superficial decorativeness of the Federation Style and laboured over a gargoyle while forgetting the poetic house it would adorn. "The Megaethon: 1850, 1906-29" is an instance. This poem, which celebrates an early Hunter Valley prototype of the modern Tank, is as lugubrious as the machine it commemorates. Murray has taken to heart, perhaps, too much the role of poet laureate of the Northern Rivers and has stumbled into the trap of bathos that has proved the bane of many other laureates: he has been carried away by the sense of his occasion at the expense of its actual spiritual, or poetic, equivalent. The poem claims, truly enough, that the Megaethon is "slow as workaday, available for metaphor". But the metaphor is made too available. As a metaphor for patience, the reader's is tested a little too closely, while the poem's subject never gets as "mega" as its title might suggest.

But *The Daylight Moon* is not simply an ethnic curiosity about eccentric mid-north-coasters, nor is it a mere narrative celebration

of the good old days. While it does move with a sense of a more gracious time for living, it is also about the passing of time as it makes the present. For me, the most successful poem in the book, if not one of the most interesting Murray poems I have read, is "1980 in a Street of Federation Houses", where certain years of personal and public history float through the mind of a man waiting for his children on his access day, in a "suburban street that leads to the past". Among other interesting thoughts, he contemplates the proposition "To reproduce yourself is to admit defeat". Then there is the definition of the post-war era as the one in which

The Bomb and the Club Mediteranee had to lie  
down together . . .

These modern equivalents of the lion and the lamb express with a nice irony a modern view of the cultural determination of Blake's ideal equivalents. In this way, the poem cleverly gets into the consciousness of its persona, perhaps a 60's "radical" intellectual, someone corrupted by the Balmain Push, who is so advanced as to have taken methadrine, been divorced and learned to shake off a country background and laugh at the wood choppers at the show. Evidently this persona has been profoundly rocked by the A.L.P.-D.L.P. split of 1955, a year which is reconsidered as

an obsolete year  
and the whole Labor Movement  
shifts and re-levels in his mind  
like mercury, needing new calibrations.

It is as a realisation of a mind and an era needing "new calibrations" that this poem is successful. Yet it has a lightness of touch, as if "wearing a feather", like the women that emerge from the surf at the end of the poem.

"1980 in a Street of Federation Houses" has authority in the way it registers the interaction of public and private history. It fulfils the description of a poetic philosophy outlined abstractly and polemically in "Poetry and Religion".

Religions are poems. They concert  
our daylight and dreaming mind, our  
emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture  
into the only whole thinking: poetry.

"Whole thinking": public and private, emotional and intellectual, city and country. It is the term that neatly characterises the tone of *The Daylight Moon*. The title of the book, itself, concerts "our daylight and dreaming mind". Taken from a short lyric, "The Sleepout", the wholeness of recalled impressions of a child that "sleeps in a verandah room" is rendered. The surprising paradox revealed at the end of the poem is that it is darkness that kindles such impressions into light:

And out there, to kindle wherever  
dark found it, hung the daylight moon.

The religious function of Murray's poetry is to make stand out the illuminations hidden in our day-to-daylight world. It is the ability to bring out the moon in a wide variety of experience vividly, wittily, in a manner distinctly, but never offensively, Australian, that characterises Les Murray's new achievement.

In *The Daylight Moon*, there is a hidden tautness and a bite that speaks of a genuine maturity. Among these pastorals are knots of thought, experience and feeling that I find more consistently satisfying than in earlier Murray volumes. This volume is 'fuller' and more relaxed in its mastery than previous work. It's a good book to take on holidays. In a deckchair, lolling in my scungies, *The Daylight Moon* kept the sun nicely out of my eyes.

#### Alan Urquhart

**Carolyn Polizzotto, *Approaching Elise*,**  
Fremantle Arts Centre Press, \$15.99.

Carolyn Polizzotto's book *Approaching Elise* is a remarkable book. The cover is stunning. The use of one of Elise Blumen's paintings, Summer Nude, with the brush-stroked Elise of the title, and the sense of strong colour and light, promises the reader an experience that will be powerful and quite special. The ambiguity of the word APPROACHING and the fact that the face itself is in shadow hint at a certain subtlety about the way the material will be presented. The text of *Approaching Elise* is spare; pared down; yet it is sharp in its imagery. Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* said that 'the vast majority of works of art are small scale . . . and the effect

on the reader is a broader grasp of the subject because the interpretation is more concentrated'.

At the same time, paradoxically, the narrative is remarkably dense, because of repetition: because of the texture of its fabric. One version of the story is overlain upon another and another and another. It's like looking at a multi-faceted mirror, where you get a series of fragmented glimpses — tantalising because the whole picture is never clear, never complete at any one time. It shimmers and shifts, in and out of focus.

Instead of indulging in ballooning detail, Carolyn Polizzotto concentrates, as Lytton Strachey once recommended, 'on pure essentials, a vivid image on a page or two, without explanations, transitions, commentaries or padding'.

There is an overlap of the two art forms, as writer and painter combine their talents. Carolyn Polizzotto, the writer who has an awareness of colour and form prefaces one of her interviews with Elise with a painterly fragment, impressionistic, yet sharply real —

In a garden, seated on wooden benches at a wooden table. The garden is in a clearing, house behind. Stark square pillars are stained with iron from the reticulation. A low autumn sun, hot nevertheless, striking on my back through the trees. On my left some scrub, a road, an outhouse and the river. An old, old woman wearing a tie-dyed purple top over black jersey trousers. Pale pink suede sandals in a very contemporary style. Petite and erect, hands in lap or sometimes on the table, she is beautiful, her hair drawn up. It's light and golden, where she is, especially in that garden in the autumn light.

I feel huge and ungainly beside her, sprawled uncomfortably, getting a crick in my neck from turning to face her as she stares straight ahead, gazing at the river, recounting her stories. Her face is alive with the energy and expressions of the small girl she is describing.

And Elise Blumen, the painter, in one of her diary entries reveals herself as an artist with words as well as paint as she describes her first visit to Italy.

I've only seen Turin and yet, I believe, I've experienced Italy. The *grandezza* of the streets, the lightness, the royalty and this rich tranquillity. Squares and palaces and, next to them, the houses of the poor, beautiful too because of their construction — or decorative because of the dirt, perhaps! Richness in the hand-carved grids and railings of the balconies, the different window shutters. The *signori's palazzo* itself: I walk down the stairs

and soft Persian carpets silence my steps, the smooth railing accompanies me, and high above me the ceiling curves. Black eyes drink me, curved lips talk in foreign tones and foreign sounds echo from my mouth. The sound of a violin glides through the house, lonely; there's just the violin and me.

*Approaching Elise* is an important work for at least three reasons. It adds to that list of women painters chronicled by Germain Greer in *The Obstacle Race*. And it adds to the body of work by feminist writers offering new perceptions on things that are important for women. Finally it breaks new ground as far as the writing of biography is concerned.

Too often women artists have been judged by male standards of excellence and have been seen as 'modestly talented' or 'dabblers'. Elise Blumen for many years saw herself this way. Yet she fought very hard, not only against societal pressures, but her own estimation of her work. Quite early in her student days she was told by a teacher after quickly drawing three roses, 'Ah, it is because you are gifted that you can do it like that'. It was the first time anyone had suggested she was gifted. Even so, years later, she still regarded herself as modestly talented. This book reassesses the value systems that define talent and genius; it attempts to place these things in the context of a whole life, rather than merely in terms of a public life.

For the feminist reader Elise Blumen's dilemma of needing space for herself, yet unable totally to free herself from the responsibilities she feels towards her husband is poignant. She reveals this is a passage from her diary, written in 1954 when she had left Arnold and her sons in Australia to return to Germany for several years.

Arnold remains my responsibility. I love him maybe more dearly than before, because I know his weaknesses and limits now. Before, I loved his opportunities. I might be able to help him! If he could live without me, I would be free, but only then. Well, now we should be able to find out, because in fact we are living separately. I don't know. I'd still give up part of my personality if I thought I could help Arnold that way, but I don't believe in it any more. I think you have to do it by yourself.

Carolyn Polizzotto has devoted time and care to this work. Thinking about it, about the way it should be shaped. About the process. About

what biography should be doing. And the result is rewarding. As you read, you are not only aware of Elise, whose presence is strong, her powerful voice resonating through the diaries, but you are also aware of Carolyn Polizzotto — not obtrusively or self-consciously, but as a force in her own right. A warm and honest presence; one who lets Elise speak, yet is herself there, so that subject and narrator are exposed to the reader's scrutiny which makes them at once, both vulnerable and human.

'... Poor Carolyn,' says Elise at one of their interviews. 'How can you not be confused? I jump around so. But you must make it like this, too; you must hop as I do because there are logical links between each point. You will pick and choose.'

The words illuminate the process and it becomes increasingly clear that Carolyn Polizzotto sees Elise Blumen's life as a metaphor for her own. She admits this tentatively, engagingly, at the end of the first section *Remembering Elise* . . . 'What I remembered — who knows? — may pertain more to my life than hers.'

It is this metaphorical aspect of *Approaching Elise* that makes it such an exciting break through in the writing of biography. Carolyn Polizzotto combines the immediacy of the oral record, the veracity of the diary entry with the truth of fiction. It seems to me that the imaginative power behind this work is as challenging as the most adventurous works of contemporary fiction.

#### Julie Lewis

**Slipping Through the Spaces: *Not Being Miriam***, Marion Campbell, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1988, 192 pp., \$14.99.

Those who read Marion Campbell's first novel *Lines of Flight* will no doubt be eager to see her second work. While *Not Being Miriam* does not have the density or cohesion of the first, it is very good. In fact its tendency to fragmentation, or at least a brittleness or delicacy of structure, might make it more accessible than was *Lines of Flight*.

*Not Being Miriam* tells the story of a number of women. The stories of Bess the drama teacher

(what we might have once called the central character), her sister Cassandra, Lydia, Else, and Aunt Mamie, are brought together in a way which reveals the implications of the social on the problematised self. In *Lines of Flight*, Campbell explores aspects of selfness such as the fraught nature, if one accepts that 'I' is founded on division and unequal power relations, of making art, and of any move from 'I' to 'We' (in fact of conjugation), and the problematising of a woman's subjectivity on bearing a child. In *Not Being Miriam* these ideas are further developed by the interweaving of fictions and myths, and by the drawing together of disparate characters from specific social backgrounds. Dark pasts, of childhood and history, and the equally murky present, are explored with clarity and intelligence.

The main informing myth is that of Ariadne, though more recent mythologies are involved. At least two Alfred Hitchcock movies are referred to, *The Birds* and more particularly *Rebecca*, both from Daphne du Maurier stories). The social and the mythological are brought together in a setting which has a suburb fortuitously named Palmyra, but which also includes, "the *Rottenest Island*", Esperance ("when the French called this place Esperance, they were being sarcastic" p. 93,4), Kalgoorlie, Fremantle, Gilderton and obliquely, St. George's Terrace (a place which has recently given us another reading of the Ariadne myth). To write specifically about places in a small town runs the risk of fetishizing them, but while John Curtin High School might start getting phone calls for Bess Valentine, Black and White taxis will search in vain for 66 Demeter Street, Palmyra.

*Not Being Miriam* suggests ways in which women might make use of mythology. If the idea of the Labyrinth provides the structure for the novel, it is a Labyrinth turned inside out. It is not so much a matter of following a thread, as of slipping between selves, of seeking the spaces through which one can travel to encounter other selves.

Three of the figures associated with the character Lydia might serve to clarify this. These are the window, the gazebo and the game of Scrabble. As metaphors of connection, exit or freedom, these are ambiguous. As the German mathematician Lydia knows, books and people may be flung from windows. The gazebo (a word Lydia makes in Scrabble from *gaze*), is both a

private space for retirement in open air, and as Lydia's husband Harry considers, a prison for public display:

Could tell them about the bloke on the Costa Brava who built seven gazebos onto his own place, one hexagonal turret for each of his daughters. In that case, for display? Seven daughters embroidering their complaints through the latticed stars, their dark limbs aglow. (pp.52-53)

The Scrabble game, though apparently a nice metaphor for interlinking words, for meshing of endless possibilities, is itself a lie, as anyone who has been stuck in a game with seven vowels knows.

Any metaphor relying on a notion of meshing is already mixed. A net contains and traps as it suggest ramifications, (networks, branches, links), interstices, gaps and holes to slip through. It is the holes that provide the means of support for this novel. One can see what a tricky business this all is. The negativity in the title makes a space, or establishes a need for a story to be told, but that story makes other spaces. The problem is in finding a language to talk about this.

If there is an "I" in this novel it is Lydia's, and it is Lydia's mother who suggests the windows:

Learning is for connecting with other selves, other worlds. Learning is for making windows into other spaces, other times. Only then we can create. (p.111)

Though this passage introduces Lydia as a magician, it is not mere fancy. It suggests that the concerns of those who would escape the rise of Nazism are imaginative concerns. This is further stressed in those of the Lydia stories which deal with the Nazis of other times, which discuss repression and cruelty, in particular of women. These women are the "paper witches", because they are unable to authorise their own existence. That they are written and read by others is fundamental to the designation of their crimes. They include Johannes Kepler's mother Katerina and Lindy Chamberlain.

It is in these stories that the main device of the novel is emphasised. "Connecting" with another self, Katerina Kepler, Lydia remembers:

Later he said, when I was in trouble: Mother, what if the second focus of the ellipse is empty, even of the idea of God? Johannes, I told him, Johannes, the sums you are playing with are holed. Accept it. Accept it and let me travel through. Who will it escapes. (p.124)

It may be that what is being suggested here is the possibility of a feminine alternative to the phallus as a symbol of transcendence, that while the cross, the sword, the rocket, tall buildings and so forth might serve a particular symbolic order, another is being proposed. While there are dangers in willed mysteriousness, in preserving the feminine as enigmatic, these dangers are already inherent in any celebration of the phallus (as one sees in the "Paper Witch" chapters). By contrast what is offered is generosity of metaphor, and in consequence, of imaginative action. Such involves creation mythology, not just about beginnings, but about making and remaking of selves in social interaction, in metamorphosis.

In the use made of Ariadne's story the emphasis is on her abandonment (itself a ambiguous word), and it is this, at the conclusion of the novel, which provides the starting point for women's remaking of myth:

She shakes her head: waters roaring, she jubilates in this reverse thirst, these oceans pouring out, she spits: sluicing sand, beaches, dunes. Her mother is a huge head on the beach, a shape chalked out on the kitchen floor. Sightless out of some piety the gods of visibility called feminine. She gives them a gaze learned from blindness, new, tactile, intimate. Slow. Beach mother sways: light in waves, rolling dunes, eddying air. Kitchen mother rises, draws her shape: passageway, porch, suburbs, freeways fanning out . . .

In the wet sand at the cave entrance, Ariadne sees that the sun has made her dark. She is black in fact. She is ready. (p.187)

What I see to be a problem in the novel is its treatment of Bess as a victim. One of its strengths is the way in which it offers explanations as to where people come from and where they go, but the distribution of powerlessness between characters like Bess, Else, Lydia and others is false. If Bess, multilingual actor, would-be Antigone, is to become unhinged, it is self-indulgent to involve Else, unless it is being suggested that the two are already implicated in each other's break-down. My concern is not that characters don't behave as I would wish, but that

this book might in places celebrate phony defiance, or offer a misleading picture of a victim. The writing in of typical bigoted and clichéd criticisms of someone like Bess might eclipse some of what I have attempted to outline as more encouraging developments in the novel.

Campbell has talked about the tyranny of theory, of the anxiety that one's colleagues will be assessing one's writing for theoretical soundness, especially in discussions of the "self". (I will leave others to speculate on Campbell's choice of the name Miriam, the Hebrew version of her own Christian name.) None of this anxiety is apparent in *Miriam*, which far from being merely a French Pastiche, is original and productive. Campbell has established for herself a place from which to write which is neither in the margins nor in the authorised canon of cringeworthy tales of growing up in Australia.

**Pippa Tandy**

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ANDREW BURKE — has worked in Perth in radio and as an advertising copywriter. He has published a number of collections of poems.

ANNE CASEY — writes poetry and short stories, and works as a reference librarian. Her most recent work is an annotated bibliography of the life and works of Dorothy Hewett which will be published by LAA in January.

CHIN WOON PING — born in Malaysia, currently teaches at Haverford College, Pennsylvania. A poet and translator of Indonesian/Malaysian poetry she has published articles on aspects of East-West Comparative Literature, and the Asian influence on American literature.

SARAH DAY — lives and works in Hobart. She is the author of a collection of poems called *A Hunger to be Less Serious*, published by Angus & Robertson.

ADRIANA ELLIS — was born in Perth and has had stories published in various magazines. This story was written whilst on a grant from the W.A. State Department of the Arts.

STEPHEN HALL — was born in England and has completed a law degree at the University of Western Australia.

SARI HOSIE — teaches in a Perth College of TAFE, and is writing a collection of short fiction as part of a Postgraduate Diploma in English at Curtin University of Technology.

DIANA KAN — lives in Melbourne and works as a graphic artist. Her illustrated books of poetry are *Happy Families and Other Poems* (1973) and *The Birdman* (1984).

JEAN KENT — is a student counsellor. Her poems and stories have been published in Australian literary magazines and broadcast on the ABC and 5UV.

LEE KNOWLES — has published two collections of poetry, the most recent of which, *Dial Marina*, won the 1986 Western Australian Week Poetry Prize.

ANDREW LANSDOWN's latest collection of poetry *Waking and Always*, was published by Angus & Robertson in 1987.

PENELOPE LAYLAND — is a journalist and has spent most of her life in Canberra.

ASA LE TOURNEAU — lives in Perth and is studying English Honours at the University of Western Australia.

JULIE LEWIS — writes short fiction and biography and edits the book pages of Fremantle Arts Review. Her latest biography, *Jimmy Woods: Flying Pioneer* will be published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 1989.

CHRIS MANSELL's third book of poems, *Redshift/Blueshift*, was recently published by Five Island Press. *Shining like a jinx* will be published by the U.S. small press Amelia early in 1989.

CHRIS McLEOD — won the Donald Stuart Short Story Award (1987) and was runner-up in the Randolph Stow Literary Award (1987). He is at present writing under a grant from the W.A. Department for the Arts.

SHELLEY O'REILLY — is 23 and lives in Hobart. Next year she will begin a PhD on Pre-Raphaelite poetry at the University of Tasmania. This is her first published story.

MARGARET PACKHAM-HARGRAVE — grew up in Sydney and now teaches secondary English at Hurstville. Has published poetry and short fiction, and dreams of writing full-time and completing a novel.

GEORGE SEDDON — has just taken up a position as Professorial Associate of the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature at UWA.

JANET SHAW — is a Melbourne writer who has won several awards including the 1987 Judah Waten Prize. She has also had a children's book published by Angus & Robertson.

MICHAEL SPINDLER — lives in Perth and teaches American Literature at UWA. His short stories have been broadcast by the BBC and he has had short fiction and poems published in various journals.

NICOLETTE STASKO — is originally from America and lived in Perth for ten years before moving to Canberra where she now writes, teaches and edits.

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PIPPA TANDY — is a Masters student in the English Department at UWA. Co-author with Marnie O'Neill of *More Than Just Talk* (Sydney, McGraw-Hill, 1985) an English text for year 11 students.

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BARBARA WILLIAMS — British-born, Canadian poet, has been columnist on Australian poetry for *Poetry Canada Review* (Toronto) since 1984.

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