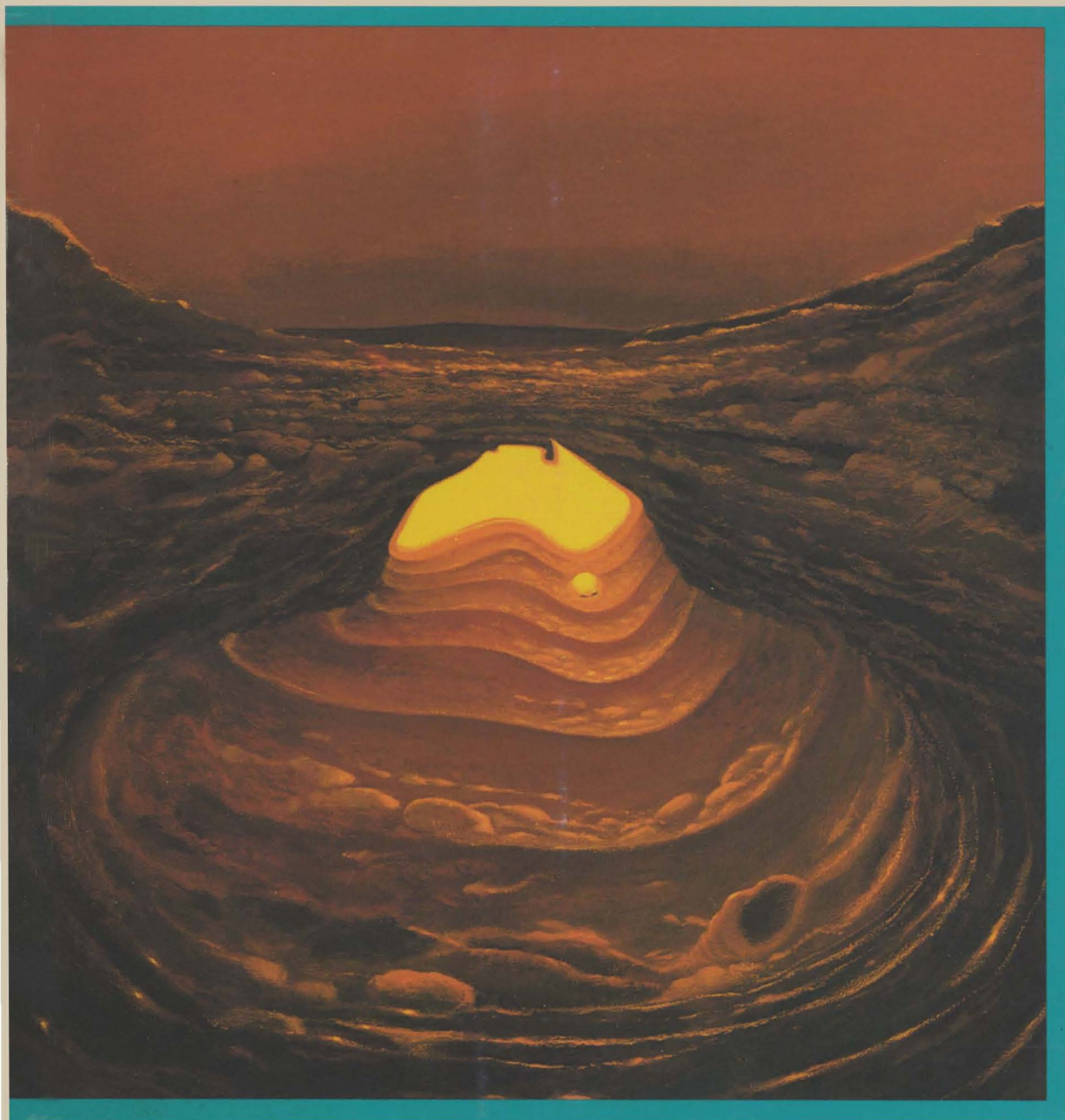


WESTERLY

STORIES · POEMS · ARTICLES · REVIEWS



JUNE 1990 NUMBER 2 \$6.00



Mister
NEVILLE

A BIOGRAPHY PAT JACOBS

'Who is there who really understands the mysterious point of view of the native, or can fathom his mental process towards us?

It is surely patent that we began all wrong, and have continued on the wrong road in nearly all our dealings with him...

We have forced our civilisation on him from earliest times, our laws and our language...' AO Neville.

Neville's work as Protector of Aborigines in the twenties and thirties, when he became linked with the ideas and policies of miscegenation, has made him into a controversial and larger-than-life figure.

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WESTERLY

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Obituaries

Ee Tiang Hong, one of Malaysia's finest poets in English, died at his home in Guildford, Western Australia on Friday, 27th April. Born in Malacca in 1933 he was educated in Malacca and Singapore and migrated to Perth with his family in 1975, becoming an Australian citizen in 1979. He was a lecturer in Education at the WA College of Advanced Education and completed his PhD in Education at the University of Western Australia in 1984, publishing books and articles in this field as well as his four volumes of poetry: *I of the Many Faces* (1960), *Lines Written from Hawaii* (1973), *Myths for a Wilderness* (1977) and *Tranquerah* (1985). A fifth volume, *Nearing a Horizon*, will be published posthumously at the National University of Singapore. Ee Tiang Hong was a pioneer in Australian-Asian literary culture.

Ronald Berndt, one of Australia's leading anthropologists and an occasional contributor to early issues of *Westerly*, died in Perth on Wednesday, 2nd May, 1990. As foundation Professor of Anthropology at the University of Western Australia he was an outstanding teacher and researcher who specialised in the study of Australian Aboriginal life, traditional and contemporary. Imbued with a strong sense of social justice as well as academic rigour, Ronald Berndt's numerous books and articles, many written or edited with his wife Catherine Berndt, have made a unique and irreplaceable contribution to Australians' understanding of themselves.

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Aviary

“Write it down,” you say. “Start with the aviary.”
“How can I — —”
“Sing it then. Don’t worry how it sounds. Just sing.”

My grandma lived in an aviary and the rooms of her house were filled with stuffed birds. While relatives preened and squawked about her, old Caroline sat like a stuffed owl, eyes unblinking and ringed claws gleaming in dim light.

“Kiss grandma,” elders would crow, nudging me forward to endure the rasp of her mouth against my cheek. She smelt of mothballs and dried lavender in a room that reeked of mould, dust and dried feathers.

As scandals of the day were aired, croaks of approval emanated from the bowels of Caroline’s chair as proof that she was still alive, though there seemed little difference between her and the inanimate birds with their gasping mouths and dusty odour.

Released from the horror of a kiss on greeting, I would weave a way to the window where flecks of light filtered through old discolored netting between heavy velvet drapes. By slipping under their sagging hems I had discovered a place where I could squat unseen to stare on sky and living birds floating in another world.

Life out there with sun and light
not mouldering death
kept out of sight.

My grandma lived in an aviary because of my father’s inspiration. It was made from strong mesh which spread over the land with its abundant trees and engulfed the house as well.

In this aviary paradise lived birds from many regions including colorful parrots and strutting pheasants with plumage of crimson and gold. Even a tawny frogmouth sat frozen in position, like part of a tree stump, while brilliantly colored budgerigars squabbled overhead.

Living in the aviary with my grandma was a housekeeper shy as a female bowerbird. A dun colored woman with peppered hair and sallow complexion who wore drab dresses which merged into brown papered walls like a cardboard cut-out used in a collage.

Lizzie had a dark moustache and wispy hairs sprouting from her chin in the semblance of a beard. She had a deep voice which seldom rose above a whisper, but she treated my grandma with kindness.

Lizzie was a good cook and Sunday visitors were rewarded with hot potato cakes, thin, crisp and golden, which melted in the mouth. There were often goodies to take home too. Bottles of pickles and chutney or homemade jams and preserves. But, to me, it seemed her shadowy life was lived at the same level as that of the frogmouth. Neither laughed, neither intruded.

Life could have gone on forever like that, with provisions being ordered by phone for home delivery and regular Sunday rituals. Then the unthinkable happened.

One Sunday Lizzie appeared in the doorway, whiskers trembling and sallow face bleached white with fright, until she made her announcement to the assembled elders. Henceforth, she wished to spend her fortnightly day off outside the confines of the aviary. Consternation ran like diarrhoea through the room.

What would she do?

How would she cope?

What would happen?

There had never been such excitement on a boring Sunday. Even the afternoon tea laid out on the traymobile was ignored. Hot potato cakes grew cold and delicate cup cakes filled with jam and cream winked red jellied eyes on white paper doilies. Even Caroline's face sprang to life with an animation she had mislaid decades before. Then suddenly they remembered me, standing, no doubt, with jaw agape, and bundled me outside to play.

If I was a stuffed bird

I could stay

but being a child

I was sent away.

Taxidermist

where have you been?

I close my eyes

so I am not seen.

Outside the birds took as little notice of me as the adults had done inside. They acted as if I was not there and if they had any fledglings they were kept out of sight just like me. Chirruping, singing, preening or flying there was a rhythmic flurry of movement and sound except from Tawny frogmouth perched on the end of a fallen log. He sat so silent and still I could never have known he was there except for a telltale opening of one eye when I approached too close for his liking.

A sulphur-crested cockatoo on a limb of a gum-tree stretched a wing from the side of his body revealing a patch of yellow that matched his upturned crest. Two galahs took turns in preening each other, whispering secrets in muted tones.

Some day I would have secrets too. Like the budgies. Like the elders. "What is to happen to Lizzie?" I asked as we drove once more to our home.

"None of your business," my parents said, speaking in a unison reserved for inquisitive children. So the mystery of the housekeeper meshed in my mind with the mystery of the local priest for he also was discussed behind closed doors.

What did the priest do?

What did he say?

What was the motive

behind all the visits

he made into the aviary?

If I had put half the energy I devoted to watching into listening through keyholes there would not be so many mysteries now, but I wonder whether the spaces are as important as the perceptions. After all, they too, have made me what I am. Disconnected fragments have lodged inside my mind like pieces from a jigsaw puzzle which can never become a picture without the missing portions.

Did Lizzie drop crumbs
in the pantry to lure
mice into traps
so Tawny could have
his dinner?
Or did she purchase
rabbits from the 'rabbitoh'
and lay them in a tea tray
with fancy white paper doily?

Was that lady a simpleton I wonder. If she was it is a miracle anyone knew for no-one ever talked to her except to issue instructions. She moved through the house like a sedated dark moth, noiseless and barely animate, until that incredible day some months after she had taken to going out of the aviary in her idle hours.

Either Lizzie 'got' religion or religion 'got' Lizzie. I am not even sure just what religion it was though it is unlikely to be Catholicism. (Old Caroline had been born Catholic but had given it up decades ago in a similar manner to people who give up smoking or drink).

The priest, whose frequent visits caused an unending stream of comments, never spoke to Lizzie so he was no doubt as startled as everyone when Lizzie took her 'turn'.

She began by carrying a Bible in the pocket of an apron with a marker to keep her place whenever she slid it in the pocket. Her face remained as expressionless as ever, the eyes behind her thick glasses flat as buttons on a rag doll, the whiskers on her chin beginning to show signs of grey.

As we entered the house there were no sounds of activity from the kitchen, no clanking cups of hissing steam. There was no delectable aroma of frying potato cakes or fresh baked biscuits. The musty smell of Caroline's drawing room penetrated the far reaches of the house along the hall to the entrance and back to the kitchen.

Some uncanny instinct made my parents insist I should stay in the garden while they entered into the darkened house. And then it happened. Like a cracked gramophone record it started up, a harsh tuneless voice, without accompaniment, began to sing 'Onward Christian Soldiers', gathering strength with every word as if the hymn had momentum of its own.

Louder and louder quiet Lizzie sang and, daring to peer through the kitchen window, I saw her sallow skin on either cheek was mottle by scarlet blotches. Her eyes through the thick glasses had sprung to life like polished stones. Clutching the bible to scrawny breast, poor Lizzie was out of her tree.

She ignored everyone and everything about her, even when some men wearing strange white coats came and took her away. She acted as though she could not see them or hear them. All that existed was Lizzie, the Bible, and the hymn she sang with fervour. Even the elders were so caught up by what was going on they failed to notice my thunderstruck face glued to the kitchen window.

What finally happened to Lizzie remains a mystery. All that existed after she was led out the door was the fading sound of the hymn she sang that resonates in my head today.

Old Caroline is another matter. I have no idea who looked after her once her housekeeper was taken away. Lizzie may have been a twilight creature yet I remember her so vividly and have no recall of her successors.

It was several more years before the mystery of the visiting priest was explained. The aviary was situated on a large valuable site in close proximity to his church and Caroline's veiled hints of making a will in the Church's favour had held him in a state of thrall.

Poor priest, not only was she no longer a Catholic, she was a lying Protestant!

Known by my grandmother but not by the priest was the fact that her home was owned by my father who bought it to house her for her lifetime. The Church never did get it, for my brother eventually sold it to his brother-in-law and then it was sold to developers, so the holy man's visits had been in vain!

When Caroline died we went to the house and the elders opened the windows and drew back drapes that had been drawn for decades. Sunlight at once shafted the rooms with lewd intent. Stuffed birds seen in sharp light looked eerily alive, not unlike the other birds outside in the trees. Scented air blew softly into musty rooms after years of oxygen deprivation. Shadows began to dissipate.

So, doctor, I have begun
from the early years
but I cannot guess
when ends begin.
I only know
when they have ended.

There is so much I neither know nor ever can but the house and the birds have long since gone and the aviary was demolished. Old Caroline and Lizzie would be dead some forty years or more so where can they exist now except inside my mind?

If I learn to let the past go it will slip beyond recall and that would mean no purpose. No purpose for them. No purpose for me. Just an endless unrelated series of events; not life at all.

Is that why people laugh
when they look at me?
Am I alone in believing
my reality?

A cold wind is blowing me this way and that and a sense of terror is trapped inside me. Only in an aviary can I feel truly safe.

A wild creature sees
the bars of its cage
but in a Reserve
thinks it's free.
If I forget
I cannot
be
me.

Passenger

I am not afraid of death, but I am afraid of cars. Milan Kundera once wrote that there was nothing more fascinating than car accidents or other people's love letters. Love has been synonymous with death forever, and my love is no different. For today my love died, quickly. I am no longer a passenger, and it's a good, strange feeling. I have always been carried — talking gaily, commenting on scenery, hopeless with directions. I never know where I'm going; where I'm being taken, and am constantly surprised. Nothing is predictable. But today? Today I'm in control. Today I'm going to drive . . . or die.

I read the love letters he keeps in a manilla folder. "Letters" is written in his small handwriting. The squiggles look like flies legs, broken. He left the folder on his desk in the musty garden bachelor flat. Last week I rang, early, and a woman answered the phone. "A break-in," he lied and laughed when I spoke to him that evening. I read the letters and want to make notes; questions to ask when next I see him. He will become irritated. "All these questions," he'll exclaim. "Words are useless, use your senses, feel, smell," and the questions will evaporate as he holds me, his smell overpowering. The bulge in his pocket is a knob of garlic. He eats it raw, and stuffs whole cloves into his mouth. "Well, I'd rather not smell of Scandinavia," he'll say as I pass out, my head on his shoulder, my nose in his armpit.

He denies me the guilty pleasure of searching for the letters; secretly wanting to know all about him. It feels odd, seeing my handwriting, reading my letters, amongst the others. They are mainly uninspiring, and sadly, I realise, mine are the least inspiring of all. They are apologetic, and humility disgusts me.

The only letters of interest are from a forty year old South African woman. Her name is Suzette, and she is married to the director of a large diamond mine. Suzette has no humility. She became obsessed with him on a Greek Island, Hydra. He cleaned her room. One night he found her hunched over his mattress, with a small torch, reading his diaries. They made love "joyously" in his mouse-hole attic; the walls lined with cisterns. "Sipping wine in a long-stemmed crystal glass on a sunny morning while boring people go to work," she writes. I hate her.

My mother always said: "What costs \$400 to a car can cost you your life on a motorbike." Her best friend was killed after riding into the back of a bus. My sister Carolyn bought a bike to ride around Australia on. She went on practice runs in the middle of the night, around the block in Camperdown. Then she headed up the coast; but by Brisbane she bought a van. The bike was stuck in the back — she would not concede defeat. Mum was relieved. "What costs \$400 to a car, can cost you your life on a motorbike." Carolyn has never been a passenger.

Lawrence Durrell says a man with no heart and only senses is like a shattered wine glass lying on the kitchen linoleum. It annoys me that I cannot recall the exact quote from the "Alexandria Quartet", and I cannot refer to the book because he has borrowed it. I am possessive of my books — they are all that I own and sores

fester when they are not returned. I have lists; scraps of paper in the bottom of my bag, a torn page on my notice-board, names of friends and book titles in my diary. I know where they are. At an engagement party, drunk on champagne, I told a friend she did not know the definition of "loyalty". Too late, I realised she had in her possession "Breakfast at Tiffany's" given to me by my mother on my 18th birthday. I wanted to suck the words back in; "rewind". But I lost a friend, and I lost my book — although I know it drives around in her glove-box waiting to fall into my lap at some unlikely meeting.

I don't need to drive in the city. I live close to public transport and my friend has a car. Last Sunday, he raged at me for never re-working my stories, for buying olives when he had some in the fridge, for not seeing him enough (when his chest smells of perfume). We lunged to a stop under a jacaranda tree. I held onto the door handle, surprised when it broke off in my hand. Trapped, as he harangued me. He did not care. "The passenger will have to unwind her window, to open the door, like the driver has always done," he said, self-satisfied. I did, puzzled.

Always a passenger. But the only times I've wanted to drive is when I've been drunk — and confident. I took my driving test in the country. The constable jumped into the passenger seat and told me to drive to his place. "Hope you don't mind lovey," he said, "the wife's just rung me from work and said she's left the iron on. God, bless a working woman, might've burnt the bloody house down." I drive him home in second gear. Kids, bikes, dogs and horses are all over the road. He strides inside. I watch the sprinkler rotate on the yellow grass and the small birds hop into the spray. He returns about 20 minutes later, eating a sandwich. I drive him back to the station, and go through a Give Way sign. "Oh no, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I say cringing. "What about?" he asks, picking lettuce from between his teeth and burping. I'm silent. "Who's your instructor? Local man?" he asks in front of the station, dollar signs in his eyes. "No, my mother," I say, and he shrugs. "Okay," he says, "you're passed." I'm scared to drive home. I'm frightened of people like me on the road. Is it a plot to keep me off it; to curtail my freedom? I'm paranoid. He says so.

I thought we passed the test and it would work. We spent a day in his car driving along the Pacific Highway towards the sun. A catalytic space, no escape. As the sun blinked and dropped, we knew everything about each other. Intimate. Close, Together, in the small secure space. Neither wanting to escape; understanding, comfortable, at the end of the long day.

If a choice is to be made as to who drives, it is invariably the man who takes the wheel, even if the car belongs to the woman. In a family, the father always drives, so the mother can turn around and attend to the children, perched along the back seat. On our family holidays, dad always drove, smoking a cigar as fat as his neck. If it rained, the windows were up and the smoke was revolting. Dad swerved around hillsides while mum sat in the back, with a "sick" bowl, between two of the children. As dad swerved to the left, the child on the right threw up, and as he swerved to the right, the child on the left began to wretch, and mum would beg dad to stop as we felt trapped, like sick prisoners, throwing up in the back as dad swerved around hills.

I scrub his kitchen floor and throw out the left-overs. A chicken carcass and some hollandaise sauce which has coagulated in the bottom of a saucepan. Then I read the letters. "You want to taste so many women, and I, head over heels in love with you, must leave." "My house has a large bath, we must fill it with jasmine oil, listen to Bach, sip Sauterne and share it sometime." And so they go on. I read, and blink. It is all so familiar. I-have-to-be-adored-I-have-to-be-adored. This man has no soul. He is programmed to respond, but the responses are limited, and are we? I will smash

the terminal, the 'memory', the disc drives. But as the part lie shattered on the floor, "bleep bleep, bleep bleep" will persist until I go mad.

I close the folder and slam his door. As I cross the highway, I think "that car coming towards me could easily accelerate and run right over me." Then I think, "If I'm sane and capable of thinking that, what if the driver is insane and thinking . . ." But I don't hurry, I amble. I want to lie on the road and smile at the sky.

"I'm very angry with you," he says loudly into the phone. I nod sleepily.

"Yes?" I say softly.

"YES," he yells. "What did you do with my hollandaise sauce?"

"I threw it out," I say defensively, but can feel an apology surging to my lips.

"I . . . I . . . a cockroach was floating on the top," I lie, "it had a smile on its face. It died in ecstasy," I humour him.

"All day, behind the bar, I was looking forward to coming home and eating fresh asparagus with hollandaise . . ." I drift away. A chauvinistic bully. He does not thank me for a clean kitchen floor and he knows he is behaving badly.

"I read your letters," I finally say.

"Oh yes?" the tirade ceases, "what did you think?"

"I-just-have-to-be-adored, I-just-have-to-be-adored," I say quietly.

A night later he reads me a poem by Banjo Patterson. It is about the wine of life being a woman's love and art being the star to guide one. It annoys me, and I cannot help reacting. "Banjo Patterson's a chauvinistic . . ." computer, I nearly say, "bully." He laughs.

"I was hit by a car today," I said. "The sign said WALK and so I began to cross the road. As I did a car spun 'round the corner and a woman screamed. I stepped back, but was still hit, and fell, and knocked my cheek on the side mirror. If I hadn't stepped back, I would have been pushed forward and by the time the car stopped, it would have been on top of me. Afterwards, I was surprised by two things: my reflexes — I always thought I'd freeze in a moment of danger; and — if I'd been killed they would have said, "she died instantaneously". But as I fell, I knew I'd been hit, and kept thinking over and over again, "I've been hit, I've been hit." I always hoped my death would be immediate and I would have no knowledge of dying. But now I believe there is always an instant between the fatal blow and death, when one knows . . . I wasn't injured, and got up, a bit shaky, but couldn't cross the road. The woman who screamed had gone half-way across, and she turned 'round and came back and fetched me . . ."

"Don't talk about death," he says. But I'm upset, and riled.

"People always whisper 'death' in those ghostly hushed tones. But denying death is the death of culture. The more it's not admitted, the more it permeates everything," I say. He doesn't understand. He laughs.

"Thanks for cleaning my flat," he says.

But tomorrow I shall drive.

Skirmish

Choppers clattered overhead and the black estuarine mud gaping
all vivid now as if it were yesterday
he had been there
to see the movie.

Not having fought in 'Nam
only in Sydney once and at a party in Brisbane
come close in Launceston
twice, which didn't count really, Launceston

he felt wounded, nursing the ghost-limb
of no tragedy, robbed
of the other wound, initiation to the men's club
bending the elbow
that real talk
a quiet beer with a few of the blokes

turning away from things better not told
to those like him
who never went
and had nothing to withhold
and would ever play at passages never taken

Cliffs of Fall

Gulls on their arc glide out from the headland
the sea beneath them slides grey and green
toes feel for a foothold in crumbling soil
fingers claw gorse roots, bracken, ti-tree
claw into dirt to stay above the whirling sea
dirt trickles, spills, rolls out over
the edge, unlodges a space for you up ahead
clambering up you dislodge more only someone waits
like a cicada's husk, the skin, tanned, crinkled
across ribs, withered flanks folded up
hugging itself, as if it might be born again
those empty holes its eyes hold your attention
your strength, breath going from you toward it
you grow weak, shiver, chill, despite the sun
groaning, you come back to the bedroom
waking in sweat, thinking it was just a dream
nothing but a dream, thankful for the cold
breeze that disturbs the curtains, thankful
for the pink and bronze stippling across the dawn
thankful for each sensation, each heave of blood
each gasp of breath that winds you to that dream.

Listening to Handel's *Water Music*

A little uncertain about the barges
And if he could conduct like the first violin
Who does not raise his head above the Thames
And yet there seems a certain boredom in it
An autumnal sadness on the water
Which allows the notes to carry to the King.

Handel was reinstated through his entertainment
By an elaborate speech: the wind did not
Blow the notes too far from their repeats
And yet there was nothing obvious, as if refused
Of favour still left a residual sadness
More to do with water than music on it

More to do with the bravery even of a barge
Carrying a kingdom and the curious formality
Of that kingdom's purse carriers: the notes
Leaking between the conversations, the gust
And gist of what the King said, the surround
Which being faithful, supports and comments

But not now for the King's ears or that luncheon.
We may think, not knowing, that Handel was bored
Or allowing something for the water, for inattention
For notes like trailing hands and pompous trumpets
Propping pleasure, since a watery kingdom
Is equally ruled and music goes everywhere.

The Iniquity of Us All

They are like a picture, really, the people who make up this choir, or a series of pictures. If I could take them into my studio for an afternoon, or bring a camera to capture them at the moments when they suggest . . .

Henry is tall and lean with a hooked nose, his cream silk shirt billows over tailored Italian trousers. Sweeping his hand through his halo of auburn hair, he balances on the balls of his feet, makes love to the music, plunging like an eagle on the score, stabbing the notes with his baton. He joins the tenors, then, quick, falsetto with the sopranos, then down, ya-pa-paaarm with the basses.

Head flung back like a knight in a Pre-Raphaelite painting, his eyes quest beyond the reach of his retainers with their red choir robes and long straight hair — quiet maidens in the corner of the painting. One hands his helmet, another holds water for his hands, and none of them ever laugh. He plays them like strings on a harp, and even when the music is being stroked and coaxed and yanked out of them, they do not smile. The basses look like melancholy squires who have to polish the armour and keep the horse clean, but won't have a chance to kill the dragon.

Silent at the organ, fingers brushing the keys, his wife Elvi waits for the baton with the pained expression of a woman married to a genius. Waiting, a limbo of a life she leads, her needs always at the beck and call of his. She has a foreign, cultured look, fine nose, dark skin, already greying hair piled up at the back of her head. For her, a Greek vase, or a Roman fresco — Ariadne, deserted on the shore of Naxos. Wistful, rather than pained. What does she want? Children? Some fresh direction of her own?

I haven't been here long enough to ask. Still an outsider, I hover at the edge of conversations, trying to remember names, to see into the lives behind these unknown faces.

There are real choir boys — most boys have sticky faces, singlets sticking out over the top of their pants, and a button or two missing from their shirts. But these have red cassocks and white albs and hair unnaturally smooth.

Justin has fair hair and freckles and a cocky walk, head tipped at an arrogant angle. He is too tall for his age, too sure, too good, his voice awakens a longing for peace and wholeness. Like Henry when he plays Bach on the cello. The purity of the music floats through the church, and Henry looks like a Renaissance saint — or Adam after the fall, lusting for Eve.

There is a small Orchestra. Clare, only fifteen years old, is the best. Black hair, falling smoothly to below her ears, her pale skin flushed, bright blue eyes. With her violin poised, chest up and forward, she is ardent as Joan of Arc, leading the French to Victory.

Arms folded, her father sits in the back pew, his lips tightly closed and his eyes fixed distastefully on the crucifix above the altar. He shows no interest as the choir pelts through 'all we like sheep have gone astray-ay-ay-ay-ay-ay-ay', just like silly

bleating. But at the sorrowful majesty of 'and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all', he smiles grimly. He could be Calvin or John Knox.

What a mixture of styles and eras. Or perhaps it's only my perception of them. My problem is too many styles, wanting to paint like Rembrandt *and* the Limbourg brothers *and* Roualt's savage black lines.

* * *

Too static. They need a play. As I watch them, piece out the dramas that bind them.

Clare dreams of solos and competitions and Rome — and Henry. When he takes her violin to show the orchestra what he wants, she trembles. Arriving early, she waits in her place, attentive. Runs pianissimo through the night's music, then drops in a few phrases of a Bach Partita.

'Play,' he says.

Music fills her head; she squeezes it into his soul. When she lowers her bow, he salutes her.

'We'll have that on Saturday night. Between the Gabrielli and the Tallis.

She is alight. Like a girl by Renoir, standing at an open window, ready to plunge out into the garden, into life.

Justin sings 'Angels ever bright and fair.' His notes spin off the rafters and dance gravely over the beams. Standing at the rostrum, Henry is wrapped in angel's wings. The boy's eyes gleam like Gabriel announcing the message of divine and human coupling, without the need for bodies. The man feels close to the secret of music, of love, of all things. Then the brat grins cheekily, Henry wipes the sweat from his forehead, and the moment is gone.

Elvi watches them, but she needn't worry. Henry has an eye for the boys, nothing more. His real mistress is music. Trips to Rome and Salzburg, thousands of records, always tinkering with the hi-fi. I have been into the store where he works and watched him help a customer choose a system as carefully as if it were a wife. He knows every record in the shop, the authentic ones, the sacreligious reinterpretations. Up to Bach at least. He sniffed when I asked for Schumann. Their rented house is full of music stands and bits of instruments. Moving must be a nightmare. They will never own a house nor have a child — only piles of music, and Henry's red Porsche.

The basses are melancholy and jealous because Justin sings most of the solos. They have fine voices too, but choir boys are all the go.

Justin seems too interested in money. Even his voice is something to use. Henry arranges for him to sing at weddings and funerals and he is saving the money for a computer. I sense a hard cold core. Not too hard because he is still a child. Not too cold because of his voice. But still a core.

Clare's father sits upright against the hard pew. He doesn't hold with music and musicians. There was none of that when he was a boy in the Depression. He would have gone from house to house, selling rabbits, his shoes stuffed with newspaper. The type who's worked for every penny. But he knows his daughter's good. There's an almost smug look on his face when she plays.

* * *

Summer comes early and the cicadas racket in the camphor laurels. By the end of November everyone is hot and tired and too busy and Elvi is in bed with flu. On the night of the concert, someone spots a well-known critic in the audience. A bass and a cellist and Clare are late, and Henry paces back-stage, stitching at the

cord of his cassock. He has had his hair done for the occasion — swept back like Chopin or Liszt.

Clare dashes in breathless and alone.

'Dad's stuck in Brisbane,' she says. 'I ran all the way from the station.'

'Good girl. Can you play first, and give the others time to get here?'

She nods, and dives into the bathroom to tidy up.

As she walks onto the stage, Henry stands in the wings and makes the sign of the cross. Bach floats through the hall, unwinding tensions, knitting up ravelled sleeves. A hush, then the clapping, people standing, cries of 'Encore!' She plays another sarabande. The wave of applause lifts her off the stage. Henry hugs her, her face against his chest, the others thump her back.

'Did you see old Murray's face?' they ask. He'll have something good to say for once.'

The cellist and singer have arrived, we smile as we go on, feeling the audience ready to be pleased. Justin sings the Coventry Carol. There is hardly a slip all night, and at the end the audience is standing again. Henry sends Clare on with Justin for 'Silent Night' and then it is over.

'Not a dry eye in the house, I'll vouch for it,' Henry says, his arms around Justin and Clare. She leans against him.

'Come one,' he says, 'I'll take you home.'

* * *

Tonight something is wrong, Clare white and tense, an electric current travelling from her to Henry. But not back. He avoids her glance, and the music doesn't hold together. Only Justin sings perfectly, above it all.

Elvi glances at the girl. Not jealous, or suspicious. As if she understands, too well, the pain of loving Henry. Almost as if she is afraid for Clare, and wants to warn or protect her.

But there is no way of warning the girl. Of course she can see that he is uncomfortable, trying to disentangle himself from her feelings. But she can't accept it. Dashing headlong towards destruction, she demands to know if Henry wants to hear her piece for the next concert. No, he says, there won't be time for it on the night. He turns to Justin, asks him to run once more through a difficult patch. The girl snatches her violin and runs from the hall. With a sour glance at Henry, the father leaves his pew.

Elvi half rises from her seat, and then sinks back with a sigh, and does not follow.

* * *

The Messiah is the climax of the year. Clare doesn't turn up. Henry curses, but the performance goes off well. Afterwards everyone comes back to the house.

Cake and wine and savoury dips are spread on tables and bookshelves. Henry stands in front of the empty fireplace, head back, a glass of champagne in his hand, holding court.

Plates are stacked in the kitchen with bones and gravy from last night's dinner. Piles of books toppling in the hall. Dust everywhere. I can hardly stop myself from doing the washing up.

In the overgrown garden, full of white roses, Justin is still wearing his alb and cassock. Some of the young women are with him, teasing. He chases them through the grass, laughing and squealing. A medieval Garden of Delights.

There is a loud knock at the open door. Two blue figures on the doorstep. Elvi turns pale. Henry puts down his champagne, wipes his mouth, and goes out to the

men. In a few minutes he is back, waving his arm imperiously, tells us to enjoy the party, and expect him in time for rehearsal tomorrow.

He is gone, Elvi with him, and the singers gather in anxious knots. I clear away the empty glasses and wash up.

* * *

The charge is carnal knowledge.

Henry is remanded on bail. He stands at the rostrum and denies it all. A complete misunderstanding. The father has always disliked him. Heaven knows what the girl has been dreaming of. Naturally the case will be dropped for lack of evidence.

That night his red porsche is found smashed against a tree. His neck is broken.

* * *

At the funeral, one of the basses conducts the choir and sings 'The trumpet shall sound.' The squire suddenly promoted to an equally melancholy knight. Justin and a soprano sing Webber's 'Pie Jesu.' She is choked up, but Justin sings with the same blissful purity as ever.

Afterwards, the wake in the hall. Elvi is grey with grief or exhaustion, but she is composed, talking quietly to the people who gather round her, greeting newcomers with that wistful smile.

Clare rushes in, wearing her school uniform, obviously against orders. No one speaks.

'It's my fault,' she cries, 'I didn't say . . . Dad wouldn't leave it alone . . . It's my fault. He wouldn't listen . . . I couldn't stop him.'

They all turn away. Except Elvi. She wraps her arms around the girl, holds her close. 'My dear,' she murmurs, 'my dear.'

Ruth and Naomi, I think, and am suddenly ashamed of my watching and analysing, like a peeping Tom. I haven't a clue what really happened. The girl's imagination, the father's suspicion? And the accident, was it an error of judgement because of the stress and fatigue, or was it suicide? No one will tell me, the outsider. We are all astray, more or less, the jealous singers, me with my detached curiosity, Elvi in her unhappiness. But Henry is dead. Whatever happened, the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He has paid.

I slip away. One day, maybe, I will paint a picture.

Eros on the Underground

He is walking up and down the platform
in a pin-striped suit, hair parted
exactly in the middle, clean-shaven,
smooth, a good school look.

She arrives breathless,
brandishing a brief-case, decidedly
a Today-woman. His welcome takes minutes:
his chiding her for being late
bespeaks the relief he feels
because she's there. The air trembles,
alive, alive . . .

In the train, they grip each other's hands
so tightly that she winces.
It's such a game
as they go from strength to strength.
Now she is holding, squeezing both his hands —
their eyes meet, darting smiles:
delirious, cresting, their
bring-the-sky-down-now love
sung from the Paradise train, no *vin ordinaire*,
this wine, to be.

The Trip to Work

Pushing into the carriage, grabbing a seat,
he opens a paperback; slides down.
Hemmed in by elbows and legs
he turns to a marked page.
The person opposite stares
at a woman's face and a large revolver
on a bent cover, half-masked by his hand.

As the carriage fills, he's squashed and bumped
by grumpy commuters standing around . . .
while behind the cover, on the marked page,
a figure with a revolver walks down silent streets
framed by a hit man's telescopic lens
— final as a film clip.

Darkness outside and echoing tunnels
tell him to get out . . . first stop in the Underground.
Picking up bag, book,
he edges past people who've gazed right through him
unsteadily squatting in fantasies.

The door shuts with a pneumatic hiss.
The train begins again
as he hurries along a fluorescent platform,
forgetting the blonde, in the book, behind the long-range gun,
her breasts revealed by moonlight and metaphor
as she peers at a figure she knows is armed,
afraid of an empty beach she has to cross,
along which, as the reader knows, her corpse must float
lightly above the sand when the tide comes in
without a ripple
of consciousness
of water . . .

as she
watches him,
her commuter,
hurrying
to a cage of desks

her face,
in close-up,
filling the tunnels of the Underground,
her wide red lips
the texture of magazines,
a long veined hand
resting
on her hip.

PETER LUGG

The Nightshift

The nightshift clocks on
as meals are brought
to those who cannot walk.
Floor tiles ache with shine,
reflecting sisters fiddling
medicine into paper cups.
After tea some drift
to the t.v. room
where those who can
watch life's reruns through
eyes too bored to see.

Mapping Jerusalem

I went to the church and we sat in the backroom;
There were long benches where we rolled plasticine;
We made crosses of the reddish brown sticks of clay.

We learned the story of the man they killed once
And were given treasured sticky pictures of another world.
These we carried carefully homeward where the Easter lilies
bloomed.

We walked a long way past the salt lake;
Our feet in borrowed shoes crushed the samphire clumps;
We went over hills 'til a bull or white horse frightened us.

The storm blew the dust from the showground;
It blew across the yard just before the rain came.
The water in the lake rose to meet the salt wind from the sea.

Sap rose in the delicate fringed trees
And the manna gum poured out like wounds.
Light over the salt lake blossomed in a gold haze.

Later, bonfires shone in the early summer dusk.
I saw the whirring halos of the catherine wheels
And turning back, entered the dark empty house.

We stood in the post holes hewn in the red clay
Our heads below the surface of the ancient land.
After our game we clambered out to light. And Christmas came.

Humming

A black and green blowfly heads down the street. It flies past the small park, past the delicatessen, turning left into a crumbling block of flats. The fly ascends in zig-zags, pauses opposite a second-storey window, weaves three circles in the air, enters.

She faces the ceiling. Her head rests on the pillow. The day is so hot that the walls begin to peel. A shaft of sunlight through the window illuminates the bed, but the rest of the room is dark. Dust from the bed and from the woman floats out along the beam of light and joins the dust of the world. Pouring in of hot air. Silence except for the humming.

No hand has knocked since her son last came. They sat on the balcony and looked across the courtyard. The courtyard was always empty, and he could see its grass slowly dying of thirst. Silence bled from the opposite rooms. There was little to say. She stared straight ahead as usual and ate the chocolates he brought, one by one. She liked chocolates; soft centres, hard centres, light, dark, caramels, strawberry creams — they were all the same. Sometimes he thought he could hear her mind breaking into fragments. And they broke down like shells into tiny pieces. Then down into dust. Her words were half-hours apart. She was like a jigsaw puzzle with most of the pieces missing.

The retired bricklayer downstairs sits and smokes. A blowfly goes up past his window. The retired bricklayer turns to his cat and says: twenty-nine. And it's only eleven o'clock. His overweight cat struggles onto the window ledge and strokes the pane with its paw. Together they wait for the next fly. It's a lot even for summer, he says, and then hears the humming for the first time. He puts a finger to his lips. The cat says nothing. They listen, man and cat united on a dry Tuesday.

She is unaware of the sound. The fly performs a strange dance above her face. Perhaps like bees going through ritual movements to communicate distance and direction to their colleagues. Is a fly so intelligent? It does not need to be. The fly hovers and descends, over and over, sometimes settling on the grey hair. Its wings are a blur.

He sat wondering if the silence of the flats was reflected by a silence in her head. Or was she thinking? About the outer silence? Or about the past? How come nobody ever leaves their rooms? he thought. Doesn't anyone pay visits? She once remarked, out of the blue, that she knew no one. No one else in the flats? Or no one else but him? Did she know who he was anymore? She seemed to recognize him somehow. When he asked what she meant, she said: I don't . . . But the words were lost on the way from her brain to her lips, like a tune you couldn't be bothered singing.

A small girl looks out across the courtyard from her bedroom. It's too hot to do anything but stare out the window. She sees a blowfly slowly making its way towards the opposite wall. The fly is so fat she can see it climb the bricks, like a raindrop falling upwards. Her eyes follow until it is too high to see without opening the window. She likes insects, and catches them in jars with holes stabbed in the

lid. If they die, she conducts bug funerals, marking their final resting place with tiny matchstick crosses. She imagines the insects breaking down in time with the decaying roots, until their dust fuses in the earth. She realizes that the silence of her bedroom is really humming in disguise.

She remains still. The dusty room heats up. More flies. Down below the bins are hardly noticed. Their insides hang out, pushing up the plastic lids. Dark liquid seeps out from underneath, forming a network of rivers. The sun stops them in their tracks before they reach the lawn. They are fixed onto the concrete, branching out like veins over a dead hand.

The last words she said before he left were: Frank. His name was not Frank, but it no longer mattered. Frank. Yes? he said. Frank, am I married?

The retired bricklayer puts a finger in every ear, trying to scoop out the humming. The cat begins to run around the living room. He sees this and thinks it is odd behaviour for an old cat. He opens the door and steps into the heat. His ears get fuller as the retired bricklayer looks from window to window.

The small girl enters the kitchen. Hey MUM. The mother watches through the glass for the postman. So far, nothing but flies. She is in no mood to be disturbed, but she looks at the small girl. The mother's ears, programmed all morning for the tune of a bicycle, now pick up on the humming. The humming opens the door and they follow it into the burning day.

There is a large wardrobe in the room. Antique pine. All of her husband's clothes are still there. And now hers. Dresses and suits jostle each other for space in the dark. It is like a mailbox, stuffed with letters from everyone you've forgotten.

The job required him to go to Sydney with his family. Now there was no one left to sit with her. The last face in her galaxy faded like a spent lightbulb. There was nothing to do but go to bed forever.

Flats baking in the sun. Morning prepares to melt into an afternoon furnace. The retired bricklayer stands at the bottom of the stairs, seeing a woman and girl moving towards him across the courtyard. Their heads tilt upward in unison. Blowflies whizz past without settling on their faces. The flies join a black humming train, which begins somewhere near the ground and heads upwards. It hums its way through the open window. She has slumbered inside for eight months without a breath, no one aware but the flies which swallow her body. The man, woman and child are climbing the stairs to hear their secret.

Settling

It was January: all the world was on holiday. For months surfboards had been cruising the suburbs, making waves down the aisles of buses and trains, but suddenly here Juliette was, escaping for her lunchbreak, striding out of the deep freeze of her office into the white-hot day — in all its blinding light, summer fell down around her and took her totally by surprise.

The day was so clear. Thirty degrees in the shade. On the streets, bitumen oozing into Vegemite — and all the car tyres, like Aussies overseas, lapping it up.

Why was she spending her days in an air-conditioned box without a view, writing up reports, ripping open sky-coloured envelopes, spending government millions . . . ?

While she had been filing paper, the jacarandas must have filled the sky with ripples of mauve. The magpies must have made nests in the angophoras and swooped on children loitering home from school. Had the world draped itself in freshness and stood up to its ankles in waves of blossoming heat? Juliette had been too busy to notice.

Suddenly holidaying families were strolling down the Mall. Peach-skinned teenagers in thongs and T-shirts were wandering out of the ocean and into shops. Sunlight was glittering on the fingernails of the buskers, plucking their guitars. It was dazzling the flat faces of shop windows and melting the icecreams before almost everyone's lips.

Juliette wanted to revel in this glow which reminded her of childhood. She decided she would buy herself a barely-there summer dress — this weekend she would let the sun soak into her . . .

But two steps into DJs, Juliette's blood froze. Paper leaves and bloodred berries were ripening on the immaculate hairdos of the display dummies. Around her bare summer legs, an icy blast roved.

Layers and layers of wool. Time to squirrel through skirts and jumpers; stock up against the bitter wind ahead. Juliette shivered. On their anorexic hangers, how flimsily the sunfrocks she had come for flopped.

* * *

In the Ladies Rest Room, a hot air machine was howling. Juliette sat in the still safety of a cubicle, expecting to see that her period had begun. She checked her watch: almost two p.m. Uh-oh. Usually, every four weeks, right on the dot of noon, the bleeding began. Usually, at around this time, she breathed out and as she walked away from the toilets, she felt like humming.

Walking out now, clacking over the tiles, in the big mirror Juliette caught a flash of panic on her face. Quickly, she closed her eyes.

Above the basins, all along the walls, women were communing with their twins. Juliette saw their twin heads, like ping-pong bats: backwards and forwards, from

real face to mirror face, their glances bounced. Did they touch only skin, surfaces of cheek and lip which they must shade or gloss? Did they never feel embarrassed, or vulnerable, catching their own eyes before so many strangers? Could they possibly belong to some secret club of women to which Juliette had not yet been admitted?

A perfect skin of water slipped over Juliette's fingers. As she stood in the Ladies Rest Room, avoiding the faces in the mirror, she remembered pulling her hands out of washing-up water's greasy gloves — on a day, not so long ago, wandering from the house into dazzling sun . . . Rain had fallen in the night. The air seemed to shimmer and tremble. "Oh, Rick," she called back to the kitchen. "Cicadas! Just listen!"

Still flapping a teatowel around a frying pan, Rick came and stood beside her. The strange insects drilled at the air, making the sunlight quake.

How many of them were there? Hundreds? One family? Just two? Up all day, joining wings, drunk on heat and eucalyptus, knees-up-Mother-Brown-ing all over the lawn.

"It's like a great community sing-along," she said.

Rick tilted his head. "Lyrics are a bit sub-tel. A bit — avant-garde. I don't think they'll ever make it to *Solid Gold*."

Juliette groaned and clapped a hand over her eyes.

Rick put his arm around her then. In the brilliant sun, they looked at one another and grinned. Little ripples quivered around their faces.

Juliette was already thirty-five. Time was running out. If she were pregnant now, would that make the baby a Virgo, like Rick? Not that he was anything like the Know Yourself By the Stars definitions, but a child like him might be nice. A little female Rick, for preference, wading through jacaranda lakes and building Lego skyscrapers in Laura Ashley smocks . . .

There were shelves in this store, stacked with tiny singlets and socks. Miniature hangers with dresses delicately embroidered. For the first time, Juliette looked at all these things for sale. She stared at them — and then she glanced around, as if she were doing something obscene. Like lurking around the cosmetic stands in the days when she was a hippy. She sidled away, pretending she was taking a shortcut to somewhere else.

A Virgo? she thought. What rubbish! Summer heat must have put your *brain* to sleep! Children tie you down. They wear you out. *Wake up Australia!* You don't even *believe* in the stars!

Back through the racks of autumn styles Juliette rushed, frowning at her watch and planning what she would do at work that afternoon.

As she rushed, travel bureau posters flashed by her. She had money in the building society. What was she saving it for? Next week she could be in Greece, living on calamari and retsina. She could be basking on a tropical island, responsible to no one. How wonderful to escape, deep inside a great jet, to fall asleep and float away alone through the clouds, not even waving goodbye.

She grabbed a stack of brochures and hurried back to work. On her desk, the coloured photographs might have been shells and corals, still wet and glistening, tossed up by the tide. She hardly dared pick them up, in case they dried and lost their sparkle.

Over a proposal for funding for a Women's Return to Employment Programme, she slid one of the ads. The bright lemon islands in the brochures settled in seas of turquoise and aquamarine. Where the water shallowed close to the shore, it shimmered into veils, lapping the land with dazzling saris of light.

Somewhere out of sight, the land itself must have been more subdued, preoccupied

with growing coconuts, offering fresh washing to the sun and setting up shady places for people to rest. Even there, was it necessary sometimes to turn away from the dazzle, to go quietly into a village and be a part of time passing?

Here, when summer began, spiders appeared in the garden. With silver threads they decorated the first bright morning. In the night, cicadas kami-kazied into webs. Sometimes, Juliette woke and wondered where she was. Was this still Rick, dreaming beside her? Surprised, she snuggled into his back.

All around the house, the glistening traps appeared. Without so much as a guilty shrug, the spiders dangled their stolen baubles: Christmas beetles, broken grasshoppers, blue butterflies' wings. To get anywhere beyond the newly settled rooms, Rick and Juliette had to put out their hands like sleepwalkers and delicately rip the threads. Eventually, even Rick was sick of it. He took a bat, a paling from a fence which had fallen down, and he walked between the trees, going *splat! splat! splat!*

And still each morning they woke. They beached from private voyages where all the years before they had known one another squalled, raining over them cold wars, broken promises, fears.

* * *

In her office, Juliette clacked through stiff accordions of files. Their hard metal edges scraped her fingernails. Somewhere, a long time ago, she had hidden away a document headed: Maternity Leave. But *where?*

Of course the woman she worked with would know all the details. Andrea had a two year old. "My life was *empty* before Sam," Andrea said now. And yet, on the day she discovered she was pregnant, she huddled in her room, crying. For seven months she tried to believe it was not true. Even during labour, she was still hopeful. "I'm sure it's only food poisoning," she said, fighting off the cramps.

Later she bent her head over a bundle of bones and flesh as insubstantial and delicate as a mosquito. She wrapped herself around it, tenderly, and she no longer noticed the world.

So Andrea would have all the information. When she came back from her lunchbreak, Juliette could say to her: "Andrea, I think I might be . . ."

And what would happen then? Would she see that great rush of excitement and sympathy with which mothers greet mothers-to-be? Would she be welcomed to the club? Would maternity suddenly throw its big blue cloak over her, wrapping her up like a present for everyone else to gloat over?

But what about her job? What about the *rest* of her life? What would Rick say? How would she — how *could* she — cope?

It was wintry in the office. Something was tickling the inside of Juliette's nose. Of course, the worst thing about this summer was that she had worked right through it. All summer she had stayed as white as paper, while everyone else was on the beach pretending to be the ingredients for a cosmic bouillabaisse. She would never forgive Rick if he had gone there today — without her — and was now laid out, broiling blissfully, turning lobster pink and tender while the white sand shimmered and the sea licked at him with its cool, blue tongue . . .

Returning late from lunch, Andrea was cranky. Plastic bags full of groceries lurched out of her hands and into the office fridge.

Minutes later, she was on the phone, snapping at her husband. Couldn't he pick up Sam from Child Care just this once — she didn't know how *she'd* get there

on time. Besides, they take them to the police if you're not there by six, he did *realise* that, didn't he?

The airconditioner turned in its sleep.

Juliette sneezed.

And sneezed again. What was *she* stewing up but a dose of summer flu? Every time she stepped from the unnatural cool of the office out into that real warmth, a little more of her resistance melted.

"Well, I'm flat out at work too," Andrea was complaining. "But I don't hear you suggesting we can do without my paypacket. Frankly, I think it's about time you started to take your share of the responsibility . . ."

Juliette shivered. From the back of her chair she hauled a cardigan. Tissues started falling like wilted hibiscuses into her garbage bin. By the time Andrea's phone clicked and she turned to fling her next sentence at Juliette, Juliette's nose was streaming and she had dropped a leiful of tropical blooms.

"Kids!" said Andrea woefully. "They're the best contraceptive invented."

Juliette sniffled.

"Christ!" said Andrea. "You haven't got the flu, have you?" For a moment she leant hopefully across the desk. "What I wouldn't give for a day in bed doing *nothing* . . . But you know what would happen, don't you? I'd just have to keep going. I don't have *time* to be sick." She glared at Juliette. "You'd better go home before you infect me."

Juliette dropped another tissue. Ever since Sam was born, she had tried not to let a distance develop between herself and Andrea. But here it was: the space between two planets. In a swelter of anger and self-pity, she filled in a sick form and scuttled home.

* * *

In the car, the heat dried out her nose. She started to feel perspiration running in little creeks all over her skin. By the time she swung into the drive and saw the house squatting above the wide sweep of water, her dress was soaked.

Their house — once someone's holiday house — could have floated off on the tide if the lake ever rose so high, welling up over the cliff and pouring itself in silver waves through the angophoras, the ferns and the wattles. Rick and Juliette had rented it when they first arrived. When they knew how long they wished to stay here, together, they would make further plans. In the meantime, every day when Juliette swung into the drive, she was startled by her excitement and then her sudden calm, as she saw the house and garden settle their boundaries around her.

Rick had been raking up grass cuttings. His face was red and he was streaming too from so much exercise in the middle of the day.

"What you need," he said, "is medicine."

He pulled a tiny liqueur glass from a cupboard and filled it with brandy. Juliette screwed up her face, gulped some, and then gulped some more. Her throat burned. But her head felt light and shimmery.

"You have the rest, if you like," she offered.

Rick swallowed the last thimbleful, until there was only a faint glimmer, like a fire which might still spark, where the last drop still glowed against the glass.

Through the house, side by side, their belongings sat. Under dust and sun, almost as if they had always been there. Records and books; wines and spices; half-written rock operas and abandoned embroideries. So, was this home? One day would she

go into the garden here and pause, picking roses, because sparkling webs have wrapped her up like Liberace?

Juliette blinked. Almost pinched herself.

They were sitting at a table up against the windows. Before them, water gathered into its arms the afternoon sun. Trees were tending cellophane leaves; small shadows clung to their long branches and peeling bark.

"Rick," said Juliette, "do you think you'll ever want to have children?"

Briefly, his face showed shock. Then he said in a cool, rational tone: "I've already got two."

She could have sworn he looked frightened.

"No, I mean with me," she said. "*Our* children."

Rick started to fiddle with a spoon on the table. Something like the start of a smile twitched around the edges of his mouth.

He shrugged. "We could do with a couple of the other kind of kids," he said flippantly. "Help with the lawn mowing . . ."

Rick's daughters, in the last photo he took of them, were little angels, ten and eight, picking bluebells by a roadside. He had other photos of them from the time when he still lived with his wife. First smiles, first teeth, first walks in the rain when Mummy wasn't looking. In a few flicks of an album's pages, they grew up.

Now they lived on the North Coast with their mother. And some man. They changed addresses so that he could not trace them.

Rick stared into the shiny bowl of the spoon and he started to say, "Of course, if that's what *you* want . . ."

But Juliette barely heard him. She was lost in a memory of him at Christmastime, standing by the mailbox, his face lit up. When he saw the scraggly writing, he ripped the envelope and he forgot to put out his hands against spiderwebs as he walked to the house.

A card, from his younger daughter, fell out. A photo: an old house with sagging verandah boards, spilling pots of birds nest fern, rotted gutters and a temporary air. His daughters grinned out of old squatters chairs under the leaky roof.

Anna was now twelve, nearly thirteen, already as tall as Juliette, and skinny as a bean. The secrecy and sulkiness of adolescence were about to swamp her face. Clarissa, who was only ten, had just lost a front tooth. She was wearing a skirt Rick's mother had made years ago for Anna. There were lines where the hems had once been: down to knees just like Rick's, colours drifted in brightening bands.

Was the only certain thing about having children, Juliette wondered, the fact that one day you would lose them? She saw herself at eighteen, running alone, barefoot over a wet oval. Her face was fresh and joyful and still damp from rain. At a dinner table with parents, she closed like a daisy at twilight. Out of trees, onto roads, her brothers fell. Billycars and bicycles whirling, upside down, before screeching brakes. Ambulances screaming. Parents in a kitchen, warring. It was amazing, really, that so many people finally reached that point where they could stand, whole and independent, bending in a breeze from somewhere else so that they would never again clearly hear their mothers' voices calling: *Come back, come back . . .*

Sun flamed the last drop of brandy. In spite of the cool rush of his voice, Rick's hand against the glass looked warm.

This time it was Juliette's turn to shrug. She frowned and plucked the damp dress away from her ribs.

"I'm so tired of these work clothes," she said petulantly. "I think I'll go and change."

She raked her hair from the back of her neck with her hands. Her breath shivered out of her as she stood and shuddered back her chair.

Rick tensed, not-watching her walk away.

In the bedroom, Juliette kicked off her shoes into the shade beside the bed. She searched the wardrobe for a faded floral dress without a back. As always, now that she was home, she un-strapped her watch and slipped off the silver ring which Rick had given her.

Through the window, she gazed at the hot glint of the lake.

Ten minutes — or was it ten years? — later, Juliette saw that she had begun to bleed. For the barest shattering of a second, she was disappointed. Then the moment reformed around her and a wave of looseness ran through her shoulders and neck as the tightness which had been there all afternoon dissolved.

Not this time, she hummed, as she saw herself in the mirror. Not this time.

* * *

Back at the table above the view, Rick was still sitting. Except for the distant lapping of waves against pebbles and the falling calls of currawongs, it was very quiet.

Out of lantana on the vacant block next door, a wren fluttered. Light followed the roar of a speed boat, foaming a distant bay.

Held back by windows: the thin, high chatter of leaves.

Songs of cicadas, underground.

As Juliette put her hands into sun on the table, even the sounds of her thoughts faded.

Ripples — questions unanswered, their voices beginning . . . ripples, like shy distant relatives of hope — quivered around her.

The Sock Maker

after the painting by Grace Cossington Smith (1915)

So like a pale penitent: casts down her
eyes at the slow industry upon her lap.
Firm lips closed on the pulse and quiver
of some secret grief. The endless soft wrap

of muted yard across her fourth finger
that's rubbed a red band: a thin slight sore
impression for a ring. Wall flowers
bloom in dull profusion on the flawed

paper pattern at her back. Needles thick
as thumbs. Purl and plain piece work paid
for with patience. Cheap hard wool in quick
stitch socks for solders' feet. War waged;

won, and lost in other places. Behind
their lines: the poor purveyor of her times.

Stone Street

Wire-weed clasps its thin interwoven fingers
to red clay:
the lugubrious layer of summers
that remained, end to end
each year the same. Only coming back
we recognise how hard it held us to it.

Arguments will never settle where the shed
was; only where it went.
Even the marks old places make
have been erased. Left only in our eyes,
my father's sky-small shadow in front of sun
nailing down then, last iron on the roof.

The ground where the small orchard was
has been cleared to let in light
and drive out mosquito darkness
beneath the almond and plum. A secret
network of roots that fed the fall of so much
summer fruit now can never be traced.

Years are strained to what can only
now be recovered in photograph; brought back
in a recollection of the way it never was.
Poinsettia shadows on my bedroom blind.
My grandmother, last awake, like an ending
is closing windows and putting out the lights.

Memories of Guy Fawkes' Night

Cicadas' late spring
on a vacant block above a river.
A bonfire mountain-sized,
golden rain and silver fountain.
A little girl in white
scribbling with sparklers in air.
A hot night
that still sings.
Grass and lights,
a high plateau,
a wizard's fountain of lights.
Magic's lair
sparkling at the end
of vistas of memory.

England late autumn,
breath leaving white mist
in the frosty air and early dark.
Gipsy fortune-tellers,
swarming students,
through the park
under bare trees.
Penny for the Guy,
Silver rain, golden fountain
flame trumpets, dragons,
roses. The roadside puddles freeze
ice catching fireworks' light,
reflecting back
as rockets burst high
against the sky's sharp black.
Thirty years, half a world,
the only difference is the magic
goes a little deeper.

Fulcrum (from the Latin) means 'Post of Couch'

That sloppy bather, Archimedes,
Declared he could unseat the world
Given a way out parking place.
On a safe bet, the wily Greek.
They were all too adhered to the earth.
Couldn't stand back far enough.

Things change — a bit! We make peace noises
But can't back off from greed or fear
Enough to find a point of couch.
And anyway, we've got our fulcrum.
It's atom-sized, uncomfortably close -
A guaranteed world-shifter. Out there
The heavens hold satellites, not gods.
No post of couch that I can see,
No resting-place for modern doves.

Not that old Noah troubled his brain
With fulcrums, world-shifting, all that stuff.
He just got on feeding the elephants,
Mucking out stalls, keeping the peace
In his own family. Maybe
We could do a lot worse.

Sorry, Archimedes, old son.
I guess you're on your own.

Tisiphone

This is the game they played in the space in their heads where the speakers move against the walls. It's party-time at the player's fireside. The logs were wet and wouldn't burn properly. I leaned towards them and urged the fire on.

Grow, grow, I told them, burn!

I could tell by the way she hugged the heat from the fire that she was used to a warmer climate. She knelt on the hearth and leant towards the flames as though she was trying to soak them up. Her hair was sunbleached. Bali or Broome? I wondered. No, she didn't look the jetsetter type. She didn't dress like one of Angie's friends, her clothes were too poor, too old.

I could feel him standing behind me. He was thinking that I might be one of George's "finds". George always bought a few home on Friday nights . . .

. . .to entertain us. She looked like she'd be comfortable with the bums down at the harbour. She was definitely out of place in George's and Angie's lounge room.

He is going to ask me if I'm cold. "Feeling the cold tonight?" he asks.

She turned towards me and I saw her face. Were her eyes red, or was it just the fire light. She did not speak. The floor felt as though it shifted under my feet.

My mind touched his for a moment, just long enough to arouse his interest. Then I let him move away.

Her gaze returned to the fire and I moved across the crowded room. It was the usual Friday night gathering, the weekly overflow from the Office of Human Development. I'd give George his due though, at least he tried. We'd seen all sorts of flotsam over the years. He could usually find at least one or two interesting cases for Friday nights. He found the agro old man.

I am the old man. I sat in an armchair and enjoyed the hot coffee. I was warm, and comfortable. I could forget. I could forget the streets, the cold, the wind that bites. I could forget that I had nowhere to go. Not really forget, just push it into the background for a while. Now, I was an interesting case. I did not move, not so you'd notice, unless you looked hard.

We'd watched him closely. He'd lent back into the chair with his elbows resting on the arms and his hands holding the cup, legs stretched out in front of him, ankles crossed. At first sight you'd have thought he was the most relaxed person in the room but then we knew he was winding himself up, with a little help from George. His legs moved, a tremor, nothing more than that. It grew until his whole body was affected by the tiny shuddering movement. It was as though he was out of focus, just a little, just enough to mist his features together, to mould his hands around the cup.

I could feel it coming and knew it would grow. I should have gone but I was warm. They stared. They were waiting for me.

I expected him to explode long before he did, it took ages but Angie kept our glasses full. I couldn't take my eyes off him.

"Classic aggressive type," George said.

"When's the explosion?"

"When I want it to be," he snapped.

So I waited, and waited, and waited. I was almost grateful when the eruption came. I didn't fancy hanging around all night just to see an old man drop his bundle.

They despised me. I could see it in the way they formed their cluster. The two men and the woman Angie, the one who handed out hot cups of coffee as though she knew where the next one was coming from. They waited for me like crows above the battle field. It was time for me to go. Out into the night and away I would go where the big guns are still blazing and the wind howls over the dead in the trenches. I had a place. I let it come.

He was a flop. I could tell Bill was disappointed. The old bloke pushed himself out off the chair. He walked to the French windows and parted the curtains. He stood there looking out with the light behind and the dark in front, and he screamed.

He screamed like every nerve in his body was twisted around his heart. George thought I was disappointed but, no, I wasn't. It was a beautiful scream, it rose up from inside the old man and launched itself into the night. He followed it. He was gone.

My brother spoke beside me.

"See something you like?"

"Tell me about her." I nodded toward the crouched figure at the fireplace.

"Her!" He patted my shoulder. "I tried, it didn't work. It was like playing with a brick wall."

I could see the rosy glow of the fire playing over her hair.

"Maybe I'd have more luck," I said.

George's mouth hardened and he walked away.

Damn Bill and his eternal "I'm better at it than you are" routine. The game had bounced off her. There was no way in, no feed back, just cold, hard nothingness. I'd wondered if she was there at all, there'd been no sign. Was an apparition warming herself by our fire, a figment of our unified imaginations? I didn't think that I'd ever seen her before, not on the streets anyway, but her eyes struck some note in my memory. Like a face seen in someone else's photograph album, familiar but unidentifiable.

I'd thought Angie had found her, Angie had thought I had. She might have come with the little man I'd found at the pier. The woman had followed him through the door when he arrived. Angie had already disposed of him.

She'd played around with the intensity of her touches for a little while and I'd sat back and watched him go white and begin to sweat fear. He tried to leave the room but Angie held him there, and then she'd hit his mind. He lurched back as though he'd been punched between the eyes and reeled out through the verandah doors. It always amazed me to see Angie do it. Schultz, my supervisor from work, had raised his eyebrows.

"You do meet some strange people," he said. I'd filled his glass.

The little man hadn't come back. I'd hit him too hard and it had hurt me more than I was prepared to say. I stole into the study to nurse my aching head and found George's stash in the desk drawer.

I couldn't see Angie anywhere but I noticed that the study door was closed and knew she was behind it.

I wandered around the room making casual conversation.

"Hi there. How are you?"

I was sending out feelers for candidates.

"Hi. Have another drink."

There was nothing interesting. Most were drunk and I remembered Bill saying once that if you tried the game with a drunk you could hear their brain cells shrinking.

Schultz was mentally undressing the girl he was with and she was wishing she'd gone home. I filled my glass at the bar and when I turned around the woman was in front of me. She was so close I could see the veins under the fine skin on her face.

I have a present for you, George.

She pressed something into my hand. I looked down and my fingers curled around a warm furry body. A rat! It looked up. Its eyes were pits that sent me spiralling down, down, down. A door slammed shut behind me and I was in a deserted warehouse. I wasn't alone. The blackness was lit by flickering pinpricks of red light. They encircled me, and the net closed in. One crossed my foot and another followed. Whiskers brushed against my neck. I hit out. My neck throbbed. I was standing by the bar with empty hands, my glass on the floor. My guests were silent, they were staring at me.

Schultz put his half-finished drink down on a table, took his lady friend by the arm and, giving me a strange look, walked toward the verandah doors. They passed the woman. She was kneeling in front of the fire.

I was laying back in George's chair when I felt a whisper cross my mind. George? Bill?

There was no reply. The game tended to get a little muddled after we'd all had a few drinks. I put the pipe away and went to investigate. I had trouble getting through the door. As I entered the lounge room I stumbled against George's precious Maori sculpture, New Zealand, 1983.

I didn't like it. It squatted beside the wall surveying the room with a persistent scowl, its tongue poking derision at the world. I'd set it rocking on its base, it never sat quite square on the floor.

I steadied it. It was wood, unfinished, naked. It had dried out deep down and large splits ran through it. I touched its gruesome grinning face. It zapped me. Damned static electricity. I backed off and collapsed into a chair.

It followed me. It shouldn't have been able to but it did. It crossed the floor on stumps that were supposed to be legs and squatted in front of me. I wondered if anyone else could see but the hash had burnt my brain and the people were frozen.

No-one can see, Angie. It's just you and me.

Me and who?

Tisiphone.

Don't you know my face? You've seen me many times in the minds of others, Angie. I have you.

Sleep Angie, sleep.

I slept.

George and Bill and I are seated at a table. George stares at his finger nails, his hands are splayed out in front of him. Bill's fingers drum against the side on the table. I watch their relentless movement. The sound reaches my ears and it grows, like the echo in the Marabar caves. It grows until my world is swamped by the pulse of our three hearts. It goes like the sucking withdrawal of waves on a beach. George examines his wrist.

"This is my body." he says.

Bill takes my hand. We are lying together and we are naked. I can feel the hair on him as his body slides over mine and I open to him. His face is above mine.

I take in every detail, his eyes, his mouth. His mouth gapes, lips broaden and a thick brown tongue creeps out and lies against my throat.

A crack begins at his forehead and follows the fall of his nose. His eyes recede until they are great holes in his head and then George's sculpture is on me. I push at it but it is too heavy.

Its tongue falls across my face.

I can't breathe!

I am the woman shattered and torn that kissed a rainbow one fine morn, who dreamed a dream of the sea and coming forth sheltered three, fed the cat and closed the door and went to sea forevermore.

I am the man who planted the seed and cursed it as a blighted weed.

I built the boat and sewed the sails and hammered in the rusty nails.

From the mast the flag we tore and set a compass at the core.

This is my house, suburban clone, that looks to all just like a home. It has red tiles, a barbecue, assets prized by all but few. I have a dog and a sore that at my heart was set to gnaw.

I am the seed. I was unformed I sought a soul on my birth day morn, one day I'll dream and fly free to seek the one that found the sea, who meant to dream forevermore and capsized . . .

Go!

She was gone.

I crawled out.

I crawled out of the nightmare that had become my life and the sculpture sat by the study door.

"You are an ugly bastard." I said.

Her mouth moved but I was too far away to hear what she was saying. I watched her lips without success and supposed it was her usual "Pretty, pretty, pretty" reserved for babies, budgerigars and now George's doorstep. I'd always thought she hated it.

Things are not what they seem, Sweet William.

Who's that?

Tisiphone.

George? Angie?

Silence.

George was at my side his face was white.

"Something's wrong."

"It's probably just static, George. Or Angie fooling around."

"Has it happened to you too?"

"A few twinges here and there."

"I think someone's playing the game with us."

"Don't be ridiculous. There is nobody else. It's just some sort of interference. It happens sometimes."

George still looked unhappy. I patted his shoulder.

"Look after Angie. She's absolutely wacked."

"Not again," he groaned.

He crossed the floor and leaned over her as she sat in the chair. He waved me over.

"Help me get her outside, will you? She doesn't look too good."

Between us we got her to the verandah.

"Someone touched me."

Angie was crying.

"You bastards!"

George put his arm around her and hugged her. She wiped her forearm across her face and smeared mascara onto her cheeks.

Oh Angie, I thought. You are such a mess.

She's all right.

It was the woman from the fireplace. She shook her head so that the hair flew back from her face, her eyes were dark. Her attention never left Angie. I'd done it so many times I saw it straight away. She was one of us.

I got inside. Her mind was a little cloudy but then the pathways cleared and I found the place I wanted.

Angie's the boy's best friend, aren't you, Angie?

She shrank away but I hung on. She curled into her husband's side and peered around. She looked at me, surprised. I smiled and touched her again. You're a brother lover aren't you Angie?

"You're like us?" she whispered.

Am I? I asked.

Angie was shivering. She combed her fingers through her hair. Pushed George away.

"Scuse me," she mumbled and staggered inside.

George followed her.

The woman turned to me.

She whispered inside my head.

You want to ask me something don't you?

What was she doing inside my mind? She hurt me.

"Who . . .?"

Tisiphone.

The pain receded.

Would you like to have me, Sweet William. There's only ever been the three of you, must have been difficult being the odd man out but then you never let that stop you, did you?

We'd make a great couple.

Want to play with me?

Her body pressed against mine, her hands moved through my hair and then down my face to my neck and my chest. She kissed me and I felt the warmth of her breath.

I had him now. He was mine and the time of watching was over.

I had won the game.

I raised my hands to his face and caressed it. Placing my lips against his I felt his arms move around my waist.

Her hands were soft against my cheeks and then heavier, harder. I could feel the pressure building and the pain moved in again.

I tried to pull her hands away but they would not budge. She was much stronger than I, she was draining me. I couldn't get a sound out through the power of her grip.

"I am all of them, Sweet William. I am every person you ever played the game with."

I heard a voice, a stranger's voice.

"Oh, sorry mate, didn't mean to interrupt. Sorry."

Although I couldn't see him, I knew he had backed away and vanished into the house.

"Does this hurt, Sweet William," her voice was deathly low. "This is for the angry man."

Her hands were a vice.

"This is for the little one."

I broke his neck like he'd crush a cockroach under the heel of his shoe. I let him go.

I fell so slowly that I could see her body going down, so slowly that I saw a missing button on her shirt, a rope around her waist, her bare feet. I lay on the wooden boards of the verandah. She squatted down and looked into my face.

"You will be a dead man soon, very soon, Sweet William,"

She rose and stepped over me. I felt the sole of her foot in my back and she pushed me over the edge of the verandah. I landed, face down, in the garden.

I heard George's voice. It was clear and cold.

"Where's Bill?"

"Sweet William's gone home," was her lazy reply. "Where's Angie?"

"In the study."

"I must have a word with her, with both of you, before I go."

I heard them walk into the house.

When we were kids I used to dream that there were monsters under my bed. George told me that if I went to Mum's sewing box, got her pins and pinned myself between the sheets, they would never get me. Sorry George, no pins.

He dreams, and this was the game he played in the space in his head where the speaker moves against the walls.

I am the sleeper and this is the game I play.

I play mindgames.

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(where can you find them between two covers?)

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My Sister

When she doesn't know I'm listening, my sister sings. Sometimes I don't know what it is that she sings. She caught me once, listening, and laughed:

"Real talent, I know . . ."

But I was more curious than critical that time. Anyway, my sister sings better than me.

"What song is it?"

"Don't you remember?"

She seemed amazed; memory — for every trivial thing — has always been my strong point. The things you remember, people would say. Such things!

"We used to sing that song on Sunday nights," my sister paused, looking for my indication of recognition. But I was lost. Sunday nights?

"Sunday nights coming home from Nan's. In the back seat of the car with everyone fighting over the blanket. Remember?"

And I remembered something. A blanket with a hole, ragged and ever growing, and the hole always landing on me — every time, no matter where I sat or how the blanket was thrown.

"We used to shout it out the window — the letters . . ." My sister began to sing again.

"H-A-Double R-I-G-A-N spells HARRIGAN . . ."

But the more she sang the more I knew the song was beyond retrieval, though I remembered other things: the window wound down and the cold night air hitting our faces as we shouted something — the song 'HARRIGAN', so my sister tells me. And I believe her now, years later.

I wonder if the others remember? My sisters and our parents sitting silently in the front. I wouldn't be surprised if they all share the memory of 'HARRIGAN' with my sister. My twin sister. The one I live with. And that surprises everyone.

We're not identical, my sister and I. Not alike at all. That's what I tell people when they learn I have a twin. They are fascinated till I tell them 'But we're not identical'. For some reason they seem less interested then, as if the novelty isn't valid any more. I don't know why. I think it makes us more unusual. But not everyone seems to agree, so when I see their interest waning I add: 'We're not very close, really' and they nod, feeling sorry for me. I think sometimes they're thinking 'If only you were identical, you'd be closer then'.

That's what I used to think. It was my way of explaining things. Identical twins are generally closer, I remember espousing with great authority when our older sister compared us with her identical twin friends.

"Well that's for sure," our older sister laughed. "You two aren't real buddy-buddies are you?"

Buddies?

There is a photo of us on our first day of school. We're standing together in the

backyard, holding hands. We have big straw hats on our heads, with elastic catching us under the chin, and belts on our uniforms that seem to wrap us at chest level. My sister's head is tilted slightly. She is grinning at the camera. I look a little unsure, a little wary. But I am holding my sister's hand. We look, for all the world, like buddies.

I do not remember 'HARRIGAN' and I do not remember ever being buddies with my sister. But the photo suggests something different. I look at it sometimes and imagine my mother on the other side of the camera, holding it a little unsteadily so that we are framed at an angle. And I imagine her thinking, as she watches another two of her children step out into a wider world away from her, that 'at least they have each other'.

We were a pair then, my sister and I. We must have done everything together. We must have been inseparable, referred to always as 'the twins'. I do remember that and growing, later, to dislike people for doing it to us, for lumping us together. But it had its advantages then — the correlation, the assumption of some equation between us.

My sister could draw. I couldn't. We sat next to one another at school. In all our primary classes we sat next to one another. That surprises me now but I think I liked it then. I must have.

In second grade we had to draw a picture for a school inspector who was coming the next week.

"Anything you like", said the teacher, an old nun who in memory appears two foot tall, but must have been taller than me. I think. She had soft hands, that nun. Unbelievably soft. She had found a kitten in the playground once and brought it into the class. We were allowed to crowd around while she nursed it, gently stroking the kitten. We could touch it too — if we were gentle — and I did, brushing the nun's fingers as she held the kitten in her lap. So soft.

So when she said 'Anything you like', I drew a cat because I knew she would like it.

But my cat ended up fat and ugly, spreading out all over the page in one big smudge. On their way round the room the soft hands hesitated by my side of the desk. Then they moved on behind me.

My sister had drawn a tree — light and clear and beautifully unsmudged. The soft hands fell upon it and from behind our desk a voice crooned, "Lovely, lovely . . ." Then those same hands fell upon us both — one each, caressing the nape of our necks.

"Such talented twins."

I could feel the whole class smiling.

I remember tapping my sister's thigh under the desk, then finding her hand.

My sister and I don't say much to one another. Ours is a fairly quiet household when both of us are home. We do not argue. I am trying to think if we have ever argued — this sister of mine who is not my buddy and who remembers a song about Harrigan.

I can't recall ever having had a conversation with my sister that lasted beyond a couple of sentences, let alone an argument. My mother would say that is a cruel thing to say. But it is true. I mean no harm. When we travel together in the car, I reach for the radio automatically. My sister used to joke about it — my reflex action — and I could see the joke. But that is our way.

We have not always been so keen to see the joke together, though I think we have understood much more together than people would assume. At opposing ends at times, yes, but understanding all the more.

When I was fourteen I got a five-year diary for my birthday. It had a lock and

key. I kept the key hidden under the carpet beside my bed. I remember one day writing on the inside back cover of that diary. I wrote with my fountain pen because I thought it was more lasting. If I had had one of those indelible pens I would probably have used that. "I DO NOT BELIEVE — AND WILL NEVER BELIEVE — THAT THE PERSON THEY CALL MY TWIN SISTER IS REALLY MY TWIN. SHE IS NOT MY SISTER AT ALL. SHE IS NOT EVEN RELATED." And I signed and dated it and even noted the time.

Every day after that when I made an entry in my diary, I would turn to the inside back cover and read my pledge.

I think I had been influenced by a book I'd read — about a baby mix-up in a hospital — in which two boys discover they had grown up in the wrong families. It is the stuff of movies and cheap tabloids. I remember that the idea became something of a family joke. Even now our family refers, laughingly, to 'the fire at the hospital' on the day my sister and I were born.

I never knew if she actually did read it — and I will never ask her — but after a few months, I suspected my sister had seen the pledge at the back of my diary. I think I burnt the diary a year or so later — I remember a ceremonial burning of some of my things in the backyard incinerator. But I'm not sure. Maybe the diary just disappeared like so many other things.

No, I don't think we ever argued. That was possible between my sister and I. So much was possible. We had a way of exposing one another though, like any siblings, except that we — being twins — had more to gain and only an assumed connection to lose.

My sister was the clown, the entertainer. She still is. To watch her now, pouring coffee and telling stories to visitors in our flat, I find her amazing. I introduced her to a friend recently and he told me later that he thought she was an 'animated' person. He seemed embarrassed to admit it to me, as if he ought not have noticed a difference between us, or something attractive in my sister that did not have its reflection in me.

But I am used to her ability to enchant. It is part of my sister. I used to use it to expose her. When she was at her most engaging with our high school friends, I would subtly shift the conversation towards things academic where I had the slight advantage. But she knew what I was doing. My sister was not dumb. She was as clever as me and would begin to relate an incident about my timidity because confidence was where her advantage lay.

It was a fair exchange. I think now there was no viciousness in our game but I'm not sure. Perhaps that is my memory again, struggling with another hazy 'HARRIGAN.' We acted, I know, mostly out of necessity. As distant as we may have been, we had a peculiar understanding — we pair.

I have a card I was given on my sixteenth birthday. It is from one of our school friends.

'Happy Birthday,' it reads 'to the quieter, less crazy one of the pair'.

It doesn't have my name on it. I held that against our friend for some time after that. I remember only now that my sister's card was nameless too.

I am getting used to hearing my sister sing around the flat. She does not sing very loudly and she does not sing very well. But she does sing better than me. I read somewhere once that singing or music of any kind is a sort of talking.

My sister has been here a year now. She moved in after I came home from hospital. I had been in a car accident; a 'serious' one so they tell me, though I don't recall much about it or the following months in hospital. I have to rely on what I am told. The doctor seems to think some part of my memory may have 'suffered a

permanent change' or some kind of loss (he is suitably vague about it), but my family laughs at the idea. My mother, who is normally silent and gentle and in awe of doctors, laughed out loud when he suggested it. I remember how the doctor looked uncomfortably at me and my mother blushed.

I spoke to a friend the other day. She was with my sister on the night of the accident. She told me that when my sister went to the phone that night, she turned and said my name before she picked up the receiver. Then as she listened to our mother telling her what had happened, she went pale. 'Deathly pale,' my friend said 'as if the life had been whipped out of her.'

I must have looked disbelieving because my friend added 'She really did'. And then my sister cried. 'Wept' is the word my friend used. 'She wept' — my sister who sings 'HARRIGAN' around our flat when she doesn't know I'm listening. It's a song I can't recall.

When people learn I have a twin, they are interested till I tell them that we're not identical. That's when I add 'We're not very close, really'. I think it must be an automatic thing that I say.



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An Inland Sea

Living on the edge, surveyors' hands wandered
over the parched salt-flats of blank paper,
the unmeasured hills and nameless rivers
running to the thick waters of an Inland Sea.

Now in a fully explored country the figures
move between chairs and the bar, carafes
fill and empty like tidal pools and we
speculate, as successfully, on personal geography.

Black roads flow beyond clinking of glass
to the uncharted shores where someone
makes uneasy love or calms the children
or (ignoring children) turns the television up.

Bearded men squinting from a rise, felt
their theories, like a tide of hope, withdraw
into the dust. The horizon would become
the red rim of salt-bitten eyes and

horses would buckle below sleeping men.
This is our dark continent; the standard
maps repeat their optimistic errors and
never the dry desolation of the suburbs.

Leaf and Load

The rain is breaking its phials
on the ornamental plum. From
the verandah I choose a leaf,

glistening with wet, and watch
until each vein becomes a rill
running into the midrib-river

and on to the leaf's tip
where the waters gather in a blister
to weight the leaf downwards

by imperceptible degrees. Slipping
from the chlorophyll plane, the rain-
drop hangs from the leaf-tip

as a ball-bearing might hang
from the point of a magnet, held
by the barest contact between

curve and cusp. Like a miniature,
transparent balloon tied by a child
to a tap, the drop swells,

bulges with a fragile elasticity,
bowing the leaf with its growing load,
until loosed at last by gravity.

Released, the leaf leaps up,
shudders to an easy equilibrium
in the light, impacting rain.

Defection and Dislocation: The Fiction of Christopher Koch

Let me begin not with an introduction to some of the themes of the fiction of Christopher Koch, which include matters of dislocation, deracination, defection, aspects of a question that is uncomfortably lodged in post-colonial consciousness: 'Where is home?' Instead, consider the artefact for which Koch has considerable responsibility: the first edition of his first novel, *The Boys in the Island*. The cover design, by Patricia Davey, is of a fairground, and alludes to the Greendale Carnival where the novel's protagonist, Francis Cullen, meets his first love, Heather Miles. Then the blurb: we are informed that 'the author of this first novel is a young Tasmanian'. Koch was born in Hobart in 1932. *The Boys in the Island* was published in London by Hamish Hamilton in 1958 hence, perhaps, the slightly sceptical note of that phrase 'young Tasmanian'. The blurb writer continued by talking of the uprooted fate of many of these islanders, in consequence of 'an inevitable lure to the mainland of Australia, to the big city and the wider world, to revolt from the enclosed lives of their homes and schools'. In this British version of Koch's story, the mainland that looms enticingly and terrifyingly for Tasmanians is subdued to any provincial's dream of a metropolis. In his fiction however, and in his commentaries upon it, Koch has insisted on Tasmanian difference and unassimilability to mainland, metropolitan ways and conceptions.

My copy of this book was sold from Fuller's Bookshop, then still established at 103 Collins street in Hobart. Koch worked there briefly, before getting the sack for reading on the job. As Varley's the bookshop is the setting for a crucial, disquieting contact between the youth Richard Miller and the firm's accountant Clive Broderick in Koch's most recent novel, *The Doubleman* (1985). The price of *The Boys in the Island* was 18/9d, at a time when the average male weekly wage was about twenty pounds. Its epigraph, from John Keats's poem, *The Fall of Hyperion*, said in part that 'the dreamer venoms all his days'. Such is the fate, to a degree, of those of Koch's characters who dream of escape and then, disconcertingly for themselves, manage it.

Koch dedicated his novel to two fellow and contemporary Tasmanians who would also become writers: Vivian [Smith] and Robert [Brain]. As has several times been his custom since, there were two parts to the novel. Such a structure indicates fissure, perhaps a rite of passage. The parts were bluntly called 'The Island' and 'The Mainland Getaway.' On the back of the book's jacket, Hamish Hamilton's fiction list was featured. Koch now kept company with Robert Ruark (*Poor No More*), Truman Capote (*Breakfast at Tiffany's*), a late Raymond Chandler (*Playback*), Albert Camus's *Exile and the Kingdom*, as well as John Dickson Carr, Stephen Spender, James Thurber, Angela Thirkell and two Simenon thrillers. Such international associations could seem to emphasise his exotic achievement, to

reinforce the reflection which Koch would make in his book of essays, *Crossing the Gap* (1987), that 'only a few novelists and poets had yet written about Tasmania at all, and fewer still who were native-born'.

By most reckonings this was not true, although works by and about Tasmanians would not have been easy to find and were seldom taught anywhere in Australia in the 1940s and 1950s. It was, however, many decades since literary memorialising of Tasmania had begun. 'Frank the Poet' had saluted Van Diemen's Land: 'Farmers' Glory! Prisoners' Hell!/ Land of Buggers! Fare ye well.' The first Australian novel, *Quintus Servinton* (1831) was written, though little of it was set in the colony. Charles Rowcroft's *Tales of the Colonies* (1843) followed in the next decade. These were accounts from differing angles by residents of a penal colony, one by a convict, the other by a free settler. Speaking of his fellow islanders in that defensive, hence perversely familiar and comforting way, Koch has said that

The convict past is like a wound, scarring the whole inner life of Tasmanians. It is taken lightly nowadays; but Tasmanians of my generation will remember when the suspicion of convict ancestry was a matter of real shame and anguish.

That Tasmanians share a single 'inner life' or may be strangely in need of the wounds which guarantee that they have participated in history are the assumptions of a parochial consciousness.

Such parochialism, oddly, is less pronounced in the Tasmanian literature of the colonial period. Caroline Leakey's novel *The Broad Arrow* (1859) drew on the post-Romantic fascination with imprisonment and the nature of guilt, to initiate fictional representations of the history of Australian convictism, although this was a current matter for her. The novel appeared in numerous abridged and illustrated editions for the rest of the century, including a version with the cosmetic title *Old Tasmanian Days* in 1887. Indebted to Leakey's work, Marcus Clarke's serialised novel, *His Natural Life* (1870-1) sought to be a cure for that historical amnesia favoured by Australians, not only by Tasmanians, but he contributed as well to the remystification of the convict past by accentuating the horrors which those who have turned Port Arthur into a theme park now seek to argue away.

Leakey and Clarke exploited the dark history of Van Diemen's Land, as would William Gosse Hay, Roy Bridges, Hal Porter, Peter Mathers and Patrick White, of novelists coming after them. Koch would also make use of bloody legends — of the suicide of a convict at Richmond in *The Boys in the Island*, of Brian Brady's descent from the renowned bushranger Matthew Brady in *The Doubleman*. There Koch commented, through the person of his protagonist, Richard Miller, how:

Sometimes it seemed to me that the fusty odour of fear, the stench of the prison-ships, were still in Hobart; and a tragic, heavy air, an air of unbearable sorrow, even in the sunshine, hung over the ruined, sandstone penitentiary and the dark blue bay at Port Arthur, south of Hobart, where the tourists went. Was it possible that the spirits of the convicts were silently clustered in that air, weighting it like sacking?

One of Koch's self-appointed tasks has been to invest Tasmania (and sometimes more exotic places in his fiction also), with such sad resonances, whether Australian or European history provides them, or intimations of the presence of an Otherland, beyond the normal boundaries of our comprehension. He has complexly replenished in fiction the resources of an island home which he and several of his main characters have after all abandoned.

Earlier novelists of Tasmania had colonised regions of the place, as well as its

past, in the way that Koch would do, notably with Hobart, the Richmond area, the east coast. Bridges, Couper, Williams and Timms wrote of the islands of Bass Strait, Marchant and Dick of the Huon Valley, Cronin of the Marrawah region, Kathleen Graves of Deloraine. They were proving, as Vivian Smith would instruct Koch during a boat ride across to Maria Island, that landscapes don't truly exist until poets and novelists create them. Koch and Smith might imagine 'the scene to be like the Hebrides — although neither of us had been to Scotland', but in fact it is 'simply itself, and Tasmanian'. While Koch and Smith realise that they are 'victims . . . of a colonial habit of mind — always seeking other landscapes in our own', this habit was easier to eradicate in theory than in practice.

At the end of 1956, Koch left the manuscript of *The Boys in the Island* with a London literary agent before sailing home to Australia. He thought of it as 'a young novel, with most of the faults and crudities of youth; but I believed it to be different from the novels then appearing in Australia. I was soon to find I was wrong.' In terms that echoed Patrick White's famous disparagement of the 'dreary, dun-coloured journalistic realism' of Australian fiction of the 1950s and before, Koch complained in *Crossing the Gap* of how in that decade

our prose writers for the most part were realists of the most dispiriting kind, devoted to a sort of glum and passionless social documentation. It was as though the physical hazards and discouragements of Australia — the droughts and crop failures and the unseen fact of the desert at its heart — had affected their spirits like a blight.

Yet in the week of his departure from Britain, he found White's novel *The Tree of Man* in a bookshop in Charing Cross Road. Then, in 1958, the year of the publication of *The Boys in the Island* Randolph Stow's novel *To the Islands* — whose title spoke of a yearning for elsewhere rather than of an insular fate — also appeared. Koch recollected his companionable pleasure, insofar as

Both of these novels were doing what I most valued in fiction: they were charting inward journeys, not just outward ones: their authors were prepared to bring to the novel the methods of poetry, and to deal with irrational and mysterious impulses in the human psyche. I wasn't alone and it delighted me.

More than a decade after *The Boys in the Island* was published, in a curious enterprise, but one congruent with themes in his fiction, Koch tried to disprove the dictum of Thomas Wolfe, a favourite American novelist of his. One of Wolfe's titles declares that 'You can't go home again'. Ignoring that, while doubtless agonising over it as well, Koch extensively revised both of his first two novels. A second version of *The Boys in the Island* appeared in 1974, sixteen years after its initial publication. The revision of *Across the Sea Wall* in 1982 had waited even longer — for seventeen years. Relinquishing his Tasmanian home in practice, Koch has hardly let go of his fiction. Themes and settings are husbanded, refashioned, refurbished, revisited. His is an *oeuvre* that is remarkably consistent in its plangency of tone, in the direction of its narrative movements and in the moral and intellectual matters which it addresses.

Thus *The Boys in the Island* introduces Francis Cullen's secret companions, the Lads, who speak silently and confidentially to him. They are the folk of an Otherland coterminous with his known world, but invisible to outsiders. Providing emotional and imaginative sustenance to a child of solitary temperament and ordinary capabilities, and delicately conceived by Koch, the Lads are precursors of the figures of the Otherworld portentously spoken of in *The Doubleman*. In the latter novel, Broderick lectures Miller to the effect the "“we're watched all the time from out there.

By enemies and allies". The Lads in *The Boys in the Island* are the product of a benign desire for identification with others, which is the stronger for a boy such as Francis Cullen. His parents scarcely appear in the book; their influence upon him is apparently negligible. Thus he is the first of Koch's protagonists to suffer from the effective absence of a family, and therefore of the assurances, contexts, history and lore that at least in fiction a family can provide.

For *The Boys in the Island*, a beautiful first novel, is an uncommon one. It carefully under-employs elements of autobiography. It is a *Bildungsroman* of a skewed and abbreviated type. This is so because Koch makes the influence of family and schooling on Cullen's life marginal. Noteworthy is the relative absence of Tasmanian social contexts. Since he elects to fail at school (as Koch did at first), Cullen's education comes not so much from institutions, as from ultimately unsatisfactory contacts with friends and from his self-communing. Despite the natural beauties of the island, the qualities of its light and air especially, the painterly Tasmania, to which Cullen is vitally receptive, the place is null and hostile towards his aspirations. His tale is one of loss rather than of growth: loss of his first love, of friendships, of illusions concerning what is offered to him at home and elsewhere, respectively by Tasmania and the mainland.

Alongside, and shading Cullen's story, Koch offers the narrative that might have been, a brilliant vignette of the stunting effects of parochial life through the story of Heather Miles. Cullen remarks 'the secret eyes that watched you in these little country towns' when he comes to Greendale (or Richmond) where Heather lives with her submissive mother and her brutal father. The latter, Vern Miles, rises above stereotype in Koch's subtle portrayal, being instinct with menace, secretive, cruel, autocratic, unpredictable. He is the sort of father whose rule immemorially has driven children away from home to seek their fortunes, yet he is Heather's father, not Cullen's. The boy's yearning for escape is peculiarly self-generated.

Heather does not escape Greendale. Even Basstown (or Hobart) seems impossibly distant to her. Abandoning Cullen, her entrapment of life in rural Tasmania is signalled by her decision to become engaged to the doltish Donnie who, she says, will "'be good to me . . . he's doing real well with his father's farm'". This is a story of contentedly stunted expectations, or parochial complacency which might have been Cullen's story, but is not. Such an alternative fate he avoids as he contrives temporarily his escape from the island.

In the second part of the novel, 'Melbourne was springing up darkly around the bus: the first big city of his life lay incredibly out the window.' Away from Tasmania, Cullen's progress becomes a more conventional one. He feels the exhilaration of loneliness, is dispirited by his 8 to 5 job in a Collins Street warehouse, suffers disillusionments as well as delusory enlightenments, has sex for the first time. Cullen becomes 'sick to suffocation of the landscape of torpor and endless fact.' The suicide of a school acquaintance, of whom we are enigmatically told that his 'destination had not been possible', provides another version of what Cullen's life might have been.

In the last chapter of *The Boys in the Island*, Cullen is back home, presumably with his parents, recuperating from concussion suffered in a car accident in Melbourne in which another of his friends was killed. He regresses to thoughts of himself as a five year old, 'in the sunny playing time' (nothing so earnest as a Romantic 'seed-time') before school began. This is an irresponsible, asocial time where Cullen seeks refuge: the Tasmania of dream where no-one can long abide, and to which no permanent return is possible.

The title of Koch's next novel spoke of another attempt to escape from an Australian place where a character is reluctantly anchored, as well as from the routine obligations of a dreary job and impending marriage, *Across the Sea Wall* (1965)

also introduced Asian settings, particularly Indonesian, into Koch's fiction. The author and his characters are compulsive, if often baffled revisitors of places, seeking there what they'd lost, or not fully appreciated and comprehended on first acquaintance. Jakarta would be the principal setting of Koch's third novel, *The Year of Living Dangerously*. King's Cross, which Robert O'Brien, the protagonist of *Across the Sea Wall*, views so disenchantedly, would be remythologised in Koch's fourth novel, *The Doubleman*.

O'Brien's yearning for escape leads him to flee Sydney for Melbourne, thence to take ship for Britain. His motives are inextricably connected with flight from domesticity and with his long deferred dream of adventure abroad. O'Brien's voyage, like the first that Koch made, is interrupted in Asia. O'Brien asks himself 'What did I want? I dreamed of a place.' The vagueness of these aspirations is not fully illuminated by a narrative which is more ambitious but less dense than that of *The Boys in the Island*. It becomes a tale of bad faith and disappointments as it relates a truncated journey which ends with O'Brien's return home to security (as the journalist he'd long wanted to be) although he feels discontentedly that 'my chance is had and lost.' He has missed out on the obscure adventure that he had sought away from Australia.

There was a long wait of thirteen years for Koch's next novel, *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978), part of which time the author spent in revision of his earlier work. He had his third publisher: Nelson, after Hamish Hamilton and Heinemann. This novel related provisional and unsatisfying homecomings; explored the dislocated life of foreign correspondents and of deracinated ones; skilfully used the setting of Soekarno's Confrontation with both Malaya and Western imperialism in 1965 to focus again on the question, where is home? Koch accordingly explored kinds of nostalgia. The lovers Guy Hamilton and Jill Bryant shared

a curious common homesickness. Jill longed for a cool, actual Norfolk; but Hamilton, through her, looked for an England that had never been his and had never, in fact, existed.

The consolations of a false nostalgia have no appeal to Cook, Koch's namesake and narrator. He also explains the self-deception of believing that it is ever possible to form strong sentimental ties with a foreign country, with other than one's home place. Of Java he comments that

The country was essentially unlovable for us, since we could not share its memories; and our little staked-out claims to emotional attachment had no real meaning.

So much the worse, then, for those who must live in other countries; have cut their ties with home.

Another kind of nostalgia is depicted in this book as in all of Koch's novels. This is expressed in the breast-fixation of several of his characters, a contradictory mixture of longing for and horror of the maternal. In *The Year of Living Dangerously*, the New Zealand journalist Kevin Condon addictively photographs bare-breasted Javanese women. Unanonymous mothers have marginal roles in the fiction which Koch has written. Cullen's mother has none at all in *The Boys in the Island*. Yet women's breasts terribly disconcert Koch's male characters. Cullen's response to a sight of the girl Keeva's 'big breasts' and their 'long smooth nudity' is confused and apprehensive:

They half-frightened him, her enormous nipples inside his desire. They made her no longer a person but only female.

Of Ilsa, his Latvian-born lover who becomes distastefully clinging when they are back in Australia from Asia, O'Brien says in *Across the Sea Wall* that 'her glimpsed breasts seem to have a mature fullness and weight more disturbing than pleasant.' Her breasts are 'great, unbandaged wounds'; further

this fearful white swelling belongs to no girl: the nipple's plum-coloured band is of appalling size, a disfigurement, swallowing nearly half the breast's whiteness.

Later, Ilsa's breasts, their 'giant aureolas, purple in the tainted light, are more than ever like injuries, maternal dugs distended in demand for their lost infant.' Ilsa has abandoned her child in Melbourne. For his part, O'Brien is another of Koch's characters who suffers from the abridgement of family. No mother is mentioned, although he thinks self-reproachfully of his father, a school housemaster.

Finally, in *The Doubleman*, Koch's protagonist Robert Miller has his first sexual relationship with Deirdre Dillon who — in her late twenties — is a decade older than he and the mother of a young son. He spies her first naked, about to bathe, through a window at night:

Her face is young, her waist frail and tender; but her breasts, which jolted and lunged as she came, are not tipped by the pale, demure pink buds of the women in paintings, but by big magenta circles; maternal fruits whose ripeness is both noble and appalling.

In the persistently ambivalent responses of his characters to the maternal breast, Koch offers a metaphor, perhaps only partly conscious of its nature, for the guilt and frustrated longing of all those who abandon their home places.

Coming twenty seven years after *The Boys in the Island*, *The Doubleman* is Koch's second Tasmanian novel, or at least the first part of each is set there. The later book is cooler, more elegiac in tone. The first person narrator, whom Koch has invariably employed, recollects his childhood disenchantedly from an adult perspective, rather than with the ingenuous, disappointed, puzzled viewpoint of Francis Cullen at the end of his adolescence. Koch mingles the narrative modes in which he recalls Miller's childhood, while more emphatically than before he seeks out the historical reverberations of the island for those who grew up there. Thus St Augustine's steeple is 'a watch-tower over a camp of fear'; 'the fusty odour of fear, the stench of the prison-ships, were still in Hobart.' For a short while, as Miller remembers how 'a Christian Brothers' education in the 1950s had a fine pitch of dread, unlikely to be matched again', we are threatened with the direst form of Australian autobiographical fiction: the C.B.C./loss of Catholic faith novel.

Soon Koch shifts into melodrama, a mode in whose rehabilitation his contemporaries Patrick White and Thomas Keneally have assisted. Melodrama he feels to be congruent with his Tasmanian setting. At twelve, Richard Miller is a polio victim, who regularly encounters in Fiddler's Lane on his way to school a tall, thin, menacing man who walks bent to the left, 'as though he had a secret wound.' It is a characteristic of melodrama that the victim feels that she or he is destined for that role, is due to be punished. Miller says that 'I had know I would catch Paralysis long before it happened.' It seems to him an apposite disability for a Tasmanian and he suggests how

the leg-irons and the lash of a hundred years before still hung near, like bad dreams; now, suburban and respectable under your new name, you found your children in irons once more, tormented by pains for searching than the lash.

Miller's family circumstances are the familiar ones of Koch's fiction. His father was killed in the Second World War; his mother is ineffectual and is altogether forgotten once he moves interstate. His dreaming, like Cullen's and O'Brien's, is of escape. As a stricken child he found an avenue in his readings about 'the Otherworld' (counterpart of Cullen's 'Otherland'); as a late teenager he is not however seduced by the talk of the mysterious and portentous Clive Broderick (his childhood stranger in the lane) of the doubleness of the universe, nor by Broderick's threatening reference to the watching enemies and allies out there. The occult material concerned with Broderick and his acolyte Darcy Burr is Koch's ambitious and not wholly persuasive attempt to chart the receptive ground in Australia for American ideas of the 1960s, from the pleasures of hallucinogenic drugs to the fiendish example of Charles Manson.

Miller is too priggish and canny to seek such ways of escape, however keenly he wishes to translate himself from his less than fulfilling island. American music vicariously takes him away. Bessie Smith, 'the great, far voice of the Empress of the Blues, singing of the Mississippi floods and violent passion, created in us both a similar ecstasy, while beyond my little balcony the lights winking in Newtown became the lights of Louisiana.' Later, as he hears his cousin Brian Brady sing a Hank Snow song, he finds that Brady gives it 'a plangent resonance of his own which made the ballad personal: his own song of vagrancy and train-cry, where Carolina became Tasmania.'

Usually the transposition works the other way. It always does for Miller. On the east coast of the island he sees the Hazards across the bay from Swansea as 'lavender peaks which always suggested the remote South Sea islands, beyond the sun's glittering track.' Confiding dreams to Deirdre Dillon, he asserts that 'This was no longer the east coast of Tasmania, it was the Mediterranean'. Thus the physical escape that Miller will make is imaginatively anticipated by the reconstitution of Tasmanian landscapes as those of exotic and more alluring locales.

Like Cullen, Miller gets away to Melbourne, but he stays there. This part of his growing up is told abruptly: 'I went there as a youth; I left as a somewhat disenchanted young man, harbouring that coldly passionate determination to change his life which so often comes at 25.' Moving to Sydney in the early 1960s, Miller makes the acquaintance of refugees from the war in Europe. He marries one, Katrin, with whom he shares or invents an odd affinity;

Although we were foreign to each other, we had significant things in common, we found. Our different childhoods, in a small city in Tasmania and a town in southern Germany, we were like shards from the same pot . . . We were both strangers on this latitude, we said, whose radiance in the end was like the glare of delirium. We shared the same homesickness.

This is stretching a point, expressing a desperate desire on behalf of the Tasmanian-born Miller for some similar experience of place to his own, such as mainlanders, ignorant of Tasmania's shaping geographical differences, can never share. Koch makes a likewise strained connection in one of the essays in *Crossing the Gap* (1987), where he recollects a year in 1960-1 spent at the Stanford University Writing Centre on a scholarship. Ken Kesey and Larry McMurtry were fellow students. He and the latter, wrote Koch, 'discovered how much a boyhood on a ranch in western Texas and one spent largely in rural Tasmania had in common'.

A significant secondary function of some pieces in *Crossing the Gap* is to instruct us in our reading of Koch's fiction, and especially of *The Doubleman*. Writers, he says, 'are bound to mimic in some way the pulse of the society that produced them.' 'Geography', he believes, 'is the great hidden shaper of history and character.' Having

made this an article of faith, Koch yet insists upon a contradictory experience of place for Australian writers, not only for Tasmanians. In 'The Lost Hemisphere', where he poses explicitly the question 'Where does an Australian writer belong?' Koch declares that

I respect the power of geography in forming civilisation as Marxists respect economic determinism, and Tasmania's geographical situation has always seemed to be very strange and piquant.

After all, he has shifted to an insular concern. As always, it is the Tasmanian experience that is compelling for him. In particular, Koch reckons that 'A Writer who is a native of such an island comes quite soon to the problem of trying to match its spirit with the spirit of the ancestral land in his head — the lost northern hemisphere.'

Koch offers his childhood memories of the *Strand Magazine*, with its cover illustration of the famous London street; of his naming for Christopher Robin and his reading of Dickens; and — at length — of his delayed but inevitable journey to England, where he found 'a real copy of the *Times*, bought from an actual, cloth-capped Cockney.' As he guiltily recollects, the real world had been promoted in his Tasmanian childhood as somewhere other than there. It is a sentiment which is echoed in Peter Conrad's recollected childhood lament of Tasmania in his autobiography, *Down Home*: 'This was not the life I wanted; somehow I'd been given the wrong one. My tears raged at the injustice — or incompetence — of it.'

It is not until almost the end of *Crossing the Gap*, Koch's fifth and most recent book, that he confronts in person the reasons for his desertion of Tasmania. All his previous work had in a crucial sense been a making of amends for a decision that for most of those who've taken it has been unavoidable if not always welcome, one not much investigated and perhaps little regretted. Smuggled into an essay on 'The Novel as Narrative Poem' (another prescription for how to interpret Koch's work) are remarks on Australian absences, which belong to a hoary tradition of commentary in the literature of this country. What is lacking in Australian fictional materials, by Koch's accounting, are history ('extremes of despair and joy'), 'the transcendental', 'Hunger for God.'

Yet these are not specifically Tasmanian deficiencies. A fuller explanation is given when Koch interprets his own decision through a reading of Christina Stead's novel, *For Love Alone* (1945): 'that terrible lack of possibilities, that empty suburban silence that maddened poor Teresa' in Sydney, drove him away from his home city in like manner. Equivocally, in the mode of speech often forced upon the voluntary exile as much as on the revenant figure (these being two of the common and often unhappy predicaments for the native Tasmanian), Koch recollects how as a young man 'I'd fallen in love with the landscape of my native Tasmania; but this wasn't enough to hold me.'

The human possibilities of the place had never satisfied the restless, socially marginal characters at the centre of Koch's fiction. Their imaginative powers were denied the chance of expression until long after they'd left Tasmania. As well, these youths and young men did not feel themselves to be bound by family connections or obligations to Tasmania, nor by any practical expectation that a living, broadly or narrowly conceived, could be made there. Perhaps these characters' suppression and denial of familial links is another post-colonial reflex, expressive of a desire to have come from nowhere. In recompense for his departure and for theirs, Koch made his male protagonists the vehicles of limpid, unencumbered responses to the benignly indifferent and peculiar natural beauties of the island landscapes.

In the sequence of Koch's books, a single narrative line can be discerned, a rhythm of departure, return, departure, of dislocation and relocation. In the beginning, in *The Boys in the Island*, Cullen attempted to escape from Tasmania; reached but was defeated in Melbourne; came home. The mainland is the setting for *Across the Sea Wall*, and the escape which O'Brien meditates is away from Australia. That also fails, to the extent that the European destination is not achieved and he comes home, albeit to professional and material rewards. His practical needs are satisfied at the expense of his imaginative yearning.

In the third novel, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, the characters cope with their uprooting from home as a condition of their careers. Provisional, dis-locations suit their temperaments. Nevertheless, as Cook/Koch warns, Java . . . Asia . . . cannot truly be home for them. For the time being, they've stifled that private, plaintive question of where home is. *The Doubleman* marks Koch's temporary homecoming in fiction. The terrain of his childhood is traversed again. Miller's desire to leave the island is represented as something inevitable. The anxiety and bad faith which might attend defection do not concern him. His is more simply the story of the provincial youth who goes up to conquer the city, as did Dick Whittington, Rastignac, Paul Morel. In a manner, Miller succeeds.

In this sequence of exits, returns and final departures, Koch might seem — over nearly three decades — to have resolved his ambivalent feelings as a Tasmanian. He did spend seven years in Launceston in the 1970s. More recently, his reappearances are as an honoured revenant, a favourite son. Apparently he suffers from none of the parochial scorn that was visited on Peter Conrad in some quarters for his version of Tasmania, and his autobiography. Koch's reputation depends in part and properly upon his Romantic evocations of the shaping climatic and topographical features of his home place, not nearly so much on any new mystification of its history. Yet *Crossing the Gap*, in whose essays Koch rehearses his own peripatetic career, discloses a guilt at leaving Tasmania still not wholly assuaged.

In that crucial short trip across the Mercury Passage from the mainland to a small offshore prison island, called after Van Diemen's wife, Maria, Koch confronted the persistent habit of his representations of Tasmania in terms of elsewhere, instead of as 'simply itself, and Tasmanian'. The dream of escape from it was bound up with celebrations of his home place. The elsewhere in question could be the England of childhood fantasy, an America conjured by fiction and song, or such vague, legendary locations as the islands of the South Seas, or the Mediterranean. Notably that other place could be an internal, imaginative land where one withdrew from the present.

Koch's literary career has involved a long, poignant and courageous wrestling with the reflexes of dependence that inform a colonial habit of mind. No Tasmanian, writing of Tasmania, has more fully exposed, knowingly and subliminally, the attachments and repulsions that the place engenders; the binding emotional ties which war against the desire to venture away that the intense parochial experience of Tasmania also creates. None of his contemporary Australian novelists, much as they've been troubled by the question 'where is here?', by veritable and spiritual exile, have so extensively and painfully confronted the balance of gifts and harms in their antipodean lives as Koch has done.

Inheritance

In an Outback hotel,
black women of their land,
sit bent on bolted benches.
Their flowered dresses wilt
beneath fly-stained fluorescents,
and dreamless eyes scan the floor.

In a doorway a delinquent dark mongrel,
coarse-haired and lean,
jacks a bitch on heat.
Loud drunken whites shout applause
for their boy,
betting beers on his time.

In another dawn,
crowing children stray with homeless mongrels.
Hardened snot highlights brown-black faces
as they strut the morning,
innocent of being lost forever
in the cool hours
before skyful eyes scan the dust.

Interview with Peter Porter

Peter Porter, b. 1929, Brisbane, Queensland. Educated at Queensland Public Schools. Left Australia to live and work in England in 1951. Poetry volumes include: *Once Bitten, twice bitten* (1961); *Poems ancient and modern* (1964); *A Porter folio* (1969); *The last of England* (1970); *Preaching to the converted* (1972); *Living in a calm country* (1975); *The cost of seriousness* (1978); *English subtitles* (1981); *Fast forward* (1984); *The Automatic Oracle* (1987); forthcoming: *Possible Worlds*. Rendered versions of Martial's epigrams in *After Martial* (1975). Edited: *A Choice of Pope's Verse* (1971); *The English Poets from Chaucer to Edward Thomas* (1974), with Anthony Thwaite; *Thomas Hardy* (1981), with photographer John Hedgecoe; *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1982). Also produced four poetry volumes with artwork by Australian artist Arthur Boyd: *Jonah* (1973); *The lady and the unicorn* (1975); *Narcissus* (1984); *Mars* (1988). Collaborated with composers: song cycles, songs, ballads, opera. Former advertising copywriter; freelance writer for past twenty years: poet, journalist, broadcaster, critic, specializing in poetry and music. Awards include: the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize, 1983, for *Collected Poems* and the Poetry section of the Whitbread Prize, 1987, for *The Automatic Oracle*. Wrote editorial texts for Canadian photographer Roloff Beny's *Roloff Beny in Italy* (1975) and for *Sydney* (1980) in Time-Life "Great Cities" series of books. This interview took place during the second World Poetry Festival at Harbourfront, Toronto, 10 February, 1989.

The interview began with Porter reading his poem: "What I Have Written I Have Written", prefacing his reading with the following comments:

PP The title comes from Pontius Pilate's reply to the Sanhedrin when they complained about what he put on top of the Cross: "This is Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews", which was blasphemous. Presumptuous though it may be, this seems not a bad caption to one's life and one's efforts, because [despite] the wonderful poems you're *going* to write, the only ones that really count are those that you *have* written. So this poem is part autobiographical, part confessional, part allegorical:

What I Have Written I Have Written

It is the little stone of unhappiness
which I keep with me. I had it as a child
and put it in a drawer. There came
a heap of paper to put beside it,
letters, poems, a brittle dust
of affection, swallowed by memory.

Aphorisms came. Not evil, but
the competition of two goods
brings you to the darkened room.
I gave the stone to a woman
and it glowed. I set my mind
to hydraulic work, lifting words
from their swamp. In the light from the stone
her face was bloated. When she died
the stone returned to me, a present
from reality. The two goods
were still contending. From wading pools
the children grew to darken
gardens with their shadows. Duty
is better than love, it suffers no betrayal.

Beginning again, I notice
I have less breath but the joining
is more golden. There is a long way to go,
among gardens and alarms,
after-dinner sleeps peopled by toads
and all the cries of childhood.
Someone comes to say my name
has been removed from the Honourable
Company of Scribes. Books in the room
turn their backs on me.

Old age will be the stone and me together,
I have become used to its weight
in my pocket and my brain.
To move it from lining to lining
like Beckett's tramp,
to modulate it to the major
or throw it at the public -
all is of no avail. But I'll add
to the songs of the stone. These words
I take from my religious instruction,
complete responsibility -
let them be entered in the record,
What I have written I have written.

BW *"The little stones of unhappiness" is one of the impulses from which your poetry springs?*

PP Certainly; it's rather sad that one tends to be moved by sad feelings to write bright verses. W.H. Auden, in his poem "The truest poetry is the most feigning", says: "*Oh happy grief* is all sad verse can say." Auden's title is a quotation from Touchstone's answer to the country bumpkins who wanted to know why poetry wasn't easier to understand. The point is, verse can't change anything. To write of an unhappiness does not necessarily produce an unhappy product because the misery is converted into energy. That energy, which is needed for the execution, is what is delightful in all art. Out of despair comes richness.

I don't mean people can only write when unhappy. But there's a keynote, a pedal, of disaffection, something wrong with the universe.

BW *An irritation under the skin, a splinter?*

PP It doesn't always produce pearls, of course. It saddens me that literature has a burden of meaning. No matter what you do with words, even if you write nothing but conjunctions, somebody will find some way to impose meaning, unlike music, which is the ideal art, my favourite. It is an absolute art, entirely pliable. You have a syntax in music, but not a series of absolute meanings. It is the only art in which repetition is tolerable. Schubert, for instance, was often miserable, but wrote much pleasant, cheerful-sounding music. Language is more difficult to shape than are the materials of the plastic arts. Something in the poem always indicates the unhappiness. Since there is no purpose in being on earth, as far as I can see, I think we have a challenge to be more resilient, happier, than we are.

BW *For the record, a basic question: you're billed on the Harbourfront programme as representing Australia, yet you've now lived in England, for nearly forty years and have said that you felt more at home there than when growing up in Australia. Do you now see yourself as primarily Australian again? Where do your primary cultural affiliations lie nowadays? Or are these not of any concern?*

PP I sometimes think I belong to the most notorious nationalist country: the country of "me", so patriotism and allegiances are small matters in comparison with my egotism! I was very alienated from Australia in childhood — not entirely the fault of the country, but primarily my own circumstances: being born at the beginning of the Depression, losing my mother when I was nine, being sent to a series of unpleasant boarding schools, although the last school wasn't too bad. My countrymen didn't fill me with special joy; nobody at that time did; I was going through a Dostoevskian suspension of misery. I set out for England, thinking that somebody as untutored as myself [had] better go where things are rather better done — which, at that time, they were [in England].

I felt quite at home in England because all my reading had been from the British classics. From the moment I landed, nothing ever surprised me. My expectations [were] so sharp that the country had to live up, or down, to them. I don't pretend it was easy in England; I had my usual statutory difficulties, my first kind of breakdown in 1953. So I went back to Australia, but no sooner did I get on the boat, than I recognized that I'd made a mistake. So I saved up and came straight back. I didn't see Australia [again] for twenty years.

It's rather odd, but Australians don't like expatriates, they see them as renegades. On the other hand, they take an interest in them so, after a while, I was invited to the Adelaide Festival and found the country changed beyond recognition for the better. I now go back quite often and have many friends and literary acquaintances there. My two daughters are living in the very Sydney suburb where my mother lived before the First World War. So I'm very attached to Australia. And, of course, you *are* the product of your first twenty-two years. So, however long I stay in England, I am Australian and will always think of myself as such. My wife was, and my daughters are, English. But, remember, England — or London, I should say — is a polyglot, multinational place.

BW *In the introduction to an article by Les Murray in Australian Poems in Perspective [1978], your poetry is described as "a vindication of the cultivated private life." What have proved the most valuable aspects of leading such a life?*

PP [As] I have a badly formed sense of *real* reality, I need created reality around me. I have said provocative things like: "When I was young, a Mozart sonata was more real [for me] than a Brisbane tram." This is not because I've got a wonderful skill at following Mozart, it's simply that I have a better sensory perception of created things, works of art, attitudes, ideas, than of what, I suppose, is the real business of the world: how we go about living our lives.

But I don't underestimate the dangers of tending to create out of second-hand experiences. Making art out of art is perfectly legitimate though not, perhaps, the highest thing. It's best to be an amazing genius like Shakespeare, who makes his art out of proverbial experience; people know it, but it takes *him* to point out to them what they know. That's the higher form of creation. At one's best, one occasionally enters that domain. Les is good at that. The strength of his poetry is that he does write for the tribe. It's not always *my* tribe; he tends to write for the people he esteems: the country people, not the city people. Even so, he's basically writing for everybody. His countrymen recognize him because he's a sort of proverb-giver. Not that he is original so much, but as Alexander Pope said, the poet's purpose is to say well what everybody knows. Originality comes in the expression. I used to think: "How could one write when one has nothing new to say?" Anything that sets out to be new — the Greek prefix "neo-" always makes me [wary] — is a warning light. But newness, in fact, comes out of the individual struggle with oldness, the unswervable response to what already exists. For me, the great artists may be innovatory simply because of their personalities. Someone like Stravinsky seems the ideal artist for the 20th century: totally original with already familiar materials. He hasn't changed the world like some demented sorcerer's apprentice, as Schönberg did.

BW *In fact, Shakespeare often took old tales from a variety of sources.*

PP Continuously, yes.

BW *In his article, Murray regarded poets — especially in Australia — as either "Athenian", or "Boetian". He defined Athenians as urban-minded, tending towards drama, philosophy and political theory in cultural activities and expressions. Boetians, he typified as rural, small-holding, traditional-minded poets — with farmers as the audience, perhaps and with dance, pageant, sport and commemoration as their preferred cultural pursuits. Athenians, then, are the metropolitan elite; Boetians are provincials. He draws two images of the artist: the Athenian intellectual or Bohemian licenced buffoon; the Boetian craftsman, with some remnant of priestly dignity. How do you view the artist's practice and role in society?*

PP I'll approach the question by taking up points that Les made, then deviating a little from them.

Firstly, Les's dichotomy is flattering for both Athenian and Boetian. Few people belong in exemplary fashion to either. It's flattering to me to be seen as a sophisticated Athenian against Les's simple Boetian, but Les is an infinitely clever, subtle person and I am, by the standards of Athenian civility, extremely rough-hewn. I'm not exactly a combination of Pope and Auden, so that opposition is not entirely true. However, he touches on an important matter, though he misses one element of the Athenian self. It's true, drama is the Athenian subject, but Athenian playwrights usually chose what you might call Boetian themes; their plays are nearly always set in Thebes, or such a place. Of course, there is *poetry* in the drama; so his definition is carefully designed to look fair, but leaves out certain qualities. The Athenian type of imagination is simply a different kind of poetry. It's the difference between Sophocles, or Aristophanes on the one hand, and Pindar on the other. I think there is a

poetry to be made out of market-places, cities, business, contention.

It's interesting that Shakespeare, a country boy — a country-town boy, though; he didn't [actually] dig up the fields — achieved a high level of poetry in some of his city dramas: the history plays and his Roman plays are often very "citified"; the Roman imagination was urban. The fight between town and country tends to be sporadic. None of the troops can be relied upon to wear the colours they're supposed to wear. I, myself, am a characteristic Australian in many more respects than Les, but I'm not characteristic of the myth, which is that all Australians live in the bush; in reality, hardly any of them do. Those who do live in the cities, however, like to see themselves as intrepid bushmen, or suffering cocky farmers. In many cases, they are anything but! So we have a problem, what the Germans call, "Schein und Sein": appearance and reality turn out not to be the same thing. My ideal poets are townsmen: Shakespeare — he's everybody's ideal poet. — Pope, Rochester; in the 20th century: Auden and Wallace Stevens, utterly unlike though they are. They may be interested in "pastoral" poetry, but for them, it is merely the colour on a palette. William Empson, in his book *Some Versions of Pastoral*, seemed to prove that everything is pastoral in the end. The poetic imagination converts all things that happen into the pastoral convention but many things happen in a cityscape rather than a countryside.

BW *And this will be more so as civilizations reach certain stages.*

PP Yes, the country[side] will become ever more idealized.

BW *Do you still believe that the tension between pastoral and civic responses is the reason for civilization's achievements to date?*

PP I do. For instance, the richest cultures are probably those which were not unified into central states, but had city-state loyalties: the basic unit was the walled city. Even today, Italy is not unified. There's no such thing as Italians. There are Tuscans and Piemontesi, even town identities: the Pratesi; Prato is not a big town, but you get the feeling that it is. It's good for building up empires to have a large central state. That's why Britain and France were able to develop centralized orders before the Germans and Italians. That also led to the fact that English is the world language. The English language is a great cultural achievement, but the cultural level of, say, Italian city-states was higher than that of the kingdom of England.

What worries me [now, however,] is that the world is filling up so fast. In my more gloomy moments, I think that all the heavy industry will soon be done in Korea and Japan; the rest of us will be living in peculiar kinds of service industries. Sooner or later, the Japanese and the Koreans will say: "Why should we do all the dirty work and sell you things on credit?"

BW *Do you agree with Les Murray that it's in Australia that a synthesis of Athenian and Boetian cultural response can occur? Do you think this is desirable and that it is already being achieved there?*

PP It's very desirable, but it's rather [too] hopeful of Les to think that it's more likely to happen in Australia than anywhere else. It already has occurred in the works of William Shakespeare. It's only now that Australians' share in English-based love of language is coming to the fore because [hitherto] Australian literature was dogged by provincialism. Despite what people say, provincialism is not a good thing except in the hands of a genius. What is interesting is that you're getting a kind of compost — you can't grow things without soil — of past writing and achievement which are specifically Australian and not from Europe. Australians are now getting confident about what they have to say. You can then use this [native] development and the deep-based inheritance of British literature. Out of that compost, a flowering

will come, is coming. Novelists like Peter Carey are to some extent internationalist, Australian [and] even slightly American. With [expansion of] communications, including films and television, a world-wide cultural exchange is going on.

BW *[If] civic and pastoral responses and tensions create civilizations, does this apply mostly to so-called Western civilizations? If so, what do you regard as the origin of cultural expression for aboriginal peoples, including those of Australia?*

PP Every society has a powerful sense of its culture. I am always suspicious of anthropology, which attempts to explain the acculturation of the peoples it observes. [Those observed] wear these manners so *un*-self-consciously that any observation introduces the element of self-consciousness, which nullifies the explanation. I know almost nothing about Aborigines in Australia, but societies which are nomadic tend to hold everything in common and to have a highly developed religious and ritual sense. With the organization of cities, however, ritual and religion break down. You get the development of questioning and scepticism, of otherwise unquestionably held beliefs.

There's no society that does not rely heavily upon rituals — and not only religious [ones] — to keep it going. Mr Lal,¹ at the dinner table, said to me: "Can a Western European really believe the myths he uses?" I said, "That is a meaningless question, because it puts such a weight on the word *believe*." If one writes a poem about Orpheus, one is not interested in whether there ever was an Orpheus, but in the mode of feeling which gave rise to the Orpheus myth. He said: "This is a corrupt, western way of using myths. Our myths are totally real to us." I'm not sure I believe him, but I can't see any alternative to questioning the myths. It's utterly unimportant to me whether Jesus Christ [actually] lived. The point is, there is a Jesus Christ-shaped need somewhere and it was filled. It's one of those questions that comes up as people make alarming conclusions about how Time works. In church, I never get a sense of the living human being called Christ, who was crucified; instead, I get a sense of generations of people who are inventing God in some way. I am not put off by the West being categorized as materialist and lacking in that spirituality which the East possesses, because there is a spirituality in materialism. The crass, greedy nastiness in Western capitalism doesn't lie in the materialist nature of our life, it lies in our gross nastiness within that materialism.

BW *Your poem "An Australian Garden" is [particularly] interesting in that it is one of the few poems where you write specifically and lovingly of Australian landscape. The setting is not the bush, but an actual garden which has shades of both harmonious Edenic beauty and human anguish. Was the specific origin of that poem a new beginning in your relationship to your native country?*

PP It certainly was because it was written directly out of the experience of revisiting Australia after twenty years absence. It's a garden in North Sydney, but heavily mythologized. The real garden had been in part a tennis court which the owner had re-planted with roses — a form of sacrilege in Australia: getting rid of a sports area and re-planting it with shrubs! There *was* a cat there. The snails *were* coming out. There is a great difference between the garden seen at night and [during] the day. And there were those huge, smooth-boled, gum trees — angophoras — and currawongs (birds), which make a peculiar noise. There was, however, another element: the garden seemed painful in that it was Edenic, idyllic and at the same time, there was a knowledge of the expulsion which follows. But, it's a *post*-expulsion garden as well! There was a personal element: the woman in it changed my life — eventually unfortunately, but at the time

it looked more fortunate. So it makes an attempt at pleasure-ful ecstasy [while] also knowing that the basic nature of humanity is painful. At the end, you realize that there's no snake in Eden, but there is death, horror, pain, loss. That's the stiffening which holds the world together. In Auden's prose poem "Vespers", from the *Horae Canonicae*, he says that you can't have a state without blood to bind it together. The title poem of my recent book ends: "Eden filters through the public parks, the weekend wilderness as stiff as Astroturf/ with fallen blood" — fallen blood of all sorts. I'm a meat-eater, but if I had to spend time in abattoirs, I'd never touch it. I live on this falsity: I know all happiness is based on somebody else's fallen blood and I don't like it.

BW *Do you still think of Nature as The Great Australian Muse?*

PP Yes, it's the great restorative. Australians are very open people, but not good at creating attractive urban lives. So even if you're not a nature worshipper, you give yourself homeopathic doses of it because it's the great Australian referent, there being so much of it. Unlike North America[n] landscape, it's indifferent to you, unconquerable; so much of it is arid, unlivable. The first time I flew across the United States, vast place though it is, I was surprised to notice that almost every part is lived in. You'd never get a sense of that in Australia.

BW *You've said that you're actually at home nowhere, or that as a writer, you could perhaps be at home anywhere. You have also said that great works of art give us a home to live in; [that] it's the tradition and duty of the artist to make that home. Since you're noted for vivid portrayals of 20th century pessimism, scepticism, angst, do you find it ironic that your poetic gift creates a home in which the reader has a heightened sense of alienation, or exile?*

PP That is a paradox, admittedly, but any home is a home. With Shakespeare, you get, in some plays, an extraordinary sense of rapture, freshness; in others, the most depressing feelings of a vile, complex place. That one great mind could give you both: all kinds of freshness and the truly evil alienation of plays like *Troilus and Cressida*, *Timon of Athens*.

I don't think anything could endure as a work of art unless it took into account the way things actually are, although that depends on how you perceive them. Nowadays, I would modify [slightly] what I said: as I get older, I think that the purpose of art is just that there should be art. I wouldn't, now, want to write a book like Boethius's *The Consolations of Philosophy*; I wouldn't find it very consoling! I don't find art a consolation. It's a sort of necessity, the same way air is. You can live without it, but it's so much part of what there is. [As a writer], you're a creator: you can't get off that mill. I suppose you can stop writing, but if you do, you don't feel right. So you do a bit more.

BW *[Although] you're regarded as "metropolitan" in style, your recent work hasn't seemed this way to me. Is your poetry developing a more cosmopolitan stance? In the last few titles: Machines, English subtitles, The Automatic Oracle and in your overtly mythological sequences: Mars, Narcissus, Jonah, The Lady and the Unicorn, you are incorporating contemporary and historical mythology, social and personal mythologies.*

PP Well, when I was young, music meant most to me. I was trying to write words, shapes, that were analogous to music: hard outline of subject matter, just as you have to have themes in music. In the early '70s, I became very interested in painting. Bob Gray² and I went around the Toronto Gallery [The Art Gallery of Ontario] together. In the modern section, he identified every single abstract picture; on the other hand, I was totally fazed by them. But I was able to identify most of the Old Masters by sight. Painting in its iconographic sense means more to me; I began introducing an iconographic element into the

poems, which are therefore becoming more studded with myth and references of that sort.

BW *You combine cosmological, regional, particular local [elements], as well as verbal and visual ones in those mythological titles such as Jonah.*

PP Right, but remember, I have not included those [titles] in my *Collected* works. This has rather upset Arthur Boyd who does the pictures, but I regard them as separate from the other poems. They are the imagination performing a commission task; all four were specifically commissioned. Arthur likes to use words to inspire him to paint, not that he actually takes too much notice of them, it's a question of counterpoint.

BW *They're not literal illustrations.*

PP Not literal at all. Arthur is an artist with different styles. He particularly likes doing the quick drawing; he finds poems very stimulating for that. If you take a theme like *Narcissus*, that has been treated by many people, then the moment you think about it, you see how many different aspects it has. It becomes entertaining to develop these in individual poems. But you are working at a less preoccupied state than when writing a single poem for yourself. Writing to these themes doesn't have the same immediate need. You're working on a different throttle and can even be slightly more frivolous, irresponsible.

BW *I wonder, however, if those [poems] give more glimpses into the real Peter Porter, even though they're highly transformed. It's almost as if you're off-guard in them.*

PP Very possibly; they're more revealing.

BW *More spontaneous?*

PP Yes, I think so. They've not been much noticed — well, my work doesn't get focused on by literary critics much anyway. In England, those books usually get good reviews for the poems and bad reviews for the pictures. Englishmen are notoriously bad about painting. As I put [it] in one of my *Exequy* poems — I've just been in Florence where I gave a talk and quoted this passage about when my wife and I were wandering around in Italy:

I think of us in Italy:
Gin-and-chianti-fuelled, we
Move in a trance through Paradise,
Feeding at last our starving eyes,
Two people of the English blindness
Doing each masterpiece the kindness
Of discovering it — from Baldovinetti
To Venice's most obscure jetty.

The English cannot *see* anything, despite the fact that there are good English painters. That's why English literary critics just ignore Arthur's pictures, or find them ugly and pointless. The opposite happens in Australia. The Australians admire Arthur almost to the point of idolatry, [so they] welcome his pictures and ignore my poems! That's not quite true; *Mars*, the lightest, got some good [reviews]. [It's] peculiar [but], the nastier the subject, the more frivolous and light the treatment. So, *Mars*, the most serious subject, has the most skittish poems and the most irresponsible drawings. There's something lurid, garish, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer-ish about the idea of Mars, the god of war.

BW *How did that particular collaboration with Arthur Boyd come about?*

PP It's the product of a genial London publishing Maecenas, Tom Rosenthal, who is a great [art] collector. He'd been buying Arthur Boyds for some time. I had

worked with Tom. And Arthur liked working with poets. So Tom said: "We must bring you two together."

We've now done four books and are quite close friends. I stay with Arthur, sometimes, at his house at Shoalhaven River, near Sydney. He spends part of his time there and part in Suffolk [England]. He [also] has a big, beautiful house in Tuscany which he allows the Australia Council Visual Arts Board to use so that painters and art critics can stay in the heart of the Tuscan countryside.

BW Is there a possibility that you and Boyd will collaborate on an Australian theme?

PP Well, there are Australian elements in all four of those collaborative books, especially *Mars*. Funnily enough, Arthur and I were talking about that, in Shoalhaven, last year. I think I'm going to suggest that to him when he gets back [to England]. He'd like to do another collaboration [and] I think we will choose a purely Australian theme, though what it would be, I don't know.

BW It seems an obvious next step and I'm not aware that it's been done before.

PP People like Norman Lindsay have done it. There are Australian themes, but they tend to be pastoral; we would not want to do a pastoral theme. I don't mean it wouldn't be to do with some aspects of the countryside. A book has been done recently on the rain forest: poems, with paintings by Charlie Blackman.

BW Were the poems by Tom Shapcott?

PP No, but he's doing a book on Blackman. Al Alvarez, the English poet, did the poems. They weren't so much poems as rhapsodical prose pictures. Blackman and he were old friends. Blackman brought him out; Al was very uneasy with this. He went up to North Queensland, but didn't enjoy it. The end result was not [a] very happy [one]. It didn't have a theme, but rather a topography.

I don't want to do a Ned Kelly, or any bush ranger.

BW But once you start thinking about it, once the seed is planted, perhaps the subject will suggest itself?

PP That's right. I've also collaborated with an Australian composer, Don Banks. We did two works together. Both had good titles: "Tirade" and "Limbo": single-word titles.

BW As in your collaborations with Boyd.

PP "Tirade" was given first performance by Les Musiciens du Centre de Musique, run by Ken Humble, an Australian. In French, it's pronounced: T-ee-rad; it sounds nicer! It had an Australian theme: I introduced Bert Hinckler's bi-plane into it.

Explorers are obvious themes, but they tend to have been done: Burke and Wills, Captain Sturt, Major Mitchell, and Leichhardt — whom Patrick White took over for *Voss*. But, perhaps some Australian aviators — Bert Hinckler's bi-plane used to hang in the Brisbane Museum in my childhood. He was the first man to fly single-handedly a plane from Australia to England. Hinckler: sounds German; he came from Bundaberg, or Proserpine, or Muttaborra; one of those central Queensland towns. He died doing it again, crashed outside Florence, in the Pratomanio. His body wasn't found for ages. There was some suspicion that some Italians had tinkered with his plane. Australians always believe that sort of thing, just like the legends which prevail in the Ligurian Gulf that Shelley was not drowned, but robbed by pirates and thrown overboard, but I don't believe that!

BW Returning to poets and critics and the dynamics between them: you have said, "to be too much interested in the teaching of poetry is to overestimate the

role of the university and schooling in the creation of art." You also said, "on the whole, poets are more influenced by what they read than by what they're taught." And in the anthology The English Poets from Chaucer to Edward Thomas [co-edited with Anthony Thwaite], you said, "This book was written to introduce people to the pleasure of reading poetry, not to add to the weight of studying it." Since the volume of criticism and academic study of poetry continues to increase, do you still hold those earlier views?

PP Yes. Of course, like every other fallible human being, I am only too delighted to read a long exegetical essay devoted to my endeavours, but I don't set it at a high level. It's pleasurable to know that the reading has produced a sufficiently ruminative sense that someone can make a foray into saying what they think the work is about. But the paradigm of criticism should be conversation, not interrogation. Just as we find time in every 24 hours to talk to our friends, so in writing and criticism of poetry, people ought to talk about the things in their work that are preoccupying them.

There's too much clever, but pointless, criticism done. The Academy is a strange place; once you're in it, you can become very ambitious, you don't want to lose the salary and so on. There are often impassioned people in universities but it seems they are in the wrong environment for passion to have an effect. It seems ludicrous that Dr Leavis thought Cambridge University was the best place from which to reform the world. I find Deconstruction theories — when I find them comprehensible at all — rather puerile. I don't usually know what they are on about. There's an element of arrogance, they're often scornful of others. In Canberra, I met a professor who runs one of the biggest American journals devoted to literary theory, he said: "Peter, it was great fun meeting you because it's the first time I've met a person so totally old-fashioned about literature." I thought: "That's a great compliment." He actually put it [more] bluntly: "Present-day artists are not much good. This is the golden age of criticism. *We* are the front line troops."

BW *If poetry reading is of prime importance, how do you regard the public reading and speaking of it, especially at such events as arts and literary festivals?*

PP I regard it in two ways. Firstly, as a possible introduction; people being excited [by it] can then follow the lead into the books. But it could never be a substitute for your own reading on the page. Secondly, it *is* actually a performance, a form of acting-cum-singing: a concert of poetry. It behoves the poet to do it as well as possible. I don't mean he has to be histrionic, but he has to try to communicate, build up by choice of poems, a manner in which what he does can be perceived and understood. Therefore, the selection is important. Of course, it's arbitrary, you never know in advance what the audience is like.

But I'm not in favour of poetry reading as nothing but glittery performance. Too many poets turn poetry readings into the act of a stand-up comedian. So I always vary what I'm doing, even in as short a space as half an hour: some serious poems, some which are not easily communicated publicly, nor at a single hearing. At the same time, I put in poems of a lighter, more communicative, entertaining sort, make a kind of menu. This can go disastrously wrong! I've done some very successful readings; some have been a total frost — that's partly the poet's inability to know in advance what kind of audience he's got. I've attended all the readings this week, but it hasn't given me much clue as to the real nature of the audience. There are [always] undercurrents: hostilities, cultural misunderstandings, nationalisms . . .

BW *It's important, then, for each [poet] to be purely him, or her, self, so that the audience [members] can respond and take what each [needs/finds].*

You're extremely versatile: as commentator in music, art, literature; as

- editor, critic, anthologist; realizer of versions in English from Latin; travel essayist. Do you find it easy to transfer from one writing vein, style, to another?*
- PP Not easy, but necessary. Before I begin to sound like a Renaissance man, it must be pointed out that I am a hack. I have to earn my living; I don't have any income other than from writing and things ancillary to it, most of which were forced on me; some were just accidental. The translating of Martial simply happened because I took down the Loeb edition and suddenly wanted to turn the cribs into English poems in a way just to please me. There was no element of public duty or commissioning. I earn some income by being a commentator in London — but that doesn't get [into] print; it's just radio, but I also do a lot of reviewing. To make even £12,000 a year in England by journalism alone, is very hard.
- BW *You're in a unique position to comment on Australian and British poetry and their respective societies. Would you agree with Murray's view that Australia's cultural distinctiveness is still firmly anchored in the bush? That the ballad and other vernacular forms of poetry remain the core of whatever is specifically Australian poetry? I should add that he said this about a decade ago, he might think differently now.*
- PP Oddly enough, his writing at present indicates that he believes that. It possibly wasn't as exemplified in his earlier work. Many of his recent poems in *Daylight Moon* partake of a bush-balladry aspect. They can hardly be taken for Banjo Paterson, but they do have a large degree of strong, traditional metrical patterning. Although bush balladry may be very Australian, it has many antecedents: partly Irish and Scottish songs, partly Rudyard Kipling. Kipling had a great influence on Paterson. It's not an inevitable product of the sound of the Australian voice, or manner of delivery, cadence, or metrical patterning of speech. Far more Australian, is the tendency to work in slightly peculiar metaphors and aphorisms. Australian speech is often laconic. I don't think bush ballads are laconic; they tend towards garrulity. Another point is that Australian poetry has a Wordsworthian Nature aspect. Not that I follow that. Wordsworth has never been a star that I've followed; Bob Gray does.
- BW *Yes, in his way of responding to landscape . . .*
- PP Bob is very much of the Wordsworthian model, there's nothing of Banjo Paterson about him. So Les is simply once again creating a myth to help his own creation.
- BW *Several Australian poets, like you, have collaborated with artists in poetry volumes, or written essays to accompany photographs on Australia: Tom Shapcott, Philip Salom, Rodney Hall, for instance. Is there something about being Australian that fosters strong visual response to the environment, a particularly close nexus between art and literature in Australian culture?*
- PP It's simpler than that; until recently, Australia has had better painters — the Heidelberg painting school, for instance — than it's ever had writers. The country — being so different in appearance from Europe — first influenced the people who were looking at it most keenly: the painters. So by the time of Conder, Streeton, Tom Roberts, you were getting genuine Australian response to the totally different landscape, flora and fauna, topography, light, colours. I, myself — in a rather unaccustomed splurge of patriotism — believe that the Heidelberg school were almost as good as the French Impressionists. [But] the writers have had to deal with the language which they brought from Europe. Painters have shown the way and many writers have been willing to follow them. Australian writers have collaborated with painters partly because it's like getting a lift [i.e. a ride]. Now that there's a well-established school

of Australian writing, you can see more originality in the way the language is used.

BW *Regarding British poetry, where do you see yourself as fitting into contemporary tradition?*

PP I'm that unusual figure: a slightly experimental, off-beat conservative, a traditionalist with a difference. I don't think all [poetic] good starts and ends with Philip Larkin. He was a very good poet, but not of the scale and quality of the great poets, for me, in this century: Stevens, Eliot,; not Yeats, not Pound; Hardy, perhaps. At the moment, there's an interesting new development in England [where] everything — even aesthetic matters — comes back to class. Young avant-gardists are trying to knock Oxbridge off its perch. Oxbridge in turn always crows, saying, "We ignore these people, they don't matter." etc., even to the extent that dons like John Carey say John Ashbery's work typical American self-flattery and obscurantism and that James Fenton can publish the same thing in *The New York Times*.

Another interesting development in English poetry is [what] I call "Provincial Dandyism". Although Fenton is an Oxbridge man, he would to some extent exemplify it; Peter Reading, too.³ He's not a dandy in the sense of writing nice things, but he is in his extraordinary use of language: very polemical, but also very artistic; he's aesthetic in his denunciation. Then there is a school that follows Douglas Dunn, a marvellous Scottish poet. And young men like Sean O'Brien, Peter Didsbury, Douglas Houston. They're provincial, yet anything but "cloth cap". They write almost in the style of late Auden: an illustrative, dandified, but vernacular way. This is more interesting than the mannered Oxbridge School: Craig Raine and his followers. [Although] Americans, for years, have had little feeling for English poetry — just dismissing it out of hand — what's going on there is interesting.

BW *Do you think 20th century British poetry has tended to be too inward-looking, insular?*

PP That's partly true. There's always been a "little England-ism". Even in the times of the Empire, people wrote in a very local way. I think internationalism is nothing more than the locality of one country prevailing over that of another. So when Britain was powerful, what was local in Britain *became* important in other countries. But after the Romantics — roughly after Tennyson — poetry went into a nose dive in Britain. This coincided with the rise of American verse, so you found oddities like T.S. Eliot — basically an American — revitalizing English verse, but also acting as the spearhead of American verse. Since then, the British have been somewhat disheartened.

Auden's case is interesting. He's a great international poet, but his work remains very British to me. I've always read him in the Faber and Faber editions, so it's a shock to go into a bookshop and see his books in the Random House [editions]. I've begun to see him as more American than I thought. I've never seen much of his influence in the United States. I've maintained that the most American thing he wrote was the libretto for Benjamin Britten's *Paul Bunyan*, written only a year or so after Auden went to the States. Americans dismissed it as a shocking insult to their culture by two effete Englishmen. In many ways, it's as American as, say, Bernstein or Pal Joey. It's got a genuine American flavour, written by two public-school Englishmen! Auden never became American; he was New Yorker, but what's that? He was, in many ways, the last Englishman to assume, without any posturing, that what he did, and the culture he wrote from, mattered. It has been difficult for Englishmen to believe that, so they've fallen back on local virtues. Philip Larkin, for instance, believed his poetry was important, but only within his

own country. He had distrust of outside forms, outside places. So British poetry is inward-looking in that sense. Many people in the States dismiss English poetry for its lack of technical innovation, but that doesn't seem very important. What is missing is an expansion of attitude.

BW *Presumably the presence in England of a poet like you who has chosen to live and work there, has helped foster appreciation of world literatures in English other than British and American. Have you noticed such increased awareness over the last three decades?*

PP A slight increase, but it has nothing to do with the presence of someone like me, because for many years they used to regard me as English. If they *heard* me, they would know; but on the page I was indistinguishable, from the British. What has [most] probably affected their interest in overseas writing has been prose, I think. For a long while, British-educated people have been reading American literature with greater avidity than English literature. That's now extending to the literature of other countries. But it is hard to get them to take an interest in any minority literature which hasn't been given a lot of publicity. So you find Australian literature is now being read with some interest. But it's still really an Anglo-American pond: what we're writing, reading, publishing in Britain. There's an interest in Black literature but usually by people who are black. Many West Indian poets get a white audience for performance, but not on the page.

BW *Your volume of Hardy's poetry in the Landscape-Poet series . . .*

PP A very short-lived series! [Laughs]. [With] only one other title: Burns, by Karl Miller. This was an idea of Mark Boxer when he was at Weidenfeld's. I liked John Hedgecoe's photographs; they show Dorset as it is today, but people wanted a more Hardy-like vision. I've always had an affection for Hardy, but I don't overestimate him in the way so many English writing people do.

There is a side of English self-contentedness which irritates me. The present deification of Philip Larkin is part of it. The second part is the overestimation of Hardy. He's a great poet, takes great risks, but he's also an intensely carpentered poet and can write appallingly badly. His range of subject matter and tone is audacious but also repetitive. The worse habit in England, is a turning [of] their artists into icons. Hardy has practically been embroidered on the British flag!

Les [Murray] has got to watch it, because that is going to happen to him in Australia. He's practically turning himself into the continent itself. No-one should be so exemplified. Recently, I heard the Education Minister in London talking about Shakespeare; you would have thought Shakespeare was a possession of the Tory party! In fact, good artists are always, in some way, at variance with their country. Certainly, Hardy was.

BW *As you have said, poets should be subversive.*

PP Not subversive; they shouldn't piss on the public, or shout and scream. But there should always be an element of saying "No."

BW *You appear to have a very affectionate relationship to the English landscape. Have you related to it more easily than to the Australian one?*

PP I wouldn't say more affectionate. It's because I started *looking* at the English landscape. In Australia, I never looked at landscape. I've now [also] started to look at Australian landscape. In the past, it was purely alien to me, except for river valleys. In my forthcoming book, the poem, "An Ecstasy of Estuaries", is about estuarial Australia, the sort of Australia I grew up in. I'd take a boat and row about five miles across flooded valleys of sand and mangroves. That was the Australia I *did* notice when young, in and around Brisbane. But I

found the same landscape near Perth, Western Australia. The rest was just cityscape, really.

In England, throughout the 1960s, we would go to stay in Dorset, at Charmouth — not quite Hardy country, but very attractive. The English countryside is inclined to be a little forelock-tugging, though; it's all been handled by man. In one poem — which my English friends don't like at all! — after travelling through Somerset, I say:

So much beauty, so unexpectedly preserved

.....

Not only the pheasant eating by the road
(And the cider factory, the industrial
archaeology with the rural) —

But the pattern of beauty changing in the air
(Fields painted by history, a steam
of seasons softening what lives) —

Somerset for survivors and a good thing too

Then something I'd read in *The Field* magazine:
(Seventeenth-century farmhouse,
part-converted, owner abroad) —

Seen from Ilminster spire, everything is safe
(It is being kept for posterity
but where do the people of England live?)
[“At the Castle Hotel, Taunton“]

They live in horribly grimy houses in [places like] Sheffield.

BW It looks very pictorial, but the reality . . .

PP For me, the countryside, to be interesting, has to have the sea nearby. No part of England is far from the sea. I'd find Canada an unusual place to live in, so much of it is in the middle. You've got lakes, but where's the sea?

BW It doesn't have the dynamism of coast and tides.

PP Australia has this enormous littoral. Almost all the people live on the coast. Canada has a big coastline round Vancouver, but in the Maritimes, the coast's rather grim, I believe.

BW I've only been to the edge of it, so I can't speak on that with authority.

PP I've not got the same eye for the English countryside that a native-born person has. For me, it always tends to have an element of The Picturesque.

BW Despite your prodigiously prolific output in many forms, you've described yourself as bad and idle at working. What are your usual work habits? What is your ideal writing space, mentally and physically?

PP I haven't an ideal one. I keep a list of all the things I've got to do to make money: review this, do that. I'm frequently at my desk doing all this. For the last ten years I've been compiling an anthology: *The Oxford Book of Musical Verse*. I'm still no closer to finishing it than when I started. I find it impossible to concentrate and organize all the material. I tend to get ideas for poems [that I wish to write]; they are very worrying if you don't carry them out. So I write poems in the interstices of all the other work. If something I'm working on is boring me, or I'm feeling low about it, I'll put it aside and write a poem. I write poems fairly quickly, then revise them. I work in notebooks; I have three. I've got two filled now, which I will try to sell to Canberra, about 70

poems in each. At any time, I could be working on six different poems because I work from both ends of the book.

I *am* prolific, but I have to be. I'm much more of a slap-dash, hit-and-run kind of writer than many people. For me, the aesthetic of poetry is speed, my equivalent to eloquence. I [also] think that no poet should have his texts or sources near him, either. Pound's "Pisan" Cantos are more moving than the rest, because they were written at a time of distress. He was away from his books and had to rely on memory, [so] more moving things came out. I have a self-denying ordinance which says nothing can go into a poem that cannot come out of my mind without a reference book. Of course, you've got a reference book in your head, but it's an emotionally selective one. I do check later to see if I've got something wrong. I used to have a very good memory. After all, the Greeks believed that the Muses were the daughters of Mnemosyne: Memory, by Zeus, the creative spirit. So creative spirit, working on memory, leads to art. Fortunately, my memory has always been for *unimportant* things. You make poetry out of the impedimenta of poetry.

BW *Regarding The English Poets from Chaucer to Edward Thomas and the 1982 edition of The Faber Book of Modern Verse: so few women are included. Did you have a particular reason for this? There would have been a dearth in earlier centuries, but in the 19th and 20th centuries? And why, in the Faber book, did you include only one woman who wasn't there previously, Sylvia Plath?*

PP The Faber book was a disaster, an abortion; not entirely my fault, but it was my fault for accepting the task. It had [originally] been done as an idiosyncratic, but lively anthology [edited by Michael Roberts], at a time when the English didn't take much notice of verse in the United States or anywhere else in the English language. It was updated in a shallow way by Anne Ridler, then more truculently, by Donald Hall. I was to update it again, but the rules were too constricting: I wasn't allowed to choose any poem which *had* been available to Michael Roberts, but not chosen by him. So I could put in only poems written after he had compiled it. I had a very small space at the end *and* I was interfered with: while I don't think I put in any more women, I certainly put in people whom I eventually had to leave out. I wanted to leave out some people whom Faber insisted on putting in because they were their [Faber] poets! But to answer your question about women: in the case of *The English Poets*, that was based on a popular radio programme series. I would have loved to put in Emily Dickinson, but she was American and outside our terms of reference.

BW *It was poets only from the British Isles, wasn't it?*

PP Yes, I couldn't put Dickinson in, but I could put in Christina Rossetti. I wasn't familiar with 18th century women poets in a way that I am now: Catherine Phillips, Mary Leapor . . . English literature, right up to the end of the 19th century, was deficient in women writers.

BW *I thought maybe it was personal preference, but Elizabeth Browning didn't get in the book.*

PP Well, I've never thought her work was up to standard. I probably misjudged that. I don't mind being crucified by feminists; it's not that I think a lot of women writers don't write very well; a large number of men writers don't write very well, either. It's just a question of whom you think writes best.

In the 20th century, it's more complex. There are any number of women writers whose standard is high, but not as good as the best of the men, with the exception of Plath. America is unusual in that one of the three great poets is a woman: Dickinson; Stevens and Whitman would be the other two. It's not conscious desire — perhaps it's an unconscious desire; something I'm just

bad about and that, indeed, women are very right to complain that I haven't responded to some of their writing as well as I should have done.

I don't have Les Murray's views on these things. Les thinks women are frequently possessed by fads and causes. At present, your best known Canadian writer is a woman, Margaret Atwood. It wouldn't be so in Australia, which is still much more of a male society.

BW Some women's names spring readily to mind, though: Gwen Harwood, Judith Wright . . .

PP Judith is an important iconic figure. I'm not very keen on her work, but she stands very strongly for certain Australian themes.

BW And some Australian values.

PP [Now], my last attempt at extenuation: those books were commercial ventures. At the same time, I invoke the clause: "What I have written I have written"; I take responsibility for them. But they're not dear to my heart, nor central to my judgment.

BW What are your thoughts on Canadian and American poetic development in the second half of the 20th century?

PP I know little about Canadian poetry and have selective views about American verse. I would characterize the weakness of American poetry as an overestimation of the aesthetic. Whatever its subject, American poetry is one of style and aesthetics. This can be vitiating. However, I think that the general level of American poetry — I should think this would be true also of Canada — is higher than that of any other English-speaking country. But the British still have some advantage in their cohesive social vision. American vision is fragmentary, but very powerful. For me, Wallace Stevens remains the greatest American poet [although] a lot of people are not in sympathy with him, even if they admire him. I was talking to David Ignatow⁴ here and he was claiming Stevens to be of the Whitman tradition, which struck me as unlikely but if you're recruiting your team, you try to get the best players. It's difficult to generalize about American poetry; there is so much of it and one has read so little of that so much.

BW How do you view Australian poetry in the context of world literature?

PP I don't think there is a context of world literature. I'm inclined to think Auden was right in one of his little aphorisms; he said that art should be like cheese: made locally, esteemed everywhere. This begs the question of a kind of imperialism: if you belong to a powerful nation, people will want to know about you. Australia, of course, is not a powerful nation. [I recall] Gertrude Stein's remark about the United States being the oldest country of the twentieth century. We are all of us, whether we like it or not, second-class Americans, if we don't happen to be fortunate enough to be first-class ones. So all of us, anywhere that English is spoken, are disenfranchised Americans. It's not just the language, it's the American [way of life].

BW You've described the act of poetic creation as full-blooded, a kind of divine arrogance. Would you comment on the experience of creating under the impulse of poetic trance?

PP I've never really had a poetic trance, as such. Writing poetry is only an extension — though an extension into the domain of art — of the process of thinking, cogitation. Awake, or asleep, your mind is continuously turning things over, like one of Darwin's works. Moving from that kind of thought to poetry is the act of putting an electric shock through ordinary thought, galvanizing it. Then one [also] has to have an instinct for shaping thought; poetry is a shaped experience. It is a *made* object, as much as a painting, or a piece of music, is.

I don't believe in "Kleenex" or disposable poetry; it should go on lasting *after* it has been first experienced. The difference between reading a poem, or a short story, or novel, is that you don't want to go back to the short story or novel another time, unless it's very good; the shock and surprise of the events cannot be renewed. With a poem, the shock and surprise remains. It isn't as sharp a shock usually as in fiction, but it's infinitely renewable.

BW *Do you think it likely that you will return to live permanently or for an extended time in Australia?*

PP It's difficult to say because I live in London with Christine Berg. She's English and London is very much her home. She's a child psychotherapist and is doing a course at the Tavistock Clinic, so she can't leave England. If I went to Australia, it would break us up. She has been out there with me. She's quite sharp with Australians! When they say sentimental things about being descended from convicts, she says, "But you're [also] descended from their guards." There is a strong element of bullying in the Australian character.

I would prefer to be in the position of painters like Boyd and Nolan — of going backwards and forwards. You might end up as a transpacific nothing; I would like that. If I went back, I would probably live in either Sydney or Melbourne. Sydney is a very exciting, though boastful city; Melbourne is a rather peculiar city, very interesting in many ways.

However, I would always want to come back to Europe. The ideal thing would be to live in Italy, but I would remain an ex-patriate; I'm not a good linguist. There is a huge English colony in Tuscany, but they are not always the people I would want to see. London is becoming very difficult to live in. It's not the city it was, but then, I'm not the person I was, either. England has become a spiteful place; countries take their tone from their rulers. So under the Conservative party, the British public tone is disgruntled, cruel, brutal. I don't think Mr Reagan's office has done the Americans much good, either. But then we've got Bob Hawke in Australia, who hardly fills one with joy.

[Re my own situation]: let's put it this way: I certainly could go back to live in Australia but I don't know whether I ever will.

BW *[So], emotionally, you could if [circumstances allowed]?*

PP I'm quite at home when I get there. I even managed to make peace with Brisbane when I was back in '87 at the Warana Festival. I began to enjoy my home city, though there were still ghosts around several corners. I suddenly remembered moments of intense misery; they never quite go away, these ghosts.

I had another experience like that the other day, in Florence. Since my wife died, I've always been there with somebody else. Here I was, for the first time, by myself there; I got a shock of *déjà vu*: things that we'd done together suddenly came back to me. It was a rather sneaky feeling. I find that when I travel, I get awful dreams, frightening ones; [they arouse] anxiety.

BW *Is such anxiety sometimes heightened by being successful?*

PP I think it is. The more successful you become, the more you worry about the value of success. When you haven't got it, you think it must be wonderful. On the other hand, if you do get it — I'm [talking] from watching other people; I've never had that degree of success — you may find it unsatisfying. It may turn to dust and ashes. But you would miss it if it were taken away!

NOTES

1. P. Lal, from India, was also featured at the World Poetry Festival.
2. Australian poet Robert Gray was a featured reader at the Festival.
3. Peter Reading was also featured at the Festival.
4. David Ignatow, one of the American poets featured at the Festival at Harbourfront.

Walking Wilpena Pound

for Andrew

In this country, you said, the lakes
are so shallow the fish have to crawl
on top, pointing from the peak to the new
shimmering surface of Lake Torrens just below
the fog-line, to the mountains snaking off
into the distance, disappearing
in the desert, in the play of light
a bluish-green kingdom of pasture.
But I behaved as the European I am
showered the Pound with comparisons
suggesting an underlying design
by Prince Puckler, remarked
on the need for beavers, remembered
the crumbling hillsides of Apulia
let my tongue travel over what my eyes
could not hold — native pine, small lilies
stunted she-oak, burnt by a recent fire.

REVIEWS

Vera Whittington, *Gold and Typhoid, Two Fevers, a social history of Western Australia 1891-1900*, University of W.A. Press, Nedlands, 1988, 455pp. \$45 (hardback), \$36 (paperback).

Vera Whittington's *Gold and Typhoid* is testimony to the adages "all that glitters is not gold". It is a meticulously researched social history of Western Australia during a decade best known for the gold rush, with its associated growth and prosperity. Less known, but crucial to a balanced understanding of this tumultuous decade was the advent of typhoid.

Whittington covers the gold rush era with a sensitivity rare in social history books. Her facts and figures are enriched with evocative imagery and carefully chosen anecdotes, which lend a sense of poignancy and humour to the book.

It is a shameful past in many ways, saved only by the astounding altruism and courage shown by the many nursing folk who attended those struck by the disease.

There are some glaring parallels to be drawn between society's handling of the typhoid epidemic in the 1890s and the AIDS disaster almost a century later. Indeed, the typhoid epidemic would today constitute a "national catastrophe" in terms of deaths per head of population, in the words of Western Australia's director of epidemiology in the 1950s, Dr J R Snow.

Ignorance, it seems, is the crucial factor in the spread of AIDS, as it was with typhoid. In the case of the latter, ignorance about basic hygiene was widespread. Whittington's history shows this to have been detrimental during the gold rush years.

But concern about hygiene and, indeed, fear of death and disease was clearly overshadowed by the heady prospect of striking it rich. Sudden irrevocable wealth was pursued with blind stubbornness. Young men were typhoid's easiest victims. Their contempt for sickness, their impatience and spontaneity meant they were too often unprepared for illness and unlikely to seek medical help in time. Women died of typhoid too. But desertion, destitution and poverty appeared to have played a bigger role in their suffering. Often, women suffered on the peripheries of towns, or in the city where they waited to join husbands on the fields. Often, destitution was their fate.

In the so-called "fair city" of Perth, slums housing many such women emerged. In the words of a visitor from the United Kingdom, poverty looked "poorer and dirtier and uglier in this (city) than I have seen it elsewhere."

The book contains many graphic accounts of destitution in Perth. In one such account, a nursing sister recounts the plight of a deserted wife: "The place in which the woman lived was a sack house, made of bags sewn together . . . neither airtight nor watertight. On the bed where the sick woman lay, rain was falling. The baby . . . lacked attention and nourishment. Tea without milk and dry bread, was the fare of the patients."

Destitution always "retards and sometimes prevents recovery" from disease, in the words of one nursing sister. But typhoid also struck at the hearts and lives of the comparatively fortunate.

In one especially poignant case, Whittington recounts a story about a young mother, with four children, who travelled to the fields from Albany to be with her husband, only to lose two of her children in just over a year.

The two fevers — gold and typhoid — ran neck and neck in an unlikely struggle for supremacy. Gold dominated in the winter, typhoid in the unrelenting summer. By the end of the decade, however, gold had become the dominant force, though its feverishness now belonged to the past.

The discovery of gold precipitated a sudden and dramatic population explosion in regions least able to sustain life. Before the rush, water supplies on the fields had been adequate only for spasmodic use by Aborigines. Too often, supplies became polluted by the fetid run-off from areas adjacent to the mining camps. The bigger the gold strike, the bigger the gold rush, and the more precarious and polluted the water supply became. This inevitable cycle produced the typhoid epidemic.

Typhoid aside, the experience of life on the fields must have been akin to hell on earth for many, particularly those accustomed to the comparative lushness of Europe and the Eastern colonies.

Whittington evokes well the vacuousness of the mining landscape, the isolated and isolating nature of prospecting and human fragility in the face of it all. Indeed, the crowded townships did not guarantee exemption from the loneliness that plagued many. This is epitomised by a

poignant poem taken from the pocket of a German prospector found dead on the outskirts of Coolgardie. The poem begins: "Lonely, O God, I stand upon Thy Earth . . ." The prospector had been seen alive and apparently well only the day before his body was found.

The extreme heat is a recurring theme in the book. It is never far from the reader's mind. In the following extract, Whittington brings to mind a Coolgardie heat wave: "The red earth — heavy with the dust of dry months — radiated more heat. Sweltering, stifled and scorched, the inhabitants found every task an effort which drained energy. Tin billies and bowls burnt the hands. To cook by a fire was hellish. Hoards of flies added to the misery. In the extreme heat a nauseating reek from . . . rubbish, human excreta and animal manure permeated the temporary settlement."

Animals too suffered in the heat. The following extract, one of many gleaned by Whittington from newspapers published over the decade, captures the pitiful plight of thirsty horses: "Day after day the doomed creatures hang round the tanks with wasp-like bodies; protruding eyes, and tottering legs; they move from trough to trough vainly endeavouring to steal a drop of water . . . only rewarded with a volley of imprecations and a staggering blow . . . till lingering death ensues."

Gold and Typhoid sheds an illuminating glow on the darker side of the gold rush in Western Australia. Whittington's enthusiasm permeates each page with a sense of urgency and authority. That she has successfully condensed the fruits of twenty one years work into an immensely readable work is worthy in itself. But the book is more than that. It will succeed in changing forever the common, sanitised perception of the West Australian gold rush era.

Fiona Adolph

Peter Porter, *Possible Worlds*, Oxford University Press, 1989, 70pp, rrp. \$12.95; *A Porter Selected*, Oxford University Press, 1989, 147pp, rrp. \$12.95.

After the triumph of *The Automatic Oracle* (1987), a landmark in contemporary poetry, what could Peter Porter follow with? Like other *Westerly* readers I knew "The Ecstasy of Estuaries", although I felt a little awkward with the Wallace Stevens echo and like at least one

other reader found it heavy going. Difficulty was not unexpected. In "attacca" from *The Automatic Oracle* Porter imagined himself chasing after the reading public calling out "Wait for me,/ I renounce all my old obscurity" only to admit he couldn't change. Well, *Possible Worlds* which carries the Poetry Book Society Recommendation is a delight. As with other Porter books the reading of any one poem gains by reading it alongside others, where recurrent ideas, images and key words illuminate, refer to and sometimes contradict each other, and the difficulties if not entirely massaged away, smooth out enough to reward and entice to further re-reading.

The Stevens echo proves appropriate to a poem in this collection where Porter most directly makes his own the poet of "the supreme fiction", "the invented world". The epigram to which the title *Possible Worlds* refers is from Stevens' "Credences of Summer", a poem concerned with "the limits of reality" and "the imagination's life" and tracing the connections.

Stevens, along with his North American inheritor John Ashbery, reconfirms and validates the life of art, a matter of more than academic interest for Porter. Stevens and Ashbery, Porter explains in "An Expatriate's Reaction to His Condition",¹ recognise, "Mallarmé-like, that poetry is made up of words and not just of experience itself. Thus it becomes honourable to be an airplant and to live wherever life will support one's imaginative labours" (45). Or as he chooses in "A Physical World"

How ridiculous to be Columbus
offering Isabella the earliest gold of America
when you could be Da Ponte giving Mozart
his first sight of the libretto of *Figaro*.

Unlike those who look for geographical landfall Porter cannot rest with the literal (and limited) discovery; there are always further reaches of self and art, further "possible worlds"; and with Porter much troubled by death since his first book as a thirty-two year old, the tension between rest and voyaging is no less challenged in *Possible Worlds* published in his sixtieth year. Part of the "possible" is accepting that stasis belongs with the Final Things, to live is to accept change, limitations without limit. Even when the writer's course has passed from its tumultuous

mysterious well springs, through its middle period to its estuarine period, to take the geographical figure Porter uses throughout the book, he writes not of stasis, but of acceptance, an act of will to “make home and common cause/ with fish heads and floating debris/ of the wharfs”.

It is in such acts, such “possible worlds”, constructs made in recognition of their provisional and ambivalent nature, that Porter “makes home”, where the verb is as operative as the noun. Porter re-reads the last scene of *Paradise Lost* in the light of Stevens’ “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour”. In exile from the Final Things his characters hand in hand go to construct a living space. Art, the store of fictions, is as close as one can come to home for Porter who draws sustenance from “classical” Western culture, which he reflects in a range of allusions, in particular to Renaissance Italian art, sixteenth and seventeenth century literature, and Baroque and Romantic music. The formidable erudition, a reproach at least to the inertia of the present reviewer, enriches the poetry but never congests it. The allusions are handled with ease and wit to convince that indeed here is an invaluable store of images.

Porter, coming “too late/ To be religious in the census sense”, finds images from Christian iconography as generative as those from classical mythology. With Porter as with Stevens “the death of one god is the death of all”, which death allows the figure of the god obscured to rise again, the god being “a name for something that never could be named” to use Stevens’s line. Unlike then, say A D Hope, or the modernists of the thirties for whom the fragments of classical Empire recall a lost unified ideal against which the present age is found hopelessly flawed and shoddy, for Porter the cultural allusions are alive because paradoxically they have never been alive, being always “a name for something that never could be named”, a construct through which we live and make sense of our lives.

For similar reasons Porter is free to re-use the repertoire of traditional poetic forms, not by calling for a return to “form”, but because as inheritor of the break with the pentameter no form enjoys prior authority or prestige, neither “open form” nor the “nearly mindless triolet” (returned to in “Musical Murders”). But if historical position gives him licence to write

across the range, it is talent that enables him to do so with such apparent facility. As the chancellor in “Sun King Sulking” says: “a thousands musicians were born this year/ but only one of them is Rameau”.

Talent reconfirms individuality, with its burden of suffering and mortality. But it is Porter’s talent, the ability to shape and re-shape his pre-occupations with language, death, dreams and desire that marks the poems of *Possible Worlds* from a thousand prose recapitulations of the same topic.

In addition to the “public” topics are the personal anxieties, the images of beloved ones and preoccupations with death and loss which constitute Porter’s private mythology, here given moving form in “They Come Back More” and lightly drawn upon elsewhere. For if Porter’s is a poetry of ideas like Stevens’s, it is also more personal, more immediately troubled; where Stevens booms on with Olympian detachment Porter tends to puncture grandiloquence and jolt rhythmic flow. While expressive, his verse is not romantic in reflecting the self through descriptions of nature, he does that more through ideas. Images of nature, mainly from Australia, do feature importantly in the early poems in *Possible Worlds*, however landscape description is not Porter’s interest or strength. Some poets return us to nature with revived senses. Porter returns us to the pulse of the brain, the nervous system of culture with revived intelligence. The topics are important and explored with invention and honesty, but it is the poetry with its exhilarating shifts, onrush, and at times startling directness, which brings us back for further exploration.

A Porter Selected: Poems 1959-1989, offers an admirable introduction to the work of one of the most distinguished contemporary poets writing in English. The selection itself, Porter explains, was arrived at after consulting expert opinion. Perhaps this is a pity. Perhaps not. The selection offered by Auden and Pound themselves for instance display the author’s own preferences and are interesting for that reason alone; although of course Auden was too exclusive, and maybe Porter would have been too, and so one also wants the cooler eye of the expert for a more representative *Selected*. Five attractive poems from *Possible Worlds* are reprinted. *The Automatic Oracle* and *Fast Forward* tend to be better represented, but even

here for many strong poems, sometimes the more quirky, less accessible ones, the reader must go back to the original books while waiting for the updated *Collected*.

1. *Westerly* no. 4, 1987, 43-47.

Lawrence Bourke

Rod Moran, *Against the Era*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1988. 84pp, \$12.00.

Among the post-modernist or neo-rationalist poets in Australia now achieving maturity and clarity, Rod Moran is an important voice.

Moran, born in 1952, was one of the youngest of a group of talented young West Australian poets originally discovered and encouraged by Dorothy Hewett in an informal salon that operated at her former South Perth home. He has spent a good deal of time in Victoria as a teacher and union official but now lives in Western Australia again. Like others in W.A., he is a poet whose work is in danger of unjustified neglect nationally because of physical isolation from major contacts on the literary scene, despite the fact that he is at present working as a writer full-time.

His second collection, *Against the Era*, was published recently by the Fremantle Arts Centre Press, though many poems included in it were first published in national publication, including *Southerly*, *Quadrant*, *Overland*, *The Age*, *The Australian* and *The Bulletin*. The press has recently been building up an impressive list of titles, but it remains to be seen how effectively poetry emanating from Perth can cross the Nullabor.

Moran's poetry should attract a wider audience, not only because it is very good poetry in itself but also because of what it represents. It is a poetry of highly-developed technique. *Against The Era* shows that Moran's concern as a poet is to strike a balance between three always-present variables.

The first is to deal with the major existential questions, including macro-political themes. The second is what might be called poetic integrity. It is not a radical concept but one which has been in some danger of being forgotten lately, when many poets seem quite unaware of, for example, the whole concept of mimesis. (As John Wain put it: 'gifted young artists are being ruined by

the all-pervading impression that art is easy.¹) Moran is concerned with using poetic technique properly, with both a richness of image, language, rhythm, metaphor and rhyme and the maximum possible clarity of language.

This blends with the third: communicative effectiveness. Moran has said:

I don't want to lock readers out of my poems through obscurity, precious egoism etc. There are enough poets doing a great job at that stuff, giving all poetry a bad reputation along the way. I try and write so that a generally thoughtful, ordinarily educated reader in a reflective moment could find a poem that would speak to him.²

Moran looks to blending these constant considerations in the artifact of the poem and thus his approach to poetry is that of the traditional craftsman of informed mind. Again, while this is not a particularly original approach to the craft, it is decidedly out of step with the presently near-orthodox encouragement of 'creativity' for its own sake. Moran says:

Obviously there are far easier ways to write poetry. For example, one could choose to write only for a very small and select audience. Or one could go to the other extreme and become a populist performer. The first type of poetry rarely gets beyond the circle for whom it is written. The second type communicates to more people, but hardly about anything that is important. There is a lot of both types in Sydney and Melbourne to my experience. I'm trying, for better or worse, something else, and I think it's a more difficult approach that the two sketched above.³

There is something very important predicated here: it is obvious that we are living in a time of profound intellectual upheaval. It is in Moran's approach, rather than in, say, that of the heirs of the late Michael Dransfield, that we may look to a type of poetry capable of dealing with momentous intellectual issues as well as lyrical celebration.

In *Against the Era*, Moran has clarified several of the themes of his first collection, *High Rise Sniper*.⁴ The poems dealing with ostensibly political issues are actually in a sense anti-political. In many of them he is attacking, commenting on or analysing the nature and consequences of a programmatic-ideological approach to human reality. Moran says:

Even when dealing with issues such as war and conflict I am more interested in the abiding existential matters involved: the nature of grief and loss, grief and the darker borders of the human heart where cruelty and so forth have their base camps.

I sometimes despair at my ability to perform the juggling act when I get notes from editors saying they don't publish political poetry!⁵

A nice example of this is Moran's 'Concerning a Conversation with a Radical Friend.' The language is traditional. The rhymes, half-rhymes and end-stopped lines at first, apparently, bespeaking archaic technique. But in fact the poem is in the spirit of a fresh departure:

The jacaranda's candelabra
sways purple-blue this afternoon.
A cool wind wafts their burning flame-tips.
In the warm garden small birds croon.

Our conversation explores like light
roads to freedom, the planet's strife.
Finches skitter through lavender buds,
flocks of lorikeets screech with life.

And I admit I also subscribe
to words like kindness, justice, love.
But today something made me suspect
our guides to the lush lands above.

I remark, in passing aside:
the buds and birds are coloured glass.
He says that the birds stain clean pathways,
trees with flowers pollute his grass.

How can I contest this real concern?
But I can ask what it reveals
in those who'd design a lovely world.
Like blood our tepid talk congeals.

Some would forge this world to resemble
the darker valleys of their hearts,
lit by the pure torch of perfection:
concrete enclosures, sterile yards

A tiny tissue, birds and flowers.
Yet, it's over this our talk dies,
as if impaled on a bayonet.
Small birds scatter from the mauve sky.⁶

In the diction, one can detect echoes of the social realist writers (including the early Dorothy Hewett). But the controlling intelligence is matured. Moran has mentioned among the writers he admires, 'Neruda without the Stalinism', and hearkenings-back to Neruda are found in much of his work. This is an authentic contemporary voice, from a time when political Utopiaism is seen to be crumbling and irrelevant, but by no means a voice that is Nihilistic. Auden claimed that we 'haunt a

ruined Century', but we are readying ourselves to move out of that century now.

It is for this reason that Moran's work can be described as post-modernist or neo-rationalist. But the qualification 'neo' is important. Poetry can never be entirely rationalist (since it is no more than rational to recognise the limits of rationality) and the consciousness of the transcendent and numinous remains, and is enhanced:

They play among oblivious gulls,
on firm sand, the ocean rotting
dead wood; a pattern of dunes erodes.
The child excavates wildly
towards some imagined treasure
(strange coins of pearly shell,
riches imagined in pure cuttle).
The father directs an earnest search,
laughing deeply as if innocent
of this small adventure's ending.
A gannet, dead and stiff with brine,
breaks against the loud rocks.
The child explores coloured weed
already bleaching in the sun.⁷

The poems Moran has written focussing on human relationships, nature and natural beauty often have allegorical aspects to them and are not merely descriptive. An example from his recent collection is 'Night Fishing':

Their lamps glaze white paths
narrowly on the bay's dark circle,
spears like sharp flutes in the wind.
Two figures wade an enigma of shoals,
hours probing the elusive water,
unseen currents swirling sand
from beneath soft cray-flesh feet.
Small squid skid away just beyond
the green marble of their light;
fish are fluorescent darts blurring
a moment under fractured water.
They wander in the night's black swell,
judging refraction and eddy, guessing.⁸

The poem is, apart from its ostensible subject matter, a picture of the human situation as being a seeking after elusive meaning, guessing at what is behind the appearance, a creating of small enclaves of light in a general darkness. Moran remarks that an editor rejected this poem some years ago with a note saying he wanted to publish something from him that was not 'merely descriptive'.⁹

Moran's mature and intelligent consciousness is also displayed in his series of poems on the sinking of the Argentine cruiser *General*

Belgrano during the Falklands War, which were recently presented with music at a very successful public reading in Perth. The theme would be a difficult one for any sort of simple-minded ideologue to handle. Moran's ability to speak in a voice of compassion and wisdom, rather than the shrill polemics some might have succumbed to when dealing with such a theme, made a moving personal statement into a *tour de force* of tremendous effect. Those who heard Moran's reading at the New Beaufort Hotel in Northbridge will not forget it quickly. This was the work of a major talent at full stretch.

What we are seeing in the development of Moran and a few other poets is nothing less than a genuine new direction in Australian poetry. It is one which the various pundits and literary bureaucrats responsible for cultivating and promoting the now-ageing Carlton-Balmain poetic establishment (called 'The Bubble' by Mark O'Connor, 'The Epigones' by Richard Packer and 'The Woets' by Andrew Lansdowne), quite failed to anticipate.

This is a poetry which harks back to traditional craftsmanship but is informed with a contemporary education in a world where ideologies have lost must of their power to exact loyalty and are upheld only by tanks, while both the permanent things are re-discovered and the challenge of whatever is coming with the end of the century is faced.

It is a poetry that, with all its celebrations of birds and fishing, post-dates the Gulag Archipelago as well as Auschwitz. As far as anything survives here of a conscious existentialism it is the existentialism of Camus rather than Sartre. It is tough-minded as well as lyrical, and it is doubtful that the bureaucrats of the present literary establishment will try to pay the author such ludicrous compliments as 'terrifyingly close to genius'.

It would be premature to speak of the end of ideology being upon us yet, and Francis Fukuyama is overly optimistic, to my way of thinking, when he foresees the major danger of the future as being boredom, but the climate of ideas is changing, and this poetry is symptomatic of the fact.

It is possibly for the same reason that a systematic debunking of romantic ideologues like Paul Johnson's *Intellectuals* can now be published and speak at once to a larger audience: major political and artistic movements

associated with the earlier years of this century are now seen to have come to dead ends and are exhausted. The exhaustion of modernism in the arts seems to co-incide with the exhaustion of Marxism and of at least very large parts (mainly the 'modernist' parts) of the established Christian churches. Moran has sent up the invokers of both Trotsky and Billy Graham. In one poem Moran suggests to a badge-wearing, slogan-parroting radical that what he needs is a 'kind grave-digger to your illusions'. It is plain that the following poem, 'Bay Walk', is more than lyrical. It is a celebration of the return of awareness of meaning in the natural world.

Water sculpted by the bay lights,
slim yachts swaying in the breeze,
gusted stars like luminous dust.
Here, indigo night retrieves
some meaning, symmetry and form
from the salvage of the day;
we talk in silhouettes and walk
like shadows here by the bay.
This consonance of heart and word,
laughter, human talk and ways
survive within the world's wild night;
yacht masts hum above the waves.
Back through the sweet brine wind we turn.
Above, stars like love rise and burn.¹⁰

'Bolshevic Chic' is a demolition job on 'nouveau chic proletarians' who can only 'storm the high turrets of their dreams.'

... They sip their coffee very loudly,
chat of their new relationship,
French films and other arty issues,
consuming shrimp with minor dip.

Their dress is kind of urban funky,
with specs that turn their eyes like cats,
and in the hollow of their gossip
you'll hear their tales of terrace flats . . .¹¹

This is a poetry of a new time: a time when the question arises: 'What is left?' as well as the question: 'What rough beast slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?' A time when Hungary is looking towards Saint Stephen's Crown. As I write, Yeltsin is predicting Gorbachev has six months left. Right-wing and left-wing package deals have fallen apart. Something big is happening and our consciousnesses are changing. This is being reflected in the best of our poetry, even in Perth, Western Australia.

Significantly, too, this is poetry that represents a decisive break with W.C. Williams' pseudo-Romantic injunction 'A poem should not mean/

but be.' Any purative end of older ideologies does not predicate a retreat into irresponsibility or a resuscitation of notions of Art for Arts' Sake (ultimately the most Philistine of all doctrines). Refreshingly, the poet's own state of mind is seldom the direct subject of the work:

Hope is nurtured by simple things:
the bantam feathers of late sunlight,
golden lemons like surreal fish
luminous in a lagoon of trees,
tidal wind in the wattle of your hair.
Today it was our daughter's smile
lingering like the rainbow's bangle,
grinning as she waded clear shallows,
quicksilver blue in the afternoon,
the sky gently lapping her small feet.¹²

This is getting a long way from the Wave of the Future as predicted and promoted in the silly sixties and early seventies, when, to quote one unfortunate piece, Mallarme's curse hung over Launceston.

It may be a welcome sign that, with both romanticism and social realism well and truly out of steam and sinking, something of the best of both of them can be salvaged and go on in a consciousness that is both disillusioned and capable of joy and celebration. In particular, it is a poetry of strength and meaning. Rod Moran is one of a number of writers whose work heralds a new and much more promising direction in Australian poetry.

Hal Colebatch

NOTES

1. John Wain, 'On the Breaking of Forms', *Encounter*, August 1975. In this context it is worth quoting Wain's conclusion:
The painter Victor Neep, who like most painters has to do a certain amount of teaching to make ends meet, went in to his class one day and was greeted by one of his students with, 'We've been discussing it and we've decided that no painting is worth anything that doesn't make its protest.'
'Exactly', said Mr Neep, without hesitation. 'Like — that,' and he pointed to a still-life of some apples by Cezanne.
'What's that protesting against?' asked the student.
'Sloppy thinking', replied Mr Neep.
2. Interview, Perth, July 1989.
3. Interview, Perth, July 1989.
4. Artlook Books, Perth, 1982.
5. Interview, Perth, July 1989.
6. *Against The Era* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1988) p.50.
7. *Ibid*, p.96.
8. *Ibid*, p.64.
9. Interview, Perth, July 1989.
10. *Against The Era*, p.61.
11. *Ibid*, p.52.
12. *Ibid*, p.97.

Lyn Giles, ed. *Women's Erotica, Erotica by Contemporary Australian Women*, Imprint Publishing, \$12.95 paperback.

The stories in *Women's Erotica* abound with freshly squeezed juices, cashews, corncobs,

avocados, quinces, even the odd bowl of vegetable soup, but with little else to really sustain the reader. That the volume is thin and almost half its contents reprints, I suspect is not so much an editorial decision, but a reflection that there's not a lot of good erotic fiction around; and also judging by editor Lyn Giles choices, she has opted for a nice safe book. With the 'erotica' of the book's title merely an euphemism for too many stories basically exploring bitter-sweet relationships, that have too many attempts at sexual explicitness, sounding awfully guarded in tone.

There is the feeling many of the women here *do* feel awkward about writing erotica. That they are afraid of pushing the boundaries and expressing intimate feelings and fantasies, so resort to Mills and Boom romance, or, as in Grace Bartram's story 'Flesh', that has the heroine "gliding, flowing, streaming, sweeping, always ascending, swiftly, higher, faster, until she almost topples," simply glossing over the sexual issue by emulating D.H. Lawrence's more mystical prose.

In the novel *Women in Love*, Lawrence writes of Ursula's love-making with Birkin as "overwhelming, outflooding from the source of the deepest life-force, the darkest, deepest, strangest life-source of the human body (from where) the rivers of strange dark fluid richness had passed over her, flooding, carrying away her mind."

Lawrence's imagery is certainly a lot earthier, and richer than Grace Bartram's, but even so, their language is much the same. Clearly, for Grace Bartram and a few other women in the collection, this indicates the need for more precise sexual/gender delineation when writing explicit fiction, instead of, as in Bartram's 'Flesh', simply adopting an inauthentic, vaguely masculine ethos, to tackle a woman's view of sex.

The only convincing explicit writing in this book is that by Shelley Kay and Kate Grenville. Both 'Blast Off' and Kay's "Phallic Woman" use short sharp rhythms and prose to convey eroticism, and both pieces contain a bluntness and rawness that convey the tension of the sexual encounter. But overall, the other stories in *Women's Erotica* do make up an uneven collection, with only the rare sensual illumination glimpsed among all the emotional pain.

Among the good ones, Olga Masters' 'The

Lang Women' is constantly sensual and quietly suggestive. Through the child Lucy's eyes, there is a lovely retelling of the two widowed womens' nightly routine that has the older, but still physically youthful Jess, and her daughter-in-law Carrie preparing for bed, with "Carrie's body blooming golden in the lamplight for they were enjoying the storm and had left the curtains open."

Word soon get around, and enter neighbour Arthur Mann, whose sexual curiosity in Carrie consequently sparks up a mutual feeling in both the Lang women. Arthur brings to the farmhouse a gift of quinces which Jess later arranges in a bowl, but only after she had "picked one up and rubbed her thumb thoughtfully on the skin". One senses that Jess is in fact longing after Mann, that she is actually remembering "the split of his coat that showed his well shaped buttocks" as he rode away on his horse.

From hereon the relationship between Jess and Carrie begins to alter. The appearance of Mann has destroyed their earlier, natural sensuality, and the nightly routine is now replaced by a hasty and self-conscious retreat to bed, where the women moodily ruminate on Arthur Mann.

A quietly sensual mood is also sustained in another of the book's stories, 'Civilisation And Its Discontents', recounting the warmth and trust between parting lovers, and in which Helen Garner has a nicely turned phrase that beautifully expresses the erotic:

"I want to know, once more,/how it feels/to be peeled and eaten whole, time after time."

Cheryl Wilson

No Substitute: Prose Poems Images, editors: Terri-ann White, Anna Gibbs, Wendy Jenkins, Noel King, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1990, 160pp, \$16.99, ISBN 0 949296 68 7.

There is a statement prefacing this collection of contemporary writing —

Language — stories, poems — can't approximate the real, or replace it. They are themselves ways of action, written — and rewritten in the reading — to meet the needs of particular times and places.

The conventional and more familiar approach to writing and to reading what is written is to look for verisimilitude rather than the discovery of a new experience. It is well to remember that when reading *No Substitute*. While there are moments of recognition — *Don't touch, slaps the mother in the kitchen, sifting fingers tempting sweet confections.* — (*The Day the Smiths Made a Baby*, Christina Owen) the fiction/poem/image does not move logically or sequentially from one observed/imagined/recorded fragment to the next. Each fragment has its own life, linked in a different kind of way. The reader has to make a commitment to connect and make those links.

The impact of these pieces — many of them, anyway — is sudden, sharp and vivid, setting up tensions you tend to expect in a realist (or even surrealist) piece. Having said that, I must also say that it is not enough merely to respond to that initial impact. There is much more than instant pleasure here. Re-reading brings new and constantly changing experiences as ideas/emotions expand and take you on unexpected journeys, exploring abstract/specific qualities of desire, femaleness, loss, grief.

The cover picture — fragments of buildings, fruit, furniture, flowers, sky, vegetables, in strong primary colours may constitute one aspect of reality and while the sum of these parts does not make up a recognizable whole the effect is visually powerful and disconcerting. It is impossible to say 'This is a cityscape' or 'this is like a cityscape' or even 'these are aspects of life in a city' because the disconnections make nonsense of such statements even though they may be *felt* to be true.

I am aware that this collection will be regarded as post-modern and as such be seized upon by local (and other) teachers and students of literary theory and practice. I neither want, nor am qualified to talk about it in those terms and I doubt if the editors or contributors would want me to anyway. Instead, I approach it as a reader excited by a new experience (this is the first collection of its kind to be published in Western Australia), open, I hope to 'the clash of contradictions, a multiplicity of versions of play.' The collection, so Anna Gibbs and Noel King (two of the editors) say in their introduction, arose out of a coming together of a group of

writers who moved on to become part of a writers' weekend — deSCRIBE — held in Perth in September 1988. Many of the pieces included in the collection were read at that weekend.

Hearing Wendy Jenkins read *So* at Adelaide Writers' Week this year was a different experience for me, to reading it off the page, yet the insistence of the images and their related metaphors, the italicised couplets that provide a counterpoint to other rhythms, and the changing tone of the voice, have a mesmeric quality whether heard or read.

There is no one reading of these pieces, no 'right way' to receive them. Philip Salom's *Glass Poem*, for instance. Is 'glass' intended as in 'pane of' with possibilities of reflection or of shattering, or as in 'receptacle', something to hold liquid, to drink from? Or both? I'm not going to say how I read it, as that may divert another reader from the necessary process of self discovery. In any case, on the page it is there to be received/read/responded to/interpreted in as many ways as there are readers.

Echoes of one fiction resonate in others. *In and Out the Canyons* by Marcelle George is a corollary, throwing up a different set of images of a city

It used to be that you went to town if you were really serious about something; perhaps even for some serious fun on a Saturday night.
Town, town . . .

Now you have to go to the city, and rarely past the evening peak hour. This is the precinct of councils. Men, dull-suited, roam these chambers; they permit their own kind to develop the city; they melt down the fire escape when the heat is on.

to the very personal piece in Terri-ann White's *The Life in There*

Now, there are only twelve residents here; in two blocks of flats and two houses, not counting the mansion around near Parliament House — no one really knows who or how many live there. My neighbour has lived here, in the same house, for most of her life. She was born in the front room she now uses as her study. When she was a child the Sunday ritual was a stroll through the top end of King's Park after the cooked meal at midday . . .

and Thomas Hoareau's visual piece counterpoints this cityscape. Melissa Harpley in her visual pieces *From A Leederville House* offers a different perspective.

There is something very West Australian about this collection in spite of its unconventional approach to landscape. Sari Hosie in *The Summer Before/The Seahorse* begins with 'a field of wheat stubble', familiar enough, and 'lonely salmon gums and the flat horizon of mallee country' which could be parodic except that there the cliché ends as she cuts between inner scapes (remembered) and self-conscious choosing of beginnings, alternative stories and endings. And Pat Jacobs' story *The Chrysochryse Plain* could fool you in the opening lines into believing that it is going to be a predictable story about the break-up of a marriage. Instead it explores the possibility of discovery of self when one is isolated — lost — in an alien environment.

He'd want an aerial search, remote sensing, infra red. Find her by her body heat or her chemical composition as if she were another ore body: X aggregate of minerals in Y concentration equals the human form.

The irony is that she has never really been lost in the literal sense.

Blood is a recurrent image in these pieces. In Deborah Robertson's *Consuming Passion* Kate visits a chicken processing plant, responding to what happens to those birds

A man in a black leather apron and thigh-high boots stands to the side of them, not seeming to move, seeming only with a fixed gaze, to be supervising the rain of blood from above. The dead birds drop into a shining vat that throbs at the end of the line. De-hairing, he says, steel projections plucking away like hundreds of busy fingers.

and making it impossible not to see other connections: graphic and horrible.

Anna Gibbs' *Swan Song* looks at the process of writing in a way that is hard to describe — the pain of cutting back a manuscript, of ending a love affairs. It's all there. As well as the earlier pleasure.

Then there are Lesley Stern's eight obsessional pieces as much concerned with the giving up/longing for nicotine as with the process of writing,

I must write and I must write for at my back
I always hear
 nic-o-tine-nic-o-tine-nic-o-tine
haunting near.

Stop and think for a moment:
What will happen if I stop writing? Will the words all disappear forever sucked back into some primitive vortex where they all revert to savagery and snarl and feed on one another?
... Will I internally combust, go up in smoke?

The last piece in the collection is by Marion Campbell, retravelling at a different pace, and from a different perspective aspects of the landscape of *Not Being Miriam*. In her search for identity she uses, then puts aside, memories

They're archaic. Scenes replay in slow mo. At best they're like nostalgia marketed for the commodity of now: antipodean Proustians can consume time past — when chooks ranged free and Mum was chained to the stove — in Red red ready red Rooster, feel the glow of the old FJ when they stare into the computer display of the Commodore Executive and biting into a Chiko, rediscover their adolescent libido.

After wrenching every sensitive nerve, Campbell eschews nostalgia and becomes starkly political.

Maybe I can't afford the luxury of private memory any more when we've done our deal with Pinochet to forget all those who disappeared. Maybe I need to remember that fetishizing the personal is finally complicitous with the collective amnesia which our corporate style of government promotes.

After the first death, there have been too many others.

This collection is disturbing, exciting and at times quite merciless. It won't please the reader who is looking for reassurance and neatly packaged narratives.

Julie Lewis

Robert Drewe, *The Bay of Contented Men*, Picador, Sydney, 1989.

It is about six months since the launch of Robert Drewe's latest collection of stories, so that this review will only confirm what many readers already know. This is Drewe at his best: witty, searching, savagely incisive, creating memorable scenes and sense out of the familiar

suburban landscape. The stories are set in a variety of international locations. They are entertaining, disquieting and shrewd. The writer's ease with his subject matter and his own style is evident throughout and the net of imagination is cast more widely here than in *The Bodysurfers*, so that for me, this is the more satisfying collection.

Robert Drewe's work is always topical. This is not just a legacy of his days as a journalist with a keen eye for detail and a precise way of summing up a complex situation. It's brought about by the interplay of an active, concerned intelligence and a critical set of values ranging over the material surfaces of our lives, seeing connections and peeling back the surfaces to show parts of the life within. He has a firm understanding of how the particular can encapsulate the universal. He can use prosaic detail to poetic effect. Being concerned with what are the enduring concerns of his own and other generations, he cannot be other than topical. There is an abundance of both variety and vitality in this selection too, from the deeply troubling and probing issues in the first story to the playfulness and sheer entertainment of "The Hammett Spiel".

The first story in the collection, "Radiant Heat", is a good example of the complexity of Drewe's writing and the kinds of interwoven experiences and values it examines, connects and give symmetry to.

The narrator is conscious, in this story, that he is seeking to show the connections between disparate experiences and levels of human interaction. He's conscious, in telling his story, that he's imposing a form on the formless, a shape on the shapeless, seeing patterns in the chaos that may mean everything or nothing at all. This creates a mood in the story that's very like a tale from Conrad, where the art of narrative itself, the drawing together of many threads to fashion meaning, is also part of the story.

On rare days things come together: heat, a moth plague, fires, crowds of people. When random factors combine you anticipate more things happening. The drowning tragedy on the news. Maybe the arrival of a letter, mailed from some dozy South Pacific port six months before, from a father five months dead.

At the beginning of "Radiant Heat", the

narrator talks of his discomfort in “ordering . . . so definitely” the events of a disastrous picnic at which two small children drown — it’s “too affecting a beginning, too much to accept”. It is fortunately and, he thinks, fortuitously, not his own child, Peter, who has drowned, though he also has been picnicking just the previous day and swimming in the same lagoon. At day’s end, after his bath, unaware of adult guilts and fears, this child sits in front of the television with water trickling down the back of his neck, behind his ear.

With a radio report of the drownings, the narrator’s mother has had a hellish half-hour, imagining her grandson dead. The child’s father, remembering that his supervision of the children’s swimming had been less than total, is shaken by his recognition of the delicate balance between mundane, uneventful life and the full-blown horror of a child’s extinction.

The patterning of life in children’s games, especially the computer and book games in which the player or reader is the hero, confronted by endless multiple choices on his quest, is a neat device to introduce the more serious questions Drewe wants answers to and that his narrator relates with such perplexity.

The ten-year-old son, Peter, a “dreamy monster-lover”, is well-versed in the ways, comparative strengths and weaknesses of ghouls, wraiths, wights and zombies. The narrator relates with fascination his son’s love of the chaotic, the monsters’ “potential for anarchy”, the charm inherent in the fact that “their evil was disorderly”.

Already Peter wants to channel his fate, if only to choose the sword-fight with the skeleton ahead of the possible mauling by the werewolf.

What the reader is also made aware of is that Peter’s is distinctively the experience and attitude of innocence. The anarchy is really all chosen and contained, dependent on the turning of a page, the flicking of a switch. It really is as much a controlled experience as Peter’s repertoire of dramatic death scenes.

But on the day of the bushfires, when the narrator’s mind turns to the phenomenon of radiant heat, “the killer factor in bushfires”, the father and children are exposed to a different,

more frightening and disorderly evil.

The heat from the bushfires has caused the trees to peel. The trees are described like vulnerable, wounded flesh and membrane. Is their peeling “some sensitive early-warning system” of the radiant heat that people can’t survive? Is the chaos of Nature any more frightening than that in the human soul?

At the service station where they stop to fill the tank and to clean the fatty remains of Bogong moths from the windscreen, the tensions of this rare day seem to explode. The family witnesses an hysterical woman’s violent physical and verbal abuse of a little boy. The incident is horrifyingly uncontrolled, inexplicable and cruel. The child is being hurt and is completely unprotected. The killer factor has been unleashed and it rages, uncontrolled. Later, when the truck carrying the couple and the child accelerates past the narrator’s car in a burst of light and roaring noise, he thinks for a moment that it’s the fire overtaking him.

The same overwhelming sense of disquiet, of something awry beneath the innocent surface of things, permeates stories like the extraordinarily neat “Machete” and “The Lawyers of Africa”, in which, at the fag end of a suburban dinner party, with conversation turned to more exotic events and scenes, tensions and dislikes are exposed and emotional gulfs open wide.

“The Needle ‘Story’” is particularly strong, as well as topical. Set in Perth, in prosperous, ambitious City Beach and West Perth, it is a story of disturbing questions about justice, race and persecution amid personal tragedy and alleged medical fraud. The matter of fact style of the narrative is interspersed with dry legal commentary and small, pathetic details of marital disintegration and loss of connection. The method mirrors the subject: the smooth patina overlaying lives in turmoil, the coolly contrived appearance of unity among people who love but are unable to understand or help one another.

The title story is the last of the twelve and is set in Hong Kong. As in most of the stories in this collection, there are more questions, mysteries and perplexities than answers; but some instructive progress is made in the narrator’s attempt to put a frame around the questions.

There are no contented men or women here, but people living lives of emotional isolation,

mutual irritation and almost tangible loneliness. The eye that observes them is cruel, detached and accurate. The observations are so precise as to seem clinical, but this is a writer who understands pain. Occasionally he surprises with the tenderness with which he conveys and gauges pain. In “Life of a Barbarian”, set in Tokyo after an earthquake, an Australian engineer waits for a girl in a brothel “like an ape awaiting vivisection”, Disorientated, lonely, at odds with himself and with his relationships at home strained and uncertain, he returns some nights later to ask, in “hoarse beseeching English hanging in the air: ‘Could I have a woman who kisses?’ The shame strikes him at once”.

In the same story, the engineer, Pond, reads a translated collection of the last letters of Kamikazes. The details of the Kamikazes’ selection, their mission and their devastated youth, all summarized with the editor’s brutal precision, make his heart “race with sympathy”. The letters and journal entries themselves evoke simple pity. Pond knows that for the Heavenly Wind there was no tomorrow. He has his own tomorrows to confront and no certainty.

In lives where happiness is fragile and occasional, there could be no more seductive vision than a Bay of Contented Men, where “a special harmony marked relationships among the inhabitants”, women and children “were treated even more gently” and people “loved their surroundings, their neighbours and themselves”.

This is as poignant and powerful a collection of stories about the way we live now and the emotional distances and deserts in our intimate relationships as you are likely to find.

Marilyn Anthony

Nicholas Hasluck, *The Hat on the Letter O*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1990.

There are at least two collections of stories around at the moment with intriguing titles featuring the word ‘hat.’ One is Oliver Sacks’ collection of clinical case histories — *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* — and another is Nicholas Hasluck’s *The Hat on the Letter O*, an Australian collection of short stories reissued by Fremantle Arts Centre Press twelve years after the original publication date.

Nicholas Hasluck’s stories are a far cry from the laconic tales of swaggies and swells of small town and outback Australia. A lawyer in his other life, Hasluck writes on what he knows about — the daily business of working in city offices and going home to the suburbs, memories of a private school education in a Canberra boy’s school, middle class social rituals and sometimes, directly about the law as it is perceived from the *inside*, by lawyers caught in the institutionalized webs of anything but justice. While some of the stories venture out of Australia to places overseas for their settings — England, Spain, America — these feel like tourist excursions away from the primary setting — contemporary urban Australia.

This edition has four new stories added and two of them are set in other countries, but perhaps more significantly the same two stories, those that begin and end the volume have titles which suggest the storytelling process — “Storyline” is the first title and “Storyteller” the last. While both are gently paced realistic narratives which make few demands on the reader, they are also both interested in the central role of storytelling in everyday life and in its magic and its mystery. The first story is about a special remembered moment from a childhood day of skipping school in an English village and going for a walk instead along an old disused tramway which has become little more than a line of hedgerows through the fields. That memory triggers another which touches an even deeper chord and so the story ends with the thought:

Now, I said to myself, it will always be there,
that story, rising and falling, slowly evolving,
welling up out of the darkness; it will always
be with me, biding its time.

But Hasluck doesn’t go far with these explorations. He touches on them lightly, concentrating on the telling of the stories and offering only brief moments of philosophical or literary speculation. For many readers that will be a relief, for some a disappointment since the work repeatedly creates opportunities for delving into the processes of remembering and recording but does not go far with them. For many that will be a good thing. With so many contemporary writers devoted to self-reflexive wordgames it is a very pleasant experience to

flow with narratives that set up little resistance and ask us to probe only gently at the larger questions such as: What is the relationship between lived life and the stories we tell?

The last story, about the experience of visiting the Mississippi home of the novelist William Faulkner, deals more directly with this theme than any other in the volume. The narrator asks:

Why did Faulkner's work reflect a richly imagined private realm during a period when most of his contemporaries were realists? How much of Yoknapatawah country is 'real'?

And as he reminisces about his brother who died before he could make the pilgrimage to Satchmo and Faulkner country, the narrator says:

... his ambition was to be a successful filmmaker, and he was always on the lookout for fresh material, new ways of telling a tale, means of turning fact into fiction, of letting one story flow into another as Faulkner did.

There is something of that search going on in Hasluck's own collection but without any risks taken. In mood and subject matter the stories are diverse — some are scathing sketches of the less attractive aspects of human behaviour, some are nostalgic for lost values and lost experiences, some are told mainly to amuse and entertain the reader, but all keep to the realist mode and all have the flavour of autobiography. This makes for very comfortable and enjoyable reading.

For me the most memorable stories are those which question the aims and values of the professional city life of business or the law. Obviously at home in this world Hasluck describes incidents from the position of one who is tied to it sufficiently to know all its twists and turns but can remain detached enough at the same time to see what it can do to people. In his writing lawyers and business people are shown to be the victims of the systems they manipulate as much as their clients are victims. Those who attempt to defeat the system in some way, don't last, or, sadly do those with any ideals or ambitions beyond the promotion of their own careers.

The story called "Orlick" tells of a mythical senior lawyer by that name, invented by a resourceful young articulated clerk as a scapegoat

for all unanswered questions and all delays in action on a case. Picking up the phone at moments of total bafflement in front of a client, the young clerk would feign a conversation with the very busy and elusive Orlick who always knew where to look for the key to an intricate case. Typically when faced with a client this is how the young Bowra would operate:

As the client talked about the background to the matter, Bowra would extract a large and battered file from the bottom drawer of his desk . . .

"Mr Cummings, the issue here is quite a simple one. In the opinion of our firm it is not insoluble by any means. But, as I use that word advisedly, there are some further questions we must ask you. It will help us if you will be frank. Now then, what was the date of your birth?"

Bowra brought forth notepaper and made a copious summary of the reply. He reflected a moment; tapping his front teeth with the butt of his pencil. "Hmmm. That does pose one or two problems. Just a moment." He reached briskly for the intercom and, without depressing the small switch which operated the instrument, said: "Get me Orlick." Covering the mouthpiece with his free hand, he remarked to the client, . . . "Orlick is in charge of research. A brilliant man. He never fails to find a rule of law in our favour."

More devastating are Hasluck's accounts of the way that legal processes generate their own momentum leaving those people they were designed to protect excluded and bewildered. Two stories deal with Aboriginal cases, one of them framed as an evolving film script about a historical incident. "My Brother's Movie" is the title of the would-be film-script story and this is the most experimental of them all in its presentation of remote historical events multiply framed and distanced by the voices of narrators, cameramen, actors and even entrepreneurs, with the events themselves completely submerged under the mechanics of the various acts of reconstruction. In its structure the story is reminiscent of Mudrooroo Narogin's brilliant "Koori Script", *Doin' Wildcat*, a fictional filmscript of his early novel about Aboriginal urban experience, *Wildcat Falling*.

The story that gives the book its title *The Hat on the Letter O* is more light-hearted with a simple, adolescent joke at its centre. The 'hat' is the circumflex that sits over the 'o' in some French words "like a Chinese hat", as the French-Canadian speaker in the story tell us but

only after he has thrown the female narrator into confusion by telling her, in a moment of premature intimacy (as she understands it) that he has been "circumflexed"!

Readers will find plenty to entertain them in these stories because the style is frequently lightly witty. The disappointing side effect of this is that little is explored in great depth even though the writing is constantly hinting at intensities of experience beyond those actually confronted here.

Kateryna Olijnyk Arthur

(This review was first presented on the ABC programme Books and Writing.)

Dugald Williamson, *Authorship and Criticism*, Critical Categories Series, No. 1, Local Consumption Publications, Sydney, 1989, vi + 98pp.

Authorship and Criticism is the opening bat for the new *Critical Categories* series from Local Consumption Publications. It is a revised and extended version of an occasional paper published by Local Consumption in 1986. It is important to recognize the book in this role in order to understand the way in which it is organized and written and in order to follow the debate (*The Age Monthly Review*, April and May, 1989) which has been provoked by its publication. More will be said of the debate later, but first the book and the series.

The aims of the series are set forward quite clearly by Stephen Muecke in the 'General Editor's Preface' and the following statement from that preface allows us a standard by which we can judge the success of this book:

Rather than each book functioning as an extended dictionary entry, as if it would define the term in the fullest possible way, the books develop their own specific arguments and examples, thus contributing in a prospective rather than a retrospective way to the knowledges involved.

This is an issue which Williamson also takes up in his own preface, pointing out that whilst there is no attempt at any exhaustive coverage of the topic of authorship ('there is only brief discussion here of the long-term historical conditions of authorship such as the development of printing and the book-trade,

and pertinent legal relations such as copyright') the book does provide a bibliography for the "interested reader". A few words should be said about the excellent bibliography in this book. If the brief for the book is to develop a specific argument around a topic, then it is important to counterbalance that specificity with some general knowledges around the topic (this, of course, may be accommodated within the argument). Williamson's argument as it rehearses the Romantic conception of the author and the critiques of that notion, is counterbalanced by a very well prepared bibliography which not only acts as a source of reference for the reader but also grounds the argument in the continuing debate around the topic of authorship.

It should come as no surprise that Williamson begins his argument with the Romantics. More specifically, he begins with the famous 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' passage from Wordsworth's 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. After contrasting the Romantic conception of the author, as 'a unique personality individually responsible for creating new work', with the earlier notion of 'the author as a master of collective, rhetorical practices' (p.3), he is careful to stress the dialectical nature of poetry as described by Wordsworth:

[Wordsworth] sees it not *just* as the spontaneous overflow of feeling, but as the result of a process in which emotion is re-created imaginatively, reflected upon and qualified by the constraints and pleasures of the poetic form. (p.5)

It is precisely this formulation which enabled our current notions of authorship. The poem, in the terms of this formulation, combines the individual (the lived experience, the emotions, the imagination of the poet) with the social (the available techniques of composition) in a transcendent artefact, or rather, an artefact which offered the possibility of transcendence.

The implications of this formulation, the primary importance placed on originality and individuality, Williamson outlines by contrast with accounts of the older, rhetorical 'book-makers'. The argument does not have an historical cut-off point. The formulation allows for a re-reading of earlier poets by casting them

in the authorial mode, treating them as originating and creative 'authors'. It is partly through this capability, the evaluation of writers in terms of originality and creativity, that the persistence of the Romantic idea of authorship can be read.

In discussing the persistence of these notions, Williamson focuses on the recent history of criticism in two disciplines, *auteur* theory in film studies and Leavisite criticism in literary studies. Although roughly contemporaneous, these two dominant influences are not overtly related. As Williamson explains, *auteur* theory tends to single out film directors by attributing them with an 'individual, artistic vision'. This serves two functions, on the one hand establishing qualitative criteria for the evaluation of film production, and on the other establishing the criteria for the recognition of the signature of the director who we wish to read as author.

The concern with the recognition of the stylistic features of a particular author was not so much a concern of Leavisite criticism, at least not when one had survived those particular high school tests. The concerns of the Leavisite critic presented themselves in a higher moral register.

The successful piece of work is said to integrate the creatively forged words with the "piece of living" depicted. . . . Thus there is a fusion of experience and imagination, emotional or intellectual content and artistic structure. For a Leavisite critic, the unity of form and content is an aesthetic attainment to be appreciated not in the narrow sense, as an exclusively artistic feat, but in the wider sense of a morally significant accomplishment, in which the author's wholeness of being is achieved. Moreover, this individual integrity means that the authored work has a representative and universal significance, because it shows what "the essential, fully imagined, spiritual status or stance or human reality" might be. (p.14)

From this Williamson draws our attention to the authority located in this notion of authorship and to the special clarity of vision which is attributed to the author in the public domain by virtue of his or her expertise in an artistic domain. This is what he calls 'A Portrait Of The Author'. It is this initial account of the 'Romantic conception of the author' that provides the book with its ability to represent with admirable clarity and efficiency how the various critiques of that notion react against this original Romantic formulation. Those critiques read like

a who's who of modern critical theory; Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, semiotics and structuralism, post-structuralism. As indicated by the point where he ends his discussion of the critiques of authorship, Williamson is strongly influenced by the writings of Foucault and, perhaps more importantly, by others influenced in a similar way, Hindess and Hirst, Ian Hunter and Jeffrey Minson.

After the critiques we come to the two most interesting chapters in the elaboration of Williamson's argument, one addressing alternatives to authorial criticism and one addressing the construction of Peter Weir as an *auteur* director. In the first he presents an analysis of an authorial mode of critical practice. What this entails is the breaking down of such a practice into four basic procedures; the use of the author as a classificatory index, a source of origin and a principle of unity, and the attendant strategy of interpretive commentary. In examining alternatives to this practice he gives account of genre theory and systems of signification which do not base themselves author generated enquiry.

The Peter Weir chapter functions as a case study to draw out the issues of authorial criticism and its alternatives made in the earlier chapters. In particular, what is most interesting is the attention which Williamson gives to the use of anecdote and interview in the construction of the director as author.

I have only one criticism about the book and perhaps that can be understood in the terms of the book's size restriction. Williamson does a fine job of charting the waters of the origins, persistence of and alternatives to notions of authorship and authorial criticism. But one point stands out, the jump from Wordsworth to the 1950s. I feel perhaps that some attention could have been paid to the reasons why these notions of the author persisted through the 19th and 20th centuries. I mean, of course, a few co-ordinates rather than a history of Western thought. The reason for this is not so much an appeal to a comprehensive history but to distinguish why these arguments should occur in film studies. Without this, the relationship between the practices of literary and film criticisms seems strangely unproblematic, especially for a work that shows such a fine eye for detail.

I hope that I have been able to indicate the

clarity which this book brings to its topic, but, as a final gesture, perhaps the debate in *The Age Monthly Review* will indicate the clarity which needs to be brought to this topic. Very briefly, Paul Carter published a critical letter in the review which sets a highly reductive reading of this book against the then current edition of *Phoenix Review*. Don Barry and Stephen Muecke of *Local Consumption* responded. The debate is over this book and the use to which Carter puts *Phoenix Review* seems to be independent of its own intentions. His critique suggests that we can perform an analysis of

authorship and restrict its findings to the classificatory use of the author's name, ignoring the implications for interpretive commentary which Williamson charts so well. It is unlikely that the 'crisis in the Humanities' to which Carter refers will be resolved if we cannot pay more attention to the arguments of books such as *Authorship and Criticism* which at least give us a chance to understand better the knowledges which we bring to them.

Anthony May

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

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AUSTRALIAN STUDIES ROUNDUP

Since the publication of *Windows onto Worlds : Studying Australia at Tertiary Level* (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1987), the Report of the Committee to Review Australian Studies in Tertiary Education, many significant developments have occurred in university and college studies which focus on Australia.

Developments include new courses, new centres of teaching and research and the publication of texts across a wide range of Australia-related studies. The reformist aim expressed in *Windows onto Worlds* of 'Australianising' the Australian tertiary curriculum has been significantly enhanced since 1987.

Among the most prominent developments has been the establishment of centres which focus upon research and publication. The Australian Centre at Melbourne University, for instance (under Chris Wallace-Crabbe's direction), encourages cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary research and has a close relationship with the journal *Meanjin*. The National Centre for Research and Development in Australian Studies at Monash University, directed by Peter Spearritt, is taking a leading role in the construction of much-needed bibliographical and reference materials. The University of New England's Centre for Australian Literature and Language Studies, whose director is Shirley Walker, has chosen to focus its attention (like the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature at The University of Western Australia) upon research into Australian literature and language.

The most striking development in curriculum construction has been the introduction of Australian Studies as a secondary school subject in Victoria at both year 11 and year 12 levels. This experiment is being watched with interest in other states.

The recent publication by American, French and Italian authors of books about Australian literature, history and culture should help to allay the fears of those Australians who still feel embarrassed (or fearful) of their country being in the international league. Robert L. Ross's *Australian Literary Criticism — 1945-1988: An Annotated Bibliography* (Garland Publishing, New York and London, 1989), for instance, is a highly professional publication and a major reference source, not just for Australians (no-one had thought to produce such a book in Australia) but internationally. (It is part of the Garland Reference Library of the Humanities.)

Robert Ross, who works at the Edward A. Clark Centre for Australian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin also edits *Antipodes : A Journal of North American Literature*, which commenced publication in 1987. Like *Kunapipi*, edited by Anna Rutherford in Aarhus, Denmark, since 1979, *Antipodes* is making itself an indispensable source of reference and stimulus for Australianists. In time, Subhas Chandra Saha's *Journal of Australian Literature*, published at Manipur University in north eastern India, may establish a similarly strong, international reputation.

Giovanna Capone's *Australia and Italy : Contributions to Intellectual Life* (Universita di Bologna, Longo Editore, Ravenna, 1989) is a collection of papers in culture and science which informatively celebrates 'Australian talent in Italy, Italian talent and Australia.' Papers range from Giovanni Carsaniga's analysis of Italian cultures in Australia to studies of the influence of (Italian-derived) anatomical studies on surgical practice in Australia and elsewhere, and the distorting influence of Eurocentric prejudices in biology. Bernard Hickey, now a Professor of English at the University of Lecce, writes about Australian cultural activities in Italy, which he has done so much to stimulate and serve. The editor of *Australia and Italy*,

Professor Giovanna Capone from the University of Bologna, has recently been elected President of the newly formed European Association for Studies of Australia.

Like Australia and Italy, Les Français et L'Australie (Université de Paris X-Nanterre, Le Havre, 1987), edited by André Dommergues and Maryvonne Nedeljkovic, is a collection of conference papers. Here, the theme is discovery, based upon the experience, and the metaphoric force, of French voyages of discovery and scientific missions to Australia since the mid-eighteenth century. Again, like *Australia and Italy*, the book provides significant comparative perspectives from which Australia-based Australianists could profitably learn.

Recent books published in Australia have also broadened the field usefully for other scholars and teachers. *The Book in Australia: Essays Towards a Cultural and Social History* (Australian Reference Publishing in association with the Centre for Bibliographical and Textual Studies, Monash University, Melbourne, 1988) is one such volume. The editors, well known bibliographers D.H. Borchardt and Wallace Kirsop, aim to provide 'a foundation stone for other scholars', and in this, the papers they have collected are successful. The field to which they and their authors are contributing is nothing less than the history of publishing and bookselling in Australia, at present a vastly under-tilled field. Nor need this be a dry and uninteresting area of study, as Elizabeth Webby's chapter on journals in the nineteenth century and M. Askew and B. Hubber's chapter on the reading habits and cultural contexts of colonial readers convincingly demonstrate.

Australian literary studies have been particularly well served by four recent books. John McLaren's *Australian Literature: An Historical Introduction* (Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1989) is the kind of introductory study which should be valuable for teachers and others who have not had the benefit of recently introduced Australian courses in their tertiary level studies. It also provides contextual perspectives and links between literature and history of a useful cross-disciplinary kind.

Susan McKernan's *A Question of Commitment: Australian Literature in the Twenty Years after the War* (Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1989) is a lucid and persuasive account of the changing responses of Australian writers to their society and art from 1945 to 1965. Her studies of James McAuley, A.D. Hope, Douglas Stewart, Judith Wright, David Campbell and Patrick White are complemented by shrewd insights into the contexts of politics and society, in a brisk and readable style.

Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman's book *The New Diversity: Australian Fiction 1970-88* (McPhee Gribble, Melbourne 1989) takes a later slice of time and achieves its aim of opening up the field of contemporary Australian literature for further fruitful analysis and conjecture. By highlighting contemporary concerns such as Australian-Asian relations, regionalism, migrant experience and Aboriginality, Gelder and Salzman provide valuable guidelines for others, though their concept of 'context' is more limited than Susan McKernan's or John McLaren's.

Russell McDougall and Gillian Whitlock's book *Australian/Canadian Literatures in English: Comparative Perspectives* (Methuen Australia, Sydney, 1987) — like the books mentioned earlier which link Australia with Italy and France — adopts a bilateral comparative approach. Essays by the editors (who are Australians) and Canadians such as Diana Brydon and J.J. Healy, help to focus important issues of similarity and difference between Australia and Canada, of a cultural as well as a geographical kind. Russell McDougall's 'Sprawl and the Vertical' and Diana Brydon's 'Discovering "Ethnicity"' are two seminal articles for students of Australian culture and society.

Undergraduate students of Australian Studies, considered as a separate programme or course, have often lacked direction and resources. *Australian Studies: A Survey* (Oxford University Press Australia, Melbourne, 1989) will provide some

assistance, but a far from complete survey of the field's possibilities. The most valuable aspect of this book is its thematic arrangement and bibliographical back-up. The worst thing for Australian studies, in this early formative stage of their development, would be heavy-handed prescription. Walter's book is pluralist enough to offer teachers some ideas without hampering their desire to know more. It provides some beginnings, launching pads from topics of cross-disciplinary interest, such as regionalism, urbanisation, Aboriginal and women's studies, and poverty.

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Few Australians are aware that Australian Studies is taught in many universities and colleges across Europe. At last count there were at least fifteen European countries and over thirty universities teaching Australian courses. Australian Studies is proving a popular alternative for students in Italy, Germany, Denmark and Britain, where the largest centres are located, but from Paris to Ljubljana in Yugoslavia the word is out — Australian Studies is a good thing.

Popular Australian culture from INXS and Midnight Oil to the durable television soaps and our best films are turning the Europeans on, but now the work of our artists and writers has also captured the European imagination. While Nicole Kidman and Mel Gibson can knock them dead in the cinemas, while Peter Garrett and Michael Hutchence can set them rocking in the aisles, undergraduates and graduates in the hallowed lecture theatres from Edinburgh to Aarhus, from Bologna to the eastern bloc, are reading novels and poetry by Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Mudrooroo Narogin, Patrick White, Randolph Stow, Thomas Keneally and Peter Carey. Furious debate about the relative merits of Aboriginal art, Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd, the impressionists — Frederick McCubbin, Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton — the modernists and post modernists can be heard way above the murmurings about the renaissance and the classics.

The obvious excitement generated by Australia in Europe led a group of academics to meet in London to set up an Association to help direct the Australian traffic. The European Association for Studies of Australia was formed on 14 October 1989 to coordinate university activities and enrich the European understanding about Australia. The new Association will introduce travelling Australian writers, artists and academics to European students, convene conferences and liaise with colleagues down under. France, Italy, the UK, Yugoslavia, Ireland, Switzerland and Austria sent representatives while many other countries promised backing. Professor Tom Millar from London University chaired the meeting which elected Professor Dr Giovanna Capone from the University of Bologna as President and Professor Werner Senn from the University of Berne as Secretary.

The European Association for Studies of Australia established as its key purpose the promotion and the teaching of Australian studies at European tertiary institutions. It agreed to provide regular exchanges of information between individuals and centres about activities, resources and visitors; support conferences, teacher exchanges and other scholarly activities related to Australia; and encourage visits to Australia for the purposes of research and teaching, and facilitating the work of visiting Australian scholars and artists in Europe. Beyond universities and colleges, the Association agreed to support the interests of European Australian Studies scholars in negotiations with embassies, governments, the European Community and other relevant bodies so that a better exchange of ideas can take place.

This exciting new initiative will have Berne and Bologna as its headquarters and can only improve relations between Australia and Europe.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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HAL COLEBATCH's fourth book of poetry, *The Earthquake Lands*, was recently published by Collins Angus & Robertson, and his fifth, *The Stonehenge Syndrome*, has just been completed. His study of popular culture, *Return of the Heroes*, is about to be published by the Australian Institute for Public Policy. He is a journalist and lawyer.

KATHERINE GALLAGHER's work has been published widely in Australia, and in 1981 she won the Warana Poetry Award. She now lives in London with her husband and son.

JEFF GUESS's fifth collection of poems *Rites of Arrival* was launched during Writers' Week, in Adelaide in March 1990. He is also the co-editor of *The Inner Courtyard: a South Australian Anthology of Love Poetry* launched during the same week.

STEPHEN HALL — practices as a criminal lawyer in Perth. His poems have been published in magazines and anthologies and broadcast on ABC radio.

BEATE JOSEPHI — is producer/editor of *Writers' Radio & Author's Proof*, Radio 5UV, was Chair of Writers' Week of the Adelaide Festival in 1986 and 1988, and freelances for radio in Germany and Australia.

JEAN KENT — grew up in rural Queensland, but now lives at Lake Macquarie, NSW. She writes poetry as well as fiction. Her first book of poems, *Verandahs*, will be published by Hale & Iremonger in 1990.

ANDREW LANSDOWN's latest collection of poetry is *Walking and Always*, published by Angus & Robertson. A new collection, titled *The Grasshopper Heart*, will be published by Angus & Robertson early in 1991.

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PETER MURPHY — is a Melbourne writer and photographer very much concerned with the instant of being and with how the individual can affect his or her experience of this through consciousness.

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PETER PIERCE — from Melbourne, recently co-edited *The Poets' Discovery: Nineteenth Century Australia in Verse* (Melbourne University Press, 1990).

DIANA PRICHARD — is a writer and freelance journalist. She has written a book of short stories, *The Cuban Cigar And Other Stories*, and is currently co-writing a script for a documentary on abalone diving. She lives in Southport, Tasmania.

ELIZABETH SMITHER's latest collection of poetry is *A Pattern of Marching* (AUP/OUP 1989) which won the poetry section of the New Zealand Book Awards for 1990. She has just completed a collection of short stories: *Nights at the Embassy* which will appear this year.

ROME WARREN — lives at North Arm Cove in NSW and has had about 150 stories and two novels published. Various stories have been translated and published in other countries. Her story 'Aviary' was highly commended in the 1988 National Times Award.

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

CHERYL WILSON — lives in Melbourne with her youngest son. As well as review writing, she has had poetry and short stories published in small press magazines.

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