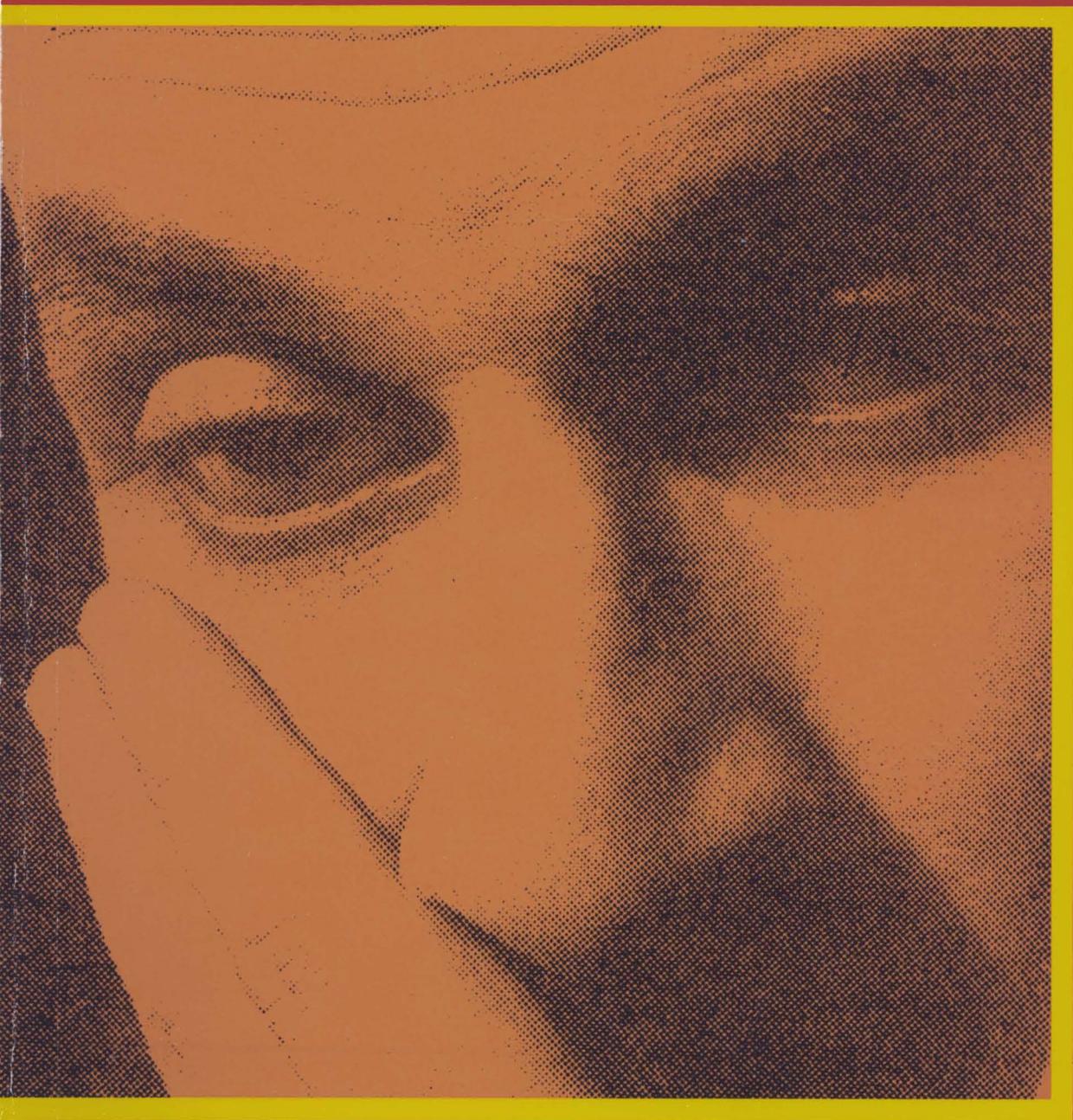


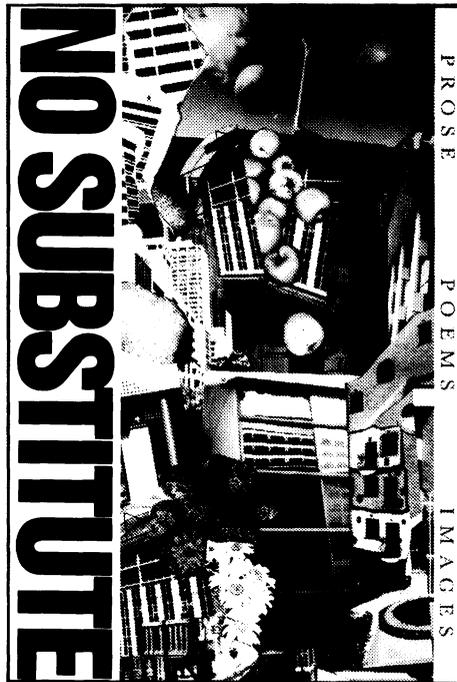
# WESTERLY

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# WESTERLY

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## **PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE**

The editors are pleased to announce that the Patricia Hackett Prize for the most outstanding contribution to *Westerly* in 1989 has been awarded to:

Terri-Ann White for her story 'The Life in There', which appeared in *Westerly* No. 1, March 1989.

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## Something is Lost

I am afraid to tell him the news. Before I set off to see my father I flatten down the spikes in my hair, as if they are somehow responsible for what I have to say. I am ready too early for fear of being late. I check the mirror again and pull my shoulders back.

At twelve when I shot up like a beanstalk, my father threatened to put a yoke on me, with a spike in between my shoulder blades, so that if I slouched it would remind me to stand straight.

I change my hand-painted rosella earrings for a pair of pearl studs. I turn my face to the light, trying to see myself as my father would. I stroke blusher on, so that he does not say I'm too pale and ask if I'm ill. My hand is too heavy — I look like a clown. I tissue off the blusher and start again. By now I'm running late.

I drive to my parents' house in Somers with the radio on. I still think of it as *their* house even though my mother is no longer there. Chrissie Hynde sings:

She will always carry on  
Something is lost  
Something is found . . .

I turn the radio off.

When I arrive my father is working in the garden.

"Thought you'd be late," he says as he walks to meet me. I kiss his cheek. He smells of sweat and tobacco and the sweet clean note of cut grass. Without speaking we both walk down to my mother's favourite part of the garden. Her jacaranda is in flower, its flowers like puffs of blue clouds.

"I really should cut these back," says my father, running his foot along the overgrown edge of erigeron daisies. "She bought these to christen the garden when the house was first built because they were nicknamed seaside daisies." My father turns away.

I want to speak, but don't know what to say. I want my father to be able to talk about my mother without turning away from me. I wait for my father on the garden seat under the jacaranda.

"If you're going to sit outside you should put a hat on," says my father. He goes off to the laundry and comes back with my mother's straw hat. The hat still looks new — not yet pummelled into shape by my mother's quick hands.

"I've kept all her things you know. Maybe when you're older you could look through them."

My mother died over two years ago. Perhaps he means that if we finalise her death by going through her belongings we won't expect to see her any more. Somehow that would be worse, as if she'd left us completely.

"Your mother was your age when she had you."

There's no answer to this. I'm thirty one. I should tell him now, say — Philip and I will never have a child now. We've broken up.

Instead I say, "Why don't we go up, I'm being eaten alive by mozzies."

"Fancy a drink?" he asks.

"What time is it?" I ask automatically. My father brought me up not to drink before six o'clock, except if we were having wine with lunch. We both laugh at the same time.

"Don't worry, it's well past six. Anyway, I don't bother with all that anymore. I just have one when I feel like it. Same with smoking — I'd cut back to a couple a day, but there's not much point in counting out my fag ends now. She never smoked and look what happened. Thought she had arthritis. You'd have thought the doctors could tell the difference between cancer and arthritis. When they did find out she was gone in five months."

"Dad, I don't think Mum would want to see you smoking heavily."

"Well, she's not here is she. I don't need a lecture from you. Anyway what are you having to drink?"

"I'll just have a mineral water."

"Trust you to ask for the one thing I don't have. I don't believe in buying mineral water. By the time all that salt's been added you're no better off." He frowns. He prides himself on keeping a good bar. I wish I'd asked for something else.

"I can walk down to the shop," I say.

"Might as well drive down. It's too warm to walk."

My car is in the drive way, my father automatically walks to the driver's seat, even though it is not his car.

"I'll have to take the death seat then," he says as he walks round to the other side. As I take off he grips the handle on the passenger door.

When I first passed my driving test my father refused to let me drive the family car.

"But I've got my licence now," I had protested.

“You’re not driving anywhere until I’m satisfied that you’re fit to drive. Let’s just go out and see. Mind you leave that ‘L’ plate on.”

So off we went with my father issuing commands and me stalling the car or crunching gears. The next day he bought me a second hand car, but he never let me drive him anywhere. I left home soon afterwards and my parents had this house built in Somers.

“Are you going to nurse that mineral water all through dinner?” he asks when we get back.

“I’m having an AFD.”

“A what?”

“An alcohol free day.”

My father shrugs and opens a bottle of white wine and takes it to the kitchen. I follow him. He starts chopping up coriander leaves. The kitchen fills with pungent, spicy smell. I tear some with my fingers.

“Where’d you find such a fresh bunch?”

“I grew it in the garden. You and Philip could grow some.”

“We’re not home enough.”

“Why don’t you have a working bee to set up a vegetable patch. We . . . I could come down and give you a hand.”

“It’s too late for that,” I say. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Everything’s ready. I made the curry last night, so the spices could soak in. I’m just adding a bit more coriander. Why don’t you sit and relax in the other room.”

I drift from room to room. I have never lived here. This is their house — free of the clutter of children who’ve left home. No dog-eared old textbooks, or tennis rackets with broken strings, or school certificates in the spare room. There are the usual old family photos, but there are many more recent ones — my parents in fancy dress, my mother as a flapper in a silver beaded shimmy dress and my father as a gangster in a white suit and carrying a violin case. They are not smiling at the camera. They are looking at each other.

After dinner my father says, “Are you going to tell me what’s wrong now, or am I supposed to guess?”

“What do you mean?”

“You haven’t mentioned Philip all evening. You’re on some wine rationing exercise. You can’t sit still. Are you ill or something? You look a bit pale.”

“Philip and I have split up.”

My father pours wine into my mineral water. He leaves the table without saying anything. He comes back with a clean glass and pours me some wine.

“Well, I’m glad your mother’s not alive to see this.”

“Is that all you can say?”

“What do you expect me to say? More to the point, what does Philip have to say?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know. He’s your husband isn’t he?”

“It was never the right time to talk. Philip works such odd hours on the paper or he was away or I was working late. When we did see each other we’d argue about why we weren’t there for each other anymore. Or else we’d just open a bottle, or two, or three and drink till we couldn’t talk at all.”

My father clears the table. I move to help him. He tells me not to worry. I wait for him to come back and explain everything as he used to when I was at school. If I was stuck with my maths homework he would say, look it’s quite easy, just remember that everything must balance and he would draw scales laden with the two sides of the equation. At university when I left studying for exams till the last minute, he would come home with his production schedules from the plant to work out how much time I had for each subject. He would always juggle everything to balance.

I can hear my father blowing his nose in the kitchen.

“I’m sure Philip’s working hard for both of you,” says my father when he comes back with the coffee.

“It’s not that. I’m working hard too. No-one’s to blame. It just happened.”

“It’s different for Philip.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re a woman. You can stop and have a family. Philip doesn’t have that choice.”

I feel my face stiffen. I don’t know what I expected, but not that. I turn away.

My father walks to the window, raises his hand to pull the curtain, then pauses. He looks over to the jacaranda. I want to walk up to him, but he seems to have forgotten I’m still there. I wonder how many nights he spends looking out the window.

“Why don’t you stay the night. It’s a long drive back to Melbourne,” he says, with his back to me. “Better ring Philip and let him know you’re here.”

“Philip’s not there anymore, Dad.” My father does not turn round.

I pick up the phone and dial my own number. I let the phone ring and ring. My father looks out at my mother’s garden, though it’s too dark to see anything.

## On and On

### 1. Locker Room . . . “routine, grim” . . .

She manoeuvred her body through obstacle courses of thighs breasts elbows ankles. Finally finally reached last locker but one. Chatter jabber around her — the latest Kylie, Cherry Lane sale, Saturday night “the most amazing experience of my life”. Clang bang of locker doors, ripping apart of stocking packets, giggles shrieks laughter. (She knew that eight hours later there would be work fuddled silence, weariness, grimness. Hands hurried, controlling buttons zips laces to make the five-o-seven the five-eleven, the boyfriend waiting at the staff door).

Waiting. For starting bell, customer one, coffee break, lunch, half hour to closing clearaway, five o'clock. (A year only she had said four years ago the fresh eighteen year old but, but). Routine, grim, stamping already her movements and working day yet to begin. (Five o'clock and after dinner to cook for him TV bed come on luv was it Monday? Thank God not tonight.)

Slowly slowly peeled off bits of clothing and hurried on uniform because the bra was torn the elastic gone, the panties dulled from too many washings. They weren't to see, know, the Miss Sportsgirl stripes with their His Undies For Her. Then all as one. White tunic, black apron, flesh coloured stockings, shoes (closed). (But under the arms whiteness Fab brightness marred by yellowness and sausage caked-for hers was sausage and smallgoods counter-smearing smartness of uniform.) Hair back please. And get rid of that cardigan. And what is that in your hair. A ribbon! A ribbon, she had tried, once long ago.

### 2. On The Way . . . “arctic glare” . . .

Past the corridor of naked male torsos from menswear row upon row. Her hand, always, wanting to trail along plastic pectoral smoothness. But of course it remained, grim, by her side. And the last one apart, shrouded in garbag plastic. They'd never bothered unwrapping it. A quick repin of “hello I'm Kim” (it wasn't even her name they didn't have hers and never would). And then out into arctic glare of white tile, porcelain dish, stainless steel fridge, sink, surface. Fluorescent light hard on skin. She greeted section head but of course it was not returned. Working day had begun.

### 3. Foodhall . . . “and nothing moved” . . .

She weighed the items, rang up the till, shoved into bags with precision mind

on other things. (And the other girls giggled and whispered “him him” “check the ass” “cute-o” and fought over who served who.) And the question “what on earth did I just sell” no longer panicked her because it did not exist anymore. She had no idea what she had just sold and did not care. She forgot who she was serving again, and again. Sausages shiny in a string slipped through her fingers tumbled to the floor. She bent, scooped, flicked under tap and recoiled back in porcelain dish. Didn’t bother checking if anyone saw, didn’t care anymore. Apparently there was sun outside. “Was that six or six hundred grams?” Sun sun. “Thankyou would you like a carrybag?” Cute ass, cute ass, that’ll soon stop. “Oh yes you gave me a fifty didn’t you, I’m sorry I wasn’t thinking”.

And the face of the man in the suit in front of her. He said something AND NOTHING MOVED. DEAD EYES. Mouth reluctantly splitting millimetres apart to vaguely slide out some sort of sound. “I’m sorry what was that you said?” Slice, weigh, ring, shove. “What was that . . .” “Six or six hundred . . .?” “Sir?”

#### 4. Isaac . . . “he is wearing a leather jacket” . . .

Enter Isaac.

Isaac Joseph.

From primary school all those years he’s changed, no, no he’s just the same. Isaac Joseph just the same. But he is wearing a leather jacket. And he is very beautiful now.

He grins with recognition, delight. His eyes do not say Oh My God look where she’s ended up.

“Are you still into horses?”

He remembers! He remembers her?

“Remember how we used to sit up the back with Snezana Banchetto and Rickey Zindycky (she knows why, she knows) because we were the dunces or something (no Isaac not that, not that, don’t say it) no hang on, because we were ‘uncool’ ”.

The knowing grin, laughter; returned, how silly it all was!

He laughs again “do you ever see anyone?”

“No. Do you?”

“No” (thank God in his voice). Oh Isaac, dear Isaac Joseph.

Isaac Joseph was definitely cool. She picked at the sausage on her apron.

#### 5. Notice . . . “on to better things!” . . .

“Run away!” he said to her that day and yes . . . yes. (And when she gave her notice the day she left floor manager had barked “don’t ever expect to get a job in *this* store again” and she had laughed, she had *laughed!* And customer overhearing, winking and grinning had said “who’d want a job in this store luv” and his eyes had said “you’re on to better things!”).

“How well you’re looking” “you’re looking good” what’s happened to you” they all said.

A day! How can she fall in love in a day!

(And mother always saying it doesn’t work, it’s the wrong reasons. You can madly, manically love someone but *do you like them?* Do you really like them. Now in

India they've got the idea, they let the parents decide and believe me girl we can see it, we know what's best. You don't even get to see him before . . .)

Yes mother, yes mother . . .

## 6. Ecstasy . . . “the most incredible experience of my life”. . .

Frantic sweep of lighthouse beam, across enchanted beach. They, all, ecstasied. (Good price only 35 bucks, 17 for half come on). A clump, foursome, over there, mass hug. Fragmenting, twosomes, threesomes. She cold on the metal of the tail end of the slippery dip. Isaac and Sara over there. Isaac and Julian and Antonia. Isaac and Julian. Floating away into darkness, distant laughter, and silence . . . and then back suddenly looking before her too loud, too loud. The repeated requests for chewing gum. The slowed, groaning stretches. Sara's deep, amazed boom voice flinging across sand and sea “this is the most incredible experience of my life”. Isaac slips another half.

But she has said no, not yet, too much has happened too soon, let me watch. Isaac incredulous. “Well if you're that secure.” The face betraying scepticism “how can anyone be *that* secure.”

The next day Sara (nor Sair-a, Sahr-a) has chewed a hole in the side of her mouth when she ran out of chewing gum and there was blood but she wasn't even aware of it, apparently. Bleary eyed, booming “I'm never going to take it again.” Five minutes later “oh wasn't it just the best.” And Isaac and Julian ‘got it’ while they were shopping for boxes of banana paddlepops in Byron Bay Woolworths that morning it was just wild it stays in your blood for three months, apparently. And a neighbour's report filtering back “there'd been all these couples fornicating on the beach last night”, apparently.

She a thousand miles away from him, sausages, TV bed come on luv, she in Byron with Isaac beautiful Isaac in a leather jacket and his very cool friends the stockbroker, the interior designer, Miss IMB, Mr Country Road on his way to New York ‘cause he'd made the most sales in a month on and on.

Isaac tells them she's in “gourmet food, catering that sort of thing.”

And he can only make love to her when he's very stoned or very drunk. And he tweaks at her breasts in an adolescent way and thinks he's arousing her . . . and he keeps on calling her Kim . . .

She goes cold, suddenly, thinks what has she done, again . . .  
Mother was right.

## 7. Away . . . “on and on”. . .

She drove back through towns of her history and heritage veering, thankfully, from Highway 1 monotony. Grandfather mining towns, weatherboard bit towns with pub, looming monolithic on main street, ludicrous in strength. And the comforting coolness of the bar, the sweet indulgence of an ouzo and coke. And out, again, into sun. The slow, sure smile of the country men leaning over gates, driving in cars

elbows out (shortless, singlet marks on skin forever in tans) as they point her on to the next town and the next. She drove on and on . . .

S U B S C R I B E N O W !

# ***SALT***

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*Editor: John Kinsella*

## Untitled

I walked up the stairs, the entrance hall was empty and the stairs rung hollow like a house that has stood empty for a while.

And then (as Bill Murray so beautifully put it) depression set in.

I suppose life is like a movie. You create situations. Watch plots unfold. And play your part. The subtle ironies don't hit you till later when you reflect. This is a story about a friend of mine re-created to the best of my ability, pieced together from disjointed narratives.

When a routine blood test showed that John Berry had been infected with the AIDS virus, the result confirmed what medical researchers in Australia had long predicted; the deadly virus had spread to intravenous drug users and the second wave of the AIDS epidemic in this country had officially begun. Berry was not a homosexual, nor had he engaged in high risk sexual behaviour. He became the first Australian drug addict that medical researchers could show had been infected by sharing contaminated needles. Berry can even remember the drug taking session when it happened . . .

"I used to live with him."

"With who?"

"That guy."

"This one! The one that's . . . dying . . .?"

"Yeah."

My brain clicks over.

"He stole my t.v. and my leather jacket."

And outside the sun shines on another day. The birds twitter and Mary Poppins sings . . .

Is this the same sun that shines on starving Sudanese; on the junkie with a needle in her groin?

The passage of time marked by the ticking of a clock. The girl crouched over, pen in hand, intent, absorbed; she writes. To tell a story that has no relevance, no meaning —

the chains rattle and the cell door slams. I'm so fucked up! I try so hard to tell this story, it's become an obsession. I think about years, times, things

I don't understand.

You must know me

I'm the one who sits and cries . . .

As the caressing darkness envelops me

I swoon  
We swing back  
to a time  
When life was different . . .  
    Christmas was magical  
        and everyone believed  
        in Santa.  
What do we believe in now?  
Heavy wings beat the stifling air  
    and the beast rises over the Urban skyline  
        carrying with it . . .  
        carrying with it . . .  
. . . two o'clock in the morning  
    he sits  
and watches the mice scutter across the floor  
    to the Trap.  
Fifteen in one night not bad.  
    His heart races  
        and his eyes are wide awake.  
        He thinks . . .

I feel so inadequate. I can't relate the story that I set out to . . . because I wasn't there

    I don't know  
and I don't understand  
the mentality  
or the reasonings of the person involved.  
    a revelation . . .? . . .

    Carrying with it innocence.  
My room grows cold  
I shiver  
I stare  
    at blank pages.  
I feel so much. I lack the eloquence of tongues —

    "I'm pregnant to Steven! and guess what —  
    I'm keeping it!"  
Do you see? Do you see what I'm trying so desperately to tell you? This is Life.  
    We condemn, We judge, We criticise.  
    We in our air conditioned offices.  
        sterile and impotent.  
The night is quiet, eerie, almost tranquil.  
But seething with antagonisms.  
Distant traffic,  
    or is it the sea,  
Constant whirring of sound . . . faint . . .

    the pen falls from her hand  
        and drops echoing on the wood  
        of the desk.  
. . . and Depression sets in.  
    A misty grey melancholy as I look back.

broken images, dirty squalor  
romantic like a Bogart  
film.

The mirror shatters —

I drive the country road, moist green pastures on either side. And fat brown cows that chew and shit their way through life. It's peaceful here, quiet. The grey drizzly sky softly cradles the lush richness of the earth. Contented cows chew their cud, and as I drive I listen to the ceaseless monotone of the engine.

. . . and in the box that  
contains my mind  
I can see a thousand images  
short flashes  
of people and places.

Dirty, filthy, smelly Pymont.  
Rats and cockroaches attracted  
by the grain that was stored  
on the deserted piers.

It was nice at night, the piers, the water,  
the bridge.

We'd talk

and laugh  
and feel the dilapidated terrace houses  
and the junkies  
were all part of a scene. A backdrop  
that didn't really exist, only in our imagination.

The moist eyes, the featureless face. A faintly repulsive smell catches her every now and then when he moves. Hulking flesh, lacking all definition and a personality to match. A masterpiece of mediocrity. Rude, pretentious — it's hard to imagine him as human. But he is. Once he overdosed on hammer, this fourteen stone epitome of transcendent worthlessness, and his ten stone mate picked him up and slammed him against a wall. To save a life not worth the effort. To save a life hell bent on self extermination.

A real stereotyped picture of a junkie, just like one out of a *Women's Weekly* or something. But he was a pretty stereotyped person. An asshole born and bred.

But there was this other bloke.  
Quiet, gentle; with a brittle false  
sort of shell.

A warm sexual nature just a touch from the surface.

To watch the sensuality of my lover's movements. Soft, warm, skin. Fluid ripples, across the silken waters of the flesh. The impassioned interlocking of our bodies . . .

Words and images rush onto the page, conveying thoughts and meanings that aren't mine. Letters and symbols seem to congregate to form a tabloid picture of a junkie, but it's not what I want. They are just people with a label and an obsessive hobby, but we had fun. There were bad times —

Like the day a bloke scored and brought him a syringe in the park and he nearly died, and the night he went speeding and his 'mate' went to a party and left him

alone  
awake  
and with nothing to do

but sit  
and watch the mice  
scutter across the floor  
to the Trap.

The camera pans to the right. We see a pinpoint of light. It broadens to reveal a garden, green and luxuriant, cultivated flower beds, dark glossy leaves, vibrant colours, rich, sweet smelling earth.

I asked him why once, you know, expecting the “my parents beat me up” routine, or the “rebellion” trip . . . “It feels great, too good, you stop caring, but I left and I came back here and got drunk and tried to forget it . . . It’s a bitchy drug because you don’t give a shit, you don’t care. And I hate speed. You’re wide awake, you feel sick, you can’t blink and your heart feels like it’s going to jump out of your chest.”

Deceptively simple?-

Do people actually overdose or is it the boredom that kills them? The endless sitting around waiting doing nothing then a sudden excess of excitement and . . .

For Christ’s sake what is the reality. I mean we’ve all seen *Dogs in Space*, we all saw Sophie die, we’ve read *Go Ask Alice* and watched *Christiane F.*

but what’s the truth?

and then I cogitate truth.

Subjective truth! there is no real Truth? What did Henry Handel Richardson say? Something about if we all told stories and we all knew that everyone was telling stories what good would the truth be. What a beautiful sentiment. Those words, so expressive, so haunting; cut through the shrouds of lies. The cloaks of nothing that surround the fallacy of truth.

What is it that I try to say.

There is no truth,

there are no lies

we all strive for,

working towards . . .

towards what? Towards Death.

but so many are waylaid

caught up by these notions.

The Doctrines of a society in its Demise.

The bottomless chasm yawns boredly . . . Sitting in the waiting room  
flicking through back dated *Readers’ Digests*.

waiting

Searching for a text book answer

“WHAT WILL THE DOCTOR SAY”.

“Yes you’ve got cancer, leukaemia, AIDS”.

“God what a relief. I thought it might  
be something terminal . . . like Life”

. . . and what happens to John Berry

he’s been dying of AIDS for five years

what happens to us all

We live the ephemeral joke,

The epic ironies.

and miss the punchline

because the punchline is Death.

How about that?

60,70,80,90,100 years we wait

and we miss our own climax.  
We drop into obscurity, into nothingness . . .  
and the void creeps silently  
overtaking  
claiming  
gobbling  
greedily.

The boy sits. He is young, about my age, a bit older. His strong broad hands fiddle clumsily with a cigarette packet. His face is almost childish. A broad forehead, crowned by honey coloured bristles. He runs his hand nervously over his head and clears his throat. Sensual, childish lips suck obsessively on a cigarette. The blue smoke curls seductively upwards, dispersed instantly by a barely noticeable gust of wind.

We stammer stupidly making inane conversation.

Three years later we begin to scratch the surface of  
the granite soul.  
. . . and the light fades  
closing the scene  
the vibrance of the garden settles into slumbrous grey

Now years later it all seems like some foggy dream, a story somebody once told you; you can't remember who or where but . . . you remember . . .

— and the dry used condoms rustle  
as the winds howl through  
the squats.

The big fat mice  
(or are they rats)  
forage among the syringes  
empty cans  
broken bottles  
and McDonald wrappers — well . . . A cheeseburger wrapper. Drugs were much more important than . . . well . . . most things.

“I need heat”

The flame flickers and goes out.

“Shit! Shit! Shit! Fuck it!”

“What are you doing?” annoyed from the next room.

“Um (to the next room) . . . do you think she'll lend us her lighter (sotto voce)?”

“Say it's for a cigarette . . . or a pipe . . . she might?”

“How dumb do you think she is?”

“She's just a fucking . . .”

'she' walks in.

“A fucking what?”

“Nothing.”

Dismisses him. “What's the problem? You've got what you want . . . with a little help from my watch.”

“I told you I didn't take your bloody watch.”

“oh, so it got up and walked off on its own . . .”

we've been over this ground before . . . “my lighter ran out”

“You stupid fuck” throws it at him and leaves.

Walking outside, the afternoon sun, and the pollution, cast an eerie brown, orange

light over the city, giving everything an unreal aura. Walked past sordid shops, office blocks,

and traffic lights.

A sea of unsmiling, apathetic faces.

A gaggle of teenage boys were sitting on push bikes outside a milk bar, she crossed the road. She wouldn't admit it but she was scared of teenage boys.

They were rude and hurtful.

It seemed like forever she'd been walking. These boots Gary had given her didn't fit properly and were giving her blisters.

"Ask no questions and I'll tell no lies"

so she didn't ask but he told her anyway

They'd broken into a car and stolen a bag and some boots.

"What was in the bag?" mildly interested.

"Er . . . uh . . ." laughs and fakes it "um, kiddies' Christmas presents . . . you know toys and shit . . ."

"God you're a dumb fuck wha'dya tell 'er that for? Christ!"

"Oh you don' care do ya' . . . look we got these boots too, they don't fit us . . . try 'em on . . . you c'n 'avem."

She put the boots on; with a couple of pairs of socks they'd be o.k. She took the bag to the police station, said she found it in a car park . . .

she kept the boots.

Meanwhile back at the ranch, the Brady Bunch watches Sandra Dee frolic through the All-American clean cut awards.

John Berry smiles. A slow lights-on-but-no-one's-home smile. He's happy, he's got what he wants out of life. I wish I could say that.

"Fuck Off You Smug Bitch!"

. . . within the sterile walls of the hospital ward a new life is born . . .

and the desperate screams of an addict

fill the corridors . . .

Two days later the mother is found dead

with a needle in her ankle

and a smile on her face.

The baby sucking on a sugar spoon gurgling . . .

He sat on the bonnet of his mates car and we kissed . . .

the boy with the Botticelli face and the

Ken Done manners.

God he was cute,

still is.

The base of a willow tree at Agnes Banks, the damp earth soaked her jeans and her underwear. She fidgeted.

god i'm cold, so cold

i swear i'm going to get a chill in my

kidneys mum always told me sitting on

damp ground . . .

oh god. he's too drunk.

i knew he'd had too much to drink

Embarrassed I pulled my hand away and stood up.

"I better go home."

Doing up my fly and very absorbed in tucking in my shirt.

He staggered to his feet and drove her home . . .

"I'm sorry"

"Don't worry . . . next time. Are you o.k. to drive home?"

"Would your mum care if I slept in the lounge room? I don't think I'll make it home."

Christ how do i get involved with these guys "Sure, no worries."

He slept in my room.

In the morning he woke up with putrid bourbon breath and a hard cock.

They made love.

He dreams about the wild poppy fields occasionally, usually when he's had too much to drink.

She tightens the cord around her arm and watches the veins swell.

A crimson poppy blooms in the syringe.

"Just this once. I'll just try it . . ." she holds her breath.

. . . and sweet oblivion rocks the cradle

as she pulls the featherdown of heroin

tight and warm around her . . .

The festering sores weep, and the feline carcass

strangles the air with the

stench of decay.

... Elizabeth Burness, Diane Beckingham, Jack Bedson, Kevin Brophy, Adrian Caesar, Kyla Casey, Judy Cluss, Sandra De Lacy, Andrea Gawthorne, Julie Gleaves, Alan Gould, Jeff Guess, Robert Hood, Leslie Fowler, Jill Jones, Manfred Jurgensen, Yve Louis, Justin Lowe, Peter Magee, Brian Matthews, John Morrison, Munganye, Geoffrey Quinlan, David P. Reiter, Graham Rowlands, Rosie Schmedding, Kay Waters, Debbie Westbury, Geraldine Wooler ...

(where can you find them between two covers?)

## **Redoubt**

*in permanent works, a work within an outwork*

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David P. Reiter, Managing Editor,  
*Redoubt*, Canberra CAE,  
Box 1, Belconnen 2616

## Storm window

The window in the old house,  
the solid frame, the curtain, the glass,  
the storm  
coming.

i

Now, the clouds pressing  
his thinking, living and bruised.  
Through the glass the outside flattens  
his toys, his play stops  
like a movie  
his parents watch and he only sees  
receding as he is carried away  
to the night-time.  
Now, the clouds livid,  
the silence alive, even the insects  
stop clicking and creaking.  
It is the end of the world  
and he is wide-eyed and empty.

ii

She can see each grain  
of earth in this light.  
She spreads her hands and  
lets it trickle,  
half dry, half moist.  
The storm is passing, the air  
lifts, she raises her head,  
sees the boy momentarily,  
staring and white at the  
window, sees further  
and watches the blue  
emergent, rushing forward  
to her.

iii

A minute only, he watches  
at the door, letting go of fathering,  
the boy's stillness terrifies him,

curtains flutter  
with rushing wind dark.  
Only the small head framed, then  
a sudden light strikes,  
he sags and clasps the door  
frame, he sees her look over, beyond  
and she smiles  
at something out there.

## The silence of the suburbs

I remember a horse delivering bread, heat and lawn mowers,  
black wide streets, tight gardens, bright suburbs, grey at the  
centre,  
houses always being built and filling up with unknown  
children,  
quiet, vacant lots full of weeds and decaying concrete,  
and narrow paths slipping into mysterious tracts of bush,  
to rocky outcrops, into silent gullies, drains, dumping grounds  
populated with broken brown bottles, square cigarette packets  
and small objects having some secret use, maybe,  
space, and enclosure by sky and authority and fear, a vague  
anger at not really being told, a vestigial sense of loss,  
seeing the grey and knowing there is a world somewhere,  
seeing it sharp for a second, in a new word, a car passing,  
other people's kitchens, a playmate's older sister, arguments  
in the back room, strange adults visiting from across the city,  
an insistent humming in the background, fear  
of having to step into the road at some time, all the cruelties  
of the playground magnified, not believing any of it, the night  
terror,  
the strange clear days of wanting to merge with the jewel blue  
sky,  
wanting to hide from it, eyes hurting, wanting to say 'yes',  
unable to get there, to be here, moving backwards  
just one step, becoming a watcher, becoming a grey stranger,  
saying 'no' and 'yes', not knowing when to say 'no' and 'yes',  
afraid  
of night falling, the earthen darkness under the house,  
spiders, snakes,  
unspeakables, mud and imagination, risk and dirt, watching  
yourself  
always watching, always waiting, ready to run from the  
silence . . .

## Reflections

I stand by the river and look at the deepening sky  
like thousands of people every day.  
The water reflects me too but doesn't show  
who I am. I glimpse a hundred images.

The sky leans. All sense of what I am  
dissolves. Crawling from the water  
are worm-like words, frogs bleeding from the eyes.  
I sink into the past as into mud —

children laughing, adults yelling, voices  
admonishing, neglecting me. I grab at the words  
but they're only bubbles of air. They placed me here

but have no substance. I am a tortuous lie,  
a concoction of fantastic oddments.  
Frogs sit on my hair, fish nose at my shoulders.

## Not Breaking Glass

There is a street full of children, and then there are two more. A boy and a girl, small and blonde, and very pretty. We can have nothing to do with them. They will not leave their front garden, and we will not go over to them. In that garden, in the evenings, the father parks his truck, stacked with panes of glass. He is the devil, dark and never smiling, who keeps his children and makes them never smile. And we never see the mother, but sometimes you can hear her scream and cry as her children scream and cry. It is at evening, when the devil is home and his truck with glass is in the garden. Just before it gets dark, before we all have to go home. We are quiet, sitting in the bushes across the road, listening to screaming and slapping and sounds of hitting. My face goes red to hear it. That's when I would like to take a stone, a big stone, and just throw it at his truck, at his panes of glass. To see how much it would hurt him, the devil. But I never do it because I know he would get me and I would be dead. Still, my face goes red. And next afternoon the little blonde boy will be on his bicycle, never leaving the driveway and never saying anything. The little blonde girl will stand on the grass, with a doll or a little toy in her hand, maybe right on the spot where the truck will park when it arrives. They will look out at us, and we playing in the bushes and on the street, all over and all around.

## Demolition Job

Last Saturday I went alone to see the movie *Hometown*. The place was full of people, all laughing and sniffling, and generally reacting at the right moments. But it meant nothing to me. I just sat and looked, at the audience, at the movie, and I felt a little lonely.

Then afterwards I thought about what it would be like. Because this place is the only one I have known. So its just a place, and basically its soft and easy and lets you do what you like. If I ever left, then maybe I could call it my hometown or something like that. Otherwise I would call it nothing. That's the way I'd like it best, just to call the place you live nothing.

Years ago I bought a beany from a shop. I saved my own money, and my mum took me and I chose the striped beany that I liked best, and it was mine. So I showed it off to my dad when he got home from work.

What are you doing with that bloody stupid thing on your head, go and take it off, he said.

I didn't know what to say, so I just said, it's mine. He scared me with his shouting, because he hardly ever shouted, and never at me.

Get rid of that damn thing, he shouted again. He was sitting in his chair in the corner of the living room. His head seemed to wobble a little as he looked across at me. His voice was deep, thick, slow, tired. Its those murdering bastards used to wear those colours, he said.

I took my beany off, stood looking at him.

They butchered our people, burned our houses, those bastards. He blinked, slumped even more into his chair, pointed his finger weakly at me.

Your people? I asked. Do you mean your family, dad?

He said nothing for a moment. Then he pushed himself up, headed out of the room. Our people, he said, our people. Don't come into this house wearing that thing again. He was speaking softer but I was still upset. My beany.

Now I am almost sure I know why that happened, years ago. Its my dad and his friends, and their beer and their country. Drinking and talking and building and rebuilding. The Old Country, the Old Hometown. A cinema full of people, a group of men sitting at a bar, or just one person listening to strange old records alone, all the same. I listen to my dad's records sometimes, I walk around the streets sometimes. But I still cannot believe like they seem to believe. So I call this place nothing.

## Hospitality

At least once every day she said she was going to leave. The others laughed, kept on doing their own thing, and forgot her as stupid. But she always said it or thought it.

One day I'll be gone. Then you'll be sorry.

They laughed, almost jeered.

In the mornings she would dish out money to the others, for food and transport, whatever. She would leave seven little piles of coins on the kitchen table, then go off into another room and start her cleaning. When she came back to the kitchen, the piles would be gone, the house would be empty.

During the days she would play at cleaning her house. Perhaps a little dusting or wiping, then a food and drink break. She felt that there were more important things to do, like watering the garden or sweeping the front porch. Because then she could look out into the street and see what was really going on.

In the evenings there would usually be two or three in the house with her. The rest would go out with friends, or go out to meetings, or go out to the movies. The ones staying were well protected. They would stay in front of the TV or behind a book or a magazine, or under blankets.

And she would sit in the living room and eat, or sit in the kitchen, and eat.

The others found this disgusting and repulsive, and occasionally told her so. She laughed and continued.

But she had trouble sleeping. A light and uneasy sleeper. Every couple of hours she would be up, checking on the others like they were something precious, to be looked at, but not touched or even breathed on. Then she would check on all the windows and doors in the house; open them up — look outside a moment — close — lock. After that, into the kitchen for a snack.

Although she never touched booze, or smoked, she did habitually scream and rant and bash at the others. They were all bigger than her. They were taller and younger and stronger. But when she was in the mood she would start swinging and screaming, till she was out of breath and had to sit down. Even when she took up the broom handle, they would just block it with a forearm and feel no pain. It was not the puny strength in her arms that hurt them, but other things.

At these times she would scream:

get out you bastard. bloody ungrateful bastard. just pack your things and get out. and don't think you can come crawling back in off the street. i won't have it. i'm not standing for it. i'll teach you. i'll show you. ungrateful devil. don't speak to me like that ever again. i don't want . . . i don't want you here.

But when all that had been forgotten, it was always she who wanted to get out, get away.

There was always the paranoia about other people trying to use her, trying to take advantage.

They want me at the church.

She expects me to visit her every day.

I just let them knock till they were fed up.

And he keeps hinting I should get a licence.

Their children are sick again.

She's always complaining about not enough money.

And the others would be sitting at the table, or be standing by the fridge, or in other rooms getting dressed. They would tell her to shut up, be reasonable, think straight, see a doctor, not be so ridiculous, cut it out, piss off. She's so bloody narrow-minded, they said, so cruel and heartless and thoughtless.

She would just put the little piles of money on the table, go out into the garden or into another room, after she had had her say. And when she came back in they would be gone, leaving her a quiet, messy house to think in.

what i want is a little apartment for myself. just a little place. maybe get a job. or something. just so i can get away from here. because people keep bothering me, coming round uninvited and asking all sorts of questions and never leaving me alone. the others don't realise, don't know what its like. everybody must have a place where they are unknown, nobody. yes, a nice little apartment, yes.

Later on she also felt a need for a pair of glasses. Her eyesight was getting worse and worse. All fuzzy, and dark.

## Confidence

'Ask questions. Then ask more questions. Then ask,  
"Is there a question I haven't asked?'" That's  
the advice I gave, though I didn't always follow it myself  
— that takes confidence, and the getting of that  
is the getting of everything. 'I'll start slow', said Andrew,  
'Boy' Charlton of his race with Arne Borg,  
'but watch me finish.' Dozens climbed the trees; hundreds  
stood-up best in boats; ten thousand crowded  
Saturday Sydney's Domain Pool, shouting the only  
way you can for the eleven minutes they swam  
880 yards: with the unselfconsciousness that  
always photographs as a suspension  
of decibels in so many open mouths, the hands  
raised as much to pump the lungs as to balance  
the feet stamping for our champion, his record,  
and our win against the world and that inevitable  
comparison, Sweden. 'Can I help you out of the water?'  
my despairing teacher said, dropping his arms  
along with his hope that I'd ever learn to swim and catch  
the rest of the class. Then I knew that to be ten  
and thin and determined to swim constituted confidence.  
Excellence in champions may be talent and work,  
but they, too, have to start. 'Can I try once more?' I asked  
and did; and did. In learning to swim, as with riding  
a bike, you remember where, when and who taught you.  
Not tall, not short, still my legs were smaller  
then in proportion to the rest of me, and for this  
I dropped my bicycle seat to ride around  
my clean, suburban Cabramatta. "Long Bob" Spears,  
by contrast, had legs so long that still the seat  
was raised on his built-for built-up bicycle. 'Who is  
"Long Bob" Spears?', the Americans asked.  
'Although called an Australian, Spears is American',  
they also replied, never having heard  
of Dubbo, best 'red earth' farming country in New South Wales,  
and breeder of Australian cycling wonders.  
Paris, Bordeaux, Milan and Turin Grand Prixs,  
world championship, gold medals,  
fees, sponsorships and that formal insouciance  
that European presidents, kings

and queens affect in the presence of a real monarch,  
a true ruler of the veledrome: these  
were his rewards. The world can be generous to a champion  
generous to rivals and confident in capacities.  
My confidence is that of a 44 year,  
67 kilogram, 165  
centimetre crown-bald, short-bearded, glasses-wearing poet  
who once thought himself a composer.  
But my first symphony, which lasted three minutes,  
had only as many ideas; my violin concerto,  
doubly scratchy, was destroyed with my string quartet.  
No loss: I could still play Beethoven,  
a storm which suited my youth, or later, Mozart, and a lucid  
elegance of piano apparently made  
for middle age and its simplifying, clearer textures,  
and concentration of relationships;  
for the dropping-off of detritus of years of harmonic fill-in,  
the pretence of modulation mere enharmonic  
change, the waiting and the making-do. Make-power,  
confidence, thought and feeling are in  
a more-nearly perfect balance now, like the strings, brass,  
woodwind and percussion in a well-conducted  
orchestra, or the fruit, acid, tannin and oak  
in a well-made wine. The touch, surer now  
than it ever was, is also accumulating handfuls  
of answers, most of which appear to have life  
as the perennial question. I expect to find those  
remaining relate to the confidence needed to live it.

## South Beach

Slender is the broken weed  
Scattering in the sea  
Like flecks adrift in a vast iris

We the pink and brown bodies  
At mothering edge  
Cordoned off by summer's blade  
From our other seasons

Finding reasons in haze and shells  
For hanging necklaces, bracelets  
Of loving words on our lover's  
Skin

Saying Yes to the gentle lash  
And dip of tides, the sun-spun  
Web of longing

Until, at night, in baked air  
Of our peripheral continent  
We lie down with the sated gull

To find a tingling quietude  
In our burning dreams,  
Indulgently inviting the sun  
To nestle with us on our bed

Finding our tender latitudes  
Criss-crossed with limbs  
With salt and time

The butterfly brush of lips  
Fusing into a form of rhyme.

## Doves Calling

I think of Ros all the time, wondering if they caught her, who she's bullshitting now. I know most of what happened at St Edmunds Street. I was there, and the rest, what went on in her head, I put together from her letters.

She'd leave me one day, I always knew that, be on the run again, but I didn't think she'd leave Karl Marx. He's her cat, a great neutered slob, the only living creature apart from me who's noticed the poor little bugger's gone. He sleeps on her doona all day, waiting.

I lie there too, going over and over that morning.

"Soft dove pink," she says the morning is. "Can't you hear it?" She stretches and scratches at her spiky hair.

"Ah," she sighs, "They're so gentle, intimate, they're washing Zarathustra away, washing away the faded edges of my dream."

Ros is like that, funny.

Often I'd say, "That's crap, you're crazy," but now I'm in love with Ros so I remember things she says. Sometimes the things she says won't get out of my head, like music, you know, when it keeps going over and over.

It started early in the night. It's dark outside, but it's summer and she throws the window open, calls out, "hi!" to strangers passing by, "where you off to?" All the noise from Chapel Street comes in and stirs her up. She rocks around the room and says crazy things like, "God can't you hear the pulse of life out there. It's driving me wild!" Half fooling of course, carrying on like a loony. She's gorgeous but she won't stop, goes on and on and on until it drives me mad and I kiss her on the mouth to shut her up. She pushes herself away from me, screams, "Get out!" Wants me to leave her with her ideas. She reckons they're sending her crazy. Yells that she has to get them down for posterity. She's talking so fast I can't get a word in. I've had enough. I say, "Yer up yerself Ros." I get out of there into the lounge room with the others.

Somebody's bought a cask of red. There's a guy there who moved into a corner of the lounge two weeks ago. He asks me if I know whose flat it is. He's a neat guy, has the corner set up like home, empties all tidy in a row. On a chair he's set up an altar with a picture of Jesus.

I go back in a few times during the night to check Ros out but she doesn't notice me. She's gone somewhere else, astral travelling she calls it. All through the night Ros writes like she's in a frenzy to get her ideas down on paper, or belts out stuff on the piano. I look over her shoulder at one stage and it's Beethoven. Ros is clever,

really clever. Out of this world. She doesn't even know who's in her sitting room, getting blind on red. Ros doesn't touch it. It's like she gets drunk on her own juice. Some female I haven't seen before says, "Why don't we shut that bitch up, doesn't she know about Craig?" Someone snaps at her, "It's Ros you idiot," and she says, "So! And who is this Ros?"

Ros pays the rent at St Edmunds Street. Maybe she owns the place. No one asks. We're pretty low because Simon's just come in and told us that Craig's O.D'd and we're all thinking it's rotten luck. Mostly we talk about music or dole queues or who's having it off with who, but after that we just sit and mope while Simon pulls at half hearted chords on his guitar. Craig was a whiz on the guitar. Someone finds a birthday candle and lights it in front of Jesus, for Craig. We all bow down with our heads on the floor, say "Om," for some stupid reason and start to piss ourselves laughing. The guy who owns Jesus doesn't get up, just rolls over on his side and snores.

I sneak into see if Ros feels like bed but she leans back in her chair laughing, butts out a cigarette in a pile of stubs. "Listen to this," she says and goes on and on until I fall asleep. I've still got the letter though that she was reading out. I found it screwed up on the floor, covered with clothes and books, when I took over her room.

She'd been writing to that poof. Poofers should be shot.

*"Dearest, dearest Andy Baby," she crapped on. "This time, I've got a fabulous idea, a collage made from a collage! I'm going to call it 'Zarathustra', or maybe, 'The Eternal Recurrence.' You can see I'm in a better mood than I was last week. Made a few scratches on my wrists. It seems I was in a great state of angst, but I can't remember why. It all seemed like a good idea at the time.*

*"To get back to the collage. Zarathustra and I have decided that the whole concept must be mathematically sound, so I've incorporated Poincare's 'Recurrence Theorem'; that means of course that the sun, moon and earth must appear somewhere in it. With me so far?"*

Anyway, she carries on like this for about ten pages, there's a bit more about this Zarathustra who she'd read about in some book. Ros is a crazy reader, just sitting here I can read the covers of the books she left on the bed, the others were stacked in piles on the floor. I keep these near me because it feels like she might just pop back in to finish them. There's *Philosophy Of Religion*, *City of Women*, by David Ireland, a manual on the Occult, and a Bible, which she had open at Proverbs. Ros could quote Proverbs like she wrote it herself.

A bit further down she says:

*"You know, now (since the explosion) I don't need to sleep like ordinary mortals. Zarathustra helps. She comes to me when I'm feeling shit-awful just before dawn, and my inspiration all comes back. I haven't got time to waste getting undressed at night, so I wear black all the time, although now I don't feel so rotten, I should wear some colour to reflect my spirits. Good idea! I must bring some colour into my haute couture from now on, particularly as I can let you know just quietly that the world will be seeing (and hearing) much more about me in the very near future."*

I like this bit on about the fifteenth page because when Ros isn't writing or reading she makes these amazing pictures out of anything she can get hold of. I don't understand them but I've stuck them all up with Blu-tack. They glitter and change

their colours when you move around the room and it's like she'll come running up the stairs, in a leather mini skirt and high heels, and say one of them's all wrong. She'll cut it all to pieces and say she's a failure and won't get out of bed for a week.

The letter goes on, *"I've cut up a few of my collages, to express the fragmentation of my thoughts, as well as their continuity. I've arranged the little squares into the sun, moon, and earth. But above all, Andy-baby, I'm filled with a new love for humanity, so the picture must radiate all-consuming love. Life is wonderful!*

*"Also, I've cut off a small piece of my hair to show that even to mutilate oneself for love is not too extreme. (The clocks have all just changed time Andy. Did you notice?) I'll glue this on the bottom right hand corner like a signature. My parents will go loopy. I invited them over today as they worry that I live in a state of what my mother primly calls 'depravity.' She'll make me feel shit guilty when she sees the bald patch. Then she'll cry. Fuck my mother! Why does she have to look so sad? I'm so happy. Ever since the explosion. Did I tell you about it Andrew? It was like an atomic bomb in my brain. Ideas cascading out in all directions and each one more brilliant than the last, and I've kept them all! I've pursued every one of them Andrew, written it down, or painted it, or played it on the piano and I know that I'm sane because I have kept hold of every one of them. Sometimes I follow several ideas at once. (The clocks have just changed again).*

*"I'm frightened Andrew. I need someone to hold me safe all the time. Fuck fucking, I'm not interested. I just want to be held. That's why I like being with you. Do you know who changed the clocks? I know this guy in Sweden I met once, he might know."*

That page is all dog-eared. I read it all the time. I wish I'd known then. If Ros'd come back, I'd hold her, I didn't know. But then Ros didn't write letters to me. I'm not a poof. I still don't understand what frightened her, but I'd hold her. She goes right off in the last few pages, but then, in a way it all makes sense if you know Ros. Listen to this bit:

*"I planned my last essay while I jotted down some interesting variations to Scarlatti. This time Andy, no-one will fool me. Any nerd can follow Nietzsche's ravings. My essay was easy, easy, easy! I tell you Andy, it was brilliant! I'm not even bothering to hand it in, they know where to find me if they want it. I'm sick of being at everyone's beck and call. I think I'll incorporate the planets and the stars in my collage Andrew! The whole universe! Have just had another superb idea for a composition which would complement it. They're all pissed in the lounge so I can try it out without waking them up. I can't sleep anyway with this idea of combining Nietzsche and Poincare battering around in my head. Seeya. Must rush before I lose it.*

*Ros-baby*

*P.S. Who did change the clocks?*

*P.S.S. I've got an even better idea for "the sun". It will be mobile, the composition will have to wait, brilliant!"*

Ros screws the letter up and throws it on the floor. Karl Marx's tail twitches when she starts belting out something new on the piano. She's so excited, I flop down beside him and watch her fingers going crazy on the keys. Karl leaps off the doona

and streaks out to sit on the balcony with the beer bottles. Somebody thumps on the wall of the flat next door. You can see her stop for a second and then try to go on, but she's lost her concentration and forgotten what the ideas is that she's written about to that jerk.

She jumps up from the piano and starts pacing backwards and forwards as if there are too many things going on in her head and she can't find the one she wants. She blows smoke all round the place, sticking out her bottom lip so it'll shoot up and make the things spiral round that she's got hanging from the ceiling. Then she shoves her head out the window and screams, "Shit, *shit, shit*, Zarathustra! Zara-a-a! drawing out the last 'a' like a banshee wail. I pull the doona over my head and don't want to know. The thumping on the wall begins again.

Well, Zara must have come because, suddenly she sweeps everything off the desk, black stockings, letters, ear-rings, a few Big M cartons, and burrows until she finds a sheaf of poetry she's written. She reads for a while and then starts to write again so fast that it makes her letter writing earlier look like slow motion. She's forgotten about the piano and Andy-baby's letter is under her feet. She's writing something about her soul in outer space.

Every now and then she leans back in her chair and lights another cigarette before she reads aloud what she has written. She lets out a gurgling belly laugh that makes me want to grab her and hug her to bits but I know it's no use because she goes on writing again going so fast that you can hardly read what she's written. She's looking buggered because it's like there's a machine working inside her head and no one can find the switch to shut it down.

She falls exhausted on the bed beside me just before dawn. She must dream because she's rabbiting on about the universe and doves by the time it's getting light. Then she's out of bed and bent over her desk writing again. I get up and take a look over her shoulder. It's to some guy Gavin I've never heard of. Half of it seems to be in some other language, but you never know with Ros, she probably just made it up.

*"Dear Gavin," she begins, "I may not return from the galaxy this time, (someone is tampering with the clocks and it is easy to misjudge timing) still, omne ignotum pro magnifico, as they say, so don't worry. I'll jot down some of the ideas which have come to me while Zarathustra and I were resting just before dawn. If they're to be preserved for mankind, someone must help me. You'll know to whom my 'bons mots' should be entrusted. But first there's a small matter which is causing me some concern: the relationship of the sun, moon and stars, or was it the earth? Zara-baby was helping me but she seems to have gone on ahead."*

Suddenly she screws up the letter and throws it on the floor with the others. "Karlee-e!" she screams, "help me!" and you can hear bodies stir. She runs out through the lounge as though the ideas in the bedroom were scaring her. Some guy murmurs, "Fuck off." She gets Karly from the balcony and sits on the bed sobbing, rocking him like a baby, her face buried in grey fur. Gradually she calms down, the cat gets fed up and twists in a flying leap out of her arms.

She jumps up quickly as though she's made up her mind about something. Perhaps it's because I've read her letters about the universe, perhaps I'm seeing things that weren't there, but anyway, she is smiling, a hard glittery sort of smile and hacking

at the neck line of the black t-shirt she is wearing. She cuts it out in a big lop sided scoop and giggles a bit at her reflection in the mirror. It's as if I'm not there.

Starting at her forehead, she spreads lipstick over her whole face and her big eyes stick out like she's wearing a kid's birthday mask. She tips out a packet of silver glitter and pats it in all over the surface of the red. Then she takes her time trying on ear-rings and chooses big sparkling drops that nearly reach her shoulders. She looks in the mirror as though that's it. She's satisfied.

I want to call, "Hey Ros! What's going on?" and stop her, give her a shake, but she isn't Ros anymore, it's as though I'm watching her through a telescope, a bright glittery star going on some journey I can't follow. So I don't try to stop her when she drifts out, wearing her latest ideas like fancy dress, down the stairs into St Edmunds Street.



## AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S BOOK REVIEW

The *Australian Women's Book Review* is the only Australian review of women's books. *AWBR* reviews a wide range of writing by women, including fiction, poetry, history, biography, women's health, children's literature and teenage fiction. Each issue contains a feature article and several reviews, all written by women. For intelligent insights into contemporary writing by Australian and overseas women, subscribe to *AWBR*.

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## A Farmhouse Burning

is a symbol of terror  
and not mere fury in itself.  
After hearing the sirens whirring  
and the taut-breathed houses cruelly  
rejoicing in their own coolness  
we speared the firetruck through the night  
to old Simeon's place: too late!  
Tourists, we saw where the orange scribbles  
had scratched the wood, whilst  
glow-worm coals conjured up the missing house  
as an amputee still feels his leg.  
We saw the lustrous, flambéd wreck  
which looked like a drunken chandelier  
sprawled on the floor  
sparkling to itself in a dark ballroom.  
We saw the napalmed chimney still standing  
as if it were Shadrach, Meshach or Abed-nego,  
amorous against a furnace sky.  
Last, we saw Simeon's old memories glinting  
among the tin-scrolled photo-frames  
pestled by the blaze;  
but saw the reddest memories  
leaping in his mind's fire.  
A farmhouse burning  
is not a symbol of fury  
but a terror in itself.

## For Words Are Wise Men's Counters

*Seeing then that truth consisteth in the right ordering of names in our affirmations, a man that seeketh precise truth, had need to remember what every name he uses stands for; and to place it accordingly; or else he will find himself entangled in words, as a bird in lime-twiggs; the more he struggles, the more belimed. (Hobbes, Leviathan)*

Like a fox that, cartwheeling in the jaws of a trap,  
kicks and crowbars the earth,  
bites the figure-of-eight chains  
rotund and spit-flecked  
and now ruddying with blood from its own split gums,  
begins to gnaw its compass-centred leg,  
(and the crunched red bone sings in the trap)  
then surgeons its body from the steel until freed!;  
like a fox, so the Trojan horse of language  
may seek restitution from those who bareback it.

But what if language is the fox's leg instead,  
entangled in precise metal,  
the blades like scimitars against its bones,  
dried, lifeless, meagre,  
still as a definition in a dictionary,  
cold as an arctic gaol.  
In its prison of precision language shrivels,  
this-word-stands-for-that-object its ball and chain;  
elsewhere, the vagabond rogue Metaphor  
filches some cheese and pawns it as moon.

## Earthbound

Who can tell what plot of earth  
will claim me? What layer of mud  
will be my mattress? What six feet  
of consecrated ground will ask:

*Who is the woodcutter, and where  
is the tree that has joined with knife  
and saw, a bleak collaboration  
to build the casket you recline in?*

Life falls apart.  
Like the seams of an old shirt,  
the stitches unravel with the days,  
and we are left with nothing but useless fabric,

until everything becomes as cold  
as the digger's profession — a cold construction  
of holes in the ground we are destined for:  
beyond death's bad joke, we go laughing from the world.

## The Hollow Axis

I have a photograph of a place on the South coast of New South Wales. The place is called Shipwreck Creek. The photograph shows no man or woman or child. I am told I went to Shipwreck Creek and that I played shot put with rocks on the sand.

Shipwreck Creek is near grid reference 296381 on Map number 8822 of the National Mapping Authority of the Commonwealth Government. When the map is folded the front cover of the map reads — Mallecoota, New South Wales and Victoria.

I look at other photographs that were taken while I was on holiday in the Croajingolong National Park. I see a photograph of myself. I am sitting on some rocks at Pipeclay Point. Pipeclay Point is situated on the Mallecoota inlet and I remember sitting on a rock at the edge of the water and watching boats cruising and jetting across the wide expanse of the inlet.

I am told that we went to Shipwreck Creek later on the same day we went to Pipeclay Point.

Two other photographs show the Old Coast Road. The Old Coast Road is a track that follows the coast. The track to Shipwreck Creek branches off from the Old Coast Road. There is a photograph of me standing on the Old Coast Road. In the photograph I am looking down at a swarm of flies which are standing in a row along the surface of my bent arm.

I have a vague memory of playing shot put in the sand. On a beach in the Croajingolong National Park I remember we drew a large circle in the sand and I stood and leant backwards with a rock held in my hand and poised behind my shoulder. I brought my arm and hand forward and threw the rock as hard as I could throw it. I remember the feeling of throwing the rock. I know it was on a beach. I am told the beach I played shot put on was Shipwreck Creek. Shipwreck Creek is near grid reference 296381 on Map 8822 of the National Mapping Authority.

\* \* \*

She lived with Carl on the intersection of two main roads that crossed each other one block north of the central business district of Melbourne.

The house was numbered 136. She lived there for seven years. She liked the bare back yard of that house. A timber frame was built above the fence line. She saw the timber frame as a gallow. She imagined Carl levitating below the gallow, his face lined into a grimace of pain.

The ground of the back yard was covered in asphalt. The fence was made of corrugated iron. The fence was coloured in twenty shades of the rust spectrum.

She liked that back yard. She poked cuttings of ivy into the cracks of the asphalt. Before long the ivy grew hesitantly across the ground. She planted bamboo in one

corner of the yard. The bamboo grew rapidly and more thickly each year and branched out to grow along the fence line.

She had nightmares in 136. She dreamed 136 sat above the axis of the earth. She dreamt the axis went through the globe of the earth. She dreamt the axis was hollow.

She walked into the city and on one of these walks she saw some workmen digging trenches in the mall. She looked into one of the trenches.

There's no dirt! she screamed. It is bitumen to the centre of the earth.

It's grey clay, said Carl.

She lived out of a suit case between the Queen Victoria Hospital in Lonsdale Street and 136 two blocks north. She learnt the discipline of taking tablets. Taking lithium carbonate is like being addicted to panadol. Two round white tablets in the morning. Two round white tablets in the evening. The tranquillizers were her eyes, she said. Two small blue eyes swallowed whole at night.

\* \* \*

She walked with Carl along the track to Point Hicks Lighthouse in the Croajingolong National Park. Her jaw was trembling and she was breathing deeply. It was a dirt track that curved around the coast through thick shrubbery. They could not see the sea. As she walked along the track she clenched her thumbs tightly between her palm and fingers. The thumb represented the will, she had been told. She concentrated all her energy into her thumbs, clasped tightly between the palms and curled fingers of her hands. She concentrated on summoning will power. She would not get sick. She would not go to hospital. She would ask to see what was in the medicine cabinet.

She and Carl had slept through a gale the previous night. She had woken once to hear a loud crack of thunder. The rain had poured down in a steady torrent through the night and morning till mid day. It was not early afternoon. They had sat in the car all morning and looked at the debris of the storm. An uprooted tree lay across the track from their car to the access road. They could not drive out of the camp site. Solid limbs of trees lay around the camp site between the few cars and tents. Only a few people were camped at Thurra River. No one was injured during the storm.

They reached the gates to the lighthouse. The gates were open. As they neared the lighthouse they rounded a bend in the track and followed the track along the coast. In the grounds of the lighthouse the wild grasses were mown into a smooth lawn. There were rocks, painted white, laid out at intervals along the track. In places the track curved inland in dips. In one of these dips, carved out of the rock coast line like a small valley, she saw a field of domestic lilies. The lilies grew thickly from a bed of lush green grass. The petals of the lilies were large, strong and white. The lilies had yellow stamens growing from their centre.

They reached the lighthouse. On each side of the lighthouse was a cottage. The cottages were painted white. Around each cottage was a small plot of land bounded by a stone fence. The stones in the fences were stacked and laid out in even rows. The fences were incomplete. The house on the western side of the lighthouse had a higher, firmer stack of stones than the house on the eastern side.

A man, aged about in his sixties, walked from the western house to the lighthouse. She went to the lighthouse and knocked on the door. The man opened the door. His face was weather beaten and craggy and red. He had sandy coloured hair.

Big storm last night, said the man. He said he was the lighthouse keeper.

She coughed and put her hands with their tightly clenched fingers and enclosed thumbs behind her back and asked him if she could look through his medicine cabinet.

Well I don't use the medicine cabinet without ringing Dr Holesworth in Orbost. He authorizes any use of medicines here, the lighthouse keeper said. But I tell you what. We'll have a look. There is another group of campers in the lighthouse. One of them is a nurse. We'll ask her advice and then ring the doctor.

She spoke to the nurse. The nurse looked through the medicine cabinet.

No, the nurse said. That valium is too strong. You'll bomb her out. She can't take that.

We can get your tablets brought in, the lighthouse keeper said. You can ring Dr Holesworth and speak to him.

Fancy that! the lighthouse keeper said excitedly. In half an hour I've spoken to three doctors. One from Sale, Dr Holesworth, and even one from Melbourne!

I'm in the middle of a group session, her doctor said. He was annoyed.

Dr Holesworth and the lighthouse keeper organized the National Parks Service to fly her tablets from Sale to Bairnsdale and then by road and boat to the camping ground. One temporary bridge into the camping ground was flooded.

There was a man once, said the lighthouse keeper, looking at her intently. He came up here with a shot gun. The police rang me. Told me to arm myself. He had said he was going to shoot the lighthouse keeper and then take his own life by jumping from the top of the lighthouse. I was up here by myself. And I was a bit scared. I stayed in the lighthouse and waited for him. His car broke down. He walked most of the way. With his gun. Well it went through my mind — He is human. It will be human being to human being. Anyway he got here. He knocked on my door. When I opened the door he dropped his gun and stumbled into the lighthouse. He asked for food and a bed to rest on. He was asleep when the police came. They took him away. He is locked up now. In an asylum for the criminally insane.

The lighthouse keeper coughed, You will be up here for a couple of weeks before the bridge is cleared. Get up on the sand dunes, he said gruffly. A holiday will do you good.

She was silent. She clenched and relaxed her fingers behind her back. She brought her hands forward and rubbed them together.

Warming up, she said. It will be a fine day.

They left the lighthouse and returned to the camp site. Their site was alongside the Thurra River. The river was shallow and ran in rivulets into the sea. The banks and bed of the Thurra River were sandy. Sand banks rose above the rippled surface of the river and provided a walking path through the centre of the valley to the high mountain like sand dunes.

They prepared their lunch in view of the Thurra River. She filled a large canteen with water from the river. Carl tied back the door flaps of the tent and hung out their bedding to dry. The two inches of rain that had filled the base of the tent overnight had drained away. Through the night a steady spray had pattered through the canvas tent and washed their faces. Their bedding was damp.

Carl made sardine and tomato sandwiches and she made a billy of tea. They sat at their picnic table, a light weight folding table made of slatted pine, and ate their lunch. They saw the lighthouse keeper drive across the long single lane bridge across the river. He was driving an old orange van with government number plates. The orange van had unmatched doors. One door was painted black.

After lunch they walked across the bridge to take a walk along the Bald Hill track. The bridge was long and wooden and had no railings. She liked the feel of its wooden surface under her feet. They stopped in the middle of the bridge. To the north west they looked up at the high sand dunes with their slopes covered with scrubby trees and bushes. To the south east the ocean made a roaring sound as the waves thumped on the shore.

They continued up the main road to the Bald Hill walking track. A yellow plastic streamer was tied to the tree near the start of the Bald Hill track.

As she walked along the Bald Hill track her fingers and thumbs were relaxed but her heart beat was fast. She took quick shallow breaths and looked with awe at the sharp colours of the road surface and shrubs. Carl found a wild duck orchid growing on the side of the track. The flower of the wild duck orchid was a dark reddish brown in colour and the flower was perched above its stalk in the shape of the profile of the head of a duck with its curved beak. It was rare to see the wild duck orchid in that region.

They walked further along the track. She hesitated as the track moved uphill and out of the shelter of the trees. They reached a rise in the track and she felt the sharp impact of a cold wet spray on her face.

No! she screamed. I cannot go on.

Her heart was beating. A wind from the south, till now blocked by the scrub, blew across her skin. She felt a direct forceful change in feeling as the cold wind raised goose pimples across her skin and slapped a wet spray in her face.

I cannot go on, she said.

She was standing in the centre of the track. She clenched her thumbs between her fingers and palms and shook her hands by turns. She stamped her feet on the dirt track.

Calm down, said Carl. What is wrong with you? We have got this far. We only have to go around a couple of more bends.

No, she said. I cannot.

Sit down and calm down, Carl said.

She sat down on the verge of the track. Carl sat down beside her and placed his day pack on the ground.

Have a drink, he said, passing the canteen. He pointed to the other side of the track.

It is always good to watch little things do things when you feel like that, Carl said.

She watched some finches on the other side of the track. The finches were hopping around on the ground within the perimeter of a large circle. The bush finches were coloured grey and had an olive green streak on their chests. The finches were about the same size as a sparrow. They pecked at the ground, their pert tails moving at right angles to the surface of the ground. At intervals the finches flew up to a tree to perch on a branch.

It is all right, she said. I am all right. Let us go on.

They rounded the bend where the south wind broke across the landscape and then descended to the estuary at the end of the Bald Hill track. At the end of the Bald Hill track was a sandy beach and a broad expanse of fresh and salt water. A bank of sand and sea grasses encompassed the inlet in a broad semi circle.

They walked from the track to a fire place that was beside a log a couple of yards from the edge of the estuary. They made a fire in the fire place and made a billy of tea. She stood on the sand near the edge of the water, and laughing jerkily, she swung the billy above her head and in circles at her side.

After drinking their tea they walked around the inlet. They found a sheltered sunny spot in the flat sand dune to rest in. During their nap Carl ran his hand over her body.

You are tense, aren't you, he said, running his hand down her shorts and across her pubic hairs. His fingers slid between her pubic hairs until he found her clitoris. She moved her body tentatively with his motion and he gently massaged her to orgasm. Gradually, softly, she released her tension with cries that pierced and then petered out in the quiet open air.

In the late afternoon they walked along the Bald Hill track to the main road. The lighthouse keeper passed them on the main road. He stopped the van and waved to them to jump in. She ran up to the van and opened the back doors and they clambered inside the back of the van.

The lighthouse keeper laid his left arm across the back of the seat. His elbow was bent and his hand casually clasped the back of the seat.

I have got your tablets, he said.

He took a phial of small blue tablets from his shirt pocket and handed them over the seat and into her outstretched hand.

Her hand was shaking as she leaned forward to accept the medicine. She took hold of the phial and placed it on her lap. Her palms were sweaty and coloured in blotches of red and white. She wiped her hands on the bottom of the tee shirt she was wearing and then carefully held the phial of tablets and unscrewed the white cap.

The lighthouse keeper turned around to glance at her.

You should have seen that boat rock, he said. He turned back to watch the road and laughed.

I will take a tablet now, she said.

She took one of the tablets out of the phial and quickly swallowed it.

\* \* \*

I have a vague memory of playing shot put in the sand. On a beach in Croajingolong National Park I remember we drew a large circle in the sand and I stood and leant backwards with a rock held in my hand and poised behind my shoulder. I brought my arm and hand forward and threw the rock as hard as I could throw it. I remember the feeling of throwing the rock. I know it was on a beach. I am told the beach I played shot put on was Shipwreck Creek. Shipwreck Creek is near grid reference 296831 on Map 8822 of the National Mapping Authority.

## **Cross-Country Walk**

### ***China Clay Works, Cornwall***

First, we were in a forest:  
light hung in cool green veils;  
the branching singleness of trees  
radiating from the heartwood,  
each leaf a crimson tongue  
burning into dryness.

On past fields, and the cottages  
with steep roofs, low windows,  
till we entered a plateau  
heaped with pyramids of waste —  
unearthed fathoms of granite  
splintered and powdered

and bleached to this milky grey.  
Nearby, anchored like  
an artificial heart, the town  
for the workers of clay,  
all primary colours ghosted  
by the same white-grey . . .

When dusk came, reverberating  
its half-note, we had turned  
to re-enter the intricate haze  
of forest and field, to pass  
the mare nibbling an invisible green,  
the hum of flies in trees.

Later that night, you and I  
strolled out to the stream's  
rushing blackness and, heads level  
with earth, drank the stars  
till our necks ached and we  
breathed slowly, slowly,

then walked back to the house  
lit by diamond windows,  
and the hearth filled with  
tree shapes, pyramids, wings,  
flickering, sighing, like some  
small broken-off part of a star.

## The Ballad of the Barbed Wire Ocean

No more rice pudding. Pink coupons for Plume. Smokes under the lap for aunts.  
Four running black boots beside a red sun. Flash wireless words like Advanree.  
When the ocean was wrapped in barbed wire, terror radiant up the night sky,  
exhilaration raced flat out in squadrons; Mum's friends took off sun-hats to cry.

Starting south of the then world with new showground rifles being screamed at and shown  
for a giggle-suit three feeds a day and no more plans of your own,  
it went with some swagger till God bless you, Tom! and Daddy come back! at the train  
or a hoot up the gangways for all the girls and soon the coast fading in rain,

but then it was sand-ridges steel-flung and blazing as iron bombs keened down  
and the bombers burned their crews alive in off-register henna and brown.  
In steep ruins of rainforest pre-affluent thousands ape-scuttling mixed sewage with blood  
and fear and the poem played vodka to morals, fear jolting to the mouth like cud.

It was blown-off genitals, it was pickhandle, it was bayoneted husbands in tears,  
sometimes it was factory work, feeding jerked breechblocks and filing souvenirs,  
or miles-wide humming cattleyards of humans, or oiled ship-fires slanting in ice,  
rag-wearers squashed as by huge War Bonds coins, girls' mouths full of living rice.

No one came home from it. Phantoms smoked two hundred daily. Ghosts held civilians at bay  
since war turns beyond strut and adventure to keeping what you've learned, and known,  
what you've approved, and what you've done, from ever reaching your own.  
This is died for. And nihil and nonsense feed on it day after day.

## Coming Down

Its no land for a king's  
crusade of Holy Writ and the  
burnished lance — those armies  
of the Lord — not here — the legions  
in their armoured crosses — they'd  
get dry rot, or rust; and when the  
wars were done, with Jerusalem won  
and the populace converted back, or  
burnt — they'd sell the lot for  
scrap, with the manuscripts inside.

That's what I like about this  
country — that corrugated sheet  
of blunt, tin fence practicality.  
Bugger the aesthetics! — as long as  
it keeps the chooks out of the vegies.

For a corner has its value in the  
market place, a population shifts, and  
brutal to the point, there is nothing  
quite like a ball on a chain for plain  
ordinary speaking.

So we smash those hollow walls — its  
a stingy decade — there's enough museums  
already, and an empty church is only  
good for patios, for the hand made bricks,  
for knocking down.

## The Lost Friend

Julia and I were at university together in the seventies. We were both clever and teased by other students for being swots, 'though we weren't. For different reasons neither of us socialised much on campus. I had an angry husband and three young children to placate whilst I studied and Julia, well she had an older, and jealous, lover who wanted her home (they shared a basement flat on the beach) as soon as lectures were over. Being in an eternal rush drew us together. Not for us the long, absorbing discussions in the canteen, nor the leisurely chat, strolling through the library gathering appropriate reading matter. We were in and out as fast as possible. By second term we were collaborating in library techniques, photocopying half each of the 'must be read' articles and chapters, then swapping. Later we just exchanged notes on our reading as we grew to respect each other's ability to weed out the definitive argument or quote to impress a lecturer. There was no competition; we were the best by a mile and we alternated in regard to the top mark — probably due in part to the old adage that two heads are better than one. I suspected that Julia was naturally smarter, but I compensated by working harder. I had more to prove, placed as I was in an unsatisfactory marriage and viewed by my own peers as a housewife who would soon recover from grandiose notions of going to university. Thus it came about that a girl of eighteen and a woman of nearly thirty, from vastly different backgrounds, became best friends.

Julia had money or rather, she had rich and doting parents. Italian post-war migrants, they were still basically peasants despite their success. Initially the money was made from growing vegetables, a lot of hard yacker in the paddocks then driving all night to get their produce to the markets by early morning. With a workload unthinkable to most Australians, they advanced to the respectability of owning a small supermarket themselves, then two, then a wineshop, a service station and various other profitable enterprises. Julia's mother still did the books and pretty well ran the whole outfit while Julia's father looked for the rare opportunity to get back into the paddocks or behind the wheel of a truck. Their son, Nino, worked with them in the business but Julia was the external proof of their achievement and they adored her. Coming from a mean, Irish Catholic background myself, with parents who believed that the only solution to the problem of female children was marriage as soon as it was decent, I was amazed at the generosity, the love of Julia's parents for their child. She maintained and nourished this love by being, in their sight, the perfect daughter. She visited them regularly, which pleased them, but ensured that they rarely needed to visit Julia and thus she was able to keep her two lifestyles quite separate.

Perhaps I envied Julia her parents, I don't know. I do know that I cynically believed they'd get an awful shock if they discovered how their daughter was really living and amused myself with an image of their reaction the day (or more probably the night) they tripped over the older lover.

And so we progressed through university until the middle of third year when I went through a bitter, messy divorce. Thankfully it was the Whitlam era and I was able to continue as a student whilst supporting myself and the kids. Julia, generous as her parents, often brought chickens or steak for me to cook, knowing that we seldom enjoyed such luxuries. One night she appeared with a bottle of Corvoisier as she'd split with the older lover and we celebrated her new freedom. She was cagey about the reasons for the break-up, saying merely that he was too jealous and possessive. Some gossip I'd heard nagged at me, something about Julia and one of the professors. I looked at that beautiful face, Madonna like, with straight black hair falling down each side of the perfect oval — hair which so often she allowed to swing across her face as a shield. Enigmatic, serene, removed, no wonder half the males on campus lusted after her. But crass undergraduates were not Julia's style. They knew it — some reacted quite nastily to it — but it didn't stop them wanting. That night we got pretty silly on the cognac, but Julia didn't volunteer information on her love life and I didn't ask any questions.

We graduated and began earning money. Mine was never enough, but Julia was able to satisfy some of her more exotic tastes. She went to Europe and came home determined that she would go again soon and this time I would go too. Somehow it all fell into place and we did Europe together — me the housewife trailing Julia the sophisticate from London to Athens. She had an address in Amsterdam to collect some coke and when I screamed my fears about gaol and never seeing my children again, she assured me that everyone did it and it was perfectly safe as long as you got rid of everything before going into countries like France or Spain. She was right and we were only searched at the border between Switzerland and Italy by which time we were clean.

But what fun we had. Two unattached females looking for adventure, one with a 'last chance' desperation and the other desperate in her own way for Julia craved excitement, the different, the bizarre. She lived dangerously and thrived on it. Men did not interest her unless they were attached, for it was the challenge of wresting a man from his commitments that gave any affair its spice. One flirtation in Melos nearly ended in disaster when an irate wife threw a pottery jug at Julia, missing her head by inches. There were angry male mutterings at the two foreign women who were invading what was preferably masculine territory. I was terrified but Julia thought it all very funny and sauntered out of the taverna, her head high, a smile on her lips. Back in the hotel even I could laugh at the absurd gallantry of the fat, greasy little man who thought he'd made a conquest with Julia. But I didn't laugh in Berlin a few weeks later.

It was New Year's Eve and we spent the wildest night I can recall. However, it was here that I saw Julia as cruel for the first time. Oh, I'd thought some things she did a little mean, thoughtless, but not cruel in any deliberate way. When, as a student, I'd first heard the word 'hedonist', it seemed to fit Julia perfectly and having almost a philosophy for pleasure seeking appeared so sophisticated to me — enough to excuse, even justify, many of her actions. But Berlin was different for I saw that Julia took pleasure in others' pain.

We'd worked our way down Kurfurstendamm, with what seemed like a million other Berliners, drinking at the bars and taverns, and collecting quite a merry group around us as we went. I had a particularly insistent admirer who said he was a captain on an ocean liner — later we learnt that Gunter was in fact a 'captain' on a canal barge. We were all invited to his private club, where the drinks cost an arm and a leg which didn't matter as we weren't paying, then later to his apartment for breakfast. His girlfriend, Ilse, was less than pleased and her fury seemed to be expressed even through her poodle who kept nipping at our legs the whole time we were there. Not only had Ilse been waiting nearly all night to celebrate the New Year with her

man, now that he had at last arrived home he'd brought half a dozen free loaders whom she was expected to feed. She bitched, she sulked and then, swallowing a large dose of Gunter's charm, she capitulated. We ate a hearty breakfast of 'small breads' with sauerbraten, bratwurst and limburg cheese. This feast and the coffee sobered us. Most of the party left but Julia and I were offered somewhere to crash in the sitting room.

It was the scream that woke me. Ilse stood in the doorway staring at the back of Gunter's head. Julia sat astride him on the couch, fucking him. She continued what she was doing and slowly smiled at Ilse — not the smile of a Madonna this time, more that of Messalina.

Back in Australia, Julia and I saw less of each other — the occasional lunch or girls' night out when we sometimes entertained friends with accounts of our adventures in Europe. Berlin was never mentioned. Like most of us, Julia was bored with her job. Teaching was not the soaring experience we had been led to believe. It was dull, limiting and too much hard work with too little reward. We agreed that the most that could be said for the majority of our colleagues was that they suited the job. The high-flyers got out and I, at least, envied Julia her freedom and opportunity to do the same. Her new position, as research assistant to a federal politician, sounded much more exciting with more money, plenty of travel and a chance to move into the big league.

Nigel Wetherbee had been recently appointed to the Ministry when Julia went to work for him. He was typical of the politicians our state sends to Canberra, a folksy, homespun fellow with an eye to the main chance and a belief that any publicity was good. Thus he was not averse to putting on a funny hat, spitting a dummy or judging a pie-eating competition, anything, as long as it was filmed or photographed by the media. His public persona was that of the court jester and, while thinking voters despaired, the ordinary folk loved him and returned him to office year after year. None of this was news to Julia, but her new job was a step in the right direction and Nigel was to be her passport out of this hick state and into the corridors of power.

The media took considerable interest in the attractive, female assistant to the state's most popular son. The pair went everywhere together, from art exhibitions, to dinners, on fact finding tours overseas. It was all reported in the local papers. Once there was an interview with Nigel's wife, Terri and she said how pleased she was to have some of the social load removed from her shoulders, to have more time for the kids, and how much both she and Nigel appreciated Julia's efficiency. In one Sunday paper she explained that she seldom went to Canberra these days, had not been overseas since before the children were born and believed that her contribution was to maintain a stable homelife for her children and for Nigel who so much appreciated it after the rigours of a week in the capital. Politics were Nigel's life: they had never been her's. The article and the accompanying photograph, gave the impression of a woman determined to preserve her privacy and her family, and to remain aloof from the gossip which always surrounds a tall poppy in a small community. It was clear however that Terri was putting up a fight of sorts for she was seen more frequently with her husband at political events. She was photographed once with Nigel and Julia on opening day at the Royal Regatta Yacht Club; all three smiled happily at the camera.

Over the next two years I saw Julia less and less. I had remarried but she found Tom boring so she seldom came to the house. As before, we'd have drinks at the pub, perhaps a meal, but the relationship had changed. Most of our time together was spent listening to tales of Julia's exploits, her travels — now all first class, the V.I.P.s she knew, the gourmet meals, the flat she and Nigel shared in Canberra. This last was supposedly a secret but I'd heard it before from other sources. I tried

several times to ask, in a roundabout way, “Why Nigel?” meaning of course, he’s so gross, so stupid. She knew what I was getting at but only once gave any indication what the relationship meant for her. She liked controlling a powerful man and he was besotted with her. She enjoyed the speculation about them as a couple. Did they or didn’t they? Nobody really knew definitely and that gave her a buzz — fooling everyone.

A year later we all knew — there were details enough to satisfy the greediest gossip. Months after the trial I went to see Julia. I’d put it off as long as decently possible but nevertheless I was unprepared for the change in my friend who looked as though she’d not last the twelve year sentence she had to serve. It’s not easy to chat casually in gaol, well not for me, and after five minutes I’d run out of the fascinating activities of various mutual friends and Julia certainly wasn’t interested in Tom’s doings nor those of my kids.

“Why did you do it, Julia? You were never a violent person. It’s not as though you were madly in love or anything. Why for heaven’s sake?”

“You’ll think this is crazy, Maggie but I don’t know that I did, shoot them I mean. Nigel and I were as high as kites and I fell asleep in the chair. That’s all I remember. The police said I was sitting holding the gun and giggling — that really got up their noses. When it came out in court — that we were smashed — I looked at the jury and knew I was a goner. This hick town can’t tolerate any mention of drugs and would never forgive that. I suppose they reckoned I’d destroyed their chosen son, and his stupid wife, long before shooting them, if I did.”

“But why were you there, Jules?”

“I was often there, for meals, working. Almost one of the family so Terri said. She rang and asked me over for Adam’s, their youngest’s birthday. We had dinner and the kids went off to a disco or something. Terri went to bed and Nigel and I had a port or two and then did a line, and that’s about all I remember. Sometimes I think Terri planned it all but she was so much the martyr, so dumb, I’m sure she didn’t have the nerve or the brain.”

“God, Jules, it’s bizarre if she did.”

“Yair, a bit like something out of those Greek myths we had to study at uni. Being punished for what you didn’t do on account of all the things you did do.”

## Meetings

Our joke: we must be corrupt. Or ripe with age?  
And laugh, exhaling hesitation. We have our usual  
and will transfer credit for the oldest metaphor,  
seduction with meal. You look so good. I'd love  
to eat you. And you will make your wine-glass sing.

In pines and gums through buried hills magpies  
sing the complex brown and blues of evening home.

The rain is coming on. In the pane our eyes blur.  
Replaying movies. Storeys down, water insinuates gloss  
on cruising taxis. Umbrellas open their black calyx.  
I close the window, shutting out the city and its idiot  
roar. Muffled cries slide through darkening streets.

On sleeping verandahs dogs start from dreams  
and growl at shapes moving out there in the rain.

Over office blocks and building sites clouds roll  
back. Releasing fragrance. It is in our hotel room,  
and in the Botanic Gardens. It brings the flying fox  
to the leaning pawpaws, bruising them with kisses.  
The Great Dog stares at them, sagging from the attack.

In strange rooms we drift down dream's verandahs  
where a child wakes in night's cool and murmur.

The steaming streets conjure the moon. It sails  
over the freeway and overpass and streaming traffic.  
It swirls in pools and gutters, it rides in neon  
and headlights over walls and windows. Its shadows point  
us to where the interchange shimmers in the dark.

Rain crashing on corrugations is gone into cliché  
where the wireless sings of nostalgia to the night.

## The problems of the articulate middle classes

I step round my solitude with a scrupulous lightness  
I am afraid of disturbing its sleeping bulk  
stretched out over my room  
I have scarcely an inch to squeeze past:  
it lay down only a moment ago  
just as the last person went out the door  
and I want it to stay there  
eyes shut and not stirring  
for hours and hours and hours.

We began with politics I believe, especially opinion polls  
(approximately 20 minutes)  
followed by a proper crescendo of responsible minority  
indignation (25)  
the vulgar ambitions of rich developers who sponsor the nation's  
culture and probably debase it (nearly 45)  
a good book written by a friend (10)  
disclosures of amazing disloyalty perpetrated by someone's  
respected colleague (1 hour)  
who's also a friend (half)  
and promiscuous as well (right through to 6.30)  
the despair puzzlement and recurring dislocation of  
the young (40 minutes)  
the old (15)  
ourselves (all day and  
the day before and  
the day after  
and in between these archaeology and architecture and administrative obsession and  
Aids and solitude and slimming and cervical cancer and systems analysis and poetry  
and post-holocaust novels and other dead serious and marginally significant  
interweavings of themes and variations and  
linguistic proliferations  
we can  
excite  
in  
one  
another.

Now if I reduce myself to a shadow, a thinness, scarcely a  
breath,  
the motionless shape on the floor  
will go down, down, into a truly profound unconsciousness  
and I will sit still  
and wait  
and at last, very faintly and from far away in the distance  
will perhaps come to my ears  
the wordless and meaningless  
exquisitely musical  
song of the silence.

## Death by Accident

I hear it first in her, the slow perplexity  
that does not yet know a vocabulary of loss.  
Women move about her kitchen making tea,

one irons a shirt; 'You go upstairs and sit  
with him' she says, 'not many have come who were  
especially for him.' And there in a study

stalled in a paper-filled untidiness  
he sits alone; tells me how the boy could make  
his brother laugh, made friends with girls

who always fell for him; then she's at the door  
with tea for him — 'Have it with the whisky.'  
It's a later marriage, he's learnt the fatherhood

of sons quite recently, shows now a shuddering  
half-acknowledged pain: 'It's her I think about.'  
Like children, hand in hand they go

to their sorrow, as though they knew that  
in death's vast disorder only their small  
habitual kindnesses will survive.

## Show Time

Under the streetlight she stands,  
her clothes black, her hair and her eyes.  
Her cheeks glitter, her red lips quiver and she  
howls. Lights flick on, flick off embarrassed,  
his blind unmoved.

He stares at the mirror  
hearing the faint wintry calls.  
His teeth gleam like the snow.  
*Show time*, he grimaces at the glass  
and glances down at nothing to show.  
She leans against the wall  
under the streetlight, her tears her bitten lips  
her black tubercular garb her supplicant hands.  
She calls his name, she moans and slumps  
to the base of his building,  
him home the door closed  
and the blank refusal of the blind.

*I do wish she'd stop*  
he mouths at the mirror, afraid  
to speak in case she hears. No time  
for talking: she'd talked her way in once:  
he sees again her image behind him, the thin  
white frame, the black triangle  
beneath the adolescent breasts  
and now she's all in black  
calling at his door while his grey  
flesh crawls with nothing to show; and he  
gropes towards the switch.  
She knocks again.

*Go away*, he mouths, staring at his red rimmed eyes  
his slack grey paunch, himself with nothing  
to show. I wish I'd never . . . She sits on the step  
her black dressed rucked above her knees  
her black hair resting against his door.  
With red nails on her long white fingers she  
scratches again at his door. The knife of light  
under his door flicks off. In the still night (her  
moaning stopped, and her howls) she hears again  
the creak of his bed. She closes her eyes and waits  
for mourning. Limp on his bed he waits for sleep.  
*Show time*, he dreams.

## Ned Kelly takes his love to the beach

Naked they jump into the sea  
as if not even the cold  
could prevent them  
touching. Then she looks up  
to the flag on the shore  
helplessly flapping  
above the bathers  
floating in the  
sun. I suppose  
it had to come to this  
he mouths, his voice  
drowned by the harsh gull cries  
where they strut  
at the crocheted water's edge.  
Tell them I died game (some thought he said)  
feeling himself  
shrivelled  
as a three day drowning  
freed from the caves of the sea.  
But those who watch  
can barely hear his voice  
coarse as plaited coir;  
and those who listen  
to the gulls' cries and the waves  
cannot see her salt tears  
drop in the ocean, or feel (as she  
floats beside him  
her hair spread like a halo)  
the pallid touching of skin  
or soul at the end of its rope. Such  
is life he seems to say  
as he waits  
for the trap to open. But the  
swimmers beached at the ocean's edge  
(with the flag half-mast in the sun-  
drenched air behind them) dream  
only of bodies twisting like seals  
in the broaching sea. And the thin  
comfort of flesh.

## Skiing Bush Lake

*for Megan*

*only the snow can begin to explain  
how children are apt to forget to remember  
with up so floating many bells down*

— e.e. cummings

Father and young daughter, on snow  
pristine as a poem before the page  
can track it into the dried flowers

of print. His skis know the angle.  
She's fine so long as the trail holds  
to level but spills on every incline

laughing as her feet splay. He never  
rescues her from the drifts, pretends  
to sight owls as she brushes mishaps

from her mitts. Soon she's balanced  
enough to jab a pole at needles slumped  
with snow and create her own storms.

At lunch, his thumbs rubbing warm  
back in her cheeks, he wonders how such  
smoothness could bequeath from a skin

so worn with experience. As she twists  
away to plead for next outings *with you*  
*just you*, he gently folds her phrases

into those private bins of memory  
fortified against the spillage of age,  
like a snow that never dares to melt.

## The Courtship of Louisa O'Farrell

Edwin is introduced to Louisa O'Farrell at the Garretts. His first observation is that her features are perfect. Almost perfect, he decides later, but that only adds to her beauty. Your eyes are the colour of the river, he says. He obtains her phone number before they part.

He invites her to the zoo. They walk slowly between the cages as he tells her about the school visits he made as a child. He hurries her past the monkeys.

But the cages are too small, Louisa says. It's too sad.

Not at all, Edwin tells her. It's all they know. They're content. They are well fed and cared for.

He buys icecreams to improve her humour. The merry-go-round begins and on impulse, Louisa purchases a ticket. She gives him her icecream and climbs on a red and white horse. The music tinkles over the lawn where the little railway used to run. Her icecream is melting. Edwin begins to lick both of them. Her horse moves slowly past and she waves. The wind lifts her skirt revealing a pale lilac petticoat. There is another man watching. Edwin gesticulates to her. She waves again. The merry-go-round is going faster now. Edwin licks the icecreams. He is jostled by children and icecream smears his shirt. The ride finally finishes.

Now what have you been doing? Louisa says as she takes a Swiss cotton handkerchief from her handbag.

He stands transfixed, enveloped in a light perfume, as she begins to wipe him.

Edwin lingers in the hall, stroking the back of a small deer. It is a curved smooth figure carved from grey stone. He enjoys touching the objects he has collected. They give him a sense of well-being. When he walks into the house it is as though he were donning a coat. An exotic outer shell. He is surrounded by beautiful pieces. The acquisition gives him almost as much pleasure as the possession. Finding something that fits into the existing order. Haggling a little over the price. Now and then, with some regret, he sells a piece to make way for another. He dislikes clutter. He strokes the deer, considering whether to make a change in his life. The hall clock is chiming eight as Mrs Buckland appears in the doorway. Edwin nods to her and proceeds to the table. He pours wine into his glass from the small carafe, then lifts the lid off his plate. Lamb fillets with three veg. He eats slowly.

Edwin begins his courtship with flowers. Sometimes a single rose, at other times a large bouquet. Her response is always the same. Muted sounds of appreciation. At times he wonders if he shouldn't send them so frequently. Or perhaps she doesn't even like flowers. But he dismisses the thought. All women like flowers. And he enjoys sending them.

Edwin invites Louisa to one of the Quartermaine dinners.

I went to school with him, he tells her. He was a year ahead of me.

Edwin, How nice, Sally Quartermaine chants. How's the bank? And who's your lovely partner?

Her eyes sweep over and on past Louisa. Edwin chuckles, oblivious.

The business of the evening is a small charity auction for one of Sally's committees. Edwin buys Louisa a leather-bound set of revised classics. A little reading, he suggests.

This room requires attention, Edwin observes. It lacks a certain balance, don't you agree? He turns.

Louisa is holding a compact and applying lipstick. She is watching the colour seep into the small wrinkles around her mouth.

Don't you agree Louisa?

She snaps the compact shut.

Yes, Edwin.

He intends to give her the ring before he proposes. He chooses a sapphire set in gold, encircled with small pearls.

Just a dress ring, he says deprecatingly, as she opens the box.

He is rewarded by her gasp of pleasure.

I know we haven't known each other long, he says, but I can offer you a comfortable life. My career at the bank is quite secure.

Her eyes are set on him. He forks another portion of glazed carrots into his mouth.

That is, he continues, if you have anything to ask me?

He suddenly remembers the swimming lessons at the old baths. Stepping, one foot after another, unable to see the bottom. Cobbler lurking in the weeds.

I can bring your family over, he offers.

No, she says. She smiles at him. Mrs B makes perfect mash.

And begins to eat again.

It is going to be a spring wedding.

The garden will be at its best then, Edwin says. The azaleas will be out. Rows of tables are set out on the lawn, covered with white tablecloths. A blue canvas is hung overhead to shade the wedding party. Guests walk through a small white pergola to the garden where Edwin and his parents welcome them. They stand in small groups chatting. The catering staff circulate. The wedding will begin at four. Edwin glances at his watch. The minister is talking to his father and drinking white wine. Edwin looks at his watch again. Louisa is going to be late. High heels are sinking slowly into the lush grass. There is a certain late afternoon cool settling. Leading toward sunset and nightfall. Edwin fidgets. His mother is talking to one of the aunts. He will have to break with tradition.

Louisa is not in the bedroom. He calls but there is no answer. There is no one in the dining room.

Louisa!

She is standing in front of the sitting room mirror, placing a small veil on her head.

Louisa we're late.

The cream silk dress shimmers as she turns towards him. Her red lips purse, then smile. She is gleaming and beautiful.

Louisa, he says uncertainly.

Before we marry, I told you, I have a wish.  
Her eyes are black.  
It's late.  
Perspiration is seeping through his shirt.  
Would you get down on your hands and knees.  
Are you mad? They're all waiting Louisa.  
Hands and knees.  
This is ridiculous. I will not —  
A small Victorian cup and saucer smashes on the hearth.  
Louisa!  
You promised.  
A saltglazed tobacco jar joins the cup and saucer. He lunges at her, knocking over  
a chair. She retreats, elbowing a Ming bowl onto the carpet.  
Please Louisa, please, he says in a voice which is little more than a whisper.  
He sinks down on his hands and knees. She lifts up her wedding dress and climbs  
on his back.  
Now! Round the dining table!  
She claps him with her heels as he lumbers towards the dining room.  
Faster! Faster!  
She takes her veil off and whirls it round her head. Something crashes behind  
them.  
Excuse me, Mrs B says, coming into the room.  
Edwin stops.  
Excuse me, she begins again, but the catering staff have run out of hor douvers,  
they want to know what next.  
We'll be out in a minute Mrs B, Louisa answers  
Mrs B backs away, closing the double doors behind her.  
Louisa, Edwin says in a strangled voice. He can see her reflection in the glass  
doors. She sits regally, looking ahead with a serious expression.

## Fat Loose Thighs

What he doesn't know he'll  
make up. He's got natural rhythm,  
she says to her friend, the two  
of them padding along the beach,  
tugging at their suits, hiding  
fat loose thighs. Talking

too much about her husband  
lately, she's been nervous he's  
grouchy, impatient with her spastic  
sloppy moves to the music, not  
knowing the correct steps yet.  
They go out ballroom dancing

every Friday night, needing  
something to do with kids away  
in college and not much to say  
after twenty years in the same house —  
so her rotund husband stands  
at the bar in a gold pendant

and cufflinks, glowing in the  
light as he shifts his chest,  
anxious to dance with pretty  
women and show off his dips — but  
she's nearby, skimming the small  
paperback book she hides

in her purse, reading about  
fancy dances like the tango —  
but soon glances to see him  
whirling someone else, thinks  
maybe it's too late, maybe they  
should've taken dance classes

a long time ago, ready for  
the empty house, ready for friends  
who sold theirs and moved, looking

for something better. She orders  
another vodka, bored by the tango  
and waltz, determined to move

in her own way. Soon there'll  
be no more fat loose thighs  
showing. Knowing she can't  
dance, she'll get him  
back with her body.

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ELIZABETH SMITHER

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## **Miriam's wedding dress**

Walking about the house while flatmates slept  
In her cut but not sewn wedding gown  
Pinned at waist, shoulder and hem  
With gaping wounds like St. Sebastian  
One girl friend woke and saw her in the door  
Practising her altar walk and screamed.

Is this the gown of after or before  
The final state, like sloughing off a skin  
The ultimate dress to undress in  
She wears for pleasure now, half-pinned  
Or the image of herself she cannot see  
But feels in waking up the dead?

## Elephant

On an old dye-printed plate  
An elephant with a blue shadow  
Walks where a small boy tows.

Because this plate is very old  
Its depths are warped and the elephant's shadow  
Is tinged with indigos.

The shadow of loneliness  
Trails outside the plate  
In a blue unhappy haze.

One sees in the deepest part  
Of such old printed plates  
Sadness congealed like glaze.

And in the evening, when the sun  
Lowers in the skies,  
That sadness, as the elephant's shadow  
Shrinks, intensifies.

Muro Saisei (1889-1962)

## **The Power of the Word: Salman Rushdie and *The Satanic Verses***

Words have always been dangerous. It is said that the Welsh poet Dafydd ap Gwilym once struck dead a rival poet by reciting a satire at him. In Reformation Europe wars were fought, cities razed and their populations slain over the correct wording of a creed. In Stalin's Russia a careless word could lead to imprisonment and death, and in China today the struggle continues over the words which truly describe the events in Tienanmen Square on the morning of June 4. Yet, at the same time, western literary critics argue that all our realities are constructed and that there is no external measure of truth on any writing. It is therefore paradoxical that this most sceptical of ages should display such a continuing intolerance of words.

The July 1988 report of PEN International listed 305 writers known to be imprisoned or otherwise penalised for their writings. Some of these are overtly political, others have merely dared to publish their poetry or stories outside approved channels. Yet surely the fate of none of these has been as bizarre as that of Salman Rushdie, who has not merely been banned or even imprisoned, but has been sentenced without trial in a country other than his own to death at the hands of any assassin who chooses to make the attempt. This sentence in effect banishes Rushdie from all public and most private life. It is a sentence of indefinite imprisonment to be terminated only by execution. Yet the offence which has incurred this penalty is merely one of blasphemy, of using words which cause offence to a particular community.

Western liberals have tended to defend Rushdie on the grounds of the absolute privileges of art and of the artist, but even in the most liberal democracies this defence is not conceded without challenge.<sup>1</sup> Laws of libel, obscenity and blasphemy are general. All are based on the proposition that words matter, that they can cause actual harm to individuals or society. The defence of the freedom to write and publish must therefore rest on the proposition that words can do actual good, that writing enlarges our freedom, our control over ourselves and our history.

Rushdie's fiction engages directly with history and politics to confront us with the question of individual responsibility and to offer his readers the possibility of freedom. He has said that he has taken his narrative style from the methods of the traditional Indian story-teller.<sup>2</sup> These stories have no simple linear structure, but move unpredictably through time, space and character apparently at the whim of the story-teller, linked by theme rather than by the historical similitude of the western novel. The listeners, or readers, are held in suspense not just about the outcome of the action but about the meaning of the action. To the western reader, this technique seems to have much in common with the *Tales of the Arabian Nights*,

where simple reality and elaborate magic are blended together in a series of tales which serve to keep all resolution, including the threatened termination of the narrator's life, at bay. Rushdie's novels similarly seem to start with the insertion of magic, or at least the marvellous, into historical reality, but refuse to allow us to settle back into either the one realm or the other. *Midnight's Children* starts with the extraordinary convention of the children of the new state and the love affair of the peephole. *Shame* starts with the triple parturition which issues in Omar Khayyam Bilal. *The Satanic Verses* begins with an ordinary act of terrorism and a miraculous freefall which continues through the centuries. Each of these miraculous beginnings simultaneously launches us into a particular contemporary politics and history. Thus each novel both locks us into history and questions its reality.

But just as Scheherazade postpones her death by engaging the curiosity<sup>3</sup> of the king in the fate of the creates of her narrative, so Rushdie makes history a product of his narrative and offers us a possibility of escaping the fate it has designed for us. More importantly, he offers the nations he takes as his starting point the chance of freeing themselves from the fantasies they have imposed on their own histories to the point of their own destruction or enslavement. Like Scheherazade's tales, Rushdie's fantasy gives his readers the chance of taking control of history.

To do this, however, the reader must abandon servitude to the word. This raises the paradox at the heart of each of his novels. His main characters are obsessive talkers. They tell and retell their stories in their necessity to define their own reality and thus escape from the fates imposed on them by circumstance. Yet they are not free to tell just any story. Saleem, the narrator of *Midnight's Children*, tries to recreate his history by lying about the death of his rival and alter ego, Shiva, and finds it impossible:

I fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer, to the illusion that since the past exists only in one's memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred . . . the memory of one of my earliest crimes created the (fictitious) circumstances of my last. (*Midnight's Children*, p.443.)

He can neither escape the first crime nor remake the last. Yet he concedes that his romanticism has been able to change the historic circumstances of the Emergency:

my presentation of the Emergency in the guise of a six-hundred-and-thirty-five-day-long midnight was perhaps excessively romantic, and certainly contradicted by the available meteorological data. (*Midnight's Children*, p.443.)

The distinction he makes here is crucial. He can use metaphor to change the external history imposed on him, but he can neither change nor hide the choice he has made by his own actions. Similarly, in *The Satanic Verses*, even Mahound cannot bargain about the truth of his words. The logic of his own position forces him to proclaim a single god, without offspring or consort, and thus compels him to declare war to the end against the people and gods of Jahilia, the city of sand. But, and this of central importance to the novel, no others are compelled to make this choice. The decision they make is their own responsibility, part of the story they choose to tell for themselves.

Words for Rushdie thus become not merely a medium of thought or of reality, but are the third part of the dialectic by which the self continually creates itself from the world. *The Satanic Verses* begins in a moment of rebirth as Gibreel and Saladin freefall from a moment of death, and so from their earlier lives. But when they land — miraculously unharmed — the narrator proceeds to tell us the stories of these earlier lives, which they are compelled to continue living out in their new lives after their fall. Gibreel, film star and voice of a hundred gods in as many Hindi movies,

who in a moment of infatuation has denied the god of his ancestors, is condemned to be through the centuries the mouthpiece of this one god. Saladin, anonymous man of a thousand voices is as many TV commercials, is condemned to live through his nothingness and consequent self-hatred until he discovers an authentic identity. Both are condemned to be rivals until they come individually to the point of choice between life and death.

Saladin and Gibreel provide contrasting examples of the relationship of the individual to the narrative of history. Gibreel, the actor, at the beginning of the novel has become the voice of others and been reduced to a figure of comedy, rushed in his litter from scene to scene, the creature of his bearers without a life of his own. Saladin has achieved his aim of becoming an Englishman. He has money, a marriage and a mistress, but like Gibreel the price he has paid has been any authentic life of his own. He is only the voice of others.

The novel's narrator suggests that Gibreel and Saladin are "two fundamentally different *types* of self." He asks:

Might we not agree that Gibreel, for all his stage-name and performances; and in spite of born-again slogans, new beginnings, metamorphoses; — has wished to remain, to a large degree, *continuous* — that is, joined to and arising from his past; — that he chose neither near-fatal illness or transmuted fall; that, in point of fact, he fears above all things the altered states in which his dreams leak into, and overwhelm, his waking self, making him that angelic Gibreel he has no desire to be; — so that his is still a self which, for our present purposes, we may describe as 'true' — whereas Saladin Chamcha is a creature of *selected* discontinuities, a *willing* re-invention; his *preferred* revolt against history being what makes him, in our chosen idiom, 'false'? And might we then not go on to say that it is this falsity of self that makes possible in Chamcha a worse and deeper falsity — call this 'evil' — and that this is the truth, the door, that was opened in him by his fall? — while Gibreel, to follow the logic of our established terminology, is to be considered 'good' by virtue of *wishing to remain*, for all his vicissitudes, at bottom an untranslated man. (p.427)

Yet both remain outside history, using it but not part of it. The translated man is the migrant, who chooses to enter the history of others and so accepts the identity they allot him. But the untranslated man has not begun to enter history, and so is no more than potential. Saladin tries to adopt other people's potential, while Gibreel, accepting no potential of his own, allows the archangel Gibreel to invade him and forces him to live the potentials of earlier history.

Both, in their different ways, attempt to stand outside history, only to be caught up in it by the hijacking of the aircraft they are travelling on. The hijackers, by contrast, are attempting to make their own history by forcing it to conform to their own words. As their leader says, " 'When a great idea comes into the world, a great cause, certain crucial questions are asked of it . . . History asks us: what manner of cause are we? Are we uncompromising, absolute, strong, or will we show ourselves to be timeservers, who compromise, trim and yield?' " (p.81) And later, after the murder of the first hostage and before she finally blows up the aircraft: " 'Martyrdom is a privilege,' she said softly. 'We shall be like stars; like the sun.' " But this martyrdom merely takes her out of history. Only Gibreel and Saladin escape, falling into the new which gives them a second chance.

In this second life, as in the first, they encounter a world made from the discourses of others. Saladin is defined as an illegal migrant and carried off to imprisonment. Locked away from all external reality, he grows horns and hooves, becoming Shaitan or Satan in the story of God's revelation of the truth. Paradoxically, he escapes from this non-being only when he concentrates his hatred on Gibreel and reverses his metamorphosis, losing his goatish appendages and resuming a human shape.

Gibreel, on the other hand, immediately becomes a part of the story of his protector, the elderly Rose Diamond, entering her life as the husband or the

adulterous lover of her youth. Escaping from her and fleeing to London, he becomes in turn the hoped-for saviour of his people, lover and protégé of Alleluiah Cone, re-established film star, and avenging angel, before he rescues Saladin. These episodes are alternated with his incarnations as the archangel Gibreel talking to his original followers, ordering the slaying of the whores in the city of sand, bearing the mad Iman to the homeland where he incites revolution and swallows his own people, or leading the girl of the butterflies out from her Indian village and under the waters of the Arabian Sea to salvation or death.

Neither in his real adventures in London — the city of hell — nor in his incarnations of earlier lives is Gibreel author of his own narrative. While Saladin's metamorphosis tears him between conceptions of the world as eternal change or as eternal unity, Gibreel's dreams involve him in the unending struggle between the words of the flesh and the word of the spirit. The former is history and literature: the poet, the ruler and his goddesses. The latter is the one god and the word of the prophet which brings history to an end. The struggle is between the servants of Al-lah, the one God who is beyond change, and Al-lat, the female who brings the living waters of delight and the sacrifice of death. Gibreel, incarnated both in the archangel and in those who listen to him, is never sure whether the words he speaks come ultimately from God or from his adversary, Shaitan. The narrative, however, shows that destruction follows from those who find the certainty that eludes Gibreel.

Saladin eventually restores his own continuity and enters history by accepting his father, his lover, and his Indian past. Gibreel, despite the act of generosity of which he rescues Saladin from the fires of hatred and London, is unable to connect his personal and cultural past to the present, and takes his own life. Each makes his own choice.

Rushdie's offence in this novel is that he offers us a text which is neither history nor fiction, but history made fiction. This forces his readers to make a similar choice not just about his story but also about our own history. In choosing what we accept about the truth of the novel, we are choosing what we believe about the world in which we live. The novel's recreation of the varieties of religious experience compels our belief in the truth of the phenomenon rather than of the vision. At the same time, these phenomena are entangled with the contemporary politics of Britain, India and Iran. Its characters in each of these countries are people who have become detached from their native systems of culture, production and nationality, and who are therefore left to make their own worlds. But the reality with which this task engages them is controlled by others: by businessmen, politicians and demagogues.

In this world the reader, like Gibreel and Saladin, is denied any certainty. He is forced to choose his own realities from the words which flow across the page before him. These words deconstruct all certainty, and thus all authority. The certainties of Islam are deconstructed, but so are those of the imperialism which sets up as a world model the English gentleman and the liberal democracy which excludes migrants from effective power and allows the burning of Brickhall. As we freefall through the worlds of Rushdie's imagination, we are forced to take the responsibility for our own readings, our own choices. The novelist offers us the past as myth, as fantasy, inviting us to choose the history we will make from it, and so forcing on us the responsibility for our own futures. By offering us no truth, only responsibility, the writer makes himself an offence.

Peter Craven, writing about this novel, has said that "No book is worth its author's death or those of the piteous fools who howl for its suppression."<sup>4</sup> This is true if we consider that the argument is merely one of freedom of speech. For Rushdie, however, the issue is one of the right to choose the story of our own life, and thus

to make the history of our own time. To deny Rushdie, or anyone else, this right is to deny the right to life itself.

Words, as the linguists have shown us, have meaning only in context. It follows that no script can ever have a finite meaning, for every reader brings to it a different context. This is why every religion has its theologians, who constantly try to interpret or recover the original in the changed context of their own history. But history itself is a text which can be understood only in context. By abruptly changing the context of several histories, including those of Islam, of imperialism, and of migration, Rushdie forces us to reinterpret them, and thus offers us the opportunity of recovering our several pasts. Only so can we subject ourselves to the will of whatever god there may be.

This does not mean that any author has the right to publish anything he chooses. He is responsible for his story just as we are responsible for ours. If his story is demonstrably harmful, inducing personal evil or social disruption, then we have a social right to demand that the book not be distributed. This right however has nothing to do with the issue of whether it affronts us or causes us personal distress or embarrassment. It merely means we can choose a different story for ourselves, but it does not confer any right to deny others their choice. The onus is on us, before we seek the suppression of any words, to prove beyond any doubt that their publication will lead to actual harm. Otherwise, the act of suppression itself constricts the social fabric and denies individual potential.

Rushdie's sentence confirms the fate he has already incurred. Those who try to tie down to any single revealed truth the fertility of his words, and their ability to generate a multiplicity of meanings from a finite history, offer only an end to history in a single unchanging word which spells death to humankind. The sadness of this is that those who are denied the hope embodied in Rushdie's words are those whose desperate condition puts them most in need of it. Without these words, their task of making connections between their heritage and their present is made so much the more difficult, and consequently our common future is the more precarious.

#### NOTES

1. See Jonathan Yardley, "Helms may be wrong but it doesn't make the arts lobby right", *Washington Post*, reprinted in the *Guardian Weekly*, 13 August 1989, p.20.
2. In his address at the Adelaide Festival Writers' Week, 1982.
3. The three novels referred to are *Midnight's Children*, (Pan/Picador, London, 1982 [1981]); *Shame*, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1983); *The Satanic Verses*, (Penguin/Viking, London, 1983).
4. Peter Craven, 'Salman Rushdie, no parenthesis', (*Scripts* vol.5, no.3, 1988, p.33).

## Finding a father: a reading of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*

Salman Rushdie's last three novels, *Midnight's Children* (1981), *Shame* (1983) and *The Satanic Verses* (1988) have all made a very considerable impact on the English-speaking reading public, if that is not the understatement of our time. Winner of the Booker Prize of 1981 with *Midnight's Children* and hailed as spokesman for a continent "finding its voice", as *The New York Times* claimed, runner-up for the same prize two years later with his imaginative novel about contemporary Pakistan, *Shame*, Salman Rushdie's latest novel has achieved a notoriety that reaches far beyond the literary world.

When the "sentence of execution" on the author was pronounced by the late Ayatollah Khomeini, in the whole Muslim world *The Satanic Verses* moved into a judgmental world of nightmare, remote even from its two controversial predecessors. Yet Rushdie has re-iterated that his novel should be judged on its literary qualities alone, independently of any possible blasphemous repercussions which might give offence. As the most superficial acquaintance with the novel demonstrates, its structure is of considerable complexity. Two Indian men fall from an exploded aircraft "twenty-nine thousand and two feet, towards the English Channel, without benefit of parachutes or wings",<sup>1</sup> and survive. Their two lives, both individual and interdependent, form a dual and alternating narrative located in twentieth century England and India. In addition, there is the alternation of seventh century Arabian experience with the twentieth century action, which is transmitted in the elaborately prepared dreams and visions of one of these two men, Gibreel Farishta.

Presumably it is the seventh century account of the rise of the Muslim religion, tenuously related to the participants of the world today, which is offensive to many, a response which is difficult for outsiders to appreciate, save in its most obvious episodes.<sup>2</sup> However, the novel begins and ends in today's world and contains five sections out of nine treating the present.

In a novel of this richness, multiplicity of character and tone any reader will have to choose a line to follow. One might, for instance, consider the variety and range of tone in this multi-faceted and scintillating narrative. It might be rewarding to discuss the differences which emerge between a passage in *Midnight's Children* concerning, in embryo, the "matter of Arabia" and the later novel. When Saleem, central character and narrator of the earlier novel, recalls how he tried to recapture the attention of his family, he evokes the awesome experience of the foundation of Islam:

On Mount Sinai, the prophet Musa or Moses heard disembodied commandments; on Mount Hira, the prophet Muhammad (also known as Mohammed, Mahomet, the Last-But-One, and Mahound) spoke to the Archangel (Gabriel or Jibreel, as you please) (...)

Muhammad (on whose name be peace, let me add; I don't want to offend anyone) heard a voice saying, 'Recite!' and thought he was going mad.<sup>3</sup>

But the tentative and confidential tone here is far from the account in *The Satanic Verses* of Mahound's experience in Jahilia. Again, one might consider the contribution made to the whole account by the minor character, significantly named Salman Farsi. As early disciple, later follower and scribe of the Prophet, his role might lead us away from the purely literary qualities of the work towards biographical conjecture.

He is, however, a Persian in Arabia; a migrant in a new land and its culture and, as such, is of crucial importance bearing on what I take to be the principal narrative concern. As I read this novel, the migrant peoples of the twentieth century and their search for personal identity are at the core of this infinitely diverse world. There was once a saying, "Home is where the heart is" and this search for identity leads back to the nostalgic pull of place, childhood, family, interpret it as one will. For Saleem in *Midnight's Children* it was all of those things, Bombay, childhood and family memories; for Saladin Chamcha, as we shall see, it is father, family, Bombay. For Satan, in Defoe's epigraph to this book, punishment consists in deprivation of such certainties:

Satan, being thus confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode; for though he has, in consequence of his angelic nature, a kind of empire in the liquid waste or air, yet this is certainly part of his punishment, that he is . . . without any fixed place, or space, allowed him to rest the sole of his foot upon.<sup>4</sup>

But the migrant's problems today, as Rushdie shows, are not primarily social problems of place or space; they are psychologically and emotionally dominant, as many examples show besides the increasing focus on the experiences of the two central characters, Saladin and Gibreel.

In all cases the experiences are essentially and credibly grounded in human character, however fantastic the circumstances may seem to be. Perhaps one should except the opening free fall as an imaginative writer's licence, but once the ill-matched couple, Sufyan and Hind, are introduced we are in readily recognisable territory. They own and run the successful Shaandaar Café which becomes the locus for much of the violent action, but their home life is less than peaceful. Their prosperity stems from her excellent cooking which attracts the customers while it increases her obesity. At the same time, she pities herself as an exile from her own country. She reproaches her husband: "England (...) is your revenge upon me for preventing you from performing your obscene acts upon my body." (p.248) It is on account of their incompatible conjugal relationship that Hind "had had to endure all the privations and humiliations of the process of immigration". The wry humour of this disclosure of a discordant marriage is solidly based in the man and woman.

Even the transformation of Chamcha into an increasingly gigantic goat, complete with horns, cloven hoofs and tail may be explained at a human level. Such a metamorphosis may seem to belong to the world of fantasies in *Shame* with its decapitating and mutilating white panther; but we should note the important distinction Rushdie later makes between Farishta's continuous life as an "untranslated man" and Chamcha's discontinuous one. When Saladin Chamcha leaves India as a boy he is determined from his school-days to integrate himself with England (kippers notwithstanding); he thus rejects his past and so becomes subject to the way people see him, to the denigration that awaits the immigrant.

For his physical transformation takes place when the three immigration officers

bundle him into their van after his unheralded arrival on the English coast. Supported by five policemen they beat and torment him, creating a “universe of pain”. Surrealist as his plight may appear, it illustrates the idea that he actually embodies the way the eight men see him:

What puzzled Chamcha was that a circumstance which struck him as utterly bewildering and unprecedented — that is, his metamorphosis into this supernatural imp — was being treated by the others as if it were the most banal and familiar matter they could imagine. (p.158)

The situation worsens when the officers condemn him to collect and consume his own excrement:

‘Animal,’ Stein cursed him as he administered a series of kicks, and Bruno joined in. ‘You’re all the same. Can’t expect animals to observe civilized standards. Eh?’ (p.159)

Such a reaction in the migrants to public opinion is made explicit in the following hospital scene where Chamcha, in his new shape, talks with the manticore which has “an entirely human body, but its head was that of a ferocious tiger, with three rows of teeth.” (p.167) When Chamcha asks who is responsible for such a transformation, and who might be blamed, the manticore explains: “They describe us (...) that’s all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct.” (p.168) And he goes on to account for the other inmates of the hospital ward:

‘There’s a woman over that way (...) who is now mostly water-buffalo. There are businessmen from Nigeria who have grown sturdy tails. There is a group of holidaymakers from Senegal who were doing no more than changing planes when they were turned into slippery snakes. I myself am in the rag trade (...) a highly paid male model.’ (p.168)

Restored to health although still transformed, Saladin Chamcha joins the other inmates in their escape from the Detention Centre compound: “The monsters ran quickly, silently (...) and then they were out, free, going their separate ways, without hope, but also without shame.” (p.171)

The multiracial world of England today, the situation and the concerns of the migrating peoples of our time, provide an important element in Rushdie’s novel. It is foreshadowed in the seventh century account of migration and pilgrimage and appears, chiefly, in the “other world” which Chamcha rejoins once he is restored to his former shape, “*humanized* (...) by the fearsome concentration of his hate” for Farishta. (p.294, author’s italics.)

It is presented in many ways: in the mythological guise of mutant beings, as we have seen; in the direct narrations of a multicultural society; in the gatherings of the Club Hot Wax wherein waxwork effigies of the “migrants of the past, as much the living dancers’ ancestors as their own flesh and blood” are celebrated alongside their current villains, “all the local avatars of Legree.” (p.292) The evening culminates in the meltdown of the chosen victim until it crumples into formlessness. This may be one grotesque expression of the migrants’ distress, but it is counterbalanced by the court speech of Dr Uhuru Simba, mistakenly accused of murder as it later transpires, when he declares:

‘Make no mistake (...) we are here to change things. I concede at once that we shall ourselves be changed. African, Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Cypriot, Chinese, we are other than we would have been if we had not crossed the oceans, if our mothers and fathers had not crossed the skies in search of work and dignity and a better life for their children (...) but I say that we shall also be the ones to remake this society (. . .) It is our turn now.’ (p.414)

This is the crowded canvas of today across which the spotlight follows Saladin Chamcha and the man with whom his destiny has been linked throughout, Gibreel Farishta. The one ultimately chooses to return to his own world, not to attempt to remake his adopted one; the other, distraught by his failure to control his psychic experience, chooses to leave it in his death. In some ways the parallel experiences prove to be journeys towards self-discovery, self-understanding. This is particularly so in the progress of Saladin Chamcha towards recovery of his Indian identity, Salahuddin Chamchawala, and acceptance of his own country. Despite all the suffering caused by Gibreel Farishta's capacity to live both in the "serial dream" of the past and the tormented present, to live in two worlds that leak into each other, an ambivalence that only death can end (p.546), his story is less disrupted; his self-discovery demands less radical modification than that of Saladin. Farishta is what he is whereas Chamcha is forced to revise the ideals by which he has lived in England all his adult life. As we shall see, his fictional experiences embody what I take to be a central concern of Rushdie's apparently chaotic world of today, the need, in the Socratic term, to "Know thyself".

When the two men are thrown together by the hijackers (and thrown out) their interlocked destinies can only be resolved by death. Both are successful actors, Farishta an idol of the Indian screen, Chamcha the "Man of a Thousand Voices" who ruled the airwaves of Britain (p.60) whose mimetic talent allows him to perpetrate the secondary application of the Satanic Verses. Earlier, the primary use of the descriptive term, intrusive verses which permitted the trio of pagan goddesses a role in Mahound's Recitation, had provoked a public retraction. (pp.105-115) In an Iago-like revenge on the man he had once considered his friend and now hates as his successful rival, Chamcha uses his talent to destroy Farishta through the latter's obsessive love for Allie. Already consumed by jealousy of Allie, whose nature is symbolised by her conquest of Everest, Farishta is driven insane, like another Othello, by mysterious telephone calls reciting banal and suggestively sexual doggerel. They are indeed satanic verses, since one of Rushdie's repeated concerns is the relationship between good and evil.

What is noticeable here, as elsewhere, is that the apparently surreal episode of the verses which haunt Farishta and will destroy a deep and mutual love is capable of an entirely rational explanation. Farishta's confidential disclosures of his obsessive love for Allie were made to his supposed friend, as man to man. These provide the matter of the persecution and Saladin's peculiar talents provide the means. It is all comprehensible at a human level, however, diabolic the intention, and even Farishta later reaches the sensible explanation (p.463). His love for Allie brought him half way across the world and in his final frenzied tale of her death (murder?) before his own suicide, his last words are of almost inarticulate devotion: "Bloody hell", he says to Saladin, "I loved that girl" (p.545). The driving force of Saladin's life lies elsewhere. It has always been to identify himself with England to such an extent that, as his English wife realizes later, he marries Pamela for her voice: "Chamcha was not in love with her at all", she thinks, "but with that voice stinking of Yorkshire pudding and hearts of oak, that hearty rubicund voice of ye olde dream-England which he so desperately wanted to inhabit". (p.180) So it was, in Pamela's judgement, "a marriage of crossed purposes", easily concluded (p.180)

Towards the end of this long narrative of two men, "conjoined opposites, these two, each man the other's shadow" (p.426), the author seeks to define their different natures:

Should we even say that these are two fundamentally different *types* of self? Might we not agree that Gibreel, for all his stage-name and performances, (...) has wished to remain (...) *continuous* — that is, jointed to and arising from his past; — (...) that (...) he fears above all things the altered states in which his dreams leak into, and overwhelm, his waking self, making him that angelic Gibreel he has not desire to be; — so that his is still a self

which (...) we may describe as “true” . . . . whereas Saladin Chamcha is a creature of *selected* discontinuities, a *willing* re-invention; his *preferred* revolt against history being what makes him, in our chosen idiom, “false”? And might we then not go on to say that it is this falsity of self that makes possible in Chamcha a worse and deeper falsity — call this “evil” (...) while Gibreel (...) is to be considered “good” by virtue of *wishing to remain*, for all his vicissitudes, at bottom an untranslated man. (p.427) (author’s italics.)

This knowledge and acceptance of self, this authenticity of character, are clearly the touchstone for distinguishing the other participants in this world; they are rewarded, fictionally, by experiencing the other Absolute, that of genuine love. Pamela herself, recognizing cross-purposes in her marriage, in a state of shock on hearing news of its unexpected end, falls into bed with Saladin’s old college friend, Jumpy Joshi, an endearing character “with wire coathanger shoulders and an enormous capacity for nervous agitation” (p.172). Soon after, however, Jumpy comes to understand that “he could do no wrong, and for the first time in his life he began to feel genuinely safe, safe as houses, safe as a human being who is loved; and so did Pamela Chamcha”. (p.187)

So too did Gibreel’s great love, Allie. She had found her own way of transcending “the incompatibility of life’s elements” (p.296) by literally climbing mountains to an altitude which reaches a state of non-being, in which nothing is worth saying. As she explains to Gibreel later in bed, such an awesome solitude throws a different light on her father’s posturing at Christmas and renders it banal and emptied of meaning: “this Jewish man insisted on celebrating with his Jewish family and others what he described as ‘an English rite’, as a mark of respect to their new ‘host nation’ ” (p.296). But she finds her own sense of reality; her experience with Gibreel is of total compatibility, whatever its later difficulties: “I read your thoughts and the right words just came out of my mouth (...) Just flowed out. Bingo: love, in the beginning was the word.” (p.296). Even Saladin’s earlier partner and mistress, Mimi, faces up to the facts of her life: accidents, ageing, and insecurity: “ ‘You get born, you get beaten up and bruised all over and finally you break and they shovel you into an urn.’ ” (p.260) So she accepts their separation and takes up with a younger lover of doubtful business morality without any illusions. As she says to Saladin over the transatlantic telephone:

‘I am fully aware of Billy boy’s rep. Don’t teach me about exploitation. We had exploitation when you-plural were running round in skins. Try being Jewish, female and ugly sometime. You’ll beg to be black. Excuse my French: brown.’ (p.261)

Such honesty deserves the successful life Mimi subsequently enjoys with her Billy boy, as far as we know.

The outstanding example of the admirably honest character who attempts to break through Saladin’s misguided devotion to things English and his rejection of his own people and country is, of course, Zeenat Vakil. Once a “rash, a bad girl”, she has grown into a woman now as intellectually fearless as she once was physically when young. As a doctor, she works with the homeless and the victims of Bhopal; as a writer, she acknowledges the derivative culture of India, based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes seemed to fit, “Aryan, Mughal, British take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest.” (p.52)

This is the woman who, through love for Saladin, sets out to release him from limbo: “When you forget people are watching, you look just like a blank”, she says (...) “An empty slate, nobody home (...) I want to slap you. To sting you back into life”. (p.61) And after the death of Salahuddin’s father it is she who offers him “in spite of all his wrong-doing, weakness, guilt — in spite of his humanity — (...) another chance.” (p.547) But the man she takes in charge in the long novel’s quiet close is no longer the same. His estrangement from his father during his adult life, his failure

to understand his father's replacement of his dead wife by two women who form a trio of love for a lifetime, his deviation from his own past: all is forgotten when he answers the undeniable summons to his father's deathbed. Wondering if he has arrived too late, he sees that the man on the bed had "extended an uncertain arm. Saladin Chamcha went towards his father and bowed his head beneath the old man's caressing palm". (p.523)

The mode and the mood of the final stages of this long, crowded and complex novel have both changed. After the turbulence of the preceding, sometimes overcharged action, often digressive and redundant as if reluctant to let anything go, the narrative is now pursued at the level of simple humanity and is the more effective and indeed moving for that. The central characters are confronted by the basic elements of human experience, love and death. Fantasy is forgotten in the experience around a deathbed, and after (even the magic lamp episode can be explained by simple coincidence or deduction).

As the son cares for his father the medical details are presented directly and uncompromisingly. As indeed are the posthumous arrangements by the old people who had cared so long for the dead man. This comes about by the recovery of Salahuddin's deep love for the father who brushes aside the son's stumbling words of apology as of complete irrelevance. "It's forgotten, whatever it was." (p.526) As the son recognizes during the mercifully prolonged closing stages of a life: "To fall in love with one's father after the long angry decades was a serene and beautiful feeling; a renewing, life-giving thing." (p.523) During this coda to an old man's life, the mood has turned to one of reconciliation; the son is given time to recognize and accept the many "old rejected selves" of his past choices. Although, as he thinks, "How hard it was to find one's father just when one had no choice but to say goodbye" (p.524), the imminence of death is undeniable. And Salahuddin accepts the fact that he has to acknowledge the rejections, misunderstandings, errors and illusions of his past life.

The astonishingly crowded and agitated worlds of both the seventh century and the twentieth century of Salman Rushdie's exuberant, controversial imagination have narrowed down to focus on the essential nature of the "true", the "good" life in which Salahuddin, like Gibreel before him, wishes to remain "continuous (. . .), joined to and arising from his past". (p.427) And Zany is there to accompany him in the quiet mood of reconciliation which replaces the extremes of uncertainties and doubts of the world today.

#### NOTES

1. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*. London: Viking 1988, p.3. Page references within the text refer to this edition.
2. eg. IV Ayesha, the Imam in exile in London; VI Return to Jahilia, the brothel scenes.
3. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, (London: Jonathan Cape 1981), re-published by Picador, Pan Books Ltd 1982, p.163.
4. *The Satanic Verses*, epigraph: Daniel Defoe, *The History of the Devil*

## Against the Glass

On the thirty-fifth, the wall to wall glass  
stretches from the ceiling to the floor.  
One can see *Tullamarine* and beyond.  
“As we approach for landing we will lower  
the cabin lights so that you may better appreciate  
the view.” Baling out of the corporate pandemonium  
into the firing line, one suffers the fool,  
if not gladly; the buck stops the pain of a tongue  
that’s bitten to the quick. One just adjusts.  
I pretend to a patient tolerance I haven’t got:  
the gifts I offer my Greek friend are damnable.  
A window is a shield.

Looking through the window at the traffic  
on the *Maas*, I told my Dutch host  
one can’t be loyal to a corporation, only a man.  
A score of years and chief executives  
since prove the lie. He asked me what  
I missed most so far from home: I confessed  
to cut lunches and a bloody good swear.  
If it’s good for the soul, my soul should be  
in terrific shape. One must hold one’s tongue,  
be polite to strangers, foreigners and corporate chiefs.  
The colour of my language pales, shifts to my face.  
In *Venlo*, he replied, we are all good Catholics  
and do not swear. Even allegiance.  
A window offers escape.

We laugh at other people’s weddings,  
smile at our own: welcome friends,  
comfort female relatives and new in-laws,  
even reprove the groomsman  
reading the *Truth* in the vestry while we wait.  
World without end. After the deed,  
the rice, the bubbly breakfast (all on film  
like a dental record), we leap unceremoniously  
into the limousine, relax our aching jaws.  
Unbeaten photographers persist, insist  
we look through the rear window and smile.  
A window invites intrusion.

## Interview with Bruce Dawe

CY *What is the attitude of your students towards poetry?*

BD I find that they don't like poetry of discourse because that is foreign to the Australian culture — discourse as a reasoned, step by step discussion about a philosophical, socio-political or aesthetic issue.

CY *Does that rule out metaphysical poetry?*

BD You have to sneak it in by the back door by way of its comic elements, for example, a poem like Donne's 'The Flea.' You can have success, too, by using poems which involve a psychological complexity with which they're familiar, as young romantics, like Drayton's 'Since there's no help' or, an earlier poem, Wyatt's 'They flee from me', which students can relate to in terms of their own experiences of love.

The discourse poems tend to involve various levels of allegory or levels of political and cultural reference, and that's where you lose them. There's a problem of course, with something like 'To his coy mistress'. Although it's a fine poem with a great sense of fun and absurdity in it, the fun and absurdity are double-edged because you feel absurd yourself by the time you've indicated what the Humber is and how the Ganges comes into it. Anything outside the immediate field of reference will become pretty dull for them — We'll be moving into the field of footnotes.

CY *Are you worried about the fact that students can't pick up historical and cultural allusions?*

BD I take it as inevitable that we won't be very interested in the Duke of Buckingham, of James II, or Colly Cibber, or court intrigues appreciated by Pope, or Dryden, or Swift unless we have a specific interest. The test of a poem is that if the references honeycomb a poem to such an extent that it can't survive without them then, in one sense, it's not a poem that you grieve for losing.

We tend to be ahistorical. For example, if you try to teach Auden you really have to sketch in something of the intellectual atmosphere of the 1930s, otherwise what does it all mean? It's a bit like a new building — you have to bring along strips of lawn and do a deliberate cultivation job otherwise it's very barren.

CY *Do you think enough is being done to further studies in Australian literature?*

BD No I don't! I think, for example, that it's anomalous that our National University has so few courses in Australian literature. If you enrolled your South American son at the A.N.U. to come to first hand grips with the heartland of Australian literature you'd be very disappointed. I just think it's odd that the National University, which is so well funded, and has had people like Alec Hope as professors there — well, they haven't honoured his memory very well.

The post-war period in Australian literature has been extraordinarily rich and it's quite anachronistic that, with all the Aussie boosting that goes on through the media, we have such a desultory attitude towards the study of Australian writers.

CY *Do you think that the analysis of poetry should be taught in schools?*

BD Yes I do. I think it's very important. That it's taught with varying degrees of success is really a bit like what Chesterton said about Christianity, "It's been found difficult and not tried". There has to be an awareness of the sorts of difficulties of poetry if any kind of sympathy is going to remain with the students when they leave school.

One way of de-mythologising poetry is the practice, common in South Australian schools, of having a poet-in-residence. This allows students to read and write poetry in a workshop situation — a kind of crash course. The other advantage is that students become aware that poetry is a living art form and not something confined to the Nineteenth Century.

CY *Is poetry chiefly read by other poets?*

BD I don't think so. I've taken part in a lot of poetry readings and I've had no indication that a majority of the audience writes poetry. The audiences are very varied — in pubs, coffee places, theatres, campuses, summer schools. I think one of the most interesting audiences of all is at the Friendly Street poetry readings.

CY *Do you see any sign of new developments in Australian poetry?*

BD I can't make a judgement. I am, and always have been, outside the scene, not by choice but through circumstance. I went from being a dropout student to being a labourer, a general dogbody. Now I live in Toowoomba which magnificently fulfils that expectation of making you feel that you're not the flavour of the month, especially if you have the opinions that I have.

CY *Is there something uniquely Australian about our poetry?*

BD Various people have worked on that question. Once you start to define those Australian qualities you find to your surprise, and sometimes consternation, that people elsewhere have those qualities too. It doesn't take away from Australia, it just proves that we're human beings too.

But I think one thing that's pretty true, and this has been reflected in the other arts as well, is that we've become less self-conscious. We're not taken in by all this Aussie kids are Weetbix kids, or if you've never held a bat you don't know what it's all about. In a sense we have to become less Australian to become more Australian.

CY *What about the laconic style?*

BD That seems to me to be one thing which is more likely to be Australian. That's what endeared Henry Lawson to many people. It's the assumption that one's worth is not measured by the volume of one's rhetoric but by some inner quality.

Australia is a large country. It swallows up artistic reputations at a rapid rate. The air's fairly dry; the leaves are a kind of dull green so they make rather poor laurels. I've always taken a moderate position, not crouching but not standing on tiptoe — you get bowled arse over turkey very quickly. If you don't stand quite as high up you've got less far to fall.

CY *What is poetry?*

BD I've never worried about definitions. Take a poem like 'Enter without so much as knocking.' If somebody said it's just chopped up prose, I'd say fine, it doesn't worry me. If they said to me the latest analysis from our most advanced laboratory tests shows that most of your poetry is in fact prose, I wouldn't

question the validity of their scientific knowledge at all. It's what I want to write.

When I started I worked in very obvious rhymed forms because that's the way, in those days, most people came to poetry; in my case through my mother declaiming fully rhymed and highly sentimental poems which I can still recite.

An ability to write in both forms — both less and more structured — is useful. Sometimes you want to work on a metaphor, which is particularly meaningful, without any sense of being hemmed in by formal requirements. If you have to worry about the formal elements at the same time it's a bit like juggling swords and watermelons — difficult, because they're so different. However, a competence in both forms will be some kind of guarantee that you won't be slack or sloppy or merely write chopped up prose; that speech cadences will have had some sort of tougher schooling.

CY *Are religious and political beliefs important to you as a poet, rather than as a person, if such a distinction can be made?*

BD I always think it proper and reasonable to write out of whatever one's social responses are without any sense of shame or apology. On the other hand I know I can often be wrong or ill-informed about those areas.

I also write out of more personal things. People who categorise me as a satirical poet forget that the satirist is also a person. However large or sweeping the declamation or the exposure of folly, they come down to the fact that they will often be closely related to the perception of what that folly means in personal terms — in terms of himself, or his family or those he loves or those he knows as people.

CY *Where do you get your ideas from?*

BD Sometimes from films, or books. I'm reading a history of Ireland at the moment. I read a bit of Science Fiction. I don't read literary journals because I don't get the time.

CY *Does a line just come sometimes?*

BD Sometimes a line just comes into your head. The first three lines of 'Life-Cycle' were like that; the rest I staggered with. When a line comes you hope the rest of the poem comes with it. Those lines or fragments or metaphors that come to you have their own kind of validity.

I have a line at the moment, which is just a couple of phrases, about the two young policemen who were killed. I want to use the word slain, rather than murdered or killed, because it opens up a larger field. It has something like the sense of feloniously but in a dark way.

One understands goodness. I don't think human beings can get to the bottom of evil. Evil and good are dimensions which creatures other than ourselves don't have to contend with. Dogs only know dogginess.

I'm not a philosopher. I don't have any natural mechanisms or a framework to assist in understanding. I don't have a fleet foot for getting to the finishing post.

A schoolgirl once asked me what is my philosophy of life. I told her, "Stay confused. It's healthier." I distrust intensely people who have too slick or too clear or too articulate a philosophy because I have a feeling that where most people live that wouldn't apply anyway, and where *they* live their beliefs can be a terrifying invitation to tyranny, oppression and madness.

CY *Having got your ideas, or maybe a line, what then?*

BD Writing a poem is a bit like chasing a greasy pig; you can end up falling on your face a lot while you're trying to catch it.

Water finds its own level. If you find that this form rather than that form is the way in which your thoughts are starting to flow again, like the water,

then that will be the way you will go. Sometimes that will be impeded by the very idea of rhyme. It's really how the thought processes are feeding into the writing hand which determines how much freedom or strictness you can accommodate without losing track of the argument.

*CY Are you conscious of techniques as you write?*

**BD** Alliteration I like and find myself at ease with because when I was young I was a terrific fan of Dylan Thomas. Rhyme I'm not quite so easy with. It's like choosing clothes. I don't have much colour sense and I don't know what will go with what until I try it on. So with a poem; you try this and you try that to see if it matches.

*CY Can you be taught to write poetry?*

**BD** You can learn some skills relating to it but you must have the intuitive capacity to go along with the skills. Sometimes people are basically writers anyway and just need a bit of encouragement.

What writing schools offer as much as anything is a sense of communion and fellowship, a reassurance that though writing is a lonely art, we are not alone. In a country like ours its finest writers could live and die and it wouldn't matter a damn, but if Wally Lewis has a broken arm the flags are at half-mast.

*CY Do you see yourself as having a particular role in Australia?*

**BD** I often think of that line from 'Hamlet' when he tells the players that they're "the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time" and that's the kind of thing that I'd like on my literary tombstone. I don't look to posterity or to being in some kind of canon. I'd rather just record the average life than write about the great figures; ordinary people who won't get the big obituaries in the paper but who are the very stuff of life.

*CY Have your overseas trips helped you at all?*

**BD** Not me, no. I don't think it's been of any significant value at all. I'm happy not to go. If people said to me tomorrow we'd like you to go somewhere else, the odds are I'd say no. I'm happy to be grubbing around in my backyard. When I travel, even around Australia, I don't really look at things, I go to meet people. Travel, in some ways, is an escape from the self, and I think you can learn a lot without going past the end of your street.

## REVIEWS

*The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, general editor Laurie Hergenhan; editors, Bruce Bennett, Martin Duwell, Brian Matthews, Peter Pierce, Elizabeth Webby, Ringwood, Penguin Books, 1988, paper \$19.99.

As some reviews of this significant volume have already revealed, any large-scale rewriting of Australian literary history is bound to offend or disappoint someone. If it is too pluralistic, offering a range of competing histories and voices, it lacks definition; if it is selective or (much worse) prescriptive, it lacks comprehensiveness and constructs a narrow, canonical view of the field; if it works entirely within existing orthodoxies, it offers nothing new to warrant its being written at all. Further, and despite the word 'new' in the title, a book such as this is not the place to look for radical new propositions or wholesale rearrangements of the field. One can, however, reasonably expect it to mark a cultural and theoretical shift — the important reorientation of Australian literary studies and its histories which has occurred progressively over the last decade. Possibly the most important task for *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, and possibly the one on which it ought most rigorously be judged, is both to reflect, and to capitalise on the opportunities provided by, this shift.

*The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* marks a crucial break with the tradition of thinking about literature which produced its predecessor (Dutton's Penguin, *The Literature of Australia* [1964, 1976], and most of the Australian literary studies in schools and universities from the 1960s into the 1980s. It has become conventional to see that tradition as more or less permanently engaged in negotiating the contradictions between two competing strands within Australian literature and Australian literary studies. For one strand of thought, usually characterised as proletarian and nationalist, Australian literature was defined by its content, its manner, and its setting. For the second strand of thought, usually characterised as elitist, Eurocentric, and metaphysical, it was Literature which deserved capitalisation, not Australia; this group protected the claims of Literature through the advocacy of a restricted Australian tradition,

constructed by the application of "universal" aesthetic standards as an antidote to the ephemeral attractions of local colour. For the first group, if I can put it this crudely, Henry Lawson was the touchstone; for the second, Patrick White must have seemed a timely saviour.

The battle for control over the definition of an Australian literature has been vividly, if not altogether satisfactorily, described in John Docker's *In A Critical Condition* (1984), itself a text which proved that old arguments never die. It is a battle, however, which is now rarely fought on the old ground. What is so interesting about much of the current discussion of Australian writing is how nimbly and deliberately it has simply sidestepped these, hitherto dominant, protocols of discussion. Rather than contesting the dominant definitions, Australian literary studies now are determinedly sceptical about any categoric definitions of 'Australian-ness', about the possibility of a singular literary history, about the importance of the aesthetic within critical practice, and even about the power of the critic to lead the unenlightened public to appreciate what it had not appreciated before. The acceptance that literature is a cultural, rather than a natural, construction has enfranchised previously unrespectable interests: in writing hitherto neglected for its lack of the preferred aesthetic qualities (much popular nineteenth century fiction, for instance, and a great deal of women's writing); in the processes which govern the production and dissemination of literature in this country (the role of publishers and cultural policies in the formation of our national literature, for instance); and in the mythic or social function of literature as a means of the 'representation' of the culture to itself. Most of these new concerns were silenced or marginalised in the earlier tradition; all of them figure significantly in this new literary history.

A better title for this book might be the plural — 'new literary histories.' Laurie Hergenhan's introduction clearly responds to critiques of the empiricist view of history; he accents the contemporariness of accounts of the past, constructed as they can only be from the point of view of the present. The account of history emerging from the introduction, and from the multi-authored format (there are more than thirty individual contributors), is one that

accents provisionality and contingency. This book does not provide a progressive, developmental history; rather, it proceeds with something of a spiral movement: often circling back to pick up issues dealt with earlier and showing how they are reconstituted in the new historical context. This slight circularity might irritate readers looking for a less complicated history, but it does reproduce the workings of cultural processes more accurately than a less equivocally developmental approach might have done. It also reflects more accurately the contingency and diversity of the material upon which literary histories do their work: the texts, and the ways they have been read.

Even provisional histories require some organisation, however, and this volume is divided into five parts. The first is a general section dealing with Australian humour, Australian 'English', Aboriginal literature, and a history of Australian literary histories — all prefaced by Bruce Clunies-Ross' general account of Australian literature and culture. The unintended effect of this section (with, perhaps, the exception of Peter Pierce's brisk historiography) is of a series of false starts, striking this reader as a gritty residue of the approach taken in the Dutton volume. The principles informing the selection of these topics as a discrete grouping were not readily apparent to me, and it is clear that the section works quite differently to the remaining four. These begin with an account of perceptions of Australia within a particular period (before 1855, 1855-1915, 1915-1965 [rather a big gap, this], and 1965-1988). Each period is then treated quite specifically, depending on the perceived characteristics of its texts or its cultural politics.

This does not produce a string of chapters on key authors or 'schools' of authors, although the range of reference within chapters is never less than cunningly comprehensive. The book's focus of concentration, though, is on the forms and processes of literary production and reception in Australia, and authors are offered a place within the contexts that such a concentration provides. So, for example, the section dealing with 1855-1915 does not have a chapter on Lawson, Paterson, or Furphy. Instead, Lawson comes up in the specific contexts of Ken Stewart's discussion of journalism and the development of Australian writing, in Cliff Hanna's account of the ballad tradition, in Patrick Morgan's and

Fiona Giles' contrasting discussions of realism and romance, and in Van Ikin's chapter on the construction of utopias in the writing of the time. Rather than being seen through a single, and simpler, frame, Lawson is viewed from a variety of perspectives, his significance subjected to different readings. It is a novel and subtle method, demanding editorial skill, and possibly some patience and tolerance from the reader at first. One cannot locate all the material on specific authors simply by turning to a section marked Henry Lawson or Patrick White. I should confess to finding this a pleasing feature of the book's view of its subject, in that the literature is seen as not entirely a product of its authors but also as a product of institutions, history, and culture. The rejection of the traditional canon as a means of organisation, however, does expose those topics used as alternative units of organisation. These are not always felicitous choices. David Carter's piece, 'Documenting and Criticising Society', is actually a discussion of social realist fiction; the title actively compromises his argument, in my view, requiring him to perform some slightly transparent manoeuvres in order to synchronise with it. Brian Matthews' chapter is called 'Literature and Conflict'; this seems an overly grandiose title for a treatment, primarily, of the Ern Malley hoax. This is particularly noticeable when other titles are quite baldly direct in their nomination of their subject matter: Robin Gerster's 'War Literature', for instance, or Susan Sheridan's 'Women Writers'. One of the problems with doing anything new is that one gets terrified when it starts to look like something old; there are hints of a small crisis of nerve somewhere in the processes of this text's production which are visible in such idiosyncrasies.

A more puzzling problem — and one that offers no easy solution — is how to counter the paradoxically homogenising effect of strenuous editing on this multi-authored history. I say paradoxically, because in order to make such a book coherent and readable the editors must minimise the distinctiveness of each of its multiple authors. Indeed, an index of the efficiency and skill of the general editor (Laurie Hergenhan), and his editors (Bruce Bennett, Martin Duwell, Brian Matthews, Peter Pierce, and Elizabeth Webby), may be the fact that the book largely does manage to negotiate the

differences between the various authors and their approaches. Lost in the process, though, may be the sound of those very discordant or even competing voices which might reinforce the book's insistence on a diversity of perspectives on what constitutes 'Australia', 'Australian literature' or Australian 'history.' Even though individual voices certainly do survive (Ken Stewart's, and Veronica Brady's, for two), it is regrettable that mostly they are muffled. The problem for the editors, and ultimately for the readers, is the choice to be made between the presentation of a selection of soloists or a choral performance.

These are interesting problems, though, and a testament to the fact that the *New Literary History* occasionally manages to be provocative as well as magisterial. If there is a theoretical point at which the *Penguin New Literary History* stops short, and at which it resists the provocative, it is before propositions of the importance of ideologies in our literature and in our literary histories. An essentially political view of Australian literary history may underlie some of the chapters but does not seem to be a central element in the book's conception or in the interests of most of its contributors. This is a regrettable absence, in my view, failing to account for useful critical work in a context which would make its specific objectives clear. More worryingly, such an absence exacerbates the difficulty of addressing the way in which literature both forms, and is (in)formed by, larger ideological structures in Australian culture. Such an objective is one I would have expected *The Penguin New Literary History* to pursue comprehensively.

Despite such reservations, the book is a most welcome alternative to its predecessor. Its influence is probably guaranteed, but it has accepted the responsibility that goes with that guarantee by presenting the work of many of the best scholars working in Australian literature today, intelligently edited, and in an eminently readable form. The measure of its success will not be its sales among the (mythical?) general readers, nor even its level of approval from disgruntled marxian colleagues; the test of its achievement will be the response of the thousands of students who will find it on their reading lists as their sole guide to Australian literary culture. My guess is that *The Penguin*

*New Literary History of Australia* is very well equipped to pass this test.

Graeme Turner

**Thomas Shapcott, *Selected Poems 1956-1988*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1989, 352pp., RRP: \$18.95.**

A *Selected Poems* represents a conspectus, even a summation of a writer's career. It highlights and celebrates individual creativity. All of which hardly needs to be said except that it makes it awkward for those of us who face the new doorkeepers to the institutions and must pass the test of ideological purity. It's a worry. We earnestly recite the credo: the Author is dead, character is dead, the theorist decrees. And then confront something like this *Selected Poems 1956-1988* by Thomas Shapcott.

Angus and Robertson, the custodians of the nation's poetry before UQP, had found their own cunning way to resolve the problem and subvert the canonicity of a "selected poems". In the 1970s and 80s A & R sent their selected and collected volumes (no doubt with secret instructions) to be printed in Hong Kong. A combination of formidably stiff spines, cheap glue and paper saw to it that the book soon broke its back and liberated its pages from the author-centric covers. So the unregenerate reader was compelled to re-construct his or her own selection from the chaos. Knowing the soundness and rigour of literary theory in some Queensland academic circles, I am startled that no-one there thought to alert UQP to the theory if not the *praxis*. Instead, the University of Queensland Press in publishing Thomas Shapcott's new *Selected Poems* have printed and bound the poetry in a most attractive and what seems flexible and durable book.

However all is not lost. Something of the old publishing tradition of short-changing selected volumes remains. Some misguided souls claim a selected or collected works is more than a discrete collection of poems; it should offer both an introduction to and an overview of the writer's work to date. Allow the fiction of a reader interested in poetry and just perhaps that reader will want to relate the poems back to the writer's career, to check changes and

developments, and maybe relate poems to what this reader knows of contemporary writers.

Here I cannot help but compare Thomas Shapcott's *Selected Poems* with the *Selected Poems* of the New Zealand poet Kendrick Smithyman, published by Auckland University Press, 1989. Smithyman's publishers must be ignorant that for us cutting-edge theorists the author is dead and the "privileged text" is a hierarchical notion outmoded and discredited along with High Culture notions like scholarly regard. Smithyman's publishers offer an introductory essay where the editor sets out the principles of selection, declares whether the poems have been revised, and offers a brief readable introductory and critical essay. Furthermore the contents page carries a list of dates that enables the reader to see at a glance where any poem belongs in the poet's career. Clearly the ideological assumptions of such critical guides are horrendous. Happily UQP will have none of this.

Shapcott's *Selected Poems 1956-1988* is divided into seven sections. The first section is what the dust-jacket calls a "sampler". What? To subvert the privileged notion of "book" where readers might be tempted to flick their own pages and sample? For the subsequent six sections the dust-jacket again offers its mischievous help. It declares that these six sections move chronologically and include "verse from [Shapcott's] novels and performance poetry as well as his latest un-published poems". However any information about books or dates is cleverly with-held. The uninitiated reader is left in the dark, unable to plot the chronological development and unable to relate the poetry back to Shapcott's many different books, or indeed to know whether the poetry has been published before, or published in variant form. This is good. The crafty publishers are clearly "re-writing" and "placing" their unregenerate poet.

For if anything emerges from Shapcott's poetry it is concern with individual creativity, with dramatising what it feels like to live in a body and know with sensual richness a particular time and place and be alert to the changes and patterns that constitute history. The poet finds "copy" in biographical material whether observing his own body, his beloved's body, his family, places he visits or lives in as well as in contemporary political news. His

Pasiphae in the poem of that name offers "There is no end to experience. Neither to knowledge" (108). Shapcott's poems continually dramatise this insatiable alertness and appetite for experience. The search leads Shapcott beyond the immediate to some compelling recreations of figures found in history and mythology.

The restless alertness is also found in the poet's constant testing of form. Shapcott has a stunning repertoire of form, from free-verse to sestinas and sonnets. He displays such a range of proficiency that it is somewhat of a relief to read his weaker poems. One weakness is a tendency to prolixity when the poetry sags beneath the weight of material. At times the poet doesn't quite get that fresh angle to the material, as in his topical satires like "These subversives, these Friends of the Dirt", and "The Joyner Act: A Queensland Text". These poems for all their good material are squibs, and lack the sharpness and passion of Judith Wright or the wry understated irony with which Bruce Dawe might have made the material spark.

It is curious that Shapcott's satires can be lack-lustre for the poet has his own sense of wry humour and offers some very attractive poems in this vein. One might mention "Travellers" (255-7). Another favourite and a poem which promotes some thoughts on style with which to finish the review is "The Blue Paisley Shirt":

I bought my blue paisley shirt to make me  
friendly  
to offer the grin of my shirt, its brisk  
handshake.  
It is a dark blue, and the paisley white curls  
even its toes.  
When I first put it on I felt good, so  
this afternoon I walked into the crowded  
room  
and my wife's deodorant under my armpits  
stewed petals  
as I moved. Surely you saw me?  
Saw me standing  
a middle-aging fool in white jeans and last  
season's sideburns  
my face made naked above its shirt of skulls.  
(154)

In trying on the new style he tries out a new self, ruefully noting the pathos of the continuing old self. It is a playful reply to those who have criticised the poet for following the fashion in poetics. The poem can also serve to illustrate why the publishers have felt impelled to subvert Shapcott's pre-occupation with creating order in

time. As the poem dramatises, for all the play with style in Shapcott's poetry, there is a consistency of looking and thinking, what one might call a "voice" or, heaven-forbid, an ethics.

Lawrence Bourke

**Robert Adamson, *The Clean Dark*, Paperbark Press, Sydney, 1989. \$35.00.**

For a film to succeed with an audience it must build on a common foundation, a shared semiotics so there is an equal basis for two-way understanding. In the same way a poem must impart a shared perceptual and cultural understanding. Language is the common denominator. In addition techniques such as assonance, alliteration, metaphor, rhythm, rhyme, metre can be cleverly concealed, while furthering immensely the overall effect.

In films (again), the juxtaposition of two shots creates a third entity, a totally new concept, i.e. the process of montage. Likewise that very principle applies to poetry: the juxtaposition of words, phrases or perceptions, can bring to birth a new concept or vision. Ideally the reader recreates in his/her own mind, the montage of the author. Eisenstein, as eloquent in theory as he was in practice, wrote, (in *Film Sense*):

A work of art understood dynamically is just this process of arranging images in the feelings and mind of the spectator. It is this that constitutes the peculiarity of a truly vital work of art and distinguishes it from a lifeless one, in which the spectator receives the represented result of a given consummated process of creation, instead of being drawn into the process as it occurs.

If we substitute reader for 'spectator' we may see how completely it fits with poetry: the reader is compelled to re-enact the process of art. Eisenstein continues:

... the image of a scene, a sequence, of a whole creation, exists not as something fixed and ready-made. It has to arise, to unfold before the senses of the spectator.

Undoubtedly this applies to poetry, which relies heavily for its effects on images, that have

to build up a total coherence in the reader's mind. "A work of art" Eisenstein continues "must reproduce that process whereby in life itself, new images are built up in the human consciousness and feelings." So life and art, (poetry in this case), are so closely connected as to be inseparable, only the author is conveying his version of it.

In this collection of poems entitled *The Clean Dark* by Robert Adamson, to what extent is the reader drawn into the process of creation, or art?

The language of the poems is colloquial and narrational: they focus on the landscape and environs of Hawkesbury. Many of them seem to form a sequence of memories of river, shooting expeditions and childhood relationships.

Let me be more specific however in an excerpt from "Green Prawn Map"

Web over web  
lace-ball in brain's meridian.  
This paper's no map, what are its lines  
as flashlight conjures a code  
from a page of light, a spider's blank?  
So he steers upstream  
away from map reason.

In its lay-out and structure the poem seems to lack coherence and be fragmentary. It does not build on a series of effects which at the end give the poem an organic unity. The montage of words, phrases does not lead sequentially to a powerful vision or climax of emotion but rather continually sets puzzles for the reader to unravel. In face this is a feature of many of Adamson's poems, but at the final line the reader is still wondering what the poem is trying to achieve. In "The Trophy" the images are indeed clear and sequential but the language is not the distilled essence of thought but prose description of a fish being landed. There seems to be no heightening feeling, no sense of drama in the situation.

In the poems of this collection there are frequent references to other artists, historical characters, for example:

"to James Dean . . . to rock 'n' roll and Sandra Dee." "Although Bob Dylan sings just tell the truth", "Robert Graves conjuring lovers for the page." ". . . think of Lawson at the Rose and Crown." "Susan Sontag is still working on it somewhere, somewhere in Greece . . . . Artaud's platonic imagery, who knows." "I feel like Catullus / wastelands, his expedition . . . ."

These intellectual asides do nothing however to create a vital and powerful work of art based on direct perception and the process of montage. Rather they conceal a private meandering quality of thought. F.L. Lucas wrote (in *Style*)

No doubt in some modern literature there has appeared a tendency to replace communication by a private maundering to oneself which shall inspire one's audience to maunder privately to themselves — rather as if the author handed round a box of drugged chocolates of his own concoction to stimulate each guest to his own solitary dreams.

This tendency is not evident in *Clear Water Reckoning*.

The poet's true concern lies with vision, clarity, prophecy and universality. Yet in this collection appear constant references to local places, i.e. Mooney Bay, Paddington, The Rose and Crown, with the end result of making the poems colloquial and parochial.

Art is above all concerned with visions and prophecy, as Vadim Leonidovich Andreyev once remarked, and must have universal appeal.

William Blake, whose visions were of the highest order, being transferred into engravings, illustrations and poems, once wrote, on the subject of visions that they

... necessitated the sharpest clarity possible without the obscuring demons of three-dimensional modelling through light and shade and all complex spatial connotations.

He was talking then about engravings and illustrations, however visions expressed in his words demonstrated perfect clarity. His highest vision (of art) expressed itself in the poem "Jerusalem"

I rest not from my great task To open the  
Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes  
of Man inwards into Worlds of Thought: into  
Eternity Ever expanding in the Bosom of  
God, the Human Imagination.

Thus most poems in this collection fail to achieve the status of great art, measured especially against Blake and D.H. Lawrence who wrote (about poetry writing)

I have always tried to get an emotion out in  
its own course, without altering it. It needs  
the finest instinct imaginable, much finer  
than the skill of the craftsmen.

Quintillian once wrote "We think ourselves geniuses if it takes genius to understand us." In these poems one needs genius, for as the author himself writes in the work *Dreaming Up Mother*:

Understanding is nothing I think as I mumble  
which is in contrast to his mother  
"Understanding is all, my mother would tell  
me."

Neil Roper

**Keith Chesson, *Jack Davis: A Life Story*, Melbourne, Dent, 1988; *Jack Davis, John Pat and Other Poems*, Melbourne, Dent Australia, 1988.**

The appearance of a biography of an Aboriginal writer and a long-awaited third volume of poems by Jack Davis are an indication of the development of writing by Aboriginal Australians. This is how one might begin a review of these two books, welcoming them from the safely protected portals of the university English department, where we can point virtuously to courses in Aboriginal writing as proof of our social conscience and fight ideological battles within the confines of departmental meetings.

Another way is to consider these books in relation to the political and social circumstances out of which they grew, to read them from within their own environment and think about the consequences for Australian history and literature if we accept the views of the world that they are proposing. Though this may be a less comfortable process, we otherwise risk excluding those very parts of the country/history which they are attempting to cast light upon.

Both of these books offer different versions of history and current events to what most Australians have experienced, and have been taught are universal. It is amazing how often this needs to be said, how stubbornly mainstream Australia has resisted hearing black voices. This in itself is evidence of what these two books show: that ways of seeing in this country are heavily influenced by the cultural experiences that derive from regarding oneself and others, and being regarded in different ways, because of one's physical appearance. It is also true that this is a question of degree, influenced by choices we are able to make as individuals.

This point emerges clearly from *Jack Davis*:

*A Life Story*, in which there are differences between the attitudes taken within Davis' own family to Aborigines. In response to news of the Forrest River massacre Davis' father complains of police brutality, but

My mother was sitting by the fire with some sewing on her knee. She put the clothes she was mending on the kitchen table and I could see that she was becoming more upset as my father kept speaking. Eventually she could contain herself no longer. "Come off it, Bill, I know you," she interjected. "You would have done the same thing yourself. You've said so, often." (p.19)

Both of these books also offer a relatively rare glimpse into the point of view of the Aboriginal child, separated from their family and placed in so-called "settlements" such as Moore River:

"Our policy is to send [Aboriginal girls] into the white community and if the girl comes back pregnant our policy is to keep her for two years. The child is then taken away from the mother and sometimes they never see her again . . . . At the expiration of the two years the mother goes back into service so it really doesn't matter if she has half a dozen children." (p.29)

If the Aboriginal child could get to a school then

Textbooks gave an extremely one-sided view of history and denigrated the Aborigines' standing in the world. Aboriginal English, the dialect used at home, was not accepted or recognized at school, which was an environment hostile to Aboriginal children. (p.128)

Keith Chesson has done a superb job in presenting not only the life but the voice of Jack Davis — echoing the tone which makes tragedy and the ridiculous seem to sit so easily side by side in his poetry and drama. The book is, as it says, a story, a series of often unconnected anecdotes which are told with gentleness and dry understatement, shifting suddenly but easily from political polemic to domestic detail. So, the rural traditions of Country Week and cricket blend with death and discrimination. The book also has its share of gossip — such as the largely undocumented sexual explorations of well-known white "settlers". They are the kind of stories that are passed around with bottles, and like any good yarns probably the details are adapted to the tastes of the audiences. It is a history which is presented as the experience of

one individual, and which somehow seems more important than the official histories we study at school, stories of parliaments formed and dissolved.

As in his previous writing, the "bush" for Davis is a significant topic and setting, a place of wonder and humour that is not grim and forbidding but rich and gentle. Ugliness and destruction come from the white invaders, and though there are no breathless correspondents or voices of outrage from around the world, the brutality and the suffering are just as real as in Tiananmen Square:

Sir John Forrest stood tall in stone  
in St George's Terrace  
gun across shoulder  
symbolic of what had removed  
the river's first children.

And that other river, the Murray  
where Western Australia's  
first mass murderer Captain Stirling  
trappings flashing, rode gaily  
at the head of twenty-four men.  
For an hour they fired  
and bodies black, mutilated,  
floated down the blood stained stream.

So now that the banners have fluttered  
the eulogies ended and the tattoos have  
rendered  
the rattle of spears  
look back and remember the end of December  
and one hundred and fifty years.

("One Hundred and Fifty Years", *John Pat and Other Poems*, pp. 30-31.)

The modern counterpart of this is of course John Pat, and the scores of others who have died in prison and from the conditions created by discrimination.

The most vivid memory I have of the death of John Pat was sitting on a bus on my way to Albany, in the southwest of Western Australia. Two women were discussing the case and concluded firmly that since the boy was only 16 he should not have been drinking, and therefore his death was his own fault. I wonder how many people agree that the sentence for under-age drinking should be death? Most, judging from the roar of silence that greeted the inquest finding that John Pat had died because of his "unusually soft skull". It's hard to visualize brutality amidst the bright riches of Perth, where Jaguars with surfboard racks cruise down Winthrop Avenue on their way to the Indian Ocean beaches, and smiling policemen patrol the

Mall. People are rarely disturbed by visible evidence of hardship and suffering.

Thanks to writers like Jack Davis, people can begin to see the other side of this glittering city. And perhaps more importantly the people with experience of that world, both the perpetrators of violence and their victims, can begin to have their actions and experiences measured against the values and history of the community at large. For most of us, racism never happens. For some people, it kills. And these deaths makes poems like "John Pat":

White of life  
the pious said  
forget the past  
the past is dead  
But all I see  
in front of me  
is a concrete floor  
a cell door  
and John Pat.

There are no doubt many comfortable blue bottoms seated on family lounges that will never be disturbed by writing like those, who will never see any wrong in what was done. The four police who were charged with manslaughter over the incident were acquitted. And what does a reader do with a poem where the "referent" is a dead boy and a grieving family, where the "social context" which permitted such a thing to happen is one we have made, where the "absence" is that of life?

It is hard in some ways to understand how the world which produced this death and hundred of others can also be written about with such gentle humour which almost anyone can empathize with:

My father was a mighty man  
He could battle giants  
And was unafraid of school teachers  
(*"Evergreen"*)

or the frightened voice of the "Twelve-year-old"

I dunno much about forgivin'  
Can't see no reason why  
There ain't much sense in livin'  
But — I'm awful scared to die.

But these books themselves are important steps for Aboriginal people in regaining the power of self-determination:

While in America, I realized how very important it was for a literate Aboriginal

leadership to emerge. It would be through effective Aboriginal writing that both the wider Australian community and the world at large could be reached. Furthermore, it was time an Australian history from the Aboriginal point of view was produced . . . . The present is rooted in the past, and the well-being of Aborigines depends upon a correct and balanced understanding of their own history. [But] People expect us to forget the massacres and to jump off into the future.

(*Jack Davis: A Life Story*. p.150)

The struggle for self-determination is not simply an economic one, but has to do with making one's image in accord with experience and history. But there is of course a conflict of interest in this respect, and it is complicated by the fact that most Australians see the individual as being in some sense responsible for and to society as a whole. In these terms, then, they can in a moral, political and historical sense be held accountable for discrimination and its effects. The most comfortable thing then is to ignore the pain, and let Australia continue as one of those complacently pleasant countries where nothing bad is ever talked about and therefore never seems to happen.

It is unlikely that these books will find a wide reading audience then, unless non-Aboriginal Australians make a radical turn-about and come up with the courage to read new versions of their own history. Is it too late? For me, one of the most moving moments in *Jack Davis: A Life Story* comes at the end, when the lost potential of this country is considered:

The initial Aboriginal response to settlement was one of co-operation. It would have been a much richer country in terms of culture — and conscience — if that co-operation had been reciprocal. (p.210).

Leigh Dale

***EXPRESSWAY — Twenty-nine Australian writers respond to Helen Daniel's invitation: Stories based on Jeffrey Smart's painting 'Cahill Expressway.'*** Penguin Books, Australia, 1989, 294.pp, \$12.99.

Collections of Australian short stories continue to proliferate and it becomes ever more challenging to find interesting common denominators, be it by emphasis on region, the Travel Experience, Literary 'Transgressions', or Women's Anger and Erotica. Helen Daniel has

a gift for exploring new umbrella concepts. First there was the innovative linking of a group of seemingly dissimilar writers in her study of 'Liars'; more recently there was her 'Good Reading Guide' surveying the last twenty years in Australian fiction. In *Expressway* she does not rely on existing works but invited 'major Australian writers' so submit stories using Jeffrey Smart's painting Cahill Expressway as a starting point. (There is no indication whether any of the work offered was rejected, and it is tantalising to speculate which five writers — as she informs us — declined at the outset and which further nine found that the idea did not work for them.)\*

Daniel's cautious dream was that the book might provide an insight into something like a national literary imagination at work, but when she examined the final selection of twenty-nine pieces, it far exceeded her expectations, and she discovered that she had created something new, a form which might quite possibly be read as a collective novel.

Whilst conceding that the reader may not necessarily share this view, she does lay claim to the book as a special work, and this does not seem excessive. However good, rich and varied the individual pieces may be, seen together they achieve an extra dimension, a quality that is partly thematic harmony, partly the sheer fun of playing a sophisticated literary game.

Although the cynic might wonder which of the stories were genuinely written in response to Daniel's challenge, and which of them merely had a blue-suited figure or a bleak stretch of expressway attached to work in progress, it does not seem very important in the long run. The best of them are very impressive, others are interesting, and then there is a small handful of dubious quality — it's all nicely balanced.

With the better-known writers the reader's interest is focussed on the question of how each of them will approach the challenge. Will they use the *Expressway* image as a grain of sand to produce a pearl that is recognisably characteristic, or will the 'artificially induced' process of creation have unexpected results? (In the event, it seemed to work both ways.) With the less familiar names it is easier to accept the work on its own merits, and there is the additional joy of discovering previously unread writers. It comes as no great surprise that some of the outstanding stories, with or without

*Expressway* overtones, are by Elizabeth Jolley, Gerald Murnane, Glenda Adams and Michael Wilding. On the other hand there are disappointing things from Barbara Hanrahan, Peter Corris and David Ireland.

Of particular interest, and defying all labels, are contributions by Morris Lurie, Brian Matthews and Glen Tomasetti, and some high quality writing by Amanda Lohrey.

*Expressway* has taken the idea of creative editing along new paths and may quite possibly be the start of a new genre, no matter whether collective novel or not.

\* Note: In a later interview Helen Daniel stated that no story was rejected, and that if all 38 writers originally approached had responded with submissions, all of them would have been accepted.

Margot Luke

**Brian Matthews, *Quickening and Other Stories*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books, 215pp., \$11.99.**

Remember Patrick White's famous "Prodigal Son" letter, decrying the "dreary dun-coloured" products of journalistic realism? If Brian Matthews' stories are any guide, then Australia needs a new Patrick White to dispel the dreary dun-coloured products of post-modernist literary artifice and whimsy. If *Quickening* is any indication, the positive and worthwhile contributions of non-realists such as Peter Carey, David Brooks, Gerald Murnane, and others could soon be undermined by less worthy successors.

For this reviewer there was one — *one* — worthwhile item in *Quickening*, this being the brief title story which provides a marvellous evocation of a woman's experience of feeling the first movement of her unborn child. The rest I find to be boringly derivative, tiresomely modish.

Take the opening story, "Scenario". Everything here is modishly tentative, existentially undefined:

From where you stand, on the lawn, it could be — a film set; or — a stage. Though you know that neither comparison is quite apt and yet both are involved. (p.1)

... it's as though you are looking through a proscenium arch.

And perhaps you are. (p.2)

The play or film seems to deal with the need for a couple's suburban courtyard to be dug up, and the man's seemingly inordinate apprehension about this. A buried cylinder is found, containing a script of some kind prepared by the husband, and the story rehearses the ways in which this cliched revelation can be used to promote further cliches:

The confession is that:  
he has never loved Susan and has been playing out a tortured, empty charade . . . .  
he was, between the years 1968 and 1971, the infamous Hindley Street killer . . . .  
the paper that Susan reads begins: "From where you stand, on the lawn, it could be . . . ." (p.11)

The whole thing ends with an invasion by characters labelled "POST-STRUCTURALIST", "NARRATOLOGIST", "REVIEWER", and "PSYCHOBIOGRAPHER". All of which is very clever to be sure.

Then there's the story, "Dog Lovers". Charlie and Madeleine, a childless suburban couple, lose their beloved pet dog, Bonzo, and Charlie hides his happiness at being able to return to gardening in a dog-free zone. But Madeleine replaces Bonzo with Pip, and then Bonzo himself comes lolling back (with one damaged leg) — and the two dogs take to fighting with each other. Madeleine takes Pip to dog obedience classes, and Charlie soon becomes convinced that she is more interested in the lean, German-accented dog-trainer than in himself. A dog-induced coldness settles upon the marriage, and, in pique, Charlie buys himself a dog of his own and sets about training it himself.

Happily for the divorce courts, Charlie and Madeleine find their love rekindled as they begin to explore doggy ways. Their sexual behaviour starts to follow doggy customs, they take to prowling the floor on all fours, naked, and eventually they slurp their food from floor bowls, with hand-assistance disallowed. Charlie jokingly buys them genuine dog-tags to wear, accidentally loses his own tag down the shower-drain, and is subsequently killed by traffic as he tries to run away from a Council Dog Pound truck. Madeleine moves to a dog-breeder's cottage in the country.

Now what on Earth is a reader expected to get out of that? Enjoyment, presumably — but from what source? Humour? Maybe, but not for

this reader; I found Matthews' "funnies" jejune and/or tasteless, or else just plain strained and un-funny:

the two dogs . . . walked to opposite ends of the lawn in a show of bored uninterest, then rushed together at a combined speed of, conservatively, two hundred miles an hour . . . . (p.103)

Perhaps the story is to be viewed "seriously"; perhaps it is to be seen as a "comment" on obsession of some kind. Maybe, but this reader found it a fairly trite essay on the topic.

"The Anecdote Affair" is more cleverly structured, but nevertheless dogged by the same ultimate banality. The narrator is good at telling successful anecdotes, but finds that his anecdotes are being told by others (as their own personal anecdotal truths), and the narrator is diminished (first spiritually, then physically) by this loss-of-self.

This is, I suppose, a clever idea, but I would nominate Michael Wilding's "The Words She Types" and Harlan Ellison's "Shatterday" as *vastly* better works with roughly similar concerns. The Matthews narrator all too easily falls into the trap of bemoaning his plight, and the story (as far as I could see) merely views his anguish with an appropriate safe overlay of defensive irony. I wondered what someone in Ethiopia might think, since life there seems to offer more pressing matters for concern.

Was that a blow below the belt? Ethiopia seems far away from the realm of these stories, and one could just as easily speculate about what Ethiopians might think about those with the leisure to cultivate outrage about mere books of fiction. But the final story in the collection actually raises the spectre of *real* human suffering, and the book which began with "Scenario" and the "NARRATOLOGIST" ends with this list:

HIROSHIMA. GUERNICA. DERRY.  
AUSCHWITZ. BUDAPEST. DRESDEN.  
DACHAU. SHARPEVILLE. MY LAI.  
THE SOMME. SAIGON. WARSAW.  
PRAGUE. TREBLINKA. NAGASAKI  
. . . . (p.215)

The final story is "The Funerals", a fable in which the inconspicuous country town of Yardley finds itself overrun with phantom mourners bearing their dead to burial. In the

obligatory mode of such works, the story matter-of-factly describes the phenomenon (hinting at the cultural and chronological diversity of the mourners) and injects minute touches of controlled whimsy as it describes the reactions of the town's occupants. The fabular conventions are all observed, and in this respect "The Funerals" is as sound a fictional construction as Morris Lurie's "The Larder" and Peter Carey's "Do You Love Me?"

The trouble with the Matthews story is that it bites off a bigger, more sensitive issue than the Lurie or Carey fictions, yet it has nothing particular to say about its special subject. The story offers no firm explanation for the appearance of the sudden funeral processions: the reader is left wondering why the mourners appeared *now*, and why they chose Yardley. If anything, the story ends up offering evidence which runs contrary to its own genuinely anguished message, for by appearing in places such as Dachau, My Lai, and Guernica, the phantom mourners imply that not all parts of the earth are so tainted.

So I can't say much for Brian Matthews' short fiction. Perhaps he should look at the work of the American fantasist Harlan Ellison, or contemporary horror-writers like Stephen King or Clive Barker, all of whom are prepared to offer their weird effects as *literal* realities. It's just too easy to create the dog lover couple whilst hiding behind the cloak of literary artifice, it's just too easy to present the phantom mourners to readers who know they are Symbolic Devices. If this is where the liberation from realism has taken us, it's time for writers to do some soul-searching and some back-tracking. Good literature should be made of much sterner stuff.

Van Ikin

**Bill Neidjie, *Story About Feeling*, Broome, Magabala Books, 1989. ISBN 0 9588101 0 9.**

At the first Conference of Aboriginal Writers at Murdoch University in 1983 there was a great sense of pride. As they saw it, writing by non-Aboriginal Australians had little to say — Mudrooroo Narogin (Colin Johnson) called it boring and derivative, criticising in its utter complacency, and its unawareness that it was "becoming more and more irrelevant to the

society with which it seeks to deal". Aboriginal writing, in contrast, "is and can be more vital in that it is seeking to come to grips with and define a people, the roots of whose culture extend in an unbroken line far back into a past in which English is only a recent intrusion."<sup>1</sup> They were also very conscious, however, of the difficulties they faced. The most important of these was mechanical; getting their works published in the first place. Next was finding publishers sympathetic to what they were trying to do, who would not therefore change or censor their work to please white readers and their sensibility and would then have these works properly distributed.

*Story About Feeling* suggests that the first of these problems is on the way to being solved. Founded in Broome in 1988 as a project of the Kimberly Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre, Magabala Books has already published a number of books by Aboriginal writers, including the award-winning *Rappa Rappa*. These books speak in a peculiarly Aboriginal voice about peculiarly Aboriginal concerns. True, the distribution problem remains. It is not always easy to get hold of Magabala books, though they respond very promptly to enquiries — P.O. Box 668, Broome, 6725, Western Australia. Nevertheless this venture not only marks a significant milestone for Aboriginal writing but is also a model of its kind; the white people involved offer their services respectfully as well as enthusiastically. Keith Taylor who transcribed and edited the tapes of his talks with Bill Neidjie to make *Story About Feeling*, for instance, makes no attempt to explain or interpret Bill's story, insisting in his preface that, in Bill's words, "Someone can't tell you. Story telling you yourself." In the design, too, Peter Bibby is scrupulous in his use of paintings by Aboriginal artists who have all given permission for their use. The photographs by Brian Stevenson, Ian Morris and Greg Miles, too, all respect the spirit of the text.

This is an important book, then, for Aboriginal people, because it puts down in writing a tradition of knowledge and love of the country which is in danger of being lost, with the present breakdown of traditional Aboriginal culture. True, there are dangers in this. Traditional culture is oral, not written, and thus knows nothing about the anxiety with meaning which is bound up with writing and with

reading, the desire to stabilise “reality” and take hold of, explain, control and even possess the world. In this sense, writing stories down could mean endangering them, drawing them into the ambit of Western culture which has also attempted to assimilate Aboriginal people. There is, after all, a profound symbolic relationship between the discursive and material practices of imperialism. Against this, however, one must set the impact of a book of this kind on us non-Aboriginal people, the colonisers. It is on this impact that I want to focus since it is surely impertinent as well as impossible for a non-Aboriginal reader to canvass possible Aboriginal readings. This importance for us is clear, almost self-evident. Keith Taylor puts it this way in his Preface:

In a world where our vision becomes even more blinkered by the dominance of a single cultural way and where such dominance threatens the survival of other ways of thinking and being, there is an urgent need for more stories like this.

That said, however, complications begin to appear. The first of these is the matter of a beginning. Every beginning, according to Edward Said, raises a number of questions about reception, interpretation and response.<sup>2</sup> Just as “facts” are only facts within a certain perspective of understanding, so reading any text draws on the training we have received and is influenced by the context in which we are reading it. It also raises questions about the material it uses — the world it reworks, about its point of departure from that world and what it therefore presupposes about relations between “reality” and textuality and about the conventions, existential as well as aesthetic, which govern it.

These questions become particularly urgent with *Story About Feeling* since it makes few concessions to our notions of reality or textuality and works by different conventions. Aboriginal novelists like Mudrooroo Narogin, playwrights like Jack Davis or poets like Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal) borrow their forms from non-Aboriginal culture, though in the process they also modify them, using them for their own ends. But *Story About Feeling* appears to the non-Aboriginal reader to have no recognisable form, seeming to be just a series of personal reflections and thus of no particular significance

apart from a personal or even vaguely anthropological interest. The first problem it poses, therefore, is hermeneutical, how to read, and where to find significance.

This might seem a minor matter, but it is not. More than most, Australian culture is profoundly ethnocentric and logocentric — witness the problems we have in coming to terms with what we like to call “migrant writing”, to say nothing of cultures very different from our own. If Europeans tend to take the consciousness of ourselves as in Daniel Defert’s words “a planetary process rather than as [the product of] a region of the world”,<sup>3</sup> then Australians probably take that consciousness to extremes, regarding ours as the only possible culture and English (as we speak it) the only possible language. Being Australian is thus an extreme form of Orientalism,<sup>4</sup> “a self-confirming business” — hence the anxieties caused by any challenge to our self-identification. I have argued elsewhere that these anxieties have a great deal to do with our racism in general and with the peculiar virulence of attitudes towards Aboriginal Australians and their culture. At the moment, however, the concern is with responses to *Story About Feeling*, and about the difficulties its different entails.

First of all, comes the need to accept and tolerate this difference, learning to read in a different kind of way. The European conquest of other cultures, as Todorov suggests, was in part justified by our understanding of Biblical universalism, the belief that it was given to us to “convert” the whole world. It succeeded not by the moral superiority but by the superior power of this ideology grounded as it was in domination rather than acknowledgement.<sup>5</sup> What was different from us was seen not merely as different or inferior but wrong. Aboriginality thus became part of what Abdul Jan Mohammed has called the “manichean allegory” which provides the supreme rationale for colonialism, transforming racial difference into word and even metaphysical difference, and assuming the superiority of the European and the inferiority of everything Aboriginal.<sup>6</sup>

The political and social consequences are obvious and apparent around us. But the effects on sensibility are perhaps not so apparent since they affect the way we perceive the world and thus the origins of feeling as well as thought. Put simply, the point of departure for reading *Story*

*About Feeling* is thus, to a greater or lesser extent, a point of misunderstanding. This misunderstanding is complicated by our conventions of reading — though, as I shall be arguing, recent developments in the theory help to solve some at least of these problems. Reading this little book which seems at first simply an expression of personal feeling, it is easy to be condescending, to fit it into unconscious assumptions about race and to praise it for unexpected subtlety and sophistication — Bill Neidjie is already a hero of this kind as the original “Kakadu Man”. Alternatively, we may appeal to the other and more positive, but equally exaggerated, side of the trope of difference, the notion of the Noble Savage. Reading lines like:

I love it tree because e love me too.  
E watching me same as you  
tree e working with your body, my body,  
e working with us,

for instance, it is possible to indulge ourselves in the fantasy of Aborigines as people of childlike, even childish innocence, freedom and naivety, inhabitants of an unfallen world living in tune with nature. Quite apart from the repression this fantasy involves of the tragic history of what we have done to this culture, it commodifies Aborigines and their culture, turning them into a series of stereotypes to be used for our own pleasure and self-justification, projections of our own need for what is not so much innocence as irresponsibility.

The first step towards a proper appreciation of *Story About Feeling* and other texts like it, therefore, is to be aware of these problems. Our culture is essentially narcissistic, working to absorb and assimilate all that is different and then fixing it in an unchangeable position, an element in the system of differences which we call “human nature” and the world of human experience. So we need to recognise this, to acknowledge the way in which we tend to absolve difference, homogenise Aborigines into a collective “they”, the distillation of particular traits, beliefs and practices which we take to be “typically Aboriginal” and thus enabling us to classify and understand, making Aboriginality a kind of mirror in which we see the face of our own desires.

So, next, we need to break the mirror, to recognise that what we like to call “reality” is

parabolic, a series of “images projected on the white screen of chaos” (J.D. Crossan), and that our culture, like theirs, is a series of projections, not something given, which offers only one of many possible images of the world. This, of course, is where contemporary theory is helpful. As Barthes writes, reflecting on the problems facing those historians who see themselves as dealing with “just the facts”:

The paradox comes full circle: narrative structure was evolved in the crucible of fiction (via myth and the first epics), yet it has become at once the sign and proof of reality. It is clear that the attenuation (if not disappearance) of narrative in contemporary historians... represents... a fundamental ideological transformation... from now on the touchstone of history is not so much reality as intelligibility.<sup>7</sup>

Intelligibility in turn becomes a matter of story, and of finding a story which fits the way we conceive things to be. The poets have known this for some time, of course.

Only the imagination is real!  
I have declared it  
time without end.  
(William Carlos Williams)

and

So, say that final belief  
Must be in a fiction  
(Wallace Stevens)

But so, too, have Aboriginal people. Bill Neidjie’s poem suggests, moreover, that they are aware of it in an equally sophisticated way:

This story e can listen careful  
and how you want to feel on your feeling.  
This story e coming through your body  
e go right down foot and head  
fingernail and blood... through the heart  
and e can feel it because e’ll come right through

Compare this with Werner Heisenberg’s words about changes in scientific method:

The... method of analysing, explaining and classifying has become conscious of its limitations, which arise out of the fact that by its intervention science alters and refashions the objects of its investigation. In other words method and object can no longer be separated. The scientific world view has ceased to be a scientific view in the true sense of the word.<sup>8</sup>

It is this which gives us our cue. Bill Neidjie's stories, which are about plants and animals, birds and fishes, rocks and the earth itself as well as human beings, are part of an investigation of this kind, and one which has profoundly personal and social consequences. Their language, that is to say, is the language of promise, since it is involved with concrete things, brought to full sensuous contact with a living world laden with possibility because in it ancient traditions of living are preserved and renewed:

Listen carefully, careful  
and this spirit e come in your feeling  
and you will feel it . . . anyone that  
I feel it . . . my body same as you.  
I telling you this because the land for us,  
never change round, never change.  
Places for us, earth for us,  
star, moon, tree, animal,  
no-matter what sort of animal, bird or snake . . .  
all that animal same like us. Our friend that.

Stories of this kind can only be understood from inside their own world. They are revelatory only to insiders because their effect is textual, because, calling to us to listen carefully, they call us to become what we hear. This is not only a spoken text therefore but also a ritual text, one which enacts a way of living.

The great temptation of the black writer is, perhaps, in Fanon's words, to "turn white or disappear", but Neidjie knows nothing of this temptation. Even though he has lived for much of his life away from his traditional country, working in timber-mill camps or in luggers or labouring jobs in Darwin or for the Air Force during the war he insists on the tradition of his people. Nor does he seem to know much about that other strategy of black writers, the strategy of camouflage or mimicry; black skins speaking through white mouths. The voice which speaks here is Aboriginal. Even though it speaks English, Neidjie puts his own cultural mark upon it, colonising it with his own intentions and intonations, appropriating the words and adapting them to his own needs, experience and aspiration. In writing, the author is usually absent from his/her creation. But this is essentially a spoken text, since it is suffused with and indistinguishable from Neidjie's originating presence, and models his world, one in which all things share the one life, expansive and vibrant. As he reflects on a cave painting, the world appears as process, not something static, time as

not linear but as continuing presence, and the cosmic personal.

We don't know how many thousand years  
that painting was there.  
Our Aborigine never writing, no date, no anything.  
No one bin make everything . . .  
only painting and stone axe.  
Ironwood — spear, bamboo . . . all burn, you can't  
see.

What is invisible like this, however, matters as much as what is visible. Our culture, in contrast, fears and dislikes what cannot be seen. Finding its apparent disappearance threatening, it suspects what has to do with the process of becoming, of moving from one state to another, preferring fixity to fluidity even in our description of the world — in defiance of fact, of course. But in Aboriginal culture visible and invisible are part of the one process of being which at the same time repeats the one pattern.

The world of *Story About Feeling* is therefore dialogical, an open and reciprocal relationship between self and self, self and other selves and with the world itself as another self. Seen in this way the passage quoted earlier takes on a new significance:

I love it tree because e love me too.  
E watching me same as you  
tree e working with your body, my body,  
e working with us . . .  
That tree, grass . . . that all like our father.  
Dirt, earth, I sleep with this earth.  
Grass . . . just like your brother.  
In my blood in my arm this grass.  
This dirt for us because we'll be dead,  
we'll be going this earth.  
This the story now.

The locus of these poems, as of life itself, is not so much place as this relationship, this assembling of all living things in the story which brings them together and makes them whole. But it is not merely self-referential because it does not refer but presences, and celebrates this bringing together. Nor, in contrast with our kind of aesthetics, is it self-justifying either, because this presence comes when it comes without any attempt on the story-teller's part to control it, and comes as a kind of gift, a proof of the goodness of things.

Our culture sees the external world as a source of information, something external to us to be exploited and developed for economic purposes or looked on for pleasure as a kind of panorama.

But here it is an aspect of self to be listened to, accepted in reverence and lived out:

That tree now, feeling . . .  
e blow . . .  
sit quiet you speaking . . .  
that tree now e speak . . .  
that wind e blow . . .  
e can listen.

Our aesthetic attitudes usually have to do with a fantasy of domination and control, separating self off from world, and effacing our presence in it. But here, though and indeed because it is part of the whole, the self is central, a speaking, listening, feeling, erotic self. The world, too, is a living experience, not something dead and inert but a state of mind, the product of “dadirri”, an inner deep listening and quiet still awareness, a waiting which is profoundly reverent and essentially trustful. Where our attitude to the world and the authority we assume over it is antagonistic, this is agonistic. Self and world are intimately interrelated, living and moving together as lovers do.

For all its apparent simplicity, therefore, this is a very important book. It is important, first of all, for the challenge it offers to our notions of textuality and thus of reality, calling us in a sense to rewrite ourselves and our world and reinscribe ourselves within it. As Foucault reminds us, our discourse is in a sense our life. The way we describe and inscribe ourselves into the web of relationships which binds us to ourselves, other people and cultures and to the natural world is thus a crucial determinant of behaviour and culture. Our scientific and technological culture not only tells us, for example, that we are the primal self-referent of all language but makes us act as if we were. *Story About Feeling* however, weaves language into the whole of reality, seeing everything as textual, ourselves as part of a cosmic story, or dance rather than its author, investigator or master.

This cannot, I think, be dismissed as mere nature mysticism. The parallels with contemporary physics are striking and significant. But Neidjie's world view also throws light on Derrida's proposition that there is not only “no outside text” but also “nothing outside of the text”. Any reading which refers to anything outside this text, this world as signifying process, is not only illusory but destructive since it destroys the otherness in which we are situated and which in a sense we also are.

All this may seem merely theoretical but its consequences are profoundly ethical and even political. Making contact with what is not only unthought in our tradition but, to use Derrida's phrase, “that-which-cannot-be-thought”, Neidjie's stories destroy the basis of the manichean allegory of racism, its assumptions of universality on the one hand and of its own superiority on the other, undercutting this fantasy of difference by writing it into its own text, showing us ourselves as the other sees us:

Well e can make money.  
E get im from underneath, riches in the ground,  
E make million, million might be.  
But trouble is . . . dying quick!  
People . . . bit mob they die because lot of money.

Neidjie's view of the history of European-Aboriginal relations is equally ironic and subversive. It begins, for instance:

But wasn't Aborigine fault.  
White-European didn't make friend with Aborigine.  
That first go e put chain!

Neidjie recognises that he and his people occupy the space into which we Europeans have attempted to write our culture and write out Aboriginal culture. But he resists this attempt, overwriting it by marking the European presence in this way going back over this marking, as Derrida puts it “with an undecidable stroke”, making a space of double inscription. This remarking becomes decisive since it escapes the pertinence and authority of our kind of truth, not so much by overwriting it as inscribing it within his own play as one of its functions or parts, making white people, not Aborigines, the incompetents, the foolish ones. The effect on the reader is thus to call into question notions of power and assumptions about reality, interrogating our culture by offering glimpses of other modes, other definitions and suggesting that existence is polyphonic not monolithic. Our grammar, it seems, is not the only one, nor is it the infallible guide to reality, to what is actually the case.

This is easy to say, of course. But the adjustments involved are both profound and complex. They demand, in fact, a virtual reevaluation of value. Profoundly troubling at any time, this is perhaps particularly so today when so much else seems to be in a state of flux and called into question, when most of us lack

a world-view which has the capacity for this otherness, for making the move towards a more polyplonic world. For this reason, reading texts like *Story About Feeling* will remain difficult.

Maybe therefore the place to begin is within the self, recognising that the discriminatory image we have made of Aborigines which closes us off from them, is just that, an image, the embodiment of what Jung calls the "primitive shadow", our disowned and unconscious self. As Jung also points out, however, the shadow is also a moral as well as psychological problem. Precisely because it embodies the dark aspects of ourselves, its recognition challenges the very image we have made of ourselves and demands considerable moral effort.

*Story About Feeling*, however, makes this process much less challenging that it might otherwise be. Aboriginality here is not particularly threatening, being more intent upon itself than us. The contradiction it offers to our world-view, therefore, functions less as a threat than as a kind of heuristic device, leading us out from our own limited order into a more inclusive and insightful way of conceiving the world and our place within it, enabling us to make an option for otherness, which is shown not as dangerous but bountiful and an opportunity for expansion, enlarging the possibilities of existence. Pointing beyond the narrowness of the merely literal and empirical, these stories remind us of the way "reality" is bound up with the

imaginary and thus setting us free to reimagine who we are and where we are situated.

The question then, becomes whether in fact there is any other way to live or any other way of knowing reality than the way these poems do, textually, living and knowing in parables. Let us conclude therefore with another parable, one of Kafka's:

Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares. Another said. I bet that is also a parable. The first said: you have won. The second said: but unfortunately only in parable. The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.<sup>8</sup>

Bill Neidjie would understand, I think.

Veronica Brady

#### NOTES

1. Jack Davis and Bob Hodge (eds) *Aboriginal Writing Today*. Canberra, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985.
2. Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1978.
3. Quoted in Marie Louise Pratt, "Scratches On the Face of the Country: or what Mr Barrow Saw In the Land of the Bushmen." In Henry Louis Gates (ed), *"Race", Writing and Difference*. London, Chicago University Press, 1986, p.144.
4. Edward Said, *Orientalism*.
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7. Quoted John Dominic Crossen. In *Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*. New York, Harper and Row, 1973, xv.
8. *ibid.*

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

TIMOSHENKO ASLANIDES — won joint second prize in the ABC-Bicentennial Poetry Awards with his fifth collection, *Australian Things*, soon to be published by Penguin Books Australia. Tim is now working on his sixth book *Australian Alphabet*, from which 'Confidence' represents the letter 'C'.

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LOUISE DAVENPORT — lives in Melbourne and works full time. She has had stories published in various Australian magazines, and is hoping to do more writing in the future.

LURIS EDMOND — is a widely published New Zealand poet; her *Selected Poems* won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1985 and her most recent collection is *Summer near the Arctic Circle*. In 1989 she published *Hot October*, a first volume of autobiography; the second is now in production.

ADRIANA ELLIS — 'The Courtship of Louisa O'Farrell' was written whilst on a grant from the WA Department for the Arts. It is one of a collection by Adriana to be published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press in April 1990.

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ELIZABETH SMITHER — is one of New Zealand's most highly regarded poets.

GRAEME TURNER — is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Queensland. He has published widely on Australian literature, film, television and popular culture; his most recent book, co-edited with John Tulloch, is *Australian Television: Programs, Pleasures and Politics*.

HELEN WATSON-WILLIAMS — formerly Honorary Research Fellow in the English Department, University of Western Australia. She has published widely in English and French literature.

MICHELLE WEST — was born in Western Australia and now lives on a small farm outside Hobart and runs an arts and crafts gallery there, with her husband. She teaches history at a Matriculation College and is a freelance writer.

GRAEME WILSON — was born in London, has lived in Hong Kong and now lives in Devon, England. He has published a number of translations in *Westerly*.

C.D. YEABSLEY — is an English teacher and freelance journalist. With his wife, he has co-authored five books for students of English in Japan.

A notice from the Perth Centre of International P.E.N.

## **Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Indonesian novelist**

Pramoedya Ananta Toer has spent the last ten years under city arrest in Jakarta. Before that he spent fourteen years in prison under the Indonesian government from 1965 to 1979 for his involvement with the left-wing cultural organization, Lekra. Under the Dutch he served a two year prison term from 1947 to 1949 for "printing and distributing illegal revolutionary pamphlets." He is the author of a renowned quartet of novels — *This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps*, and *The Glasshouse* — that deals with Indonesia from the time of the Dutch through the struggle for independence. As each of the novels was published, it was banned by the Indonesian government, after being condemned by the attorney general for being "Marxist-Leninist propaganda" and representing a "threat to security and order."

Toer began writing regularly while working as an editor of the *Voice of Free Indonesia* when he was 22. His best known early book was published in 1947, *Krandjhi-Besaki Djatim (The Fall of Krاندji Besaki)*. After his release from a Dutch prison in 1949 he received a prize for his novel, *Perburuan (The Hunt)*. Toer once again found himself in trouble with the authorities in 1960 for a book defending the Chinese minority in Indonesia, *Hoakiau Di Indonesia (Chinese Diaspora in Indonesia)*.

A failed coup by radical military officers in October 1965 led to a violent campaign against the left, in which organizations were eradicated and thousands of activists were imprisoned or executed. Toer's books were banned, his library, manuscripts, and notes were burned, and he was imprisoned first in Jakarta and later on the island of Baru. Here he and his fellow prisoners were forced to clear land, build privies and barracks, and raise their own food, and Toer entertained them all by telling stories so compelling that they soon filtered throughout the entire prison.

In 1982 Toer's editor, Hoesoef Isak, and his son were harassed by the government after the son attempted to arrange a panel discussion including Toer at the university. The son was dismissed from the university, and Isak was accused of attempting to influence the faculty.

Toer's publisher, Hasjim Rachman, also a victim of the 1965 campaign against the left (he served ten years of his fourteen-year sentence with Toer), has been harassed for his publishing activities. Beginning early this year, he has been subject to interrogation by the attorney general. The attorney general has asked Rachman to cease printing Toer's work, threatening to remove Rachman's son from his job with Garuda airlines if Rachman does not comply with the request.

Toer lives and works in Jakarta. His literary stature and the international attention he has received have granted him a degree of protection, but he cannot travel around Indonesia without permission from the military and he cannot leave Indonesia. His latest work, *The Fugitive: A Novel*, will be published in the U.S. for the first time next March by William Morrow.

Action to take: Letters protesting the banning of works by Pramoedya Ananta Toer and the harassment of his publisher should be sent to:

President Raden Suharto  
Istana Negara  
Jalan Veteran  
Jakarta, INDONESIA

Ambassador Abdul Rachman Ramly  
Embassy of Republic of Indonesia  
8 Darwin Avenue  
YARRALUMLA ACT 2600

For more information, contact Joe O'Sullivan at the Perth P.E.N. Centre.



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