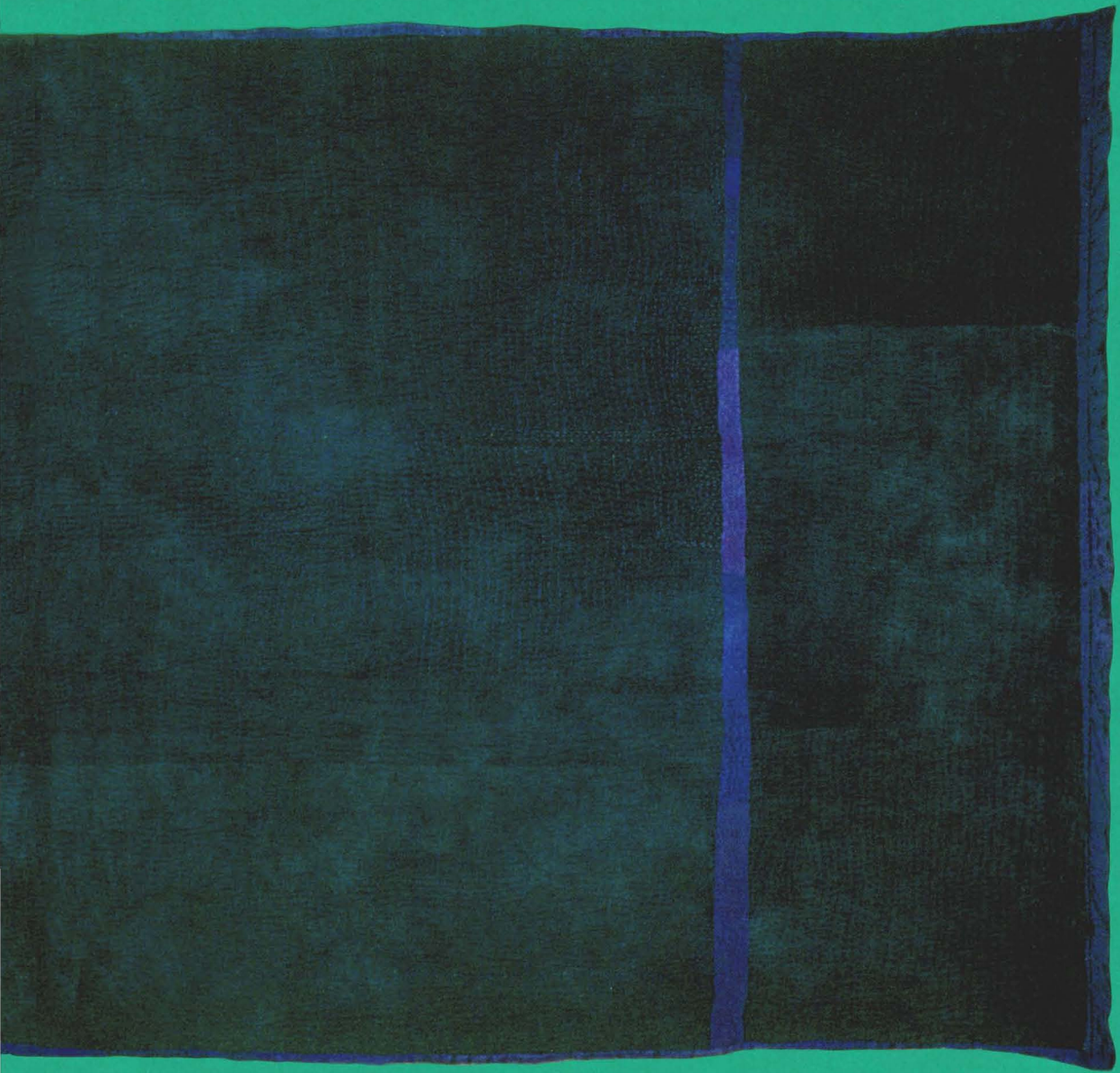


# WESTERLY

STORIES · POEMS · ARTICLES · REVIEWS



AUTUMN 1994 NUMBER 1 \$5.00

## **Editors' Notice**

After many years of work with *Westerly* Peter Cowan has decided to call it a day. He retires as the longest serving editor of any Australian cultural magazine, and we wish him well for his future writing.

The editors are pleased to announce that Julie Lewis has agreed to join Margot Luke in editing fiction for *Westerly*; and also that Giovanna Capone, Director of the Centre for Australian Studies at the University of Bologna, Italy, has become an Editorial Consultant - both commencing this issue.

## **PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE**

The editors have pleasure in announcing that the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to *Westerly* in 1993 is

**Christopher Doran**

for his story "Christmas Cake", published in the Summer issue, Number 4.

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## Mediterranean Issue

Each year the Summer issue (no. 4) of *Westerly* is a special issue of poetry, fiction and articles on a selected theme. The editors would now like to receive contributions in each genre for the 1994 Summer issue, which is to be a "Mediterranean Issue". Contributions need to be received by 31 August at the latest; material received sooner has a greater chance of acceptance.

Perth and some other areas of Western Australia, and other parts of Australia as a whole, are often seen as having a Mediterranean climate. *Westerly* is interested in receiving material concerned with links or similarities between Australia and the countries around the Mediterranean Sea. These might deal with features such as climate, food and wine, dress (or undress), art and architecture, the quality of light, beach culture, attitudes to time and many other matters. Creative and critical work from Australian writers with links to these countries is particularly encouraged.



# WESTERLY

a quarterly review

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Three *Westerly* Indexes 1956-77, 1978-83 and 1984-8, are available at \$5.00 each from the above address.

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### **Katharine Grant Watson, the artist's wife: Portrait of an English Lady\***

Katharine Hannay was a young Englishwoman who married the novelist and naturalist Elliot Lovegood Grant Watson in 1919, six weeks after they met at the inauguration of the Arts League of Service. On that occasion, Katharine nervously shared the platform with Wyndham Lewis to explain the aims of the League, which evolved into the Arts Council of Great Britain. A few weeks later, Grant Watson helped Katharine move the books of the League from the top flat to the basement of the building, because the upper rooms were wanted by the owner, Mrs Annie Besant.

Grant Watson, because his mother disliked his Puritan Christian names, was always known as Peter. During a pause in their work, Peter congratulated her on the speech she had made at the meeting: "You made a good speech. You must be an idealist" (2: 184).<sup>1</sup> Katharine explained that she did not really believe the League would succeed, but that "somehow, as a sceptic, I think I can put the thing far better than I could if I were a dedicated enthusiast . . . if you are detached and reasonable, if you can see both sides, you may be more efficient than if you are blind with enthusiasm." The idea seemed to disturb Peter, who thought it "cynical", but Katharine's ability to assess fairly matters with which she had little emotional sympathy was to play an important part in their relationship. Peter asked Katharine if they could meet up in Wales, where he and his step-father were taking a cycling tour and she was about to visit with her married sister.

In Wales, Fate threw them together alone for two days. Peter told her about the expedition he made in 1910 and 1911 to Western Australia with Radclyffe Brown, and about his love for a woman, some eight years older than he. She was unhappily married, and a brave attempt to leave her husband for Peter had disastrously failed. This precipitated Peter's breakdown, from which even then he had barely recovered. Katharine felt that the story she had to tell him was less significant: her early life in the cultural circles of London society, her war work on English farms, and the death from war wounds of the man who had wanted to marry her. On the evening of their

\* This paper was originally given as the Dorothy Green memorial Lecture at the 1993 conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature. Katharine Grant Watson's story occupied much of Dorothy Green's thinking in the year before her death.

1. Bracketed numbers refer to the five typescript volumes of Katharine Grant Watson's autobiography, "Between Two Worlds." Held with restricted access in the Department of English, James Cook University.

first day, Peter, who had been living for two years with a woman who wanted to marry him, spoke ambivalently about marriage:

"I have always been very much against the institution of marriage," he said. "A prison . . . you know what Bernard Shaw says about it; but I want children . . . I want little girls so that I can teach them to swim, and read Shakespeare with them" (2, 188).

On the evening of their second day, he explained how his mother taught him to love living things, and to look at them "with eyes that could see." "We had shared it together, she and I," Peter said. "There is so much in sharing things . . . did you know that?" Katharine felt as if she were about to jump off a cliff: "Do you think it possible that you and I might try to share things?" she said.

"How do you mean?"

"To share life together."

Here is Katharine's own account of that moment:

"Lots of women have wanted to marry me." He said this with an earnestness which absolved it from its naiveté. "But I couldn't do it. Some were intimate friends, and you are a stranger, and yet I think we might."

"You don't think it is just *because* you don't know me?" I ventured.

"No," and now he was regarding me with that desert-look, "no, there is something blue about you."

"Blue?"

"Yes. You are like a veronica - you know that little weed, a clear blue, that grows in the grass?"

It was nice to be associated with that little flower, pervasive though it could be - especially as I felt I was being a very forward and predacious weed' (1:195).

The story of this "very forward and predacious weed" suggests that there seldom was a more inaccurate self-description. I shall try to introduce to you the life of Katharine Grant Watson from a perspective which I hope would to some extent be approved by Katharine herself.

There are four women whose voices here are stronger than mine. The first is Josephine Spence, the younger daughter of Katharine and Peter, who visited me last October and who has given permission for Katharine's story to be told today. The next is Dorothy Green, who talked with me for hours about Katharine when I stayed with her for some months in 1990. Dorothy felt that Katharine's story was a special one. She was concerned that when it was first made public it should be presented with no strong feminist bias, and on the other hand, no trivialising romanticism. The third woman is Ida Bedford, the woman whose idealised love and real friendship were so important to Peter Grant Watson, and whose own story is one of courage and tragedy. In Katharine's autobiography Ida is called "Susan," but I shall use her real name here. The fourth woman, of course, is Katharine herself, a woman I never met, but whose voice I transcribed for Dorothy from a taped conversation with Josephine lasting some two or three hours and recorded during the Christmas of 1979-80.

When Grant Watson died in 1970 Dorothy had already asked permission to write

his biography. Partly to assist her in this project, Katharine completed an account of her own life which she called "Between Two Worlds." She prefaced Book 1 with lines from Byron: "Between two worlds life hovers like a star,/ Betwixt night and morn, upon the horizon's verge." The autobiography was completed in 1977 in five typescript volumes comprising over one hundred thousand words. These volumes, the taped conversation between Katharine and Josephine, and several letters and documents from the Grant Watson papers temporarily held at James Cook University, are my sources.

Several years earlier, Katharine wrote several largely autobiographical stories for *Blackwood's Magazine*.<sup>2</sup> Her autobiography is written in a simple but shapely form, with great honesty and intelligence, and with gentle humour and charm. It is a work which supports the observation made by Joy Hooton in her account of "Autobiography and Gender," that one of the characteristic traits of women's autobiographies is the definition of the self as a self in relation to others.<sup>3</sup> Katharine several times asserts the prime importance of relationships in her life, and what she calls the incalculable value of the "metaphysics of relationships" (1:74). "I think the material of life," Katharine writes, "is made of relationships, that it is through relationships that you 'live' your life" (5:356). She was hurt when the artist who hoped to marry her teasingly remarked that she would be too clever for him when she entered the University College of London. She felt the need to prove herself competent, but she writes that she could not explain to herself "the instinctive rejection of a friendship in which I was in any way 'superior'" (1:75).

Katharine Hannay was born in London on 6 December 1894, the youngest of three children. There was a sister, Margaret, seven years older, and a brother, Howard, five years older. The family was very comfortably off. Her father, Arnold, was a lawyer and a patron of the arts. When Katharine was twelve William Nicholson, later knighted for his services to art, painted a portrait of her on a black background, which Katharine felt made her face look rather dirty, and indeed one London gallery showed it as a portrait of a little slum girl. It is a beautiful, if slightly romanticised portrait of a charmingly thoughtful child. Katharine's mother, Alice Howard, although she had no formal education, was also an artist of some talent, which her husband eventually recognised, allowing her to set up a studio in their home into which Mrs Hannay coaxed reluctant members from her household to sit for her.

Although Katharine's mother encouraged the child's caresses, relationships in the family were civilised rather than warm, and Katharine felt the lack of spontaneous affection. The family seems to have been distinguished by its cool, intellectual irony.<sup>4</sup> Katharine was told, for example, of her sister's comment after inspecting the new-born baby: "She's not a bad little thing . . . a pity nobody wants her" (1: 1). There had been a serious separation between her parents and Katharine's birth was the symbol of an uneasy reconciliation. For this reason, her mother expected Katharine to remain with her as her special comfort, and probably unconsciously, attempted to hold back her developing maturity. This had less serious consequences but never-

2. "Under the Sky," *Blackwood's Magazine*. February 1969; "Beau Sejour," *Blackwood's Magazine* April 1969.

3. Joy Hooton, "Autobiography and Gender," Susan Magarey, Caroline Guerin and Paula Hamilton eds. *Writing Lives: Feminist Biography and Autobiography*. Adelaide: Australian Feminist Studies, 1992: 27.

4. Josephine Spence confirms this impression: "There was mighty little warmth in that family." Josephine Spence to Elizabeth Perkins, 12 June 1993.



theless painful ones for Katharine, when she was sent to boarding-school at Godalming with pinafores and childish underwear while other girls kept their underwear in place with more sophisticated devices and wore adult skirts and blouses. The reluctance to acknowledge Katharine's development also had a serious consequence which perhaps determined the direction of her relationship with the man she might have married.

In 1901 the family acquired a villa in Dieppe, the centre of an English settlement, and until 1914 they moved frequently between London and Dieppe, taking children, servants and the family cat and her kittens. Here the Hannays, with the handsome, cultured father and the beautiful, charming mother, were frequently visited by other residents at Dieppe: Whistler, Max Beerbohm and Reggie Turner, Leonard and Walter Sickert, as well as dozens of authors and celebrities, some whose fame has lasted less well. They shared a beach with other English families, including Winston Churchill and his wife, the pink-skinned future Prime Minister defiantly turning lobster red in the summer sun. Diving from the jetty, Katharine once landed on top of Churchill and for a minute feared she had drowned him.

If Katharine's was not quite a Wordsworthian childhood, there were days at Dieppe and in London which were as happy as a sensitive, intelligent girl might expect at that time and in that society. Like most society parents, her mother spent little time with the children, and Katharine recalls with special love an older friend of her mother, whom they called "Aunt Eleanor" who cared for them during their parents' absences. She looked after us, says Katharine, "with all the love of a mother and with rather more wisdom" (1: 11).

In 1909, when Katharine was fourteen, she met a young artist, Noël Simmons, a visitor to the Hannay household at Dieppe. For the next seven years, Noël became a frequent guest of the Hannays, and although thirteen years older, he was apparently greatly attracted by Katharine, while she imagined that if he were specially attracted to anyone it was to her sister Margaret. At the villa, Noël slept in a room joined by a connecting door to the sisters' bedroom, the only occupants of the top floor. Noël himself commented on her mother's innocence in allowing this proximity, and Katharine later felt that it was a determined innocence that refused to acknowledge the possible maturity of the relationship: "She placed complete confidence in Noël to an extent which was justified by his behaviour, but which was eventually injurious to me, because he was too honourable to show his real feelings" (1:58).

Parties were held in London which were attended by artists, dancers, and writers like John Galsworthy and the gauche young Ezra Pound, who took the sisters out for tea. One of the Hannays' frequent visitors was Netta Syrett, a prolific writer of novels, short stories and plays. In 1917 Syrett published her fifteenth novel, *Troublers of the Peace*, in which the young heroine, Joan Wickham, was, by Katharine's account, probably a fictional portrait of Katharine, although Katharine says that she never read the book. *Troublers of the Peace* concerns what we now call the generation gap between mothers and daughters in cultured upper middle-class London, and involves a critique of the Bohemian society that centred on the Slade School of Art and included Virginia Woolf and her circle. This, in reality, was the young circle to which Katharine and Noël belonged at the outbreak of the war, and one of her closest friends, who lived for some time with the Hannays, was Barbara Hiles, who was closely involved with the Woolfs. The fictional Joan Wickham, kept at a distance in

childhood by her beautiful and socially distinguished widowed mother, is brought home from school in Europe at eighteen to be her mother's companion and enter London society. But Joan rejects her mother's circle to associate with the Bohemian art set, although her breeding and innate good sense prevent her from giving herself entirely to the coarse life the novel assigns to the artists.

There is sufficient coincidence between the novel and Katharine's account of her life at this time, and her determination to make a life for herself in London, to allow one, very cautiously, to accept *Troublers of the Peace* as another perspective, very blurred and romanticised, on this period of Katharine's life. The novel's most useful contribution is that if Joan possesses any of the characteristics of Katharine, it suggests that others saw her as a fine, honest, intelligent, determined and quite beautiful young woman, a portrait that Katharine herself does not paint.

At the end of the summer term in 1915, Katharine obtained permission from University College to suspend her studies in History in order to undertake war work. Although this was probably the first such request from a woman student, permission was eventually given. Katharine spent the next three years in conditions rather different from the "luxury and beauty" in which, Noël once told her, she had been brought up. Her first assignment was with the Forage Department, visiting remote farms to persuade reluctant farmers to sell their fodder to the army. She braved many situations which were difficult and uncomfortable for a young woman, especially at that time. She seems to have aroused a gentlemanly, protective instinct in several men with whom she associated in her work. One elderly, childless farmer, who introduced her to the poetry of Byron, imagined that she must be a neglected child to undertake such work, and wanted to adopt her. The son of a local squire sent her an expensive felt hat from London: years later, taking the unworn hat from its box, Peter told her, "You really must wear it. I never saw you look so well" (2:106). We have no report of how Katharine looked when she wore the trousers that she found necessary after Nick Bagenal, grateful because she introduced him to Barbara Hiles whom he later married, loaned her his Douglas motor-cycle when he went to fight in France. The army captain who co-ordinated her work, however, declined to re-appoint her after the first season, because he disapproved of her breeches, although she wore them always covered with a long mackintosh.

Katharine spent the remaining war years at several different farms, and later in co-ordinating farm work from London. Her account of this work and the training centre, is so interesting that it is a pity she burnt her diary because a fellow worker suggested it was "a little unkind to observe people and describe them so closely" (2: 157). Once, at a particularly difficult farm where the farmer grudgingly accepted female labour and did not make life easy for them, Katharine almost lost the sight of one eye when a cow caught her with its horn. Katharine does not mention the accident again, but the eye was impaired permanently.<sup>5</sup> Katharine's autobiography maintains a consistent attitude towards such accidents throughout her life:

For ten days I lay on my funny little hard bed, with my eyes covered, and my toes sticking out over the end. I felt quite calm and peaceful about it, as though some tension had been eased. If I lost my eye . . . well, that was a casualty of war. It is my belief that accidents like this are not accidental, that they stem from something deep down in one's inner self (2: 160).

A true casualty of war was Noël Simmons, who died of war wounds in a

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5. Katharine Grant Watson to Dorothy Green, 13 November 1981.

London Nursing Home on 27 October 1916. Katharine was now stationed in London, and visited Noël frequently before his death. From the one extant letter he wrote to her from France, the night before his thirty-fourth birthday, we know his intentions were to marry her. Katharine writes:

Noël was wounded on August 18th. When I first visited him I wondered if it were advisable, - even if it would be kind, to say that we would get married as soon as he was well again, but this seemed to me an insincere gesture, in the face of his very serious condition. The last time I saw him, and I knew it was the last time, while we were talking, there was an air-raid warning, and some planes flew over. Noël turned his head to look up at them: "If they run the war the way they are doing, there will be another war soon. This won't bring peace," he said (2:164).

Her family were reserved in mentioning Noël, and Katharine was very much alone in her grief. A year or so later, she and her sister Margaret passed a West End flower-shop where Katharine had bought some simple marigolds Noël had asked for. "I always thought," [her sister] commented, "that if you had told him you would marry him, it might have saved his life" (2:166).

Perhaps this helps to explain why, as we have seen, it was Katharine who in effect proposed to Peter Grant Watson, although there is no doubt that Peter had set up the physical and emotional environment. The marriage took place in Hampstead Town Hall, on 28 June 1919, and after a quiet family lunch, Peter and Katharine returned to Wales. Her mother's response to the engagement, writes Katharine, was a wonderful mixture of irrational truth and motherly affection: "I had hoped you would always be with me, I thought you would never get over Noël's death. You must bring the young man home, dear. We must meet him and get to know him" (2:196).

Peter's mother, Lucy, had died eight months earlier in October 1918, but her influence in Katharine's marriage was strong. His step-father, Jack Powell, thought that Lucy would have approved of Katharine, and he warned her that she would need to be strong, both physically and in other ways. Katharine later referred to her marriage as a "triune relationship" (5:360) involving Peter, Ida and herself, but at times she seems to think that there was a fourth person immanent if not present. In the taped conversation, Katharine remarked:

I think one of the difficulties in my early relationship with Peter, was that I was associated not with Ida but with his mother. And his attitude towards me as a husband was influenced by the fact that somehow his mother got in the way. But not Ida! And I always thought it was Ida (Tape, 17).

Katharine's epigraph to Book 3 which begins with their married life, is taken from the fifteenth-century Indian mystic and poet, Kabir: "In Life Deliverance Abides." For Peter and Katharine, their marriage delivered them from limbo, perhaps, into a more dynamic set of circumstances than either had experienced for the past year. On their wedding-night Peter gave her a copy of his novel *Deliverance*. Peter said that if Katharine read the book she would know that he was now free of the relationship with Ida: "You will know that I am *free*. This book will prove it to

you; that is the meaning of the title, that is the reason why I wrote the book." Reluctantly, on that night, Katharine read the book in bed:

As I read the effect it had on me was the opposite of what he had hoped for, but I did not tell him. It did not convey deliverance: it conveyed the impression of a deep, inefaceable relationship. (3:203)

In a later novel, *Moonlight in Ur*, 1932, Peter also deals with his relationship with Ida, in the story of a very beautiful girl in ancient Sumeria, whose breast is defaced by the mark of a snake-bite, suffered as a child, when her father was practising forbidden magic. Sent to the temple for the ritual ravishment by a stranger, representing the god, she unveils herself in fear to a young visitor who falls all the more deeply in love because of the mark she bears. Her father, however, marries her to an older, wealthy official, who feels cheated when he discovers her blemish, but who refuses to let her go to her lover. For his part, the young man has difficulty throwing off the guiding influence of his cultured and patrician mother. The story is barely disguised, but *Moonlight in Ur* has an allegorical grace and precision, and is, indeed, one of those books that seem to be flooded with pale moonlight.

Ida Caroline Josephine Da Silva Le Geyt was born on 19 March 1877, the second of three daughters of an Anglo-Indian father, and a mother from a long-established Portuguese Jewish family from the Channel Islands. Some details of Ida's story are not quite clear. Katharine's autobiography refers to her first tragedy simply and accurately as "her outraged girlhood" (5:356). Her mother died when Ida was about three years old. Her father apparently deserted his family before this and returned to India where he twice re-married. As a ward in Chancery, belittled by other girls because her school-fees were not paid, Ida did not have a happy childhood, but she enjoyed several memorable holidays in France with a grandmother. Sometime before Ida was sixteen she was raped by her father, either in India or England, and she apparently lived as his mistress for several years. Visiting her married sister in India, Ida, then eighteen, met and married a man some twenty years older, James Bedford of the Indian Civil Service. Ida was always extraordinarily beautiful, as can be seen in the portrait by Charles Condor, painted in Paris in 1897 when she was about twenty years old. Peter's account is that Ida married Bedford because he promised to give money needed urgently for medical treatment for one of her sisters. After the wedding, Ida told Bedford of her father's incestuous relationship. I shall quote from Katharine's tape:

She innocently didn't expect him to mind, if he loved her. Well, he minded. He was shockingly angry. And I think he stormed off. He left her for several days, he stormed off into the jungle leaving her terrified and humiliated. And he came back, not, as she said, from love but from lust. (Tape 1)

Katharine pities Bedford, whom she describes as an intensely unhappy man because he was also intensely jealous, wanting total possession, body and soul, of his beautiful wife. He kept her body, and she bore him three daughters, but she removed her soul from him, as Katharine describes:

... her only protection was to remove herself from him, not physically but soulfully, ... She became frigid and frozen to him. She was polite. She ran his house, she bore his children, but she was not *there* with him at all. And he found this unbearable.<sup>6</sup>

Bedford also involved himself in black magic in India, and it is possible that he was a man in whom the rational side had dangerously less than normal control. Nevertheless, he was a very intelligent man with his own kind of integrity. He was educated at Balliol under Jowett, and before retiring from the Indian Civil Service in 1919 he refused to accept promotion and a knighthood, because he was a strong Socialist.

Peter and Ida met fifteen years after her marriage when she was renting a flat at Steep near Petersfield so that her two older daughters could attend Bedales, Peter's old school, where he was teaching after graduating from Cambridge. They read Nietzsche together, walked on the downs, and developed a strong relationship. She advised him to go to Australia with Radclyffe Brown rather than take the position of Inspector of Schools offered by the Education Board. Knowing Peter was leaving for Australia, Ida told him more about her marriage, and why, if he met her husband when he returned on leave from India, Bedford was likely to shoot him. On his return from Australia in 1913, Peter found Ida in London, convalescent from a breakdown, her marriage very shaky and her husband involved with another woman.

When she followed Bedford back to India that year, Ida and Peter went together as far as Le Havre, travelling as man and wife, although their love was apparently unconsummated. Peter reports in an unpublished autobiography, "To This End," that Ida could not bear to be touched.<sup>7</sup> Using a metaphor easily understood by readers of his natural history accounts, Peter says that during the night they spent at Le Havre, "the whole structure of the caterpillar was transformed,"<sup>8</sup> but I am inclined to believe, as Josephine does, that there never was a sexual consummation between them, and that the spiritual consummation alone was enough for Ida, and that Peter accepted this, although not always happily.

Peter received increasingly distressed letters from India, and wrote to say he was coming to Colombo and asking where he could meet Ida to take her away. He received no reply, and waited desperately in Colombo, finally going to Madras where he wrote to Ida through one of her friends. One day Bedford and Ida came to Peter's hotel in Madras. Bedford, sure of possession, left them alone for a short while, during which Ida told him "in an abject and terrible manner that her husband had made her ashamed, utterly ashamed, not fit for any man to love - defiled for all time: . . . 'I am a dead woman,' she said, 'Nothing to give, quite dead. You must leave me, go back, and live your life.'"<sup>9</sup> Back at Colombo, he found Ida's letter waiting, ten days too late. The letter said that Ida would cycle six miles through the jungle to the nearest station to meet with Peter at Tuticorin. But of course Peter had not been there, and her husband followed and reclaimed her. Katharine knew this story when she married. Although Ida and Bedford now lived in retirement in England, Ida returned all Peter's letters, marking them, "Dead."

6. Katharine Grant Watson. Tape recorded for Dorothy Green, January 1979.

7. Peter Grant Watson. "To This End," p.97.

8. "To This End" p.102.

9. "To This End," p.105.



Katharine and Peter moved home many times during their marriage, which lasted over fifty years until his death in 1970. Katharine made each dwelling into a home, and, when they owned the property, she supervised improvements which allowed them to sell at a profit. Peter's reasons for moving were usually sound, but Katharine knew too that his moving was part of his restless spirit, and also, that their moves after the second war drew them closer to London where Ida lived. They finally settled for a second time in 1964 at Petersfield, about eighty miles from London. Kathleen Raine, the Scottish poet, an intimate friend of Peter, who knew the importance of Ida in his life, wrote to Dorothy in 1979:

Companionship was perhaps the basis of his marriage, which was also a most significant and living relationship. I stayed once with Katharine and Peter at their house near Petersfield, to celebrate Peter's birthday, which was the same as my own (June 14th) and well remember the elegance of the simplicity - almost poverty - in which they lived, and the taste of the garden - old shrub-roses, I think Félicité Parmentier - and honeysuckle and herbs, the kind of flowers grown only by people of taste and some knowledge of the refinements of gardening.<sup>10</sup>

Through the pages of the autobiography one sees Katharine and Peter as often out of doors as in. Love of nature was a true bond between Katharine, Peter and Ida, and in his published autobiography, *But To What Purpose* (1946), Peter writes:

My wife, although she was a London girl, had, I think, a more sensitive reaction to life than I. I knew the country better than she did, . . . but she looked at plants and animals in a more intimate way (168).

Their first married years were spent mainly in the south and south-west of England. They returned there during the war years, after Peter, at the last moment, and to Katharine's relief, abandoned his plan to migrate to New Zealand. Katharine's memories of their homes are fascinating, and she sometimes recorded them and their countryside in paintings and sketches. In this account only the major events can be related. In 1922 their daughter Bridget was born in rented accommodation in St John's Wood, London. Their current home at Tenterden seemed too far from skilled medical help. Katharine's first child had been still-born at five and a half months, when they were living in an isolated farm at Grafton in Dorset.

Bridget was a beautiful infant, and for the first eight months, Katharine relates, she was "the most gracious and amiable baby" (3: 251). Katharine weaned her on the Truby-King diet, which apparently was too rich for Bridget, and she became ill, changing from a gay, healthy child into a lethargic, peevish one. Bridget's illness was diagnosed at first as celiac disease, and not until she was fourteen was Katharine assured that she was fully recovered. Her life was seriously in danger several times, and many conventional and very unconventional cures were tried. To be closer to help, Katharine and Peter moved to London, where Peter was attracted to their nurse-maid, Olive, and asked Katharine if she would mind if he took the girl to bed. Katharine writes that she tried to be "modern" about it, but finally, regretfully, gave Olive notice.

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10. Kathleen Raine to Dorothy Green, 11 January 1979.

This incident made Katharine wonder if something more than the difficulty of life with a sick child was unsettling Peter, and she learnt from him that Ida and Bedford now lived at Hampstead. Peter had seen them in the distance, and had written to Ida, but she still returned his letters with "Dead" written on them. Katharine writes:

These two, Peter and Ida - so closely bound together by such affinities, were held apart by what was for him an intolerable barrier. From his story I knew that an almost fatal wound had been inflicted on him . . . but I told myself they were both *still* alive. I thought of Noël, who had died while I was somehow unable to communicate . . . but these two were *still alive*: "In Life Deliverance abides" (3:255)

Katharine saw that Peter, Ida, the sick Bridget and herself formed some kind of whole that had to be treated as one problem. But she wondered what renewed contact between Ida and Peter would mean for her:

Of one thing I was certain, I did not want to be possessive. What was the value of an enforced tie? What was the value of my experience over the loss of Noël if I had not learned to help with a yet living relationship? I kept saying to myself: "They are *both* alive" (3:255).

Katharine wrote to Ida, and received a short reply arranging to meet Katharine at the National Gallery. The two women, seventeen years apart in age, sat side by side on a central divan in the Gallery, so that Katharine could not see Ida's face, while Ida gazed forward at the paintings, unseeing. In her early fifties, Ida was still beautiful, wearing her fair hair in the same thick knot as Peter had known; but her large iris-blue eyes, Katharine saw, had no life in them at all. While Katharine was asking Ida to renew contact with Peter, partly because she felt that somehow it would help Bridget, she also found herself wishing urgently to help Ida. Ida said that she could not meet with Peter, but she gently offered a personal cheque, as she had money of her own, to help pay for a good nurse for Bridget. Katharine accepted the cheque, feeling it would be too hurtful to refuse.

Katharine and Peter moved to Churchill at the foot of the Mendip Hills, and struggled with the routine of the difficult and very ill child. They adopted the diet prescribed by a naturopath whose successful treatments persuaded the authorities to give him a ward in a London hospital for apparently incurably ill babies. This diet enabled Bridget to digest food, and after some time, Katharine and Peter took a short holiday in France, while Bridget and her nurse went to a Babies' Home. Within a fortnight, the doctor at the home wrote saying that unless they authorised an increase in Bridget's diet, he would not sign a death certificate. They telegraphed an immediate reply sanctioning an increase. Katharine went to the beach, and alone with the sea and the moon, she prayed, sending at the same time messages to Ida.

I prayed for help, help to heal this very sick child who had never even bothered to talk, but who only expressed herself with grunts and gestures. And then, in a voice which is familiar to me now, a grown-up voice, Bridget spoke to me and said "It's all right, Mother" (3:269).

Although there were ten more years of illness for Bridget, Katharine never doubted that they would win.

In London again, Katharine wrote to Ida asking if she would visit Peter and Bridget. Ida came, a very quiet presence, and after she had seen Bridget, Peter came in and Katharine left them together. For the next thirty years, Peter and Ida met at intervals, in tea-shops and other public places, Peter travelling to London when necessary. Before Katharine and Peter left the London flat, to open their new house at Petersfield, Josephine was conceived: partly in gratitude for what they hoped would be a more positive relationship with each other and with Ida. Peter assured Katharine that Ida "took nothing away from you, Katharine," and Katharine writes: "the truth is that we each gave, she and I as time went on, what the other could not give, and Peter could take it all, and was hungry for more. His appetite for life, and especially for appreciation, was insatiable. This, I think, was a protection against his over-sensitivity" (4:272).

Peter looked "rather sceptical" when Katharine once suggested that theirs was an unusual relationship which an ordinary woman might not have accepted, but he admitted, "You are my best critic, better even than Ida" (4:282). Katharine seldom accompanied Peter when he travelled to research his work, but she recalls a memorable visit to Fraser Darling who was deer- and bird-watching on Priest Island and Tannera off the west coast of Scotland. This resulted in the novel *Priest Island* which Paul Cox is now filming off the coast of Tasmania under the title *Exile*.

Josephine was born at home in April 1926 with a little drama, when the nurse saved her from choking. Katharine recalls all her nurses, maids and home-helps with brief but lively detail and often great warmth and gratitude. Four-year-old Bridget, given the choice of two names for her infant sister, chose Josephine, one of Ida's names.

A day or two later, Peter received a telegram from Sandra Jordan, a woman who had visited them occasionally in London: "She is going to have an abortion at a nursing-home," he told Katharine, who was feeding Josephine, "and she wants me to be there before she has it" (4:279). Katharine tried to respond wisely to what was implied, but she ventured to say, "You won't go just now will you?" She knew Peter was embarrassed and angry at his predicament, and felt sorry for him: "Then you will come back tonight?" "I'll stay the week-end and probably come back on Monday," he told her, "You have the nurse, you will be all right" (4:280). Katharine, describing Sandra as "rich, attractive, ingratiating," tended to question herself:

It is true I was not, and never would be, a sophisticated woman, a woman of the world. I was innocent when we married, and he did not realise this or think about it. Amongst his friends he had known many vivid and experienced women, and they all wanted to marry him - he was so good-looking and so dynamic - yet he had avoided their approaches and had dared to plunge into marriage with me after a little over three weeks' acquaintance . . . There seemed to be a bond between us which could not be described or accounted for in any terms of ordinary life (4:281).

Katharine records at this point Peter's remark that she herself was "a kind of angel, . . . not quite incarnated." Josephine, to whom Peter spoke very frankly in later life,

suggests that perhaps Katharine's sexual energy was not adequate for him. Josephine also suggests that under the circumstances of their marriage Katharine's passion received little encouragement. Both Peter and Katharine visited a well-known London psychologist for many years, and were equipped to discuss their problems. In the taped conversation, replying to a question from Dorothy about Peter's relationship with his mother, Katharine said:

Yes, the unconscious shadow of incestuous relationships was one of my difficulties in my marriage. Moreover, it was almost a precondition of my marriage that I must never give him a definite "no" about anything. . . . And when we were first married he used occasionally to call me mother. And I used always to stop him and say, "I'm your wife, I'm not your mother."

Yet their physical rapport seems to have been comfortable, and when after the war they visited the Netherlands where Peter lectured on Herman Melville, they were delighted by a huge bath in their hotel, which was indented to allow two bodies to bathe together, side by side.

If Katharine thought herself unsophisticated, there were many women who perhaps liked her the better for what she was. Some eight years after the abortion, Sandra Jordan sought a meeting with Katharine. She told her that she had done everything she knew to get Peter away from Katharine: "I did not realise what I was doing," she said. "I do now, and I am sorry" (4:282). Several years later, while Peter was writing *The Nun and the Bandit* (1935), Katharine and Peter decided not to go through with another pregnancy, partly because they could not afford another child and partly because their relationship at that time was strained. Josephine believes that Peter wanted this baby.<sup>11</sup> Katharine's autobiography does not suggest this at all, and there may have been a serious misunderstanding between Peter and Katharine about this decision. Sandra Jordan offered to pay for Katharine to enter a private clinic. Katharine later regretted that she refused (3:282), because, just as she had decided to accept the baby, Peter obtained what she calls "some evil capsules" (3:318). These made her very ill and did great damage. For four years, Katharine records, "I was a little like the woman in the Bible," that is, the woman whose continuous issue of blood was cured by touching Christ's garment (4:319). In 1936 she had a hysterectomy performed by "a very fine surgeon, who refused to charge [her] at all": "What have you done to yourself?" he said. "You have destroyed your muscles" (4:319).

This was not an easy period of Katharine's life, but she did have many good friends who valued her company when they could see her. One of these was the poet Frances Cornford, the grand-daughter of Charles Darwin. When Katharine visited the Cornfords at Cambridge, Frances always lent her a dressing-gown once worn by the famous man. Frances asked Katharine if she would look after her children (there were five), if ever she were ill (4:293). When the Cornfords went abroad, Katharine did take over these duties, and became a trusted friend of the children, especially of the brilliant young John, who, as Katharine puts it "through an unfortunate ideology," was one of the first casualties of the Spanish Civil War (4:297).

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11. Josephine Spence to Elizabeth Perkins, 12 June 1993.

A quite unexpected relationship developed with Ida. Ida, knowing the children had an excellent nurse, invited Katharine to go away with her, as her guest, for a country-weekend. This was a strain on Peter, who could see Ida only at intervals and briefly, in public places, but although he was moody, he did not protest (4:287). These week-ends were repeated and valued, and when in London Katharine also had tea with Ida in her Hampstead home. Katharine felt that Ida thought her immature because, as she said, "[Ida] was so full of experience, of suffering, and of sensitive wisdom." Katharine feared she herself talked too much in their interchange. She felt Ida's self-restraint had become a vocation to help people talk about themselves. Katharine thought she understood Ida's unnatural self-control, but added, "Her response to her own life was masochistic" (4:288). Katharine felt too, when Ida even now at different periods, wrote "Dead" on Peter's letters and returned them, that this was in some way a betrayal (4: 343; 5:360) of him; and indeed, it was Katharine who had to live with the distress that Peter experienced.

On more than one occasion, when Katharine spoke of Bridget's illness, and other home affairs, including Peter, Ida surprised her by exclaiming: "Peter, oh Peter doesn't matter." Katharine felt that Peter was the centrality of the relationship between Ida and herself, and decided that "he was so much associated with herself that she included him in her own masochism" (4:289).

After Peter's death she found a letter to him from Ida in which Ida wrote: " Can I help you to understand that it is quite impossible for me to talk about *us*, as it would be equally impossible for me to talk to anyone about one's inner hopes and fears of the Cosmos. . . . The most important point is that Katharine should not suffer more than I have already made her suffer by my mere existence. Some day she will understand and you too" (4:290).

Katharine felt she herself had always understood, and that it was her "self-chosen destiny" to bear the relationship she did to both Ida and Peter. Perhaps this relationship was less pre-determined, or at least, less fixed than Katharine thought. Shortly after the dangerous abortion, Kathleen Rawlings, a schoolteacher, entered Peter's life, and because she was unable to have a child by her own husband, she asked Peter if he would give her one. Peter discussed this with Katharine, explaining that Kathleen would take entire responsibility for the child. Ida, to whom Peter had also spoken, doubted that Peter would be able to surrender this responsibility, and asked Katharine if this affair had made her consider leaving Peter. Katharine writes:

I was astounded, and desperately unhappy. Astounded on two counts, first because of the idea of leaving Peter and hurting the children, secondly because of this suggestion coming - of all people - from Ida, so significant and surprising. I gathered myself together and then I said: "I couldn't do that, I couldn't leave Peter, it would break him." She gave me a look such as I had never seen on her face before, and I never saw it again. It was the look of any ordinary, worldly woman, puzzled, questioning, investigating. What was she thinking? That I was a poor fool? To this day I do not know what that expression meant, and I would so much like to know. "Besides, I think it would break me too," I ended rather lamely, "I am fond of him" (4:322).

It is unlikely that Ida thought her a fool. It is also unlikely, when James Bedford died in 1957, that Ida contemplated even for a moment, asking Peter to live with her,



although Peter told Katharine that he would "join her and set up with her" (5:358) if she asked. But long before then, Katharine had a meeting with Bedford which seemed to have ensured that Bridget would at last overcome her long illness.

The many treatments her parents tried, improved Bridget's health for a while and then she relapsed. Peter began to think of the evil magic he had seen Australian Aborigines invoking against their enemies. He suggested that Bedford, who had studied black magic in India, might be attacking him through the child, because magic worked against that part of a person which was most vulnerable. As a first step, Peter had Katharine and the two children, aged eleven and seven, baptised, and then asked that Ida speak to Bedford and ask him to stop making the magic. Ida's solution was to invite Katharine to tea with Bedford present, the first time that this had happened. The christenings were accomplished, Ida standing as Josephine's godmother. The ceremony provided inspiration for the children's games in which the cat was first christened with a veil over his black ears, and then married.

The meeting with Bedford was scrupulously polite, and he talked easily with Katharine about French literature in which they were both very well read. "Behind the tea-pot sat Ida in her stillness," Katharine relates. She tells also how, when Ida went to a tall window to look out into the garden, Bedford stood behind her, and put his long arms "one on either side enclosing her, his hands against the wall," and held her there, obviously longer than she wanted, while Ida stood motionless, waiting. Katharine and Bedford parted on good terms. A few days later Ida told her that she could not ask Bedford about magic, but that he had said of Katharine that she was a lady: "That is the highest praise he ever gives. I don't think there will be any more trouble from him . . . if there ever was any" (4:311).

Whatever the reason, Bridget began a gradual and complete recovery. This is Bridget's story too. She became a professional gardener, working near Exeter, and an experienced traveller. Katharine wrote in a letter to Dorothy in 1978, when Bridget was 56, that despite the extraordinarily severe winter, Bridget was "indomitable," working outdoors in weather when men would not.<sup>12</sup> Bridget was distressed by the presence of Ida in her parents' life, and after adolescence was sometimes in conflict with Peter, events that were unhappy for Katharine. Bridget was received into the Catholic Church, perhaps needing a more orthodox faith than she experienced in her family which had provided, nevertheless, an environment enormously sensitive to and involved in the spiritual life.

Katharine and Peter became closely associated with the work, rather than the theology, of Rudolph Steiner, and with the excellent Steiner schools. Although Peter lost patience with much of Steiner's writing, they both gained many friends and inspiration through the Anthroposophy Society. The Christian Community, which established itself from Steiner's teaching, rather against his will, became their church, and also Ida's. Katharine could not accept the woman priest who sometimes officiated at the services: "For me," she wrote, "the woman might figure as prophetess, or sybil, but not as priest - man is the interpreter of the Word" (4:314). Katharine's long course with a psychologist, and her continued reading in psychology, philosophy and science were sustaining and fruitful for her. She had a sensible, balanced acceptance, refusing to subscribe to any dogma she could not understand, and insisting on a cohesion between science and religion. Although

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12. Katharine Grant Watson to Dorothy Green, 27 April 1978.

Peter's Cambridge training was as a scientist, his studies in psychology and religions were also extensive, and for many years he himself was sought after as a counselling psychologist. In 1961 Peter was granted an audience with Carl Jung in Switzerland, and Katharine was also twice received by Jung with whom they had luncheon. As they left, Jung told her, "You are the right wife for Mr Grant Watson" (5: 378).

The epigraph for the last book of the autobiography is Jung's quotation about the duality of the creative man, who, as a human being may be healthy or morbid, but who can be understood as an artist only in terms of his creative achievement. Perhaps it was helpful to Katharine to understand Peter in this way, because in the later years of his life his holidays with Ida, and the way he sometimes abandoned Katharine at difficult moments to go to Ida, caused her much pain:

He went away with her [travelling as brother and sister], and he and I took our week's holiday too, but it was nearly always after he had been away with Ida, which somehow detracted from the mutual freshness of starting together. He also had a way of saying: "I will take you to a lovely place I discovered with Ida." This, for me, made it a little second-hand. A personal reaction - small-minded - and I recognised it as such. (5:365)

It was not small-minded, and it is appropriate to quote a brief poem that Dorothy published in her collection, *Something to Someone* (1983):

Do not say "we" when you tell me  
What you have been doing  
These last, long months  
That I have been away.

You whose bread is knowledge  
Of the human heart  
Should know that "we"  
Turns the knife in mine.

"First Person Singular"

Yet, out of one of the most hurtful events of Peter's relationship with Ida, Katharine's autobiography achieves a splendid epilogue. Some three or four years before Ida's death in 1967, Katharine and Peter were moving back to Petersfield, and Peter found that the holiday planned with Ida in the West Country meant that he would be away until a day or two before the move. Katharine felt she could not face the work alone (she was in her late sixties), and protested, "I *am* your wife, and I need your help." Peter exclaimed emphatically that *Ida* was his wife, and that they had had a Handfast Marriage, "more real than any church ceremony" (5: 366) and had exchanged vows. Ida threw her wedding-ring into the river, and he put his ring on her finger. After Peter left, Katharine, sad and indignant, went down to the Torridge River and threw her ring far out into the stream, a gesture, which somehow, she told herself, seemed to set her free. But returning, she slipped on the duck-board at the river's edge, and broke her right wrist. It was a nasty break, and had to be set twice. Ida and Peter came back a few days after receiving news of the accident, and Ida stayed briefly in the neighbourhood. It was one of those accidents which Katharine ascribed to a psychological or even spiritual cause.

During the visit which Katharine knew was likely to be the last time she would see Ida, she asked Peter to leave them alone for a short time. The two women spoke only of ordinary things. But as everyone gathered at the door in leave-taking, Ida came back, and kissed Katharine. Ida died in 1967 in a convent nursing home in London. The nuns, observing the calmness of her last months and her peaceful death, exclaimed that she was a saint. Peter died three years after Ida, in May 1970. Katharine nursed him to the end, and was moved by the expression of subdued joy on Peter's face after death. Katharine herself died on 30 August 1986, at the age of ninety-two.

This account constructs a portrait of Katharine which, try as I might to be faithful to my sources, must be different from the account Katharine's autobiography constructs of herself and her family and friends. But I have tried to emphasise those things that Dorothy discussed most often with me. While writing the autobiography, Katharine thought of publishing part of it, but in 1977 wrote to Dorothy: "*This MS is for you yourself*, and not for the Library or publication."<sup>13</sup> Josephine, however, reports that before her death, Katharine hoped that "Between Two Worlds" might one day be published.<sup>14</sup>

I shall end with the epilogue that Katharine wrote a few weeks after finishing the autobiography:

... One night, I was awakened (at least I thought I was awake, but I was still asleep) by a thunderous noise; it seemed to involve a struggle, and out of this struggle I saw Peter's right hand, wide open, and I grasped it. I can still feel the skin of the palm, I felt it was his hand and no other, and I called out: "The other hand too; both hands." Then it sounded like a great effort, and the other hand came out, and I held both hands. With this I awoke, feeling very frightened indeed. There was absolute silence. I got up, put on the light, wished there were someone else in the house, and my fear stayed with me that night. It was not until two days later that the thought came to me: "A handfast marriage": of course, "A handfast marriage" (5:490).

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13. Katharine Grant Watson to Dorothy Green, 29 November 1977.

14. Josephine Spence to Elizabeth Perkins, 12 June 1993.

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# SUSANNAH VASS

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## Driving you crazy

From the park the city is a scribble  
of lights which arc and course  
along ribbons of road and flash  
from tower to Swan in morse:  
communication and action which  
belie the time of after black  
when morning has just begun its twitch  
from beyond the hills; shivering in lighter shades.

It had been a long route there,  
a journey of words across the bench seat;  
explorations of each other from coast  
to suburban sites, finally to meet  
motionless at this peak in silence  
which could be punctured by unbuckled  
belts - should I grant such licence  
for the removal of restraints.

But I hesitated to allow  
a sliding together across the seat  
to straddle gearstick or rest into door handles  
and press the windows with our feet,  
for fear the passage back would be in light.  
Directioned daylight traffic,  
unlike the meandering headlights at night,  
we would be going somewhere.

## Seizure Time

Beneath the flickering fluorescent tube her body moves    scientifically,  
precisely avoiding waves travelling towards her in bursts  
and photons, deflected by elbows and kicks.

Maybe not. I switch the light off. She flails still.  
I know. Inside her now the light rebounds from  
saliva-shiny surfaces,  
is absorbed by tissue, progressing with blood through  
arteries and veins.

A pinball of light; her body clicks the score.  
Her head: a bonus series of whizzes and bells, grinding teeth, flickering  
lids.  
Hundreds of passages speeding. Ricochet! Double back. Magnify.

Broken. Totally human now in carpet-flattening heaviness  
she winches open eyes towards me and I glimpse its end,  
glowing streams escape through the dark room.



## That Summer of the Bicentenary

At the start of that summer on the sloping hillside  
we walked beneath wheeling seagulls and amongst  
gravestones luminous as marble lanterns;  
beyond, in the distance, the summer blue of sea  
infiltrated the long calm. For two hours  
late on that vivid afternoon it was death  
that we denied and the chill air of parting,  
walking our last steps together  
in a marble twilight of blackened crypts  
and angels with broken wings.

Luminous the headstones were and bright  
the desperate surge of your love, flaming  
into the last hours as night came on, surreal  
and sentient, flaring as we wandered  
hand in hand, and together hip to hip  
through the paths of the other dead.

## And Birrga Birrga for Uncle

She mends her throw net and goes down  
to a favoured place, the white strands  
over her shoulder, lead beads a'swinging.

The statue moves when she becomes  
one line that launches and descends  
from sandshoed toes to finger ends.

What flashes are hers! What knees  
the drifting waves immerse, what drags  
bunch the mesh with waiting catches?

The fish are small and few;  
she persists half a bucket,  
she has five mouths to feed.

And much enjoyment in this practice,  
release from the house; here she chooses  
emerging rocks, working her way forward.

The water falls, in come sandpipers  
flying flat and fast to the fresh wet mud  
and crawling worms on reddish sand.

She wades out for whiting, following the shore  
casting aspirations, pocketing fish  
till her brown shorts bulge, then to the bucket

Increasingly distant. The sandpipers far out,  
the bay dry white and glaring;  
she digs, hard work with a hunting knife,

Washes blue mud from the clasped shells  
in a pool as her grandmother taught: "Birrga birrga."  
Talks of a huge crab down a long hole, too clever.

Her life is all providing, she settles  
a squabble on the blanket, collects  
the picnic things, stows the car, leaves;

Her stand upon the shell sharp rocks  
eternal, her body a bay's silence,  
her spirit the balanced stone.

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## WALTER VIVIAN

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### Heavy Metal in the Foundry

The lowly skimmer boy conducts the casting;  
as the overhead crane groans and rattles chain,  
heavy ladle splashing golden metal  
fully charged with spitting incandescence,  
he takes up his baton, a hooked steel skimmer,  
and awaits the approach to cold black moulds;  
suddenly there is a radiance, a cauldron of liquid sun  
so hot it crystallizes the sweat on his brow  
and he thrusts forward to hold back the lava flow,  
glowing slag, while the honey gold of running metal  
lights up the moulds and chases out blue flamed gas;  
the boy taps his skimmer, shattering shards of brittle fire  
and conducts slag free pouring after pouring, until he achieves,  
a sparking, sputtering symphony, and the casting is done.

## The Whistler

They say whistling signifies  
being without a care, free  
as the breeze. My father  
whistled a lot in earlier days.  
There is a photograph: courting  
my mother at the Gardens, his face  
creased only by laughter then.  
In my memories  
melodies breezed about him  
like warm gusts of summer air.

On family picnics by the sea  
we fingered sandstone features  
of cliffs, ribbed and hollowed  
by wind's persistent whittling,  
held hands on rock ledges  
thrusting upturned faces  
towards salt waves of spray.

Gradually down the years  
my father's whistling stopped.  
He listens, silent now, bent  
from leaning into the gale,  
weathered by exposure to repeated  
buffeting. But in his eye  
still glints the sea's hard brightness  
and the sound that breaks  
is the wail of distant keening.

## The Granny Killer

The old women liked having their hair washed. They closed their eyes and grunted with pleasure. They lay back with their heads suspended over the basins, their faces turned upwards towards him as if proffered to be kissed. On young women, he found this upturned position of the head sweet and submissive; on old women he found it simply brazen. Standing over them, he massaged the shampoo into their hair, rubbing his fingertips over the uneven surface of their skulls, round the back of their heads and down into the softer flesh at the nape of the neck. Few other people would have been as familiar as he was with the shape of these women's heads, disguised as it was by their hair, or would have felt the odd little knobs and hollows in the bony caps beneath their scalps. If he wished, and if the women entrusted it to him, he could hold the weight of their heads in his hands. The sheer dead heaviness always astonished him.

Sometimes the old women complained that the water was too hot or too cold or ran into their ears or down their necks. He'd adjust the temperature or the angle of the nozzle and watch the women roll their eyes around beneath their closed lids, searching out the changes. When the women sat up, a little dazed from the blood in their heads, their hair sticking out from above their baggy necks, they reminded him of ridiculous, half-plucked birds. He always said, as a joke to his younger clients, he ought not to cut off the old women's hair, but their heads.

Only ever so often, surprisingly seldom, the thought would drift into his mind: if his customers knew that he murdered old women, they would not be coming to him for their perms and rinses.

The thought bore no remorse - it was merely a reflection on the possible effect such knowledge would have on his business. The old women, as much as he disliked having to deal with them, formed the bulk of his clientele. But apart from the passing worry about the risk to his business, his guilt didn't make him change his behaviour. Even though the papers, which lay amongst the dog-eared magazines on a small table in the waiting area, were emblazoned with news of the latest - the sixth - murder, he still told nasty jokes about his elderly customers to anyone who listened, just as he always had, when their old heads were underneath the noisy dome of the dryers and they couldn't hear him. He still followed his jokes with a conspiratorial wink with his younger customers in the mirrors and they almost invariably smiled back at him. But he never brought the subject of the killings up,

nor engaged in conversations about them. If the killings were discussed, as they often were, while customer and hairdresser groped for conversation they felt they had to have when their heads were thrust so close together, he quickly changed the subject.

The papers had dubbed him the Granny Killer. In that name he sensed the same conspiratorial smile he exchanged with his sympathetic younger customers. He could see the Walt Disney grannies in the heads of the journalists who wrote the headlines - bent old women with spectacles and shrill voices and handbags for bashing impudence over the head with.

Whenever he had a decent break, while waiting for a perm to set or a dye to take, or between the comings and goings of customers, he sat in the back room of the salon, which had a one-way window overlooking the shop. From there, unbeknownst to them, he could keep an eye on his customers. They made a strange sight - they could have been aliens with their spiked and rolled heads, their hair matted with thick pastes, their bodies caped from neck to knee in shapeless plastic - but the humour seldom struck him.

He kept the washing machine in the back room, in which he tossed the used towels, and he stored the shampoos, colourings, perm lotions and other bottles of hairdressers' potions in what were meant to be kitchen cupboards. He spread the newspapers out on the table and drank his tea to the chug of the washing machine. He read about the police investigations with fierce yet disappointed concentration, like a man come back to life who reads his own biography and finds, though all the facts are correct, the retelling is so unlike his life it is hardly recognisable.

He read that the Granny Killer attacked the women in their homes, all in the same suburb, in an area characterised by solid, dimly-lit homes with back gardens divided from each other by paling fences. The doors were not forced, the windows were not broken. The killer entered through doors already opened, perhaps on the sweet chance of a breeze on hot afternoons, perhaps in carelessness, perhaps even in welcome. He strangled each of the old women with a pair of laddered stockings that had been worn many times and were stretched irreversibly into the shape of the wearer's feet.

He had left no fingerprints, no clues to his identity. All the police had was the testimony of a woman, who saw a man running away from the house of the fourth victim. The woman had watched him absent-mindedly from her kitchen window while she was washing the dishes and couldn't remember much about him. But she had noticed something peculiar - the Granny Killer (if it was him) wasn't wearing his shoes. Instead he carried them by their laces. She said the man had sprung lightly along the footpath, staying up on his toes, as if the concrete was so hot it burnt his bare soles.

While he read he swigged whisky from a teacup. He used to drink only tea during the day and kept a kettle and a small china teapot in the back room, with which he had made himself rich, dark brews, speckled with tea leaves like the sugar in burnt toffee. He had found it soothing to watch the hot liquid pour from the spout in a shallow arc, dividing into geometrical strands and twisting together like a braid of amber hair, and to hear the sound it made when it landed in the cup: first high-pitched, then growing quickly deeper and throatier. Now he supplemented his tea with whisky, chosen perhaps because it had a similar comforting colour. He was beginning to drink too much. By the sixth murder, he was having to start the day

with a drink just to steady his hands. "Hair of the dog," he would say out loud each morning after he tossed back the first nip. He sucked a lemon afterward, to cover up the smell.

\* \* \*

Since becoming the only witness, the woman had taken an almost fanatical interest in the Granny Killer case. The area opposite her kitchen window, at which she had so often stared and seen nothing, had suddenly become the landscape through which a murderer had made his escape. For three days the police had examined everything in sight of her window. They had gone out and stood on the footpath, searched the surrounding strip of grass and bushes, and had gathered in small groups, pointing and looking up and down the street and at her window. They had brought in sniffer dogs, to try and track down the path of the killer, and two men who had got down on all fours and closely examined the grass and gutters and bushes. She had stood out there herself several times, wishing that by standing on the hot pavement where the killer had run she might somehow drag some detail of him from her memory like the heat of the sun sucked out the smell of old dog droppings from the grass.

Standing there, she noticed anew the glaring pavement, with leaf debris caught like lint in the cracks, and the haphazard prints of some silly dog set forever in the smooth surface. She noticed too, for the first time, the trapdoor cut in the very bitumen of the road - a square door leading straight downwards, into the earth. Why had she never noticed it before? The trapdoor made her think of the time she had seen two telephone workmen set up their little canvas shelter beside the footpath and lower themselves waist deep into the ground. Glimpsing them beneath the tent as she walked past, she had thought for a moment the men were dwarfs. She was reminded then, as now, that an elaborate network of drains and pipes lay beneath the ground, where vermin scurried and cats found retreat, and sewerage and gas and water and the rubbish from gutters rushed to their destinations. We forget the layers below the surface, she thought, the passages full of movement, the trampled traces of long past events.

Now, when she watched the passer by from her window, she was reminded of foreign tourists walking oblivious past historically important landmarks. Sometimes they glanced up at her window, but during the day they could not see her on the other side of the pane. The occasional dog snuffled past, following some invisible smell.

The woman had learnt that, in Holland, a cloth had been designed which absorbed and retained smells. The cloth was white and came in squares. Dutch police used the cloth to hunt down criminals. They lay or wiped the cloth on something the criminal had touched. The material was so absorbent that it sucked the smell in, as if by taking a deep breath that was never expelled, and trapped the smell in the weave. The pieces of cloth were sealed in glass bottles where the smells kept fresh and ripe for at least three years.

Together, these shelves of bottled smells formed the world's first smell archive - a storehouse of the stink of criminal misdeeds.

Imagine, the woman thought, entering this archive and walking between the rows of shelves. The bottles would look just like those used for storing dried beans

and leaf tea in a kitchen cupboard. Open one of the carefully sealed bottles and a smell would escape. It would nearly knock you over in its rush to get out. It would punch you on the nose, your eyes would water at the impact. You'd slam the lid on the jar and put the jar back, but it would be several minutes before the smell finished its boisterous journey around the room. It would pummel the air furiously before it wore itself out. You'd try another jar, cautiously this time, opening the lid just a fraction so only a little would escape, but this smell would be reluctant to move. You'd have to stick your nose right in the jar and suck it out. The smell would be such a delicate thing that you'd fear it may get lost amongst the hairs of your nasal passages. As you continue through the archive, opening and sniffing bottles, it would be like you were a winemaker sampling the bouquet of a ruined wine.

But that was all fantasy, the woman thought, as no human can really smell those smells and match them up. Only dogs could tell what the bottles contain. Dogs were trained to sniff the suspected criminal and match what they smelt with the smell on the cloth.

Scientists were trying to build machines that could recognise and match smells as well as dogs can. They called the machines "electronic noses". The scientists wanted their machines to transform a smell, which is invisible to humans and can only be stored on a piece of cloth for three years, into something which could be seen and put on permanent record. To do this, they were searching for ways of seeing smells. They were searching for each smell's colour and shape.

So far, the scientists' efforts had been unsatisfactory. One team had tackled the task by reconstructing the shape of smell molecules. They stuck together red, yellow and black plastic balls. Their smells looked like children's toys. Another team of scientists used computer graphs. A single, jagged line for each smell was the final result, looking like the outline of a range of very steep mountains. The differences in the smells could be told by the differences in the number of peaks in the range and their height and steepness. The computer graphs had met with some favour because they were very easily filed and matched.

But none of the smell machines were accurate enough yet to be used as evidence in court. Until they were, juries in Holland were prepared to accept the evidence of dogs.

And what juror would not? The woman, thinking again of the dogs she had seen following an invisible trail down the street, knew a dog's sense of smell was superior to a human's. Only yesterday a dog had come up behind her while she was standing talking to the greengrocer and shoved its nose up the back of her dress. And she had heard that dogs could pick up the smell of fear.

What of the jury that might be chosen to try the Granny Killer's case? They would not be immune to smells or unaware of their mysterious power to repel or attract. At least one of the jurors, for instance, would probably wear perfume, conscious of the closeness of her neighbours and her tendency to sweat under tension. The woman herself vaguely believed the advertisers' claims that her brand of perfume was scientifically designed to react with her "unique body chemistry", and produced a smell on her that was different to anybody else's. The juror's perfume may attract another juror sitting a little upwind from her. He may in turn, the following day, put on a scent to attract her. His scent might be one of those potions, claimed to make him irresistible to women, that she had seen advertised in pornographic magazines. Instead of concentrating on the case, he might hope the



female juror, by unknowingly inhaling the potion, would be drawn to him in a way she couldn't explain. He might hope the scent would make her like him so much that one day she'd let him stick his nose up her dress.

\* \* \*

The smell of the old people's home always struck him first. Not just the smell of piss which, though pervasive, he somehow didn't mind. It was something sweeter, something that made his nostrils flare involuntarily at the first whiff.

The hairdresser went every six months to the old people's home and cut the women's hair. In some ways, he preferred these customers to the old women who came to the salon. They were incapable of complaining or making demands. They sat impassively in their chairs and let him do what he liked to their hair. Some of them, because they couldn't sit up by themselves, were even strapped into their chairs. What perfect clients! If they talked, it was usually only to themselves, or in an unintelligible gabble that he just ignored.

The nursing staff trusted him with the old women. He had been cutting their hair for 11 years and nobody bothered any longer to supervise him. He had become quite adept at pulling the women up from under their armpits if they started to slip out of their chairs or at steadying their heads with one hand while snipping with the other. The hair fell to the floor in meagre wisps.

Sometimes the urge to touch their skin overcame him and he slipped his hands underneath their dresses. Most of the women didn't react at all. They had long ago abandoned their inhibitions to the ministrations of strangers. One woman even liked the way he touched her. In her coy little glances he saw how she would have flirted with him if she had still been a young woman. But two of the women, despite their advanced state of senility, had still retained their old notions of modesty. They moaned in distress, even cried out, and he found this more exciting than the glances of the flirtatious woman. He knew that though the two modest women appeared to be upset, their reactions weren't genuine. No rational or emotional impulse propelled them - their reactions were as mechanical as the function of their organs, which kept expanding and puckering and squeezing and excreting though the women were oblivious to them. Their moans of distress could just as equally be of pleasure.

But for days after touching any of the old women, he could never get rid of the sensation that some of their skin had come off in his hands, like the slippery grey dust a moth's wings leaves on the fingers.

\* \* \*

I saw him, thought the woman, he was right in front of my kitchen window. Yet I can't remember anything about him but his gait.

She wracked her brains, trying to remember some detail about his clothing or his face. She stood in front of the window, holding a dish in one hand and a cloth in the other, staring through her reflection at the opposite path, and tried to recreate the

scene - her with suds gloving her forearms, the steam from the water dampening her face. But the barefooted man who sprung past in these attempts was an invention, not of her own, but a caricature of the type of evil man she grew up with in story-books and now often saw in Hollywood movies. This creation, though he varied considerably in looks, crowded out her memory of the real killer. He had terrorised her for so many years, lying under the bed when she was a child and later, although she was an adult, following her along quiet streets in the middle of the night.

Now he was back again, lurking somewhere amongst the pipes under the ground, rising up at unpredictable times through trapdoors in the road, treading lightly once above the ground as if it were too hot to bear because he, unlike her, was always aware of the thinness of the crust that separated him from her. She was afraid, afraid to go out alone, afraid to open a window on a hot night, afraid even to use the phone after dark. She imagined her voice travelling along the underground wires far from the safety of the house and out into the dark, dodging the rats and cockroaches, to places she would never dare go on her own - badly lit streets, subways cobwebbed with graffiti, wet alleys - and rushing heedlessly, in luminous little bubbles of innocent sound, right into the killer's arms.

In the hope of recognising the Granny Killer, she had started searching the faces in the street. She was frightened of the killer, but she was more frightened of her inability to recognise him. She sidled up beside the people waiting at bus stops or hanging around the entrance to a cinema and looked at them sideways, trying to examine their faces without them noticing, or she watched their reflections in shop windows. She felt like a child covering her eyes during a movie because what was being shown was too unbearable to watch but who was unable to resist peeping between her fingers.

She had begun to suspect everyone. She suspected the man who stood behind her in the queue at the bank, whose warm breath she felt on the back of her neck when he sighed. Stopped at traffic lights, she once swapped a glance with a man through her car window, took off when the lights turned green, then slammed on the brakes right in the middle of the intersection, suddenly wondering if that man had been him. She even found herself wondering about a teenager she saw standing behind an old woman on the bus, rolling his eyes skyward with impatience while she fumbled anxiously in her purse. Then there was that council gardener, wearing no more than shorts and boots in the heat, who she saw only yesterday planting seedlings into freshly dug beds, easing their hair-like roots into holes in the soil and tamping them down gently with his fingers, downing spade and punnet in the hottest part of the afternoon and disappearing down the street to buy a cold drink. Or so he said.

\* \* \*

The woman's a crank, the police thought. She phoned all the time with her useless suspicions. They had given up hoping she would identify the killer. They had far more faith in their computer.

In the absence of any good clues to the identity of the Granny Killer, the police had turned for help to a special computer that held the records of hundreds of serial killers. Unlike the smell archive, which told nothing about the killers except their

identity, the computer was a ragbag of other sorts of clues - the oddments and quirks that made up the killers' characters. By pressing a few buttons on the computer keyboard, the police could call up notes about men with lame legs and suspicious glances, men who kept magazines under the bed; they could read about men with missing fingers, likings for old movies, clockwork watches and particular cigarette brands; they could learn about men's collar sizes, missing buttons, open flies. There were even the names of tunes in the computer, tunes which had been whistled or hummed, there were discoveries of secret drawers full of women's underwear; there were records of spoken words, repeated phrases, lonely childhoods. And there were the places the killers lived and operated, the boundaries of suburbs, paling fences, forced doors.

Many of the killers so minutely described had never been seen except from a distance. Some of them had no names except for nicknames given them by the police. Some of their victims had never been found and were only presumed to exist. The computer was full of unsolved mysteries - speculation and assumption were as much a part of this electronic storehouse as the known facts. Yet, for the police, the composite of all the fences and undone buttons and dirty magazines was a type of archetypal serial killer, to which they referred for help in all their different cases. They consulted it like seekers of truth do an oracle. The newspapers spoke of the computer as if it were a kind of electronic horoscope — as though the police could read from the luminous pixels what could be read from the stars.

The Granny Killer had mixed feelings about the Computer Killer. On the one hand, he was overwhelmed by curiosity. He longed to know what aspect of himself the computer could reveal; what clues it could hold to his character. It unsettled him to think that other killers in other suburbs, in areas that had never heard of paling fences, even tens of years ago, had transformed into evidence of his, the Granny Killer's, identity, just by the very act of having existed. And he, who had been scrupulous in leaving no clue behind in the dim old houses, was nonetheless to become evidence of other killers who existed now and in the future. Over this process he had no control. He wondered what action of his would give others away.

Methodically, the police studied the details of other killers and compared the Granny Killer's behaviour. Killers repeated certain patterns of behaviour, they explained to the press. They needed only to find a similar pattern in another killer's behaviour and they would be able to make guesses about the Granny Killer's character and his life style and predict what he would do next. For the Granny Killer, it was like having the features of a remote and forgotten ancestor suddenly discovered in his face.

It was false, he knew, this sense the computer gave that he was a member of one ancient and tainted bloodline. Yet it added to his premonition that something different to the usual clues would eventually expose him. He did not fear the evidence that forensic police, dabbing delicately at doorknobs with their little brushes and magic powders, could pick up. That type of evidence was obvious - fragments of cloth, strands of hair, cigarette stubs - there were ways he could control them. But each time he had returned to the back room of the salon, even after he had chucked his clothes in the washing machine with the towels and had a few drinks to regain his composure, he was haunted by the sense that some evidence of his presence, over which he had no control, still persisted in the dim old homes, as telling as the shape of feet left in the stockings. Unlike the microscopic evidence the police

could find, the kind of evidence he feared was always bigger and lasted longer than its tiny manifestation, resonating in the empty rooms of once occupied houses, amplified but not explained by grubby fingerprints on light switches and withered pot plants on window sills, just like the residue of past generations lingers so palpably in a family heirloom that it seems to stay on the fingers long after handling, slippery as the dust left by a moth's wings.

For the moment these traces of presence were nothing more than indefinable sensations, but he could not rid himself of the idea that his interaction with the earth somehow altered it permanently. He knew that, should the police ever be able to identify these changes, they could track him down just as easily as a dog could.

\* \* \*

On the floor, flat on her back, just inside the front door of her own house. That was how the neighbour found the body of the seventh victim. At first she had thought she knocked her neighbour backwards when she pushed open the door.

The neighbour left the body where it was and went into the bedroom. She stripped the bed and made it again with clean sheets and pillowcases. She dragged the body from the hallway into the bedroom and lay it on the bed. She washed down the hallway floor with a bucket of water and disinfectant. Hot and tired from the exertion, she returned to the bedroom and sat on the bed. The dead woman must have put lipstick on earlier in the day, because there were still traces of fake pink left around the rim of her mouth. The neighbour licked a tissue, wiped the mouth clean with it, and applied some of her own lipstick in its place. She threw the tissue in the toilet and rang the police.

Five minutes later she found the shoe on the back stair.

The shoe was brown, left foot, a size 9. The heel was worn down on the outside, suggesting that the Granny Killer walked with his feet pointing slightly outwards, the outside of his heels striking the ground first.

\* \* \*

The woman stood in front of her window and imagined the police searching for the owner of the other shoe. It was like the fairytale, she thought. The police would carry the left shoe, not on a cushion held by two footmen, like a Prince once carried a glass slipper around his kingdom, but in a plastic bag. They would be followed by a man with a dog. They would try the shoe on every man under suspicion, and check their wardrobes and attics, their dustbins and incinerators for the other half of the pair.

She imagined the men, nervous men, sweating men, answering their doors.

Would the shoe fit?

Would dogs lie?

Men sitting on chairs, in kitchens and lounge rooms, police kneeling at their feet. Wives and children looking anxiously on. Men being asked to walk around the kitchen with the shoe on while the police surreptitiously check to see if they walked with their feet pointing slightly outwards. Men taken by surprise, wearing dirty

socks with holes in them, embarrassed by their naked toes poking, pale and wrinkled, from their casing. Size 9 men driven to breaking off the ends of their toes or cutting a slice off their heels to change the size of their feet, like the Ugly Sisters did, their devious subterfuge revealed by blood trickling out of the slipper.

Then at last a policeman would emerge from a back room, holding a brown shoe, right foot, size 9, keeping it well out in front of him, because it smelled.

The woman tried to imagine the feet of the Granny Killer. She looked at her own feet. They were always paler than the rest of her because they seldom saw the sun or fresh air. Her little toes looked withered, as if from lack of use. Delicate scribbles of capillaries cast a mauve shadow in her instep. Did the Granny Killer have unusually thick soles so he could stand the heat of sunbaked concrete beneath his feet? Did he have a mauve shadow in the hollow of his instep? Did he have a wife who tickled him there?

\* \* \*

If his wife was once shy about undressing in front of him, she wasn't any longer. She took her clothes off without a thought for him standing watching at the bedroom door. She had thickened up as she got older - her back and shoulders were almost like a man's. Her bra left a pink line around her back and under her breasts because it was always too tight, so even when she took it off you could see the shape of it on her.

He watched her take off her stockings. She insisted on wearing them when she went out, even in hot weather. Her generation were like that. Young girls, like the ones his son mixed with, did not bother. She felt undressed without her stockings, even improper. They were part of the face she put on to the outside world, along with her lipstick and curls. He had the husband's privilege of seeing her without her stockings on, of being familiar with the spider veins on the inside of her knees and the way her hairs curled on her shins.

She threw her stockings over the back of a chair. Worn stockings did not shrink back to their original size, he thought, but shrivelled like the skin on a flaccid penis. He watched them slowly shrink as they hung there, the nylon puckering in places, but stiff with grime and sweat at the toe.

When the stockings ladder she will scrunch them into a ball and toss them in the peg basket in the laundry. Stockings were useful for hanging out the woollens. She knotted the top end and threaded the legs through the arms of the jumper. They looked funny on the line - feet in place of hands, knot in place of neck, the panty part drooping helplessly like a head on a broken neck.

Time he gave her hair another trim.

Suddenly aroused, he coaxed her onto the bed. As he thrust into her, he watched her eyes moving beneath the closed lids, as he always did, never knowing if it was a sign of pleasure.

## Story Butties

My grandma's stories have never been told.

Perhaps because they're as ordinary as washing on Mondays (yes it took all day; boiling the water, filling the copper, agitating the clothes, wringing, rinsing, wringing, pegging out, bringing in, sorting, mending.) On Tuesdays she ironed. And it was on a Wednesday, no particular Wednesday, that she disappeared into the gap between oven and wall where she was scouring the built up stains from splattered fat from the chip pan. Years later when I asked, they said she'd died. Funny, I don't remember her dying.

Sometimes when I'm cleaning that same space, the oven pulled away from the wall, I find myself in her kitchen, timber boards beneath my feet and the front door closing as grandad heads off for his daily pint at the dinnertime session. I have to blink, squeeze into existence my two girls who've been playing chasey in and out of the kitchen all this time. "Hey, that's an outside game," I say.

I push the oven up square against the wall, give the top a last wipe then get out the chip pan. I think of Maureen and Pete. Maureen had known my grandma. Maureen said I looked like her only I was taller. I heat the oil, peel and chip the stories right up until Pete's death. I always stop there.

"We're having chips for tea." I tell the kids.

They like to cram them, salt and vinegared, between slices of white bread thickly buttered.

Chip butties.

Story butties.

Here's a favourite. Dad on the 650 Harley Davidson, dressed in leather - boots, trousers, jacket. Beside the bike is the cyclecar, mum inside nursing my baby sister. Mum is dressed in her slim green and white vertical striped, square necked frock. She wears sunglasses. My brother and I are seated opposite.

We've stopped at the ruins of one of those stone circles just outside town. There are daisies everywhere.

Rise and shine sleepy Joe, now's the time don't you know, to get into a new kind of thing...

Herman's Hermits on the radio is the most intrusive the outside world gets. To our family, the sixties come and go unremarkably. My one hip remembrance, is

saving the OMO coupons to send for a free FAB, IT'S A GAS, COOL BABY, JUMPIN' JACK FLASH tee shirt.

Was there a war in Vietnam?

Whose footprint was that giant step for mankind?

On Sundays we rode to the countryside, made daisy chains for our hair, ankles, wrists. During the week, outside of schooltime, we skated downhill toward the main road, spinning ourselves to a stop at the bottom by wrapping our arms around the lamp post. And there were endless trails of paper chase, hopscotch on the pavements and variations of truth or dare which always seemed to end with a knock on ancient Mrs Dolby's front door.

Oh and my grandma died, though I don't remember this.

Anyway, what's to be said about death. I listen to a song on the radio, begin to cry, I can't work out why, the lyrics don't seem all that relevant. Then I hear the song was written for the singer's son who died in an accident. I know about absence. I know about loss. It's the finality of death that I know nothing of. Someone's no longer around. You miss not seeing them.

Loss, absence, but I don't know about death.

When my grandma died, mam planted a white rose. I loved that rose.

I've always felt that those gone somehow remain. In memories, dreams, in the facial features of a niece, in the mannerism of a second cousin. It takes generations for the dead's presence to be obliterated, perhaps it never is. Three generations on, a red haired child, "Great grandad had a red beard," we say.

Then there was a new decade, a new life. Somewhere else in a land of blue skies. A wide, flat, somewhat barren outer suburb of Perth. B for blue, we'd learnt at our school back home, blue as in sky (was the sky blue?), blue as in rivers - at least that's how they were marked on maps, though the Ouse was more like the gravy served over lumpy mashed potato in the school canteen. Mam was a canteen monitor, her uniform was blue, sky blue.

*Monday is washing day...* Mam wrote home, "You can hang the washing first thing and 'ave it in dry and sorted by ten. The rest of the day's your own." And of an evening the sky streaked orange and red, silhouetting grass trees. In the darkness were stars. I imagined my grandma to be a star, one whose light reached us still though it had long ago burnt out, collapsed, disappeared.

Maureen was glad to meet us, we'd looked her up of course.

She'd been in Australia three years now.

"Fancy you being Meg's lot," she said.

Maureen said I looked like my grandma, only I was taller. She showed me a picture of the two of them as young women on a day out at Bridlington. My grandma had an unfocussed look as if trapped someplace else, so that there was little pleasure here for her on a rare day out.

Maureen introduced us to Pete, her nephew, (well I assumed he was her nephew, theirs was an unlikely pairing). Pete liked stories too, he'd tell us again and again of when he'd been a lad amongst many, loose on the streets and with young uns in tow because the parents were all out doing war work. "There were ration coupons," he said. "One egg per family per week and dad got that, us kids getting a dip in the yoke."

Sometimes he'd get dad talking too. Huskin's place was bombed, theirs the only

house in the street without kids. Dad an' lads had searched the rubble for segments of incendiaries. Pete would then talk about footballs made of compressed newspaper pinched from someone's back step, and of a club house cum air raid shelter, equipped with bunks an' all.

I don't buy the ready cut, pre cooked and frozen chips in packets. You can't crisp them up the way we like them. I select the potatoes myself, I use a hand pressed chipper to get a good even sized chip, it takes no time once potatoes are peeled.

I drop a chip into the pan - it sizzles so I know the oil's hot enough. I divide the chips in half and put in the first lot. If you put too many in, they get squashed and go soggy. I prepare a salad to go with the chips.

When Pete got sick, Maureen asked if I'd come to the hospital where Pete was undergoing tests. I'd been spending a fair bit of time with them because of the stories I told myself, because Maureen had said that I was like my gran.

"Pete's through there," Maureen had pointed to a NO ADMITTANCE corridor. "They had him put on a green gown, they'll put an oscopy into his rectal passage to see what's there, what shouldn't be there."

EXIT

STAFF ONLY

ENQUIRIES

FIRE ESCAPE

WARD A

WARD B

I counted signs then uniforms. Nurses and service attendants of all kinds walked past the waiting room in multi colours; burgundy, olive green, pink, turquoise, blue and white checked, pale blue, but uniforms all the same. There was a photograph of Mounts Bay Road before the narrows was built, a dried banksia branch in a grey tub. I tried to get Maureen interested in the photograph. She was quiet, unusually quiet.

A nurse in white said we could see Pete. He hadn't eaten for twenty four hours and was pulling threads of lettuce from a ham and salad sandwich. A cup of tea was on the table beside him. Maureen kissed him on the forehead. "How you going love?" she said in a voice that saucered his teacup. I stood back, glad of the open door behind me.

All that week, Venus and Jupiter were close together. You saw them just after the sunset. Maureen said it was a sign, that dying happens at the right time, and if you're sensitive and stay with it, you can even tell the lives that person's lived previously.

Over the next few weeks, I sat with Pete when Maureen couldn't be there. He was drugged heavily for the pain which seemed to descend on him within days of the diagnosis. He was losing weight. When conscious he'd sip flat lemonade to keep his lips moist.

I thought he'd been a nun, his pale, inert face radiated the purity of one who'd lived with sacrifice and integrity for a worthy cause. Maureen said she'd seen a musician, a young man sensitive to beauty and art. She said she'd always wondered what with Pete's long skinny fingers.

"So where does he go now?" I'd asked her. I was wondering for the first time



where my grandma might be.

Maureen said there's a path that winds up a steep cliff. The wind blows hard as if to say go back, not this way, and only those who are called know how to go on, how to find a hand hold in the rock where there seems to be none, and where to heave your weight up onto the next ledge. By the time you get to the top of the cliff, she said, you're almost gone. Finally, there's just the wind and the foaming sea below.

Maureen stood, leant over Pete as if to check his breathing. She tapped up and down very lightly on his sternum with her fingers, muttered something under her breath, made a sign in the air above his head, throat, heart, belly, genitals. She sat down, took his hand in hers, covered it with her other hand and closed her eyes.

Death has many flaps and openings, I'm intrigued by the fastenings; velcro, zipper, press studs, lace ups, hooks and eyes. Like one of those fabric toys supposed to develop manual dexterity in the child. Open a buttoned pocket, take out a blue felt sky on which every cloud has a silver lining. Chain stitched beneath in gold thread are the words, death is not final. And then there's a tear that's been mended too many times. It frays. The sun bleached orange cotton has had its day, had a good life, you can't complain. We say it of tents, a favourite outfit, of dogs and grandmothers.

Once upon a time, a chain of good set in motion by great grandmother...the story of change ends with happily ever after. Fabulon takes the fuss out of ironing. Dishlex takes the drudge out of washing dishes. Free at last. Free at last. Outer suburbia becomes character city. The velcro rips apart. To have made a difference. For life to have counted. Velcro fastening undone. We are all undone in life, you've got to do your small part, do it for your children if not for yourself, for your children's children.

Behind a laced up the front bodice is the hint of adolescent breasts; her mother is glad the girl is attractive - liked, accepted. Her mother fears the girl is solicitous, flower of the mountain taking garlic croutons from the mouth of another.

In the childhood game, lithe girls line up on the wooden slatted cloakroom bench. They drag their skirt zippers up and down in the game of - *Will you marry me sir?*

Tell me about your life and I'll tell you about mine. He sips cointreau, winks with press studded eyelid. She disappears.

Believe and ye shall have life eternal reads the plaque at the entrance to the crematorium.

I went in.

It was carpeted with that inside outside type. The walls were bare except for the fabric flowers anchored in plastic pots. The minister's words were rushed and methodical. Now we say goodbye to Peter, now we commend his soul to Jesus who is Christ the Lord, now we pray a blessing on the surviving relatives, now we commit Peter's body to the flames - though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...

Red velveteen curtains parted to receive the coffin.

In His house there are many mansions.

Outside, a kookaburra laughed. This at least felt appropriate. Maureen would

take it as a sign. My head hurt, my jaw was tight. I hate to cry, I hate to cry in public. We weren't related or anything but I knew I'd miss having him around. I went home to study, I had an history exam the next day.

The second lot of chips are ready. I lift the wire basket, shake off the excess oil, tip the chips onto paper towels. I add them to the first batch which I've kept warm in the oven. I salt and vinegar the lot.

"Dinner," I say. The girls carry in plates, bread and butter, drinks. This is one meal that won't be resisted.

I didn't see Maureen again until after the exams. She invited me to stay with her a few days at a fishing shack in Mandurah, a place she and Pete went some weekends. She was sad. I didn't know what to say so I talked about the exams. She listened. I'd had to write about reconstruction in post-war Britain.

Each morning we fished doing all that Pete had done, rigging lines, baiting hooks, unsnagging, untangling, wriggling the hooks from fishes' mouths. As I scaled the fish, translucent tears splayed out over the bucket.

Maureen cooked. "A little butter and black pepper," she said.

"It's how Pete liked it." Maureen looked old, as old as Mrs Dolby.

On the last evening I took a walk by the river. I wanted to feel the grass beneath my bare feet. I wanted to feel the grass cool and spongy but it was dry and spiked, it had recently been cut.

The warm air intensified the river smell, congested with petrol from weekend power boats, disturbed weed, cheap sunscreen, and dog shit deposited too frequently along the narrow stretch between river and road. The sky between day and night, was grey like a black and white photograph overexposed. I walked fast, striding. It felt good to move after what seemed like days of sitting.

I kept an eye out for something elevated to stand on. I wanted to look back where I'd been, to look ahead. I considered a swim but there was no one around and though a strong swimmer, I can be more fearful than a child when it comes to water, thick and opaque.

I found an upturned dinghy, climbed onto it. The sky, now dark was like a mirror, the milky way a smudge of toothpaste across its surface. It felt familiar to me, as familiar as the inside of my bathroom, perhaps even as an extra layer of skin. I looked for the star that I imagined was my grandma. I made a wish - she loves me...a star fell. Her star? Or Pete's?

The day before Peter had died, I'd cut his toenails. I did so guiltily, despising him for asking me after all we weren't related. He was so thin, pale, it didn't feel right touching him this way. Maureen must have guessed my reaction, she talked me through it, talked of how the way we are in this life affects what we come to do in the next.

It struck me then and there, that she'd bottled this whole thing, capped it with a rubber seal, labelled, dated it and put it on a shelf for the collection.

I knew it was a collection I'd inherit.

## a. longifolia

She's had a letter:

In Minnesota it's Autumn  
and his children are growing  
faster than the trees.  
They holidayed at Kangaroo Lake,  
Wisconsin, and doesn't she remember  
how good they were on ice-skates?  
They'll do it again sometime soon.

The letter, returned to its envelope,  
rests on the corner of her desk  
with a company report, auditor's statement,  
memos, *The Financial Review*.

Outside her window, beneath  
the longifolia, Easter Lilies  
in their third year  
will not flower this spring,  
some kind of deficiency in the soil.

But she remembers, between analysing data,  
how his bath robe peeled off his shoulders  
slowly exposing its fruit, his flesh, white,  
waiting for her teeth.

And the chill of the snow, the way  
it melted in her gloves, and refroze,  
the terrible ache in her ankles  
after five minutes on the ice.

But she'd tried, buckling over, falling,  
eventually watching them  
from the rocks below the woods.  
They'd soared across the mirror of the lake,  
Kangaroo Lake, dancing, sliding, laughing,  
as she unlaced her boots.

She was waiting for the fire.

Beneath the longifolia, the Easter Lilies,  
will not flower this year.

## Extensions

I enjoyed watching them at work  
the way the neat facade  
was ripped away quite quickly  
and suddenly the garden disappeared  
making the street untidy with debris,  
palettes of bricks, piles of timber,  
whilst miniature earth-movers  
gouged holes uncovering  
the foundations of misery,  
exposing beams and joists  
shocking as bones through broken flesh:  
the skeleton of hope.

I savoured visual chaos  
how it was impossible to tell  
what picks and shovels, wires and pipes  
all the activity, the materials  
would shape, yet knowing there  
was an avid purpose  
of making, transformation,  
and the house with its suffering look  
plastic at its windows,  
like eyes taped down,  
would re-emerge, whole and solid  
its masonry matching.

But with metamorphosis  
enjoyment ended. Windows,  
blue perspex, white frames,  
now eye the street as a brash face  
might mask its pain  
in harder lines, deeper shades,  
keeping the world at bay  
with vulnerable bones of hope  
fleshed out to rebut despair,  
each potential flaw  
clad with veneer, looking tough  
a strategic lair.

## The Stranger Fiction

Art and life came tragically together in *Intimate Strangers*, (A&R Imprint, 1990) Katharine Susannah Prichard's nineteen thirties novel of the Great Depression. In the 60 years since *Intimate Strangers* was first published the literary detectives have made their own fanciful deductions about its relation to reality. Now Jack Beasley joins the chorus; but the unknowable truth remains unknown.

Inevitably those who thought they knew my mother and father's story were sure that *Intimate Strangers* was an account of their marriage. The bare facts were enough for them: he was a returned soldier decorated in the First World War; she was an artist (musician or writer - well, you have to make allowances for poetic licence.) She was known to have become a communist. Their lives together had ended tragically when he committed suicide during the Great Depression. That much was known. There were glimpses of Katharine and Hugo Throssell V.C., for those who had met them, in the characters of the novel, Greg and Elodie Blackman. The setting for the story was the familiar seaside scene of the Western Australian beaches. Anyone could tell that. "Calatta" was Rockingham, or Cottesloe, or was it Point Perron, or the Basin at Rottnest, perhaps? In Katharine Susannah Prichard's lovingly evocative language the places and people seemed real. And yet, as in all works of fiction, reality and imagination were woven together in *Intimate Strangers* in new lives, new people, new events which exist only in the mind of their creator and the words in which their existence is evoked.

To Jack Beasley it is easier than that. In his recently published book, *A Gallop of Fire* (Wedgetail Press, 1993) he chooses to make his own version of truth out of Katharine Susannah Prichard's fiction. Facts so long buried that no one could care about a couple of occasional liberties - the hidden thoughts of others conveniently revealed, times adjusted to suit the case - are manipulated to make his inventions sound more convincing. Katharine was "sure" my father had read the manuscript of *Intimate Strangers* while she was away in the Soviet Union, Jack Beasley says. "She assumed that Throssell had read the draft and, acutely aware by now of his own inadequacies, saw it as strictly autobiographical and responded to its suggestion." He discounts her own explanation of the novel's origins; quotes her statement that "the novel is the simple story of two friends who recognised themselves immediately when they read the book" - and disregards it entirely, preferring to re-construct my father, a man he had never known, as the model for Greg Blackman and the series of

"stodgy consorts" he finds in Katharine Susannah Prichard's novels, and to make his own suggestion for "a more convincing" ending to the story.

The circumstances leading to my father's death are detailed in the introduction to the 1990 Imprint Classics edition of *Intimate Strangers*, upon which I have drawn extensively in trying, again, to recall those long past events. But they are only that, circumstances - the basis of fact, ignored by Jack Beasley, upon which a probability can be built. The reality remains what it has always been: the unknowable reason why my father decided to die; my mother's pain; my own unending doubt.

The interweaving of fact and fiction is the very substance of a creative writer's art. Characters known, even at the briefest, most remote acquaintance, are absorbed, assimilated, transmuted into new forms; reshaped, ascribed the personalities of another drawn from deep reservoirs of the author's memory; fitted with someone else's peculiarities, perhaps, and given a history pieced together from the fragments of events whose origins may have been long-forgotten, or made up out of those daydreams and fancies which seem to come from nowhere. It is hard to imagine that the wilder moments of Peter Carey's Oscar or Salman Rushdie's Chumcha were ever more than fantasies, but even writers of such extraordinary imagination turn to a recognisable reality from time to time: in the death of a father, recreated with pain, or a country pastor's awkward affection for his son - moments of truth heightened by their contrast with the glorious sea of improbability in which they are immersed.

So it is in Katharine Susannah Prichard's literary method. Reality was at the foundation of her universe; her reality was given the glow, not of fantasy, but of a romantic vision of life; and the people who lived in her world usually moved to clearly defined purposes; in *Intimate Strangers*, the search for "the fire of a regenerating idea."

Katharine told Louis Esson in November 1928 that *Intimate Strangers* was to be "a study of the married relation, urban and as close in as possible". The Great Depression had not reached Australia by that time, but as she wrote and the novel developed during the next four years, the Depression became the pervading background to the story. Later, Katharine maintained in a letter to Ian Reid of the University of Adelaide that the focus of the story remained unchanged, although the tragic coincidences of life led her to rewrite the ending.

The social history of the 'twenties in Western Australia which forms the background to *Intimate Strangers* is little more than research for the scholars now. Once, those events ordered the days for people like Greg and Elodie Blackman. The facts are retraceable. They are there to be verified in the text books, official reports and treatises of the times: the returning heroes of the Great War were frequently forgotten, as Greg was, when the glories of their victories faded. The jobs that were to be waiting for them somehow failed to emerge, or faded from grasp. Many who had survived the greater horrors of war found themselves unprepared to learn how to live again; turned, as Greg does, to feckless gaiety, satisfied to be alive during those first fine years of peace. And when it came, the Depression's corruption of human beings was also a fact attested by those who remember: not only the corruption of the victims deprived of livelihood and self-esteem, as if unemployment were guilt, but also those who faced the fear, scrabbling to live, to hide their sense of degradation, and those who escaped in self-centred security, ignoring compassion. The growth of a militant consciousness among those so deprived of hope is no less a documented fact of those times - a fact which Katharine Susannah Prichard herself



knew well.

She had reached her own political grail long since when she began work on *Intimate Strangers* in 1919. She had joined the newly founded Communist Party of Australia in 1920; conducted classes in Marxist philosophy for the Labor Study Circle in the 1920's and spoke on the esplanade at Fremantle with the wild men of the I.W.W. during the lumpers' strike at Fremantle, where Tony Maretti speaks to the unemployed in *Intimate Strangers*. She had worked with the secretary of the Hotel Club Caterers' Union to form an organisation of unemployed women in Perth, as Joan Williams records in *The First Furrow*. When she wrote of the unemployed, Katharine Susannah Prichard knew what she was writing about.

Suicide was the way out for many men in the depths of the Depression. Professor Geoffrey Bolton records more than one hundred suicides in Western Australia in the first year of the 'thirties. It would not have made an exceptional conclusion to *Intimate Strangers*, as Katharine Susannah Prichard had originally intended. Suicide haunted her. Throughout her life those whom she had loved ended their own lives in pain and despair. Her adored father, Tom Prichard, obsessed by his failure to find work, hung himself in 1910. Her first lover, described in Katharine's autobiography *Child of the Hurricane*, as her Preux Chevalier, attempted to tie her by the threat to kill himself if she ever left him. Suicide is a recurring theme in novel after novel: in *Black Opal* it is the rejected lover Arthur Henty who takes his own life; in *Haxby's Circus*, the lion-tamer, Gina's lover; in *Intimate Strangers* itself Louis Marzic, Elodie's father, has killed himself, and the theme of self-destruction went on in short stories like "The Happy Farmer", and later in the gold-field's trilogy.

There is fascination in playing the game of hunt the origin; but identification of the characters of *Intimate Strangers*, a routine inquiry to academic researchers, was to be a question which had devastating effects upon the lives of my mother and father. The central characters were said to have recognised themselves. Indeed, by chance they were independently identified for me when my researches for my father's story began in London in 1981; but that was only part of the truth. The attributes of many others may have gone into their creation. As I read *Intimate Strangers*, I cannot help seeing much of my father in Greg Blackman. You can see Jim Throssell, as he was known to the family, in his charm, something about the way he is described, his pride in his physique, his flirtatiousness. Captain Hugo Throssell V.C. took pleasure in his admiration for "a good pair of pins". The language Greg uses could be Jim Throssell's: "Cripes girl, I was gone on you when I wrote that." It could be my Dad speaking.

But there were differences too: Jim Throssell was no artist; he had none of the true-blue conservative loyalist attitudes attributed to Greg. The secret records of the Military Intelligence released to me from archives attest to his dangerous socialist views. Greg Blackman would never have been a speaker from the same platform as radicals like the I.W.W. leader Monty Miller, as the secret police dutifully recorded Captain Hugo Throssell to have been.

And Katharine herself? She shared Elodie's love for the beach; hers was the same rust-stained beach umbrella; she too walked alone along the long empty shores of Rockingham with a red parasol, swam sidestroke in the sea-green shallows, tended us children when we went down with measles and ruined a holiday at the beach; took on the upkeep of the family when Jim Throssell was tossed out of a job, or

chucked it in for something better that never turned up.

But Katharine Susannah Prichard was rather different from that too saintly, long-suffering creature; the aquiline nose, olive skin, European Jewish ancestry belonged to someone else; and Katharine could never have doubted herself as Elodie did, thought of herself as insignificant, a "snail of a woman". Not Comrade Katharine, committed communist and fearless fighter for the underprivileged!

A little imagination can find traces of many models, if the game is on, if we are to take those make-believe figures apart, stretch them on the dissecting table and find out where they might have come from. Name them; they're dead now, beyond defamation. There, the acknowledged models, Rose and Les Atkinson who recognised themselves in Greg and Elodie. You can see them when you know. The estrangement of Hilda and Louis Esson too, perhaps, their worn-out marriage held together for years by her selfdenial when the light of Louis' genius guttered, fading into his Celtic twilight; Nettie Palmer, sacrificing her poetry to domesticity. Did she help to make Elodie's abandonment of a career? Christian Jollie-Smith, concert pianist turned solicitor - where does her story fit in? Katharine knew them all; knew their disillusionment; love staled by familiarity; regret for the hopes of a career unfulfilled. There were memories of her own past loves too: Guido Baracchi whistling arias in the small hours of the night outside her bedroom window at her mother's home in Ormond, just as Jerome, Elodie's lover, does. Jim Throssell might well have seemed morose and unfriendly to Betty Roland, Guido Baracchi's current consort, when they both called to visit Katharine and Jim at Greenmount, as Jack Beasley reports.

Katharine Susannah Prichard herself denied that *Intimate Strangers* was autobiographical. She explained to Henrietta Drake-Brockman for the Australian Writers and their Work series that she had changed the original conclusion of *Intimate Strangers* in case the work came to be regarded as autobiographical. She recognised that the changed ending was not satisfactory, and in a letter to Jack Lindsay in 1961 confessed that she thought *Intimate Strangers* was a failure:

"I think because it did not remain true to its conception. The m.s. was drafted and in the rough when I went to the U.S.S.R. In it the husband shot himself and Elodie, disillusioned in her affair with Jerome, seeks to identify herself with the universal flow of life towards that better earth - whose 'margin fades for ever and forever as we move'. When I returned home my husband had died like hers. It was too painful then to write of what had happened to me. I changed the end. My literary conscience failed the test I suppose, so the book was a failure."

The intriguing speculations about the identity of the characters of *Intimate Strangers* might have died then, if I had not unwarily revealed in my biography of Katharine Susannah Prichard, *Wild Weeds and Wind Flowers*, (A&R Imprint, 1990) that shortly before her death she told me that for all of the long, lonely years since my father died she had secretly feared that he may have read the unfinished manuscript of *Intimate Strangers* left in her workroom when she sailed for London and the U.S.S.R., and seeing himself in Greg Blackman, had taken Greg's suicide as his own way out of the impossible accumulation of debt and the shame of his failure. There was no certainty, none of the assumption that Jack Beasley asserts. Katharine seemed satisfied with my assurances that depression, financial anxiety, sleeplessness and his

failing health was a more probable cause of his decision to end it all. To others the more romantic myth of a war hero prompted to suicide by his absent wife's word was too tempting a story when *Intimate Strangers* was televised by the A.B.C. in 1981.

I had agreed that the original conclusion of *Intimate Strangers* should be reconstructed in the television play. The inner logic of the story demanded it. My mother had recognised that in her letter to Jack Lindsay. I assured myself that the fictitious character was not my father; no one now would think so, I imagined. But in a promotional story for the TV play, the *Women's Weekly* seized upon my mother's fears and turned them into sensational facts: "When Katharine Susannah Prichard's husband secretly read *Intimate Strangers*, the novel his wife had written, he was so devastated he picked up a gun and shot himself..."

It was to correct that travesty of the truth that I gathered together the facts for my father's story and my autobiography, *My Father's Son*, (Heinemann Mandarin, 1990) documenting the medical record of Captain Hugo Throssell's war injuries, the will he had written on the day before he took his life, bank records of his debts, the Repatriation Commission's decision to allow a pension for the continuing effects of his war wounds and the meningitis that had resulted from them, the cold facts of the death certificate. I quoted his farewell message pencilled on the back of his will: "I have never recovered from my 1914-18 experiences, and, with this in view, I appeal to the State to see that my wife and child get the usual war pension. No man could have a truer mate." The facts, I believed, told a less romantic story of a discarded hero finding his own death the only means of ensuring a livelihood for those he loved.

But re-reading *Intimate Strangers*, I found those words of my father's final message echoed by Greg Blackman in the revised conclusion. The same words almost unchanged. Could it have been after all that he had read them in the manuscript of *Intimate Strangers*? Or did my mother add them to the ending of the novel in recognition of his sacrifice?

Does it matter now - except perhaps to me? The novel stands as it was published; that is how it must be considered. Greg and Elodie are as they were created in *Intimate Strangers*; their only life is in Katharine Susannah Prichard's words, and there they have a kind of immortality denied those who live and breathe beyond the printed page. Their existence continues. Their author and those who may have had a part in their creation no longer live.

Katharine asked me once, in 1969, whether I thought she should re-instate the original ending of the novel. I did not feel that I could ask her to relive the memories of my father's death. I have never seen the original manuscript. It was not among the papers she left to me. Perhaps she had burnt it together with all of the unfinished manuscripts and personal letters that she destroyed. Perhaps it survives somewhere. Who knows?

## The Afternoon

The afternoon a 727  
flew low over the hill  
between sun and farm  
throwing a huge dark bird  
across the fields -  
it altered things.  
Three sheep formed  
into an arrowhead of fear  
in the farthest corner  
of the paddock.  
A cat fled to barn  
and the dog  
slipped onto an orange mat  
of the verandah.  
A red tractor  
seeding  
on the southern slope  
stopped -  
hunched in its own shadow.  
A walker with stick and pipe  
along the unmade road  
stayed behind a curtain  
of pepper trees:  
did not look up.  
And I felt a faint tremor  
beneath my feet;  
a shaking in solid things;  
the strange upheaval  
in altered schedules  
and times.

Off course -  
I stood in the open doorway  
while the flung aircraft  
thundered into near distance  
leaving each patchwork  
fragment  
of violated farmland  
flapping beneath its tail.

## Mad Man of Bibaringa

Snow along the ranges  
fell at lunch time  
and he was already walking  
in that direction  
days away  
in the middle of the road  
at 6 o'clock  
a shadow performance for car lights  
on a hard thick tightrope  
surrounded by the safety net  
of his mind  
bare feet  
bare top  
thin trousers ballooning in the wind  
his head protected  
by an empty plastic bread bag  
outside of cold and rain  
and the knowledge of his antics  
without direction  
simply a poor player  
whose gambolling show  
became a continuous circus  
of fun and fear  
drawn on by the ranges  
and the snow  
between a slow applause of showers.

## Reef Dreaming (for Sarah)

Leaving the boat  
you enter the world of water  
naked of knowledge -  
schooled only in the use  
of snorkel, mask and flipper.  
At first, uncertain of the ocean's depth,  
your arms and legs go everywhere;  
the sudden terror in your heart  
heard in each troubled breath you take.  
A fish swims in front of you. Then another.  
And another. The colours brighter than  
the brightest colours in your favourite box of paints.  
Now your mouth becomes a gill, limbs  
a tail and fins. You drift among reef and other fish:  
a friend, a fellow fish ... until the reef appears  
like the living thing it is  
to crawl out from the shadows of the deep  
and seek the light it feeds upon.  
Now, caught between coral and the source of light,  
fish dreaming turns to fear - you feel the reef  
slice into your flesh like a knife, gills  
filling with water...

Taking your hand we find a strip  
of sand to stand upon, and I explain  
how the glass in the mask magnifies the view.  
'It changes the look of things,' I say.  
'Like the mind does when it dreams.'  
Still holding hands we set off for the shore,  
floating like lovers on a canvas by Chagall...  
Our lives suddenly changed and, at this moment,  
more luminous than the colours of the reef left behind.

## At Night the Enemy

In the morning as always, we eat on the balcony above the street. 'Hamsal, we must get out,' says my wife, passing a gift of food. Flecks of sunlight lustre her hair. Behind her, the city wakes to its freshest wounds, its new deaths. The children play with their toys. My mother guides them, gathers them below her like a tree. 'It's too dangerous, this city.'

My father lies back in the shade, his open mouth a trap for flies. Sunlight makes pink flowers of his toes. His softness annoys me.

'Hamsal,' her face is small with worry, 'to protect your family.'

I look at the way fear has bruised her face, like a fist, cut lines into her soft cheeks. She trembles, even in sleep. Such is her love. a woman's love, like the flesh beneath her tongue.

'You mean, run away. Up country.'

'Chah!' The dark of her eyes sparkles. "'Run away"?!' Rarely does she dip into her anger. 'It is wisdom, Hamsal!' I watch the sunlight blink across the waking city. A bird flies up, vanishes into an orange cloud. My wife came to me as a child, and at times becomes again the weak intruder in my family. I think even the children blush with shame. 'The leaders will solve it. We have our life here.'

'Iye!' She slaps her forehead.

The enemy send bombs in the night. They hit like blows to my guts. In bed we hear them shelling the sector of town near the border, but soon they grow closer. Sometimes we burst awake, shattered from our sleep by fear, alert to changes in volume, the nearness of our death.

My family sleeps in two rooms. We who are younger, and our children, sleep nearest the street. Should a bomb hit the building, it would still kill my parents. We have seen the endless destruction of buildings, their people spilt like bloodied intestines. We are always measuring the chances of death, of maiming, injury. The remote abstractions of our deaths. They chatter around our fear like parrots.

At night my mother, rock by day, slides through the house like water, goes to the toilet, makes coffee at 2 a.m., whispering to herself. With each soft thud from the border, her whispering scatters like hungry mice. Her tone pleads, is angry, as if she is arguing wedding plans. She sleeps like the wind at dawn.

'Father! Thunder!' cry the children. 'Rain is coming!' They burrow into darkness, chanting little songs. Comfort is in the singing. And sometimes we join in,

making a spell around the building. Death and magic.

Downstairs in the shop, I carry out the morning meats. They sway above the counter like flags of defiance. The commerce persists. The momentum of our lives carries us into the absurd day.

'Pirrun has gone,' says me wife.

'Where?'

'To the North. A farm they say.'

I wonder how, Pirrun who is a puny clerk, Pirrun has managed to slip his entire family through the blockades. Where would he find a farm? Who would employ the weedy Pirrun? The cringing worm, Pirrun!

'He'll starve.'

'Someone will feed him.'

'A fool will feed him!'

Our loud voices fill the shop like posters for faraway places. Bright, warm places; thin as paper.

'This war of fools,' says my wife, sorting figs, 'has gone on too long.' She seems sometimes old; the rarity of an old woman. Her voice is dry with shrewdness. She knows the profit has gone out of it. 'Too many have died.' Her cool eyes stare down my indignation, my anger. She seems always to speak from some secret knowledge. 'Now is the time to seek truce.' I take her opinion, taste it. To stop the guns would be like giving up alcohol. Or heroin.

I examine the face, grey with poor sleep, she brings to the street. In the shop there are no tables and chairs, the furniture of lies; what is spoken is recorded in our eyes. I say, 'Have you forgotten?! are you asleep?! They wait for our guns to be laid, before slicing us up for their pigs!' My voice slaps in the small shop, may crack the walls like a passion too strong for one ribcage.

I think of my cousin, Imsah. He is massive as a bear, red with fury. His wife, his children, two of his brothers have died by the enemy. Part of him has been blown away, and what is left has hardened. His blood is fury. 'The enemy must die as worms!' he shouts. Bullets cross his chest like medals. From the deep of his chest his voice beats like a battle drum, a call to honour. And death.

'The killing must end,' says my wife. She arranges the loaves like stones on a grave. 'Let the leaders agree to talk.'

'What do you know?!' I shout. 'You don't care for our border, our land, the soil built from our dried bones and blood!'

'Hamsal, I care for peace!' The sweet words. I cannot see if there is truth beneath the fleshy layers of her eyelids. 'We cannot live as we do.'

My wife is a shrewd woman. Yet I wonder if she covets peace like a mother wearied by her children. She would draw the plans, cease the fire, deal and raise, gamble our lives. In my heart the weapons coil and hiss.

I open the door. The sky is orange as blood. splashes of blood make bold patterns on the walls and cars. Blood is the art form here. I bang the door behind me, leave her to her soft words.

All day the truce stretches across the city like a piano wire, throat high. I hear the silence hum in it. To touch this truce and feel its sharpness, is to slice the tips from your fingers. All our fear quivers through it.

'Two have died,' she says.

'Only two?'



'In the market. A secretary and a moneychanger.'

'I nearly went there, today.'

'didn't you notice?'

At dusk we withdraw upstairs, like snails into our rooms. The cool air breathes through the streets, the buildings. Radios sing to each other, recite the news. The silence between us fills the house.

I sit at the window, my rifle sniffing the street like a tiger's nose. Rarely is it wise now to eat. In a moment the enemy may break the truce, snap it clean, the wire whipping through our sector beheading. I watch the sky for shells, listen for their soft keen. Each thump in my heart may be the first bomb.

Is it foolish to sit and wait? To wait like the virgin bride in the darkness of her bridal chamber, the victim of another's strange lust? My rifle stirs. I am a man. there is courage in me that should kill the truce. For my people, to be the first to fire. To be second is to be last, is to be dead.

Suddenly the blast strikes sharp in the belly. We spill into the shrieking street. Here in our street! The blowing apart of a building, in the very building I buy my bread! The fire is hot even at our door. We run in the dark towards the fire as if it is a holy vision.

'My brother is there!' I shout. The apartment block is half its height. It has burst open like a massive wound, fallen apart, collapsed like a woman in tears. Its solid squareness is full of molten rubble, torrid to the eyes. 'And your cousin's family!' I call to my wife. She gazes at the fire like someone blind. She has the look of someone before a firing squad.

My eyes run tears of hatred. We watch the soldiers operate, cool as doctors, dousing the flames, picking at the rubble. They cut from the building pieces of flesh. The livid remnants of lives. My brother and his family have gone from me, like the removal of a leg.

'Hamsal!' cries my wife, 'We must go!' She drags at my arm, to pull me across the border, into the country, to Pirrun!

'No!' The dishonour. 'My brother stayed here. He wasn't scared!'

She punches my face. It's a woman's slap, like a kiss. I clasp her wrists; she spits in my eye. Around us people stare: why are you fighting? here? now? I strike her jaw; she falls like a shirt blown from a line.

In my arms then, I gather and carry her back into the darkness, the empty, fireless hole we inhabit. My mother at the door is frightened. The children cry out. 'Be quiet; she has fainted!' I say. I resettle at the window, nurse my rifle. Across the city, the guns throb into the night air; an ecstasy of shooting. The death creatures in our hearts. They call to each other like lovers.

### Heinz's Women

Josephine swung slowly from the makeshift noose, an extension cord wound tight around her neck from the ceiling fan. The fan had otherwise fallen into disuse since the Bureau had given Heinz an airconditioner. Her legs were splayed, rigid as a peg, and her face was awful. Her eyes and mouth were glued wide open in immortal surprise, bordered with garish cobalt blue eyeshadow, to match her bulging cobalt blue eyes. Intuitively, Heinz's mother had sent up a matching organza gown in electric blue from Adelaide after he told her Josephine had moved in and that it was getting serious. If she were to see that gown on Josephine now, creased and spoiled, with dust settling on the folds gathered where the sleek material had slipped from her narrow shoulders, she'd be mortified.

Heinz's mother worried about her son, boarded up on that filthy barren island in an archipelago no-one knew existed. The Joseph Bonaparte Gulf. Cape Desolation Sound. Siren Island. The location could sound so exotic and pioneering - a last bastion of unfulfilled colonial promise and unchartered maritime splendour. Such notions could only possibly be entertained by people who'd never been there.

"Josephine? Yeh, she's alright", barked Heinz into the static. "Same as ever. What? I'm having trouble hearing ya. Yeah. Nah. Nah, she can't come to the phone. She doesn't like speaking much at all. Yeah, rightio Mum. See ya. Yeah, ta ta."

Heinz pulled himself out of the low rattan chair and staggered across the room to the fridge, slapping Josephine on the thigh as he passed. Her frail body swung lightly in a widening arc, then spiralled toward true centre.

"Mum sends her love."

Josephine was unlike Heinz's other women, who swept in and out, leaving him alone for months at a time. They toyed with him, these other women, hovering around the island, singing to him in undulating isobars, teasing him with a presence that felt like blood pressure dropping. Often they were wild, furious women intent only on a form of decimation, on reducing Heinz to his most naked and vulnerable condition. They were unpredictable - despite Heinz's existence being given over to rendering them predictable - and he could not anticipate them with any real precision. Heinz was not canny, and he was not intuitive.

Josephine was a stayer. Josephine hung in and looked on in perpetual organza alert. Josephine didn't leave Heinz entirely alone. She oscillated. She saw things. And she assimilated all, monitoring him like a satellite dish. What else is a girl to do

on Siren Island? She didn't speak, so she couldn't censure him verbally. She didn't need to. Her physical presence was sufficient to alert Heinz to his enduring qualities of human ineptitude.

In the years Bronwyn had been away, Heinz had locked himself away on the island and immersed himself in meteorological matters and an ever-intensifying cloud of sexual delusion. Bronwyn was the first to have told him he was a pervert and that his treatment of women was shameful and unhealthy. Bronwyn had walked out on him. Bronwyn was the last real woman Heinz had loved - the last bona fide Bonaparte female presence. Ever since, he had turned to his nefarious nimbus women for a safer, more assured and hypothetical gratification. Every second visitor to this region of the coast was a woman: Agnes, Chloe, Elsie, Gretel. And he had nothing better to do.

Cape Desolation itself was a barren, monumentally isolated place. Jutting into the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, it was wracked with elemental extremes: high winds, or tormenting humid doldrums; constant heat - temperatures that soared into the forties like fire on the brain. Aboriginal communities avoided Siren Island, preferring the eerie seismic contours of the inland, or other less exposed regions of the coast north and south. Heinz's island was a flat, mangroved speck on the map, an ejected kidney, spent and abandoned. He received a monthly mail and cargo run from a Darwin supply ship that serviced the region. Aside from this he made little human contact - only passing commerce, like an oil rig witnessed on the horizon. And there had been Indonesian fisherman come illegally close, wanting to avoid Darwin and Broome. But they ended up, like most, in Darwin and Broome. Few visitors to the north-west coast remain strangers for long. Few slip through the radar veil that dragnets the region.

Heinz was left, literally, to his own devices. He began mail ordering pornographic literature and sexual aides from southern newspapers. His attention was diverted unfalteringly toward seeking out the sexual in everything Mother Nature or her technological counterpart had to offer. Hence, Ingrid, Katherine, Moira, Ophelia. Once the boys in Darwin even let him name one of the girls in advance - a sort of long service treat - but they were up to 'Q' and Heinz couldn't think of any girls' names beginning with 'Q'.

He became obsessed, developing what his mother would call an unhealthy fixation. She was of Afrikaner stock, and was quick to spot the fanatical in a man. Her husband had gambled away their orange grove in Natal and found fervent salvation in a Pentecostal God. Mother was pleased Heinz had found Josephine. But then, Mother hadn't met Josephine. Josephine had arrived, like an Acme contraption from a Warner Bros cartoon, in a box dropped to the nether regions from some far-off, faceless metropolis where they actually made things like - well, like Josephine.

But too much fantasising and boredom can take its toll on an unimaginative man. Heinz had practically extended his resources to their fullest with Josephine, and he was reaching the point where he could take no more. He was becoming tense. Paranoid. Josephine didn't want him to smoke. Josephine didn't want him to drink. Josephine didn't want him to fuck her. What!? But, but ... surely. Josephine suggested he find another woman if he wanted to indulge in that sort of thing any more. After ruminating on it for a couple of days - scratching his bulbous, pink tummy glistening with beads of sweat that dripped from his orange hair - he decided

to take up Josephine's suggestion and place an advertisement in the regional newspapers:

**WANTED: One open-minded Woman to share tropical island  
paradise with Professional man.**

WRITE TO:     Heinz Pedersen  
                  Siren Island  
                  Cape Desolation Sound  
                  via Darwin, NT

Buoyed by the whiff of sexual promise, Heinz radio-phoned the papers that afternoon. After the call from his mother, he grabbed his beer and collapsed back into the fraying cane lounge with its foam stuffing sprouting through rips in the vinyl cushions. His gut creased and rolled over the elasticised lip of his navy blue stubbies, and shook and trembled in syncopation with the gleeful chortles he was having difficulty suppressing. Josephine looked on in disarming admonition as he flicked through the Yellow Pages and took notes: *The NT News*; the *Katherine Times*; the *Centralian Advocate* - would that cover the Territory? Josephine wouldn't say - just that outraged "OH!" that she'd been designed for. Before he had time to rethink his plans, they were set in bold print across the Kimberleys, the Territory and the North-West Cape.

\* \* \* \*

Heinz had to wait a while, and it was during this period that the Depression settled in, and looked like developing. It did intensify, drawing heat from the warm waters of the Indian Ocean into a vortex of vivified energy. Heinz's women were rallying against him. Josephine was sending him crazy - she had stopped talking to him - and now this new female presence off the coast was metamorphosing into something tangible. In a rare moment of esoteric inspiration, the boys at the bureau had come up with 'Shakti', and Heinz, trembling uncontrollably with mounting relish, was keeping tabs on her. She was shaping up to be quite a formidable opponent: Category 1, Category 2, Category 3, Heinz ranked and classed his women.

As if this weren't enough excitement to send him skidding off the rails, a solitary response to his advertisement for female company finally limped home with the supply ship, six weeks after it had been issued. It read:

You filthy, desperate man. You're insane. Don't go getting your hopes up, but I'll be back to sort you out. You can expect me when you least expect me.

Bronwyn

Bronwyn's spontaneity had captivated and, finally, capsized Heinz. He had become a bobbing piece of human flotsam, unable to engage in meaningful communication with other, more well-adjusted human beings. He was stricken with fear and confusion. What did she mean by coming back? What could she possibly want

from him? What could her motive be? It was a joke, surely - an idle threat. But you could never tell with Bronwyn.

So now he had two furious women baring down on him. Heinz decided to batten down the hatches. How would Bronwyn arrive? She was a hard, sinewy Territory girl, born in the VRD, with a Truck Diver's Licence to boot. She wouldn't be waitin' for no boats. If she wanted to get there, she would be there within days - she'd take the road through Katherine and Kununurra, then 4WD it up to the Cape, and be across in a dinghy in hours.

He couldn't face her. He just couldn't. But where to go? What to do? He listened to the radio messages he had helped construct:

"Severe Tropical Cyclone Shakti with wind gusts of up to 240 km/h is heading for the coast and moving in a South-Easterly direction. It is expected to cross the coast near the NT/Western Australian border within the next 24 hours. Coastal communities between Daly Waters and Cape Desolation Sound are warned to clear the land of loose debris and prepare themselves for the winds. Repeat, this is a Category 5 Cyclone alert. Severe Tropical Cyclone Shakti..."

The earnest, monophonic voice calmly repeated the message over Heinz's crackling wireless. The winds had picked up dramatically, and with a two metre swell on an island that rose little more than a sand bar from the sea, Heinz feared Shakti would soon be lapping on his doorsteps. He'd not been intimidated by her kind before, but something about Shakti reckoned business. Down came the blinds. Heinz taped the windows and hammered planks of wood across the louvres. Josephine swung listlessly in wider and wider arcs, stirred into life by Shakti, while Heinz cowered in the bathroom like a beaten dog. Shakti was calling in her energy: the sea swelled and ebbed, swelled and ebbed, as Josephine began to moan with the mind. "Ooh! Oo-oh!" They howled in unison as the rain pummelled down and the rising seas heaved and crashed on the sands before the house. Then Shakti took a capricious southerly turn and made straight for the Sound, unleashing her fullest fury upon Siren Island.

"Hell hath no fury, Hell hath no fury....!" wailed hapless Heinz, drunk with fear and possessed of a manic energy he could not comprehend. Pacing blindly through the hallway and the lounge, he reached for Josephine and fumbled with her dress, causing her to let out a corrugated screech that peeled the iron sheeting from the roof. Then the outside came in, and the inside out, and Heinz was engorged by elements so raw and so violent, he could only climb for the chair, for the cord, and take a great leap of faith into the torrid void. All his images of women flooded in through the window, then converged and vortexed in one huge cyclonic surge. Last thoughts of Josephine and Bronwyn were obliterated under Shakti's thundering presence.

\* \* \* \*

Bronwyn had had the good sense to ride Shakti through from the relative protection of inland Kununurra. Wending her way through the mangroves like a buzz-sawing mosquito, she was the first to come across the two-thirds annihilated fibro

remains of Cape Desolation Tracking Station, where she found Heinz hanging from the rafters in a blue organza dress with a naked blow-up rubber doll splayed rigid at his feet.

Given the evidence that lay strewn round the wreckage, it was difficult for local authorities to establish whether there was certifiable suicidal motive in Heinz's fate, or whether - as they found upon Bronwyn's ardent testimony - it was another of these isolated incidents of Death by Misadventure.

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## Static in Pink and Blue

Helen Marshall picked up another Pap smear and placed it under the microscope. She adjusted the focus as the light surged towards her through a multitude of stained cells.

She wondered how many this would be - twenty odd a day for twenty five years? Must be hundreds of thousands.

Her finger moved the stage controls so that the patterns marched across the screen before her eyes in familiar conformations. Slipping into automatic she dipped an orange stick in ink and marked on the slide the cells that verified the adequacy of the sample.

A post coital smear this one. Oh, there were plenty of those, but they always appeared to her as the product of a happy encounter. She enjoyed each one: sperms are such cute little beings with egg-heads shading from powder blue to indigo and flickering off into pretty cyclamen tails. A mosaic of movement danced before her, as if she were flipping a magic motion picture book she'd had as a child, which turned rapidly changing images into animation. She saw the sperms' frantic activity to join with some other body in order to flourish into life.

But they were static now in pink and blue - sterile and lifeless, achieving nothing.

They lay among a population of immature cells, denied the youthful sustenance of oestrogen. Helen glanced at the patient's card and checked the age. Seventy four!

"How sweet," she said softly to the echoing walls of her little cubicle in one corner of the large laboratory.

Name: Winifred Thornton. Date of Birth: 6 June 1919. Address not far from Helen's own home on the north shore. Still enjoying an intimate relationship with her husband. Who would he be - Jim, Bob, Harry? Helen decided on *George* and enviously visualised their affectionate rapport as her eyes and fingers screened the slide from the bottom right hand corner to the top left hand corner, covering every part of the cellular abundance.

"I suppose *George* is her husband," she thought. She decided they'd been friends and lovers for years and years, and after children and grand-children still enjoyed each other. They would sit compatibly together, overlooking their garden of jacarandas, hydrangeas and camellias and they would be comfortable together. And there would be touching. She missed that.

Ian and she used to touch often. Always a kiss with a greeting in the morning

and an embrace at the end of their mutual working days before Ian changed out of his suit and tie and highly polished shoes, to go off and potter in the garden.

There was a sofa in front of the television and after dinner Ian would sit at one end while she lay at the other with her legs draped over his knees. His palm gently brushed her calves at first, then squeezing, palpating, wandering with tactility to caress the ankles. Fingers laced through toes. Fingers holding the ball of her foot with his thumb massaging the toe-bed. Fingers stroking the instep, thumb firming into the arch. In musical response his sensitive hands strummed her keyboard legs, from time to time accentuating beat with pressure. Her hand clasped the back of his neck and moved across his shoulders, manipulating away the tensions of the day.

But that was two years ago.

Helen removed the slide from the microscope stage and wrote NO ABNORMALITY DETECTED on Mrs Thorton's card. She positioned another slide.

Sometimes she wondered if she had made the right decision, but how could she have gone with him? For ten years she had been a Senior Cytotechnologist at the Institute, part of a research team, respected by her peers, with five scientific papers published in her name. Always working on a new project. Each month the journals were anxiously scrutinised with the dread that somebody else may have pre-empted the publication of *her* topic. Teaching programmes, lectures, overseas conferences. Achieving something worthwhile.

And then Ian had announced that Price Waterhouse wanted him to transfer to the Jakarta office - a promotion with prospects of a partnership.

It was a blow. She was pleased for him, of course. They discussed it at length. There had been no harsh words. Ian had said, "Well, I'm going - you come if you want to."

Helen told herself that everyone must find fulfilment in his or her own way. "I have come so far and I enjoy my work so much. It is part of me and I need it. All those years of study and dedication - how could I give it up?"

The children were leading their own lives - David in a solicitor's office in London, and Belinda sharing a house in Glebe and apparently making strides in her career in Fashion and Design. Helen's work provided her self-esteem now and was absorbing and satisfying.

Ian said he understood. He left for Jakarta two weeks later.

\* \* \*

The evening drive along the highway was always congested and Helen was glad to climb out of the incessant smog cloud of the city to the leafy air of home. The house in which the family had grown up was too big for her of course, but it had a lovely position, looking down into the valley where the creek below meandered slowly to join the Lane Cove River.

Bulging handbag and lunch-time shopping were dumped on the kitchen bench, and Helen slipped off her shoes and poured a scotch and soda. She took her full-bodied white uniform onto the deck and relaxed into a cushioned chair.

Her gaze trickled down through the pittosporum struggling for its legitimate claim over privet and lantana, to a sprinkling of bracken fern. Dimly through the



eucalypts she could distinguish the lofty bustle of Chatswood and St Leonards, but around her all was still and undisturbed. Just an occasional screech from a sulphur-crested cockatoo and the soothing drone of cicadas.

"I like this," she told herself. "So quiet. No intrusions once I get home. "It had been a good day, with some routine reporting and then consultation with colleagues correlating material for another publication. Her input was so important, as she had many years of experience on which to call. The evening light flickered on her neat greying hair and the sweet gum-tinged breeze was refreshing. Helen wondered if Winifred and George were enjoying the ambience of a similar setting a few kilometres away. They would be drawn together after working in the garden, or a day's excursion, or returning from individual activities, to exchange ideas and experiences in their continual Happy Hour. They would be sitting near each other, chairs angled to catch each nuance of companionship and endearment. Perhaps there would be touching.

The deepening light surged towards her through a multitude of black-limbed tracery, in shades of cerise and royal blue. Her thoughts deepened as the smouldering colours graduated to maroon, to indigo, to navy blue, and inevitably died. She shivered as the first chill fanfared the arrival of the lonely night.

Helen Marshall returned to the house and switched on the light. She took from the rack the latest of Ian's regular letters. It ended as so many of them did with, "I miss you - I wish you would re-consider." She wondered if Winifred had had a career, and if she and George had been able to rekindle their harmony after a separation.

She reached for the telephone book. Just a chat - ring and have a talk - it wouldn't do any harm to see how he was feeling. Her finger ran down the page headed OTC, and stopped at INDONESIA - Jakarta.

\* \* \*

A few kilometres away Winifred Thornton, smartly dressed and freshly-coiffed, heard the soft knock on the back door. She moved through the stylishly furnished house that had been her husband's legacy ten years ago and unlocked the catch, smiling as she watched her young gardener slipping off his boots.

There was a chill in the evening air and she stood aside to welcome him inside.

"Have your shower first," she said, "and then we'll have dinner. You know where the towels are."

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# PETER HICKS

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## Elegy for Zoe Ryan

I am saying your name.  
Quietly and fully.  
The vowel must come

On breath drawn cleanly  
From the body's centre.  
My teeth unlock, and I -

Hollow from lung  
To lip - become  
A fundament of song.

I am fluting you into time.  
Giving, and being replenished.  
I am saying your name.

\*

A short, deep dream ago  
You gave placenta  
To the tide. Now,  
From the same grey phlegmatic  
Jetty's head, we throw to you  
Flowers as dark and fragile  
As your child's eyes.

\*

As surely as the lover's roar,  
Dying is dialogue.  
"Justify your passage!"  
Sing the departing.

We, alive, rustle  
And join limbs, contain  
The past in ceremonial  
Cages of air.

\*

A child, a bell, a promise,  
A prayer. The child,  
A comet; the bell, a reef;  
The promise - the breathing tide.

Each dusk I tend  
Your grave at jetty's end.  
Each night you die again:  
And our all is ocean.

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# ALAN CLOSE

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## The 3am News

"The walls of his heart are paper thin"  
Dr Zhivago

We sleep head to head,  
only a single skin of brick  
between us. My eyes fly open  
as your light clicks on. It's 3am.  
Through the wall I see you  
reach for the diary on the bedside  
table and uncap your pen.  
You are so small under the doona  
and blankets. Your ear pokes  
through your hair. I can close  
my eyes and see, on other mornings  
more recently than it is possible  
to believe, the shadow of the pawpaw  
tree playing on the glass, and  
hear the sigh of the apostle birds  
and smile at the sun rising through  
that ear. A cassette is dropped  
into your machine, a button pushed.  
I wait for the music to start. You  
pump the wall, a hollow knock  
inside my heart.

### This Country is my Mind

Many Australian critics of literature and art as well as a number of historians have attempted to document the early settler's response to the land in the nineteenth century. The reactions of convicts, officials, botanists, explorers, and free settlers show the manner in which cultural values influenced their perception of the environment. It took time for the settlers to become aware of Australia's intrinsic beauty and time for new cultural values to develop. Unfortunately nineteenth century poets such as Harpur and Kendall, while demonstrating an attachment to the land, frequently fail to convince today's readers that they struggled to present the landscape in terms of its own aesthetic. In the twentieth century poets such as Judith Wright, David Campbell, and Les Murray show that Australians now find their own cultural significances in the country's landscapes. Of these poets Les Murray is the most important, for he has concentrated on perfecting a language that echoes his response to the land and reflects his feeling for the vernacular republic.

Murray's persistent search for poetic integrity and the mimetic effects he seeks influence all his poetry, but most particularly his pastoral; it's here that he most frequently records the Australian perceptions of the country, and for that to be authentic Australian readers must see and hear the country and people they know. This is not to say that nationalism dominates: it simply means that a universal experience bears the sights and sounds of a particular landscape.

Poetry, Murray argues, to mirror wholeness of life for us, must use both functions of the mind (daylight reason and reverie) and include the body's response to the dance of life.<sup>1</sup> He explains the body's rôle in some detail in "Poemes and the Mystery of Embodiment":

The ensemble of effects in a poem calls into play our automatic nervous system, the one we don't consciously control, by bringing about a state of alert in us. This is the state balanced between the urge to fight or flee and the urge to surrender, and in it we mime movements and gestures presented to us by whatever has caused the alert. It is a mirror state, or an echoic state, in which we half-consciously imitate the dance that is danced before us, and we probably flicker in and out of this state very rapidly, alternating it with other states such as intellectual receptivity.<sup>2</sup>

Closely aligned to Murray's theory of alerts, echoic states, and mimetic move-

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1. Les Murray, "Poemes and Poesies", *Blocks and Tackles* (Sydney: Angus and Roberston, 1990), 163-179.

2. Op. cit., 181.

ments are his statements on language and the use of the vernacular. Often critics interpret literally Murray's comments on the latter and castigate him for a disjunction between his theory and his practice. For instance, a reviewer of *Dog Fox Field* writes, "And yet Murray, for all his bush epiphanies, is himself capable of staggering layers of metropolitan complexity: of pun and paradox and allusion and obscurity".<sup>3</sup> To say the least the reviewer misses his mark and reveals a less than comprehensive knowledge of Murray's writings on the vernacular. As early as *The Peasant Mandarin* Murray claims that the vernacular is not restricted to the rural or working class, but rather it is an attitude of mind that writers demonstrate who have "resisted colonial alienation and kept faith with the main vernacular culture".<sup>4</sup> He also asserts that it is not just a form of speech, but a culture of "our deepest common values and identifications, the place of our quiddities and priorities and family jokes" and the "subsoil of our common life".<sup>5</sup> When language reflects this culture it may be at "full stretch, with all its resources of nuance and overtone and quasi-musical resonance, and also with all its daylight resources of precision and the capacity to catch the sheer *this-ness of things in ways which make them unforgettable*".<sup>6</sup> Now the very "this-ness of things", or what Murray later describes as "the struggle to naturalise our language and adapt it to the literary needs of Australia",<sup>7</sup> comes about by reflecting the country "with the aid of intense, almost scientific precision, aided by mimesis of natural sound".<sup>8</sup> "This-ness", the mimesis of sound and the vernacular then are linked, and in part can be judged by analysing poems for the manner in which intensity of feeling finds expression in a language that mimetically expresses what Australians know, and that exhibits the distinctiveness of the experience.

Murray's achievement in finding the language for his Australian experience can be heard in all his pastorals, but most particularly in his personal lyrics where his feeling for the country, which as early as 1969 in *Weatherboard Cathedrals*, he calls his "mind"<sup>9</sup> and which he says in the documentary "Daylight Moon",<sup>10</sup> "possesses you". Pastorals show his vernacular sentiments and his ability to depict aurally and visually the Australian bush. For instance, "A Torturer's Apprenticeship", a recent poem, reveals Murray's ability in recording a particular Australian experience in rural New South Wales. No Tityrus or Colin this country lad, but an object of derision and ostracization by an identifiable strata of small town society "in a middling cream town". The timeless contrast between town style and rural poverty finds local particularity where children are as tall as adults, but still children in their cruelty in stigmatising difference:

where full-grown children hold clear views  
and can tell from his neck he's really barefoot  
though each day he endures shoes.<sup>11</sup>

The small town youths believe "that only dim Godly joys are equal"; therefore in

3. *The Weekend Australian*, 9-10 February, 1991.

4. Les Murray, *The Peasant Mandarin* (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 1978), 153.

5. Op. cit., 146.

6. Les Murray, *Persistence in Folly* (Sydney: Sirius, 1984), 93.

7. *Blocks and Tackles*, 28.

8. op. cit., 27.

9. *Weatherboard Cathedrals* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1969), 5.

10. ABC Television, May, 1991.

11. *Dog Fox Field* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1990), 78.

their brazen modern world the rural lad "must be suppressed, for modernity, / for youth, for speed, for sexual fun"; his emotional transparency, "poverty can't afford instincts" and loyalty based not on class but mutual respect, act as an icon of significance that threatens the peer group's ideas of pleasure. Through the psychological transference of guilt the innocent one becomes evil:

they see him as a nascent devil,  
wings festering to life in his weekly shirt,  
and daily go for the fist-and-finger  
hung at the arch of keenest hurt.

Multi-layered in resonances and artful in its movements through pun, paradox, aphorism and idiom, the poem rests firmly on Murray's belief in values nurtured by "the subsoil of our common life".<sup>12</sup> The Christ reference in the last lines, "But for the blood-starred barefoot spoor / he found", rather than displacing pastoral experience by ideology reinforces it, for Christ the outcast, the defender of the common man, ensures that the metaphysical is an extension of this one.

Personal statements on the manner in which the natural world gives rise to human conduct espoused by the Torturer's Apprentice intuitively (and later confirmed by metaphysical experience), appear throughout Murray's work, but occur most frequently in *The Ilex Tree* (1965),<sup>13</sup> *Weatherboard Cathedrals* (1969), and *Poems against Economics* (1972).<sup>14</sup> These early personal pastoral lyrics show Murray testing in art those ideas that he knew instinctively to be correct. Here potential and actual loss cause the poet to articulate his love of landscape, the emotional and physical joy and sorrow lived in its presence, and the responses demanded from those who choose to meditate on nature's purpose. Since 1974 personal pastorals are fewer in number, but perhaps even more powerful in the expression of the poet's suffering and conviction.

From the first three volumes, "The Widower in the Country", "The Away-bound Train", "Spring Hail", "Evening Alone at Bunyah", and "The Prince's Land" explore Murray's loss and that of others and the physical separation from a land which engenders values. "The Away-bound Train" in this group demonstrates the paradox of the physical loss of the farm and the spiritual permanence of attachment. The emotional progression from dependency to detachment which the stanzas ostensibly plot, belie the reality. The opening two lined stanza, "I stand in a house of trees, and it is evening: / at the foot of the stairs, a creek runs grey with sand" fuse landscape and life in the speaker's mind. The train may sound its "admonition / at a weatherboard village standing on the fields", and the speaker may imagine his dissolution in surreal images,

As we dash through the forest, my face,  
Reflected, wanders and sways  
On the glass of the windowpane, and  
I press my nose to my nose.<sup>15</sup>

12. *The Peasant Mandarin*, 146.

13. Les Murray and Geoffrey Leahman, *The Ilex Tree* (Canberra: ANU, 1969).

14. *Poems Against Economics* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972).

15. *The Ilex Tree*, 35.

but the landscape dominates. The mind "trails far" in the train's wake; the land alone possesses timeless harmony, so any escape into the world must be an illusion, "this is my country, passing me by forever: / Beyond these hills and paddocks lies the world". The "left-behind hills" will, however, remain more real than the world to which the speaker hurries.

"Cowyard Gates" from *Ethnic Radio*,<sup>16</sup> written twelve years after "The Away-bound Train" intertwines inextricably loss and ideals; absence and presence, memory and land are one: the only exile, physical. A clever use of technical devices controls the powerful emotion; by using a conceit that compares house, feelings, and land as one construction, Murray counteracts the destruction and grief recorded in the first four stanzas:

I had said goodbye to that house many times  
and so helped it fall.  
I had even ransacked it,  
carried off slants of sunlight and of wind  
that used to strike the bedroom planking, blades  
against the upstart.

Wit too in linking feelings with architectural structures ensures that emotion remains contained:

Many feelings are suspended:  
the front verandah feeling, looking away at the west,  
the back verandah felling, wet boards, towel on its nail,  
all widowed in the air.

Suffering heard in the colloquially short line that is repeated twice "I didn't go to look", is at the conclusion of the poem counteracted by memory's power to bring the past's poignant beauty into the present, and even the formal and emphatic "I did not go to look" is modified by its context:

Supertime lamp,  
full moon through the loungeroom door.  
I did not go to look.

In many personal pastorals the ideology of country values transcends the loss, and the poet, despite his physical exile from the land, celebrates the harmony that exists between it and country people. Murray sings in the tradition that others have sung, but his Australianness is unmistakable. "A New England Farm", "Manoeuvres",<sup>17</sup> "Troop Train Returning"<sup>18</sup> contrast the land's powerful calm against the chaos of war and city. Poems such as "Toward the Imminent Days"<sup>19</sup> and "The Garden Path", reveal the intertwining of country life and ideology. Surprisingly "The Garden Path" from *The Weatherboard Cathedrals*, finds no place in collections of

16. *Ethnic Radio* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1977), 51.

17. *The Ilex Tree*, 22, 27.

18. *Weatherboard Cathedrals*, 18.

19. *Poems Against Economics*, 3.



selected poems.<sup>20</sup> Unpretentious in its traditional rhyme, lyrical ease, and proverbial wisdom, the poem reveals the way in which the seasons, activities and lives intermingle. The country-city *topos* discreetly enforces the values of common life by placing the "citified stranger" at the threshold of his own beliefs:

That I'm inclined to stop and gaze  
Long from the garden path before  
I cough politely and become  
The citified stranger at their door,

To stand too long, in fact, and spy  
On sweetness quivering in a spoon  
In spite of shame that sniffs my heels  
And country dogs that must bark soon.

Universal in its depiction of country bounty and individual in the voice of the speaker whose wit transforms the city interloper into one of the elect in a country paradise by the use of the biblical allusion to the publican, "The Garden Path" demonstrates the continuing vitality of the form and Murray's genius in shaping the tradition to depict Australian experience.

With the exception of the specifically Boeotian poems most of Murray's pastoral can be considered meditative, and the constant reflection on values warrants the term "hard pastoral". For example, the sequence *The Idyll Wheel*,<sup>21</sup> in universalising the particular and celebrating the values that the seasons engender in the people, show those conservative ideas that critics with different social agendas consider destabilising. Such have ever been the accusations against the pastoral singers and still their ideals survive and flourish as do the singers of the songs.

In the "Preface" to *The Idyll Wheel* Murray claims that his calendar is not the artful cyclic year of "miniature peasantry painted as for a proprietor"; nonetheless demonstrates sophisticated art and ageless ideology. "Preface" and "Epilogue" direct us to the sequence's artistic and ideological impulses. In the "Preface" Murray makes it clear that it's not the precise recurrence of seasons that gives rise to harmony in nature, but the intermingling of time past and time present:

As forefather Hesiod may have learned too, by this time,  
things don't recur precisely, on the sacred earth: they rhyme.

To illuminate one year on that known ground  
would also draw light from the many gone underground.  
"April : The Idyll Wheel" recalls how Anglo-Celtic ideas of agriculture and husbandry were imposed on the land's primitiveness:

The seasons used to blur, or so we dream,  
on the wheel of an idyll, before we came.

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20. *Weatherboard Cathedrals*, 36.

21. *The Idyll Wheel* (Canberra: Brindabella, 1989).

An idle wheel, we said, and lashed  
the years to make them a driving wheel.  
Idylls were idols, thefts of time.

The dream is, however, greater than the form it finds in the farm: it's the timeless desire to live in ease in the pleasance:

And the farms once made, they live by touches,  
a stump burning, a scooped dam, new wire stitches  
and unstated idylls had driving to and from.

Murray ends the poem by attempting to reconcile the spirit of the georgic with that of the eclogues, the desire for ease with the need for work, universal longing with particular detailed effort:

So, into the blue dimensionless as an ideal  
with a Y-tipped prop our neighbour hoists the unreal  
statures, flat and wet, of her whole family  
for her glance and the warm sun to re-fill  
above the pleats and rare flickers of their hill  
where her old father tinily moves, keeping busy.  
The idyll wheel is the working wheel.

Ostensibly denying the stylisation of cyclic presentations found in Australian paintings such as S. T. Gill's, the poetry of David Campbell's "Cocky's Calendar", or in the European calendar cycles, the weight of masterly descriptions of colour and texture that intertwine with particular times and events lead not only to Australian places, but also to disclosure of time's pressures. For instance, in "January: Variations on a Measure of Burns" the fecundity of nature, while peculiarly Australian and in the witty Murray manner, recalls in the variety of produce and bursting nectarines other descriptions of nature's bounty:

and zucchini and wart squash and Queensland Blues  
(not the dog but the pumpkin) squeak together like shoes  
in tractor trailers, and nectarines bruise  
from being awaited.

Behind this Australian scene stands the descriptions of the prodigality and bursting ripeness of the English tradition of "To Penshurst" and "Upon Appleton House".

The pervasive presence of landscapes of colour and light throughout the sequence reveals that the artist who records and observes, knows the landscape intimately and searches with artistic integrity to reproduce its uniqueness. In Murray's descriptions of rural life, farms, nature and landscape, the conceits of presenting one in the appearance of another, show that he sees a relationship in which an exchange between the seasons, the land, and the people takes place. Therefore in presenting the hills in "April: Leaf Spring" as long-limbed and dressed, as it were, in khaki and navy wool, Murray's "this-ness" comes from seeing the land as knowable experience:

The long-limbed hills recline high  
in Disposals khaki boiled in tankwater  
or barbed-wire-tattered navy wool.

The conceit here, though linking unlike substances, associates like colours and makes us aware of the accuracy of choice and enables us to see familiar sights with intense clarity.

Throughout the sequence the transference of identifying characteristics between farms, nature and farmers, is constant. Anthropomorphic nature steps in outcrops "towards the roofed creeks' / greener underground forest"; clusters of creek trees expand, "as if from dreams of rain" ("April: Leaf Spring"); "the sun ... stares right through houses" ("May") and "peach trees are a bare wet frame / for notional little girls in pink dots of gingham" ("August"). The farms with their buildings, animals, and paraphernalia absorb nature and nature absorbs them. For instance, clouds become "all the colours of a worn-out dairy bucket" ("July"); they also "grow great rustling crops of fall" ("August"). In early September "the valley was a Friesian cow"; in February nature has all "its plants pot-bound"; "flying insects" are "the small weeds of a bedroom window" ("September"); "light stands up behind the trees like sheet iron"; "soil is itself a concrete" ("December"). Even the names of the dead once "shouted over coal-oil lamps / cling to their paddocks" ("Preface"). Transference is endless and reveals the interdependence of all life.

The sophisticated poet-narrator of the Bunyah cycle, while he mingles with the people he celebrates, never loses his power to observe and remain sufficiently detached to see what it is that he cherishes and admires. He knows the strengths and weaknesses of his community in a way that they themselves would not understand, and he knows in a way that they never do, the manner in which the land shapes them. He identifies with them because of their beliefs. In assessing the destructive influence of government policy on rural life, "the government's retreated for keeps from this valley", ("January") he writes in the tradition of Virgil; in recognising a potential self in the drunkard escaping "mortgage world time politics", he works within the vernacular tradition; in the presentation of the bush yarn in "June: the Kitchens" he shows the ability to capture the humour, exaggeration and associative thinking of his subjects; yet the respect he shows for those who will not read his poetry is always present.

Preoccupations with seasons, landscapes, and people extend beyond the cycle of the *Idyll Wheel* and occur throughout Murray's career in poems such as "A New England Farm, August 1914",<sup>22</sup> "Towards the Imminent Days",<sup>23</sup> "The China Pear Trees".<sup>24</sup> "Shale Country", "Granite Country" and "Sandstone Country".<sup>25</sup> Of these poems, "The China Pear Trees" in showing the physical power of the trees to endure and draw settlers, suggests that, at times, Murray could believe that the dominant partner in the creation of values is nature:

It was this shade in the end, not their coarse bottling fruit  
that mirrored the moist creek trees outward, as a culture  
containing the old gardener now untying and heaping up

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22. *The Ilex Tree*, 22.

23. *Poems Against Economics*, 3.

24. *Daylight Moon*, 25.

25. *Dog Fox Field*, 41, 45, 93.

one summer's stems and chutneys,  
his granddaughter walking a horse the colour of her boots  
and his tree-shaping son ripping out the odd failed seedling,  
"Sorry, tree. I kill and I learn".

Closely aligned to the seasons in its works and days emphases are Murray's poems which capture the presence of animals and the manner in which they might see their place in the rural environment. Murray's views about Boeotia are relevant here. In "On Sitting Back and Thinking about Porter's Boeotia", Murray argues that Boeotia is associated with celebration and naming and Athens with philosophy, abstraction and counting.<sup>26</sup> While these distinctions may help to categorise kinds of poetry and poets' preferences for subject matter, they could lead to the mistaken belief that intellectual intensity and stylistic virtuosity may habitually be the prerogative of the Athenian. Such has never been the case; and it would be foolish to approach Murray's cattle poems and his most recent "Presence: Translations from the Natural World",<sup>27</sup> with his comments on Boeotia in mind, for these could exclude the wit, sophistication, and imaginative subtlety, and not least the Murray *ludens* of parody and dazzling vocabulary.

This is not to say that the Boeotian sequence "Walking to the Cattle Place" is wholly successful.<sup>28</sup> The poems need to be read in sequence to appreciate what Murray calls the "enormously ramified detail about cattle and their place in human history",<sup>29</sup> and yet, the very discursiveness of a poem such as "Goloka" distracts from the important points that Murray wants to make. Boeotian philosophy, history, mythology, mystical meetings between humans and cattle, while showing wit and imaginative daring, and while stressing the worthiness of the Boeotian life, do not focus attention on the essence of that philosophy. For instance, in "Goloka", the historical reference to witchcraft and science and their war against the Pope, and the subsequent destruction of Boeotian joys, is intellectually satisfying once the images from cloven hoof to rainbow cake, are sorted out, but the multilayering throughout the poem obscures the central message. The Puritans, for example, are not easily identified in the "Good People resigned from dancing":

When Cloven Hoof and Wheel made war on a chair  
And Hoof was burned to hide the holes in his back  
that was indeed war  
good people resigned from dancing and lived in the air  
much wearing of black  
then madness was easy. That day crumbles here. More future  
in a little girl feeding the clean beasts rainbow cake.

Not all the poems present these difficulties; and it's the accumulation of attitudes within the sequence that reveal the variety of ways in which Boeotian culture has shaped our ideas of ourselves. In "Artery", for instance, Murray presents man as developing his sense of guilt as a consequence of his slaughtering animals:

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26. *The Peasant Mandarin*, 172-184.

27. *P. N. Review*, 17 (5), 1991: 14-21 and reprinted in *Translations from the Natural World* (Sydney: Isabella Press, 1992).

28. *Poems Against Economics*, 37-70.

29. *Persistence in Folly*, 14.

... It was this horror  
beyond the great ice, that launched us. Luscious bone-fruit.  
What silk will tie this artery of knowledge?

"Birds in their Title Work Freeholds of Straw", in the cattle sequence, is one of the few poems that can stand alone. The activities are centred in a rural setting and the references to the world stock exchange are tied their source in farming. The indescribable and "unpickable knot of feeling / For the furred, smeared flesh of creation, the hate, the concern" belongs to a culture in which children experience "sparetime childhoods". The manner in which Murray intertwines life and farming recalls his seasonal poems, but here the clever pithiness concentrates attention on the attributes that emerge from the lives of those closely associated with nature. The Kirk passage where the ministers unknowingly become like farmers in the hard work of milking grace from theology, illustrates Murray's technique:

It was very bad news for the Kirk:  
Old men of the hard grey cloth, their freckled faces  
Distended, squeezing grace through the Four Last Things  
In a Sabbath bucket.

I can tell you sparetime childhoods force-fed this  
Make solid cheese, but often strangely veined.

The lines "It will make them sad bankers. / It may subtly ruin them for clerks", evoke those bush Australians and Buladelah-Taree holiday makers who flee the city hoping to find that sense of belonging, that Murray unerringly captures with humour and poignancy in, "They will never forget their quick-fade cow-piss slippers". Daring in its balance of intensity and mundanity, the line reveals Murray's understanding of the roots of Boeotian culture.

The most successful of the Boeotian poems show personal experience as in "Birds in their Title Work Freeholds of Straw", or work through wit and humour in "Boeotian Count"; not a few, "Cows on Killing Day" (*Dog Fox Field*) and "Presences: Translations from the Natural World", gain their effectiveness from the precision with which Murray presents the world from the perspective of the animal.

Murray's interest in the natural world extends beyond Boeotia and presences to familiar Australian objects that represent cultural assumptions and topographies that reveal our past. Poems such as "Driving through Sawmill Towns",<sup>30</sup> "Rainwater Tank",<sup>31</sup> "The Dream of Wearing Shorts for Ever", "The Sleepout", "Louvres", "The Milk Lorry", "The Butter Factory",<sup>32</sup> "Pole Barns", and "Gun-e-Darr",<sup>33</sup> almost work like emblems in that the poet uses objects to explore the formation of Australian attitudes. Take for instance, "The Sleepout", that begins with a description of that Australian architectural oddity constructed at the verandah's end. For many generations this make-shift bedroom afforded the only privacy for young family members, and its proximity to nature through the garden or bush fostered imagina-

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30. *The Ilex Tree*, 33.

31. *Ethnic Radio*, 53.

32. *Daylight Moon*, 13, 18, 20, 34, 35.

33. *Dog Fox Field*, 53, 29.

tive exploration of the surrounding countryside. The opening statement "Childhood sleeps in a verandah room" concentrates in an emblematic way meaning in the sleepout; five lines of realistic description follow before Murray explores the manner in which physical attributes of the location give rise to childish fears:

Breathings climbed up on the verandah  
when dark cattle rubbed at a corner  
and sometimes dim towering rain stood  
for forest, and the dry cave hunched woollen.

Surprisingly the child sees in the forest forces more positive intimations than the imaginings evoked by the sleepout:

Inside the forest was lamplit  
along tracks to a starry creek bed  
and beyond lay the never-fenced country,  
its full billabongs all surrounded  
  
by animals and birds, in loud crustings,  
and something kept leaping up amongst them.  
And out there, to kindle whenever  
dark found it, hung the daylight moon.

Positive connotations outweigh negatives in these stanzas and nouns of place dominate; the quantitative and qualitative adjectives such as "starry creek", "never-fenced", "full", "daylight" indicate that for Murray, nature promised meaning.

All the poems in the group, even "The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever", have their starting points or conclusions in the exchange between people and farming or nature. In "Gun-e-darr" the emblematic pull to discover meaning by deciphering localities or objects gives place to metamorphosis as the first stock route becomes "the blood-red cattle serpent". As a group the poems shows the manner in which Murray's intense feeling for nature, and for those whose lives are attuned to it, seek expression through objects that bear the marks of the relationship. They show the love and interest that Australians have for their rural past. The tradition of pastoral nostalgia gives place here to *locii* of values that the social critics of Murray's conservatism may well find destabilising, since the poems reflect for many Australians the attitudes by which they define themselves.

Genre modifications of the topographical tradition occur in Murray's historical-topographical poems, but unlike many of our earlier poets, Murray's unambivalent love for the Australian bush and its people enable him to see the spirit of the past settlers, whether free or convict, as a positive presence in today's vernacular republic. Murray shares with his predecessors of topographical poetry the use of "time projections to demonstrate the historical necessity of his moral vision".<sup>34</sup> Familiar topographical subjects such as journeys and rivers bear resemblances only in name in Murray's poetry, for more than any other Australian poet he transforms poetic traditions to reflect the "subsoil of our common life". Unlike those English

34. J. Wilson Foster, "A Redefinition of Topographical Poetry", 399. *JEGP*, 69, 394-406.

poets who instance history to demonstrate the continuing and constant land use and its connection with morality, Murray in "The Transposition of Claremont" shows that our preoccupation with our immediate past, while recalled with detailed accuracy is often spatially dislocated, "My generations memories are intricately transposed". He also realises that knowledge and conviction about our bush heritage cannot be categorised:

What was town, what was country stayed elusive  
as we saw it always does, in the bush,  
what is waste, what is space, what is land.<sup>35</sup>

Although "Aspects of Language and War on the Gloucester Road"<sup>36</sup> with its discursiveness interfused with wit and humour, anecdote, reflection, local history, and personal comments, seems to have little association with topographical poetry, yet its firm base in the vernacular republic ensures that a single vision dominates. The rapid narrative shifts reflected in the verse structure and its visual presentation on the page, find a firm foundation in the dominating couplets and in the voice of the narrator, who sees the land and its shaping influence from his own personal experience:

Now the road enters the gesture of the hills  
  
where they express geologic weather  
and contend with landscapes in spills  
of triangular forest down fence lines  
and horse-and-scoop dams like filled mines.  
What else to say of peace? It is a presence  
with the feeling of home, and timeless in any sense.

Visual accuracy, scientific geological knowledge of the land and its impulses, and a analogy of peace, attest to Murray's unique technical ability. Without the intense feeling for the bush that permeates sight and sound, statements of peace that enter the text almost at right angles would falter; but there is no disjunction in the poet's mind between the bush and its people: they rhyme:

I travel a road cut through time  
by bare feet and boots without socks,  
by eight-year-old men droving cattle,  
by wheels parallel as printed rhyme  
over rhythms of hill shale and tussocks.

In the two river poems "Physiognomy on the Savage Manning River"<sup>37</sup> and "Hastings River Cruise",<sup>38</sup> Murray imaginatively enters our collective past to see the present. In the "Physiognomy of the Savage Manning River" the past reveals practi-

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35. *Dog Fox Field*, 2.

36. *Daylight Moon*, 82.

37. *Daylight Moon*, 9.

38. *Dog Fox Field*, 51.

cality, "We do what's to be done / and some things because we can", and it gives presence to the driving vision of the outcast, "The black dog will have his day yet". In "Hastings River Cruise" the history of convicts working the "oyster shells in shark tides" intersects with the present, "No one's walked in Australia / since, for pride and sympathy". The poet's relationship with his country is heard in the last stanza where, through expert technical control, past and present reveal the changes in our society:

Returning downstream, over the Regatta Ground's liquid tiling,  
we passed through the place where, meeting his only sister  
in a new draft to the Port, the tugged escapee snatched the musket  
of a redcoat captor, aimed and shot her dead --  
and was saluted for it, as he strangled, by the Commandant.  
In sight of new motels, this opposite potential stayed defined  
and made the current town look remote, and precarious, and kind.

"Remote and precarious, and kind" contrast sharply with the moral energy of the past, and remind us that our potential lies not only in history but also remains clearly defined in our images of ourselves. The rhyme "defined-kind", the only end rhyme in the stanza, makes its social point with quiet irony.

Murray's technical virtuosity, ruthless integrity in finding forms that reflect the uniqueness of the Australian experience, his felicity with language and his eclectic interest are all driven by his personal experience and discovery of what "forefather Hesiod", and contemplatives of all generations have always known: silence of the bush elicits contemplation of nature's harmony, and search for meaning follows. Murray's deep personal experience, though informing all his pastorals, finds that heightened revelation that we associate with grace or illumination, in "Noonday Axeman"<sup>39</sup> and "The Returnees".<sup>40</sup> Bush silence and its effects on settlers and the contemplative poet are explored in "Noonday Axeman". That other legend of the Australian bush, the psychological destructiveness of its silence, the force that drove settlers to "drink and black rage and wordlessness", while acknowledged by Murray, is used to stress the bush's physical and metaphysical power. For Murray the problem of alienation lies with the settlers:

Axe-fall, echo and silence. It will be centuries  
before many men are truly at home in this country,  
and yet, there have always been some, in each generation,  
there have always been some who could live in the presence of silence.

The poem effectively juxtaposes past and present and its mimetic sound of "axe-fall, echo and silence" makes a profoundly moving statement on the silence of the Australian bush; also the presence of the axeman as narrator-poet, with a knowledge of past and present and sympathy and understanding for those who have failed and succeeded to live with silence, convince us that his stance is the correct one.

Written in 1975 and published in *Ethnic Radio* in 1977 "The Returnees" shows

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39. *The Ilex Tree*, 31.

40. *Ethnic Radio*, 10.



developments in Murray's style and his deepening understanding of peace with nature and with companionship, or what the ancient writers would have called *hasychia*. It's interesting to see in the early drafts of this poem the manner in which Murray chiselled his ideas until the essence of the experience emerged.<sup>41</sup> In *Persistence in Folly* Murray tells us that in "The Returnees" he wanted to capture the "human experience on this continent, the ground of perception and influence from which Aboriginal and white reaction to the country necessarily spring".<sup>42</sup> But what Murray leaves out in this passage is the intense nature of the metaphysical experience which he presents with wit and artistry that at one and the same time grounds the incidents in our humanity and extends them to the transcendental. Metaphysical wit and the secularisation of the Virgin's litany show Murray's ability in expressing the emotion of revelation in the language of our humanity:

or an angel leaning down to one  
queuing on the Day, to ask

What was the best throw that you did?

that note, raised to the pitch of tears:  
tower of joking, star of skill,  
gate of sardonyx and worn gold.

The traditions of love and hate for the bush that Murray identifies in "Noonday Axeman" have made the Australian pastoral tradition complex. The absence of early pastoral singers, distinctively Australian, has also meant that poets writing pastoral in the twentieth century have infrequently been acknowledged for the sophisticated artistry with which they celebrated harmony between man and nature. This strange literary past will probably affect the manner in which Australians read Murray. There will be no doubt that they will read him: immense poetic talent cannot be ignored; but the ideals he celebrates could be neutralised by ignoring that "subsoil of our common life" that gives the poems their life. Perhaps others with a more vital pastoral tradition, such as the Americans, will appreciate more readily the way in which Murray's genius has found a distinctively Australian voice for humankind's lasting Boeotian preoccupations and qualities.

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41. *Papers*, 1965-1988. NLA MS 5332 National Library of Australia, Box 3.

42. *Persistence in Folly*, 21.

## The 1960's : A Celebration

It was absolutely lovely in the sixties  
Creating crusades  
Painting placards  
Booing,  
Cheering,  
Clamouring,  
Knotting policemen's horses' tails  
Plotting in parkas  
Biting, jostling, punching,  
Spruiking and parading for Peace.

And when you lounged around in fugs  
Extremely late at night  
Nobody ever came up to you  
And said,  
"Excuse me, but do you realise  
That you are forcing me  
To be a passive smoker  
And that I intend to sue?"

We were comrades then  
And we put up with a lot  
For the sake of the plot.  
You didn't mind Freddy getting beery  
Or Fran fucking your friend by mistake  
Or Joe jamming his fingers where they oughtn't be;  
You just broke a finger and forgave.

And if you had a bit of luck along the way  
Sure, that was OK.  
The scope of possible conquest  
Had increased one hundred per cent;  
You could go for a lady  
As well as for a gent.  
Oh, Jack! Oh, Maria!  
Oh, Willie and Jane!  
Come Again!

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## ALEC CHOATE

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### **Black Swans Mating**

Side by side, and one after the other,  
the two necks arch forward and dip,  
the bodies plunging, tails in the air.  
The preamble is urgent,  
but with other black swans and lesser birds  
heedlessly cruising the water's glass  
or wading the reed-sighing shallows,  
their broad lake home is as calm as ever.

The necks cross, entwined,  
slip apart and again entwine,  
and in a flourish of ripples and wings  
bird balances on near submerged bird,  
the beak of the uppermost  
a flame viced on a black rod  
itself flame-barbed in the water.

The two birds part and rise,  
their necks stemmed upright,  
beaks sheened in cries.

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# IAN TEMPLEMAN

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## Snapshot

Postcards, maps, snapshots pasted haphazardly  
in the scrapbook trace the brief shared years;  
falling days when the sky responded awkwardly  
to our passion for flight, when childhood fears

muffled laughter or love was given other names.  
The photographs trace the incomplete moment,  
a happiness is misplaced between exposed frames,  
lost is the off camera dance, intimate, vibrant.

Within three summers we built an intricate  
honeycomb of images to house the heart's language,  
indexed landmarks, heathland and dry thicket  
of this border country where we are held hostage.

In transit we await visas, document yesterday,  
listen to frontier gossip, traveller's hearsay.

## Dreame, The Impossible Dreame

A few years ago, I taught a boy in year 11 called Tab Touch, a popular, studious Cambodian refugee. He was in my English class, and making a go of it. My friend, who was a business education teacher, saw his name on the class list for his typing class, and thought the timetablers were having a joke at his expense.

They weren't. Tab Touch was his real name: the only kid in Australia whose legal names were also a typing instruction.

This was in the school where 22 of the 120 year 11s were Vietnamese kids called Nguyen. Seven of these Nguyens had given names beginning with H, and two of these were Hai Nguyen. One Hai Nguyen was male and one was female.

This wasn't a problem: we all did our roll books and our mark books with an alphabetical list of boys followed by an alphabetical list of girls. The class lists which came from the timetablers used the same conventions, and these had served us well for many years. When the first Eastern Europeans had arrived you knew that Algis was a boy because his name was in the boys' list and you knew that Danuta was a girl.

In fact, we were coping well with social change until the unisex rollbook took over and parents started to be inventive when they named their offspring. It was just one more thing to complicate the teacher's day. I actually feel sorry for these kids and I sometimes don't recognize their gender from their names. I hope they do.

Take those poor kids named after places. Denver is usually a boy, Chelsea a girl. Brittany is a girl, and so are her misspelt near-twins Brittony and Britony. But what about Hampton, the oddly-named Bexley and the curious Chertsey. Are they boys or girls? What about Aden (would you call a child Kuwait or Oman)? Girls are appearing in classes called Jamaica, India, and Persia.

There are suburbs where the weather and natural phenomena seem to guide the new parent: children called Cloud are beginning to be seen, there is a Cirrus (is this an illiteracy for Cyrus, poor child?), and there are variants on Raine, Rayn, Rayne and Reyne. Skye is now common enough, but I feel most for the unfortunate Amber Skye, who seems to have been named for a weather forecast.

The variant spellings are a worry to an English and History teacher like myself: a waif in Queensland called Jersynter; girls called Jayde are quite thick on the ground now, replacing Jade (earlier generations had their Beryl and Pearl). My nomination for the national champions are the parents who invented Liouxeese (remember the Sioux Indians?).

And then there are the androgynous. Is Dylan a boy or a girl? What about Kelly? When you see that Corcoran Russell is enrolled for next year, what do you expect? Or Courtney?

I've been proving to myself over several years that I've got too old for teaching, and I knew it for sure when I met Dreame.

I suppose it was pretty obvious that no one would call a boy Dreame, and it wasn't Dreame herself that finally got to me, but Dreame's pet.

When I saw that white rat, I screamed and screamed and screamed, and I never returned to the classroom again.

The girl's name was Dreame - her given name, not her surname, which changed from time to time as her mother found herself a new partner - that's what they call them now, partners - or as the girl moved back with her father or, as happened finally, the mother changed professions and became a witch.

Yes, a witch. Better than her old trade, don't you think? It was Mr Vogelsang the deputy who told me she had been a prostitute. He didn't tell me how he knew, but perhaps that is just one of the perks of doing primary school liaison - you get to hear the hot goss before anyone else, and get to choose your time to let it slip when staff-room conversation flags.

Haxa was the first name she was called in the school - Dreame Haxa. It's actually Häxa, with the funny little umlaut over the second letter, but none of the typists in the school - none of the teachers in the school either - had time to be bothered by little idiosyncrasies like the accents on Swedish names. We were too busy spending our time on the E.O. committee, the finance committee, the curriculum committee, or hiding from the principal.

Hackser, is how we pronounced it. Häxa is what it really was, Swedish for witch, the latest, I suppose, in Dreame's mother's lifelong switcheroo with names. If she was Swedish - which she wasn't - my principal is sane and I'm ready for another twenty-five years of teaching.

I know that Dreame's old lady was actually Lebanese, two generations back, because we were all required to stop teaching one morning for the ethnic census, and when we came in for lunch we swapped stories about the allsorts we had found in our home groups.

We had a family of Peruvian-Yugoslav hybrids. There were three in the school, and

until the ethnic census nobody even knew about them or had prepared any programs to help them retain their cultural identity. The principal said this was tragic for these poor children.

I'm a fairly happy teacher - or I used to be, though things had been getting to me for the last few years - but I was surviving all right until Dreame's white rat arrived at school.

Dreame was a big girl. I mean, in the right places. An astonishingly capacious bosom for a girl in year 9. She had a good brain, and worked quite well if her girl-friends were absent, as they often were. But when Lewcey and Halloran were at school, Dreame spent her history lessons talking to them and distracting others.

On the day I packed the job in, there was a lot of giggling in the classroom, every time I turned to write some notes on the board or add a name to the map of Africa (we were doing explorers, a subject I have always found fascinating). I tried turning around unexpectedly, in the middle of writing up Cape of Good Hope, and Dreame made a hurried movement - a kind of prod at her bosom - and then I noticed that it was moving. Not romantic heaving or anything like that, but a kind of unilateral animal squirming under and around her left breast.

I called her to the front of the class, and there was a hush such as I hadn't heard since about 1975. I challenged Dreame to show me what was causing all the fuss, and she put on a friendly, casual smile, and reached inside her school jumper and pulled out a rat. A pet white rat, held in her cupped hands, which she then extended to me. She asked me if I would like to pat Jules. I wondered briefly if Jules was a boy or a girl.

Then I screamed, and what happened next has been reconstructed for me by my colleagues.

When I backed into the corner by the gas heater, and continued to scream, the two students near the door, Hilary and Hillary, a boy and a girl, ran to the office. Mr Vogelsang was at the local primary school, delivering enrolment forms, and so Mary Brunsgard, the receptionist, sent for the year 9 co-ordinator.

That was Mr Hickel, who had a leading part in the school musical "Man of La Mancha", which was opening that night in the school hall. He was trying out his costume, and giving his classes a buzz by wearing it to lessons.

That's how it was that I was rescued, still screaming, by Sancho Panza in pantaloons, embroidered jacket, a cape and a string wig. He took me to the staffroom and gave me a cup of coffee while I calmed down.

The principal called Dreame's witch-mother, and he and I interviewed her about what Dreame had done. Ms Häxa was friendly and charming and very firm, and by the time the interview was over the principal had agreed with her as follows:

- The teenage years are years of finding one's identity.
- Rats are not illegal and the school's time would be better spent on eliminating unnecessary packaging in the canteen.
- There is nothing in the printed school rules or in the Education Department regulations to prevent a student from bringing a rat to school. Ms Häxa had come with copies of both those documents.
- It was culturally insensitive of me to apply my middle-aged and middle-class values to the lives and behaviour of Ms Häxa and Dreame.

I have used dot points because that is how the principal would have the record of the meeting typed up, and it's one part of the new management style I've got used to. In fact, I almost like dot points.

There may have been other agreements reached in the remainder of the interview, but I began screaming again, and Sancho Panza, who had been hovering near the principal's office in case he was summonsed to agree with Ms Häxa, bounced in, in his pantaloons and cape, and rescued me.

That was the last day I worked. I was invited back a few weeks later for a morning tea to mark my retirement, and the staff were very understanding. The school had already changed a little. Ms Häxa had joined the Learning Assistance Program, as had a couple of her former "girls", and the principal had formed a small committee of parents to advise on alternative reading materials for English. Ms Häxa was the convenor.

I miss my former colleagues, but not the job. One or two of them who live close to me call in from time to time. I particularly enjoy the visits of Alec Klemmn, the technical studies teacher, who shows me the programs he is designing for culturally inclusive activities in woodwork to help our - their - Peruvian-Yugoslav family. It's a pity that the eldest of the family, who will be in Matriculation and is expected to get five A's, won't be doing any of this work Alec has prepared.



## Going Back

The fan stirred thickly the hot air above their heads. The blinds were closed against the heavy blue heat but shafts of light broke through the slats, filled with dancing dust motes stirred by the fan.

The heat was a palpable presence, a thing that grasped your chest and squeezed the breath out in tight-mouthed exaltations.

"Too hot for love", he grinned at her. "Good title for a song. I wonder if people die from making love in this heat."

"I'm sure they do. I could expire just from talking about it", she replied.

Small droplets of sweat stood like a diamond necklace at her throat. He licked the salty drops away.

"Dante's Inferno in outback Australia! Heat & dust! I love it!", he rolled onto his back, stretching his arms above his head, embracing the red desert that lay in wait beyond the blinds.

"The thing is to go with it, accept the heat, revel in it, soak in that sun's energy!", he was laughing now, and so was she.

"Oh, please, you sound like some New-Ager!"

"I'll show you how, take you to the edge of the rim of the world, we'll go down with the sun!", he was being melodramatic now, looking over her and moving down on her body.

The weight of his body on hers *was* the weight of the heat, its presence made tangible. It was two suns clashing, heat and sparks, the sweat a conduit of the electricity between them. She could feel her body shedding its lethargy like a snake

shedding its skin, and a new energy come pulsing through her blood. She could even hear her blood pulse, above the fan's whirr.

He was moving with her, they were both grinning widely as they slipped and slid and found their rhythm. His enthusiasm was contagious as they beat back the heat with their own hot bodies, and finally collapsed on the bed, dizzy and breathless.

"Through to the other side! We have survived!". he panted.

"Conquered, conquistador!", she laughed.

They lay then in silence, their breathing in counterpoint to the slow click and whirr of the fan and the croak of the black crows outside.

It was getting dark when they both woke, at the same time, to stare heat-befuddled at the stranger in the bed. Not strangers really, they'd known each other a year, just strange to swim up through the haze to recall the pleasures of a few hours ago. To leave sensuous dreams behind and stagger to the cold shower, dodging the frogs on the floor and waking up to reality.

They sat under lamplight and ate while a rising wind rustled the dry brown grass and blew crackly leaves across the floor to their feet. A smell of burning bushland came from the North.

"Hope that's not a bad fire", she said.

"We would have heard on the radio, or someone from town would have called us, if it was", he replied.

"We were oblivious, remember?", she grinned. "Anyway", she continued, "I don't think 'the town' would wish to acknowledge that they'll find you here with me. You're not supposed to be here ... I shouldn't be ... I don't know what to do anymore", she finished lamely.

"I wonder what annoys them most", he mused, "that I'm black or that I'm your student? Bad enough that teachers seduce their students, let alone their brilliant, *black* students."

"Don't joke" she said sharply. "This town is so narrow they couldn't visualise anything so straightforward as two people simply liking each other. Sometimes I feel like we're in the bloody Deep South. I didn't want to drag you into this, but I won't apologise for it, to you or them."

"They don't know, and if they did, what can they do to us? I'm 18", but even the way he said it sounded like a ten year old proudly proclaiming his age.

"A lot", she said grimly. "They can transfer me to some even more godforsaken hole and expel you so you don't get to University."

"Oh, I'll get there" he said with the self-confidence of youth. "Don't worry. We're survivors. I've got to go home now".

She flinched at the unintended brutality of his words. Home, to that hated white foster family. Hated by her, not him. For him, they had been family for eighteen years, and he so enmeshed he didn't even know the ties that bind would one day strangle him, she thought.

She fell into a troubled sleep that night, under the slowly-turning fan.

They led such separated lives at school, the strength of their charade surprised both. No-one would know they spent stolen days together in her bedroom. People may have gossiped that his visits to her home were more than just the teacher helping the new boy from the big city with his studies. But that's what it was at first.

She was attracted to this learned boy who moved with his family from the city to this outback town. He had a quiet confidence that was nearly shattered by the jibes of the other Aboriginals who couldn't tolerate this "whitey", and by the white students who pointedly ignored anyone new. But he held on, some determination to succeed coming not from his foster family, but from some deep seed of survival.

Yet he would never talk about his Aboriginal origins. Never. He only once said, "It hurt too much to know". It was as though the strengths he had in other areas became a strength of denial, a deliberately drawn blind over one area of his life.

She had been involved with the Aboriginal families in the town for ten years. Originally arriving as a teacher of anthropology she was both fascinated by her studies of intricate family patterns, finding lost children, seeing families brought together again, and yet repelled by the policies and practices that had brought those separations about. She handed her research over to the Aboriginal people, and went back to teaching in the High School, history and language.

She still had files on the families at school, she even had one on him. When she told him, he became agitated.

"What did you tell me that for? I don't want to know. I told you I don't, can't, yet!" He was angry, pacing the floor, vulnerable and exposed.

"I'm sorry", she pleaded. "Forget it, I won't mention it."

"Too late now, you just stirred it all up. You think information is power, and you whites always have the power, you have the information. You have it on us!"

He rarely aligned himself with the Aboriginals, mixing with both black and

white with equal aloofness, but she knew something would crack, some time.

It came when he broke into the High School. While the others stole money and clothes, he stole one thing - his file. She knew even before the knowledge reached the staffroom next day, for he came to her that night, at midnight, clutching the file.

"You knew. You knew where I came from. Not the city, I knew that, and not here, I guessed, or the blacks would have claimed me by now. Now I know, and I didn't want to know! How can I go back, there, North? How can they be my people? They are, but how can I fit in? Why should I go back? It's too hard!", and he was crying, crying in her arms.

He came to her every night that week, angry, confused, blaming her, then wanting her. She felt buffeted by his turmoil and took the blows, knowing that she was partly to blame and knowing that if it hadn't been her, it would have been someone else, somewhere, sometime, who gave him the key to Pandora's Box.

He hung on until the end of the year and passed his exams. Then he ran away the next day. She heard he hitched a ride north with a truck. The foster family, shocked and finally believing the gossip of the town, rounded on her with a fury that would not be deflected. They stormed the Headmaster's office, demanding, and getting, his agreement to sack her. The gossips smirked in righteous vindication as she packed up the car and drove from the town.

She sat at the crossroads, the red, barren land stretching silently away from her, indifferent to the agony of her decision. She could have gone north to the settlement, but she knew she had to let him go. She turned the car south, to the city, to lose her own grief in the uncaring crowds.

Six months later she drove to the settlement. She knew some of the Aboriginal families there; she had their permission to come. But none knew of her relationship with him, unless he'd told them, and she had a feeling that he had not.

Driving in she was greeted by some of the people and spent the first hour seeing people she had known through the years from her studies of the other town and here. Walking under the hot sun, she saw him leaning lopsidedly against a gum.

He saw her in a flicker of recognition through drink-dulled eyes.

"Whaddya come here now for? Seen enough?". he slurred. "I'm here, I came, what more you want?"

His language was different, clipped by drink or the influence of different dialects around him. Or perhaps anger, shame, pride, distancing her.

"Fair enough", she thought. "I don't belong here. Why did I come? Stupid, stupid!"

"Just driving north", she said. "New job, I lost the old one, now I have to travel all around. I'm going now. Take care. Goodbye..."

Under his hostile eyes, she left, but later had to pull up at a roadside truck stop as the tears of anger and loss fell.

Two years later she did see him again, in the city. Crossing the street, she sensed the same profile, though somehow older and stronger, and his eyes were warm when he saw her.

They walked for miles on pristine beaches.

"Finding my family, my people, straight away, it was such a shock, y'know? Hard, you'll never know how hard, for us all. I hit the bottle, though I said I never would. It helped for a while, dulled the confusion. But I couldn't keep hurting them, her, my mother ...", he faltered, and tears stood in his brown eyes.

"Or me. So I'm through that, 'through to the other side'", he laughed. "Studying and going back there to work. I'm a survivor. And you?"

"I'm surviving too, I suppose". Suddenly she felt both glad and tired, tired beside his youth and strength. "It's great it worked out for you. Might see you round, hey? Goodbye, again."

They had walked back to the streets again. He disappeared into the aimless crowds. She turned and walked in the opposite direction.

## REVIEWS

*Four New Poets: John Bennett, Susan Hawthorne, Beate Josephi, Terry Whitebeach.* Ringwood: Penguin, 1983, 358pp. ISBN 0 14 058697 0. \$16.95.

In every way this elegantly produced, economically priced and constantly satisfying book is an admirable collection - or rather four collections - since each poet is allocated between 60 and 105 pages for forty or more poems. Four radically different voices for the price of one. The winners in this arrangement are readers and Penguin Books.

John Bennett's *A Measure of Place* begins the volume. It's the longest and most complex of the collections and shows him to be an original and masterful presence. Often exploring interstitial tensions between surfaces, impressions, textualities, Bennett's work seems not so much to reveal, celebrate, describe or confess as to play with or problematise, delighting in incompleteness and imperfection. His 'Blackwattle Bay' sequence for example, which won the 1989 Mattara Poetry Prize, plays cannily with mathematical concepts in its 13 thirteen-line 'Fibonacci Sonnets', where

Absorbed into the eye, everything  
becomes an element, assuming equivalence  
as in a landscape photograph. Everything  
in the picture demands attention.  
The frame clings to thirteen lines.

The poem's "eye" takes in billboards, traffic, Centrepont, philosophy, cultural history (Galileo, Thoreau, Huizinga), creating connections as it goes ("An eye's mayhem, the organ of desire... / ...without understanding") and challenging the relation between perception and expression:

The atoms imagined in the furniture fill out our  
molten flesh, sensate of interstellar distances  
between each word.

Invoking JMW Turner's sense of perspective ("a mark would read perfectly as a cow") and

Gadamer's notion that "Art ... derives from play", Bennett's sequence is a manifesto on the delightful incompleteness (the sequence is framed by dots of omission...) of accretion, attempting to articulate the sense of place that is Blackwattle Bay.

And so with the many places measured by these very fine poems - from Leura and Kangaroo Valley in NSW to Alabama, China, Japan, Europe (Dresden, Treblinka and villages in England) - Bennett explores images of various pasts and landscapes in which the personal and the public intersect:

History...is continuously breaking off  
from the present, a tense process  
of working histories.  
A life, I suspect, feels both past and present  
through the present but then will ask,  
But what endures in this country?  
(Saltford)

In 'Crossing the River, Loyand', there is an uneasy linkage between perfection and mutilation, idealised past and commercial present, tourism and pilgrimage ("The Cave of a Thousand Buddhas/is defaced a thousand times/the walls are beaded with small stone carcasses/burdened by silence"). Buying "a mung bean iceblock" is contextualised by the "hegemony/of the English language". Like Po Chu Yi, who "disliked poetry that was only 'sporting with winds and moons and toying with flowers and grass'; he wrote to be understood by ordinary people", Bennett's writing is continually and variously engaging, combining both Arcadian and Boetian sensibilities.

Susan Hawthorn's *The Language in my Tongue* uses the experiences of epilepsy and the function of the tongue in framing/forming language to explore the relationship between self and the world (and between word and flesh). There is an energised excitement and fearfulness in the way (looking back to Cixous and Irigaray for example) Hawthorne inscribes the body into the poetry - self is the site if not the source of meaning - and that's ambiguous, powerful:

The tongue bleeds  
the tongue  
swells into bulkiness.

It swells and spreads  
into all cavities  
of my mouth.

It does not feel like my tongue.

It is there  
hugely  
but it is as though it is not  
a part of me.  
(‘Tongue’)

Epilepsy is a mysterious visitation which  
takes the poet, like Euridyce to another world,  
from which she escapes with strange bruises,  
blood on the tongue:

See the marks, the ridges -  
Your teeth's tracks running  
Evenly along one edge -  
(‘Enigma’)

The gods have me again -  
they lift me high and  
hurl me into the chasm  
(‘Underworld’)

Repetition, jagged lines, curt, intense utterances all seem to dramatise the experiences. ‘In the Bath’ explores the fit as both illumination and potential extinction, invoking a whole tradition of “death/by drowning” literature. These are vivid and emotionally confronting poems, expressing both the violence and the subtlety of a “grand mal” as an inspiration encounter with death and self, and articulating metaphors for the process of writing.

My tongue has been hacked at  
with a blunt axe

Teeth tear this succulent,  
tender shaper of words  
(‘Teeth’)

As well as providing brief, intense peaks, showing poet as victim, as mutant, Hawthorne's verse forms and structures are the most varied and inventive in *Four New Poets*, revealing flamboyance and virtuosity.

Beate Josephi's *Pilgrim Routes* travels, as she has, between Germany and Australia, appraising coolly, poised between two cultures:

A second language  
is like a room of one's own  
to retire to at night when the letters  
and phone calls have been answered  
the demands for attention cease.  
(‘In praise of a Second Language’)

The eleven poems in the ‘Germany 1989’ sequence throw up a series of illuminating vignettes, linking personal impressions of domestic travel to historical contexts:

Don't touch, she whispered again  
as the child's hand hovered

longingly over the rich red cord  
separating them from ducal splendour.  
(‘Schwerin Castle’)

As the title sequence suggests, the poet is a kind of ‘pilgrim’, seeking enlightenment: ‘Damascus, I thought when I looked at Adelaide’ (‘Homeland 3’) but not often finding it. Searching through ‘The World as a Museum’ and books by ‘Lorca, Cavafy, / Goyen, Hikmet, Mistral’, Josephi sees her poetic self like a contemporary Red Riding Hood ‘twirled between /the wolves, unconcerned by their howling’. Our ‘heroine’ comes in the end to ‘a small room and a song/ playing like a dead bird's wing in the wind’.

Josephi's poems have a lightness which at times seems romantic, autobiographical so that one is left feeling the poet is more of a tourist than an explorer. While she distances her self from the self-conscious posturing of some writers' statements about themselves and their work in ‘Interviews with Poets’, ‘Book Reviewing’ is epitomised in its last-line question, ‘Shall I tear a gossamer so carefully spun?’ Somehow, this notion of the process seems a touch too fanciful.

One of the finest poems in her collection is ‘My Heraldic Animal Speaks’ - a meditation on the resonance of a name and its incantatory inscriptions for the self:

Yes, I am praiseworthy. Why else would  
my inscription, beautifully crafted,  
begin with the words, blessed are those  
who relieve misery & do not inflict pain.  
Idly they shall continue...

European traditions and evocations of pasts  
and places are here grafted neatly onto an  
Australian awareness of permeable presents.

Terry Whitebeach's poems, *Bird Dreams*,  
struck me with considerable force. They are  
raw, immediate, funny, noisy - at times  
speaking from a direct domestic experience  
which is chaotic and fragmented and at others  
invoking an almost mythological desire for  
flight and escape which is imagined as impos-  
sibly idealised. Most of the poems have a  
strong speaking voice and offer themselves as  
'Conversations' with friends and family, as in  
the opening 'Ex husband':

My father loved him. He was the son Dad  
wanted  
after six daughters. And he's worth ten  
of those university bastards put together  
Dad said, referring to his other sons-in-law.

or the later 'Beck':

She won't grow properly the doctor told me  
but if she makes it to 4 1/2 feet at least  
she won't be classified a dwarf.  
When she was 5 feet 1 she told him  
I'm 3 centimetres taller than Mum's friend Lyn  
and she's 37 and an adult.  
So eat shit.

The other dimension in Whitebeach's poetry  
is a yearning for other modes of being, as in  
the 'Bird Dream' poem which takes its cue  
from an Inuit engraving. It's failure is  
expressed in 'Bird Dream - Broken':

Then quietly,  
as quietly as love enters  
and then leaves  
when trust has gone  
it folds  
its wings and moves  
out of the picture  
leaving the frame empty.

This disillusion is prefigured in the earlier  
'Poet' in which the poet's search for an inspira-  
tional encounter with a wise woman mentor is  
continually interrupted by pressing demands  
from the children ("Will you write me a note  
for school? ... Sign this ... I need another  
note...").

While Terry Whitebeach may not achieve  
a mystical fulfilment, her poetry commands  
attention by its powerful and vivid use of  
language, voicing the concerns of contempo-  
rary urban experience. What her poetry  
shows is that the metaphysical is very much  
part of the mundane, that the vernacular is  
poetic, that " ... we all make the journey/ to the  
centre of the labyrinth/ to find our own  
name." ('Shaman')

**David Gilbey**

**Robert Drewe (ed), *The Picador Book of the  
Beach*. Sydney, Pan Macmillan, Australia.  
ISBN 0 330 27417 1**

We all know about the problems with anthol-  
ogies; what they leave out or put in, the  
anthologist's taste or lack of taste, the format,  
the introduction's intrusiveness or blandness  
and so on and so forth. Yet here is an  
anthology on the way to being a best-seller, or  
perhaps already there.

This is well-deserved. It is a collection of  
very good stories, of people writing not with  
an eye to the latest trend, the market or the  
critics but for the best of reasons, to write the  
story they want to have to write, exploring  
their material, and inquiring into it, playing  
with it, shaping it and making it move to its  
own rhythms so that finally the story is  
completely itself. There's variety here, then.  
Some stories are witty, playful or flamboyant,  
like a Fellini film - Calvino's "Big Fish, Little  
Fish", for example, or Michele Tournier's "The  
Midnight Love Feast". Others, especially  
those written by Australians Helen Garner,



Frank Moorhouse and Robert Drewe himself explore human relationships coolly and with the kind of economy which makes the humdrum memorable, often memorably dangerous also. Some stories have parabolic overtones making you see what you have never seen before and others explore some of the stranger places of contemporary history recording what's there before you.

An ideal collection, then, for lying on the beach. Pleasure isn't very fashionable these days in critical circles, apart, of course, from Barthes. Yet this is what this book is all about and what Drewe's introduction insists on.

In most books the introduction is seen as an optional extra. But anthologies need one. As Wittgenstein insisted, frames are important: they condition our ways of seeing and what we see. So what do we see here through the frame made for us?

First of all, despite the international round up of writers, we see from within Robert Drewe's "hydrogenous psyche", from within his Australia which is located on the beach. From there we conduct an argument with the legend of the "sunburnt country".

The mythical qualities of its ocean shore have, until recently, been neglected in Australian literature. The sensual intelligence tended to be distrusted or denied, viewed as mere hedonism or pantheism. Literature academics, though they rarely ventured there, favoured the dry, asexual, pragmatic myth of the bush and inland desert.

Academia tends to be suspicious of pleasure. So the beach is generally off bounds, even faintly improper - only a few anthropologists and historians like Greg Denning are allowed there. Our heroes are supposed to be tight-lipped, dry-eyed and stoic, usually male - dressed in boots and leggings enduring the heat and dust of the outback or charging up the cliffs of Anzac Cove or tailing along the Kokoden Trail. The stories assembled here, however, are about our secret life. The beach, Drewe argues, is

not only a regular summer pleasure and calm, but an *idée fixe* which fulfils an almost ceremonial need at each critical physical and emotional stage: as lovers, as honeymooners. As parents, and after travelling north to the particular piece of coastline befitting their class and superannuation (and offering the most lenient death duties), the elderly retired.

Christina Stead realised this in the thirties, of course, especially in *Seven Poor Men Of Sydney* where she characterised us as "sea people". So, too, have poets like Kenneth Slessor, John Bligh and Robert Adamson and novelists like Beverley Farmer and Marion Campbell - according to Irrigary, in fact, water is the female element, next to air.

But Drewe also points to the other strain, "the wistful seaward gaze from the beach and clifftop" which he sees as a "particularly Australian habit" - is the male gazing backwards to the waters of the womb? Whether this is peculiarly Australian however, is another matter - several American stories here deal with this kind of wistfulness, John Cleever's especially. Nor is it, I think, only a matter of hedonistic longing, as Drewe implies. It also has to do with loneliness and with a sense of being stranded somewhere in between where one used to be and where we want to go, the sense Helen Garner explores in her story, "Postcards from Surfers", for example crystallised in the image of the town - or, better, the phenomenon of Surfer's Paradise:

Miles ahead of us, blurred in the milky air, I see a dream city: its cream, its silver its turquoise towers thrust in a cluster from a distant spit.

It is a dream city, moreover, which is both strangely placeless and faintly dangerous, even perhaps doomed, and there may be echoes here of that earlier attempt, 'William Lane's "New Australia" in Paraguay: "'Where's Rio from here?' 'Look at the clouds', I say. 'You'd think there was another city out there, wouldn't you, burning'."

We are in a place here, as Garner puts it, where "everything is spoken, nothing said", where love fails and people live physically close but apart and alone spiritually, on the edge of themselves as of the continent. Personally I would not contrast this with the myth of the bush but see it as its extension, the disappointment of the quest for some "Great Good Place..". Again, however, this disappointment is hardly unique to Australia. It is, I suspect, the mood of post modernism generally, the mode of many of these stories, though in post-modernism it is a mood in which melancholy is disguised by irony and the style which conceals the anxiety - or is it a strange melancholy pleasure? that there is no final form, no grand narrative, no Great Good Place. So Drewe's remark that "many, if not most, Australians have their first sexual experience on the coast" is significant - not only a kind of necessary swerve from the myth of the harsh interior, but also perhaps an attempt to repress the anxiety.

Despite the international range of the stories the introduction gives *The Book of The Beach* an Australian flavour. This is not likely to damage its popularity elsewhere however - as Diane Johnson's story "Great Barrier Reef" about the difference between Americans and Australians, suggests. Its sophisticated American protagonist reflects, "Americans were tired and bored, while for Australians, stuck off at the edge of the world, all was new, and they had the energy and spirit to go off looking for abstractions like beauty and comets" and also perhaps, myths of Australia. In this story the gaze is reversed, Australia and Australians are seen from the outside as a group of 'senior citizens' on board a rickety and rather smelly ship sailing out to the Great Barrier Reef are transformed into adventurers, just as the Reef itself is made to reveal an astonishing abundance.

Looking down, I could see that it was entirely alive, made of eyeless formations of cabbagey creatures sucking and opening and closing, yearning towards tiny ponds

of water lying on the pitted surface, pink, green, gray viscous, silent.

Tourism also has not had a good press. But this anthology is tourism at its best, travelling for enjoyment and learning at the same time, introducing us to writers from U.S.A., Britain, Italy, France, South America and South Africa as well as Australia, writers whom the introduction sets in the company of "hydrogenous" writers of the past, Shelley, Byron, Whitman, Rupert Brooke, Scott Fitzgerald and, more surprisingly, Flaubert, Valéry, Carson McCullers and Tennessee Williams. Nor does the pleasure these confluences give exclude what Drewe calls "deep down things", a sense of the destructive power of the sea, for example, and of human craziness and defiance set against it. Rick Bass' "Redfish", for example, turns on the image of two men, half-drunk, surf fishing at night from an old sofa washed up by the wild seas. Similarly, the focus of Nadine Gordimer's story about an Indian fisherman is the magnificent image of fish he catches and cannot live up to:

Water cleaned it like a cloth wiping a film from a diamond; out shone the magnificent fish, stiff and handsome in its mail of scales glittering a thousand opals of colour, set with two brilliant deep eyes all hard clear beauty and not marred by the capability of expression which might have made a reproach of the creature's death; a king from another world, big enough to shoulder a man out of the way, dead, captured, astonishing.

Water, Yeats says, is "generated soul", and images like this glitter deep down within us. As the introduction also notes, "fish are rather special things, being themselves symbolic of the world of symbols, of spirituality, in contrast with the materialistic, earthbound approach to life. "Spirituality" may not be to everyone's taste. But there is something for all tastes here. Even those who dislike the beach will probably find enough here of its grit, sunburn, compulsory jollity and occasional

danger to please their displeasures.

One of the beauties of the short story is its beauty and concentrated power. If you are so inclined you can read these stories between swims or between dozing in the sun - they are so good they will keep you awake. When summer is over they will still keep you there imaginatively. The beach will never be the same again, nor perhaps will the Australian legend.

**Veronica Brady**

**Joan London, *Letter to Constantine*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, pp. \$14.95 142 pages.**

The best comes last in Joan London's new collection of stories, *Letters to Constantine*. The final story, 'Maisie Goes to India' is superbly written. In the seven years since publishing *Sister Ships* London has lost none of her art:

Fremantle Harbour. A ship is leaving...  
The ship sounds its horn again. It is like a voice, an animal voice, from the deep mists around coastlines, warning of perils ahead. It makes you nostalgic for journeys, journeys you've never made. Departures and arrivals you've been told about, all your life, until you've made them your own (p.122).

'Maisie Goes to India' is dedicated to London's parents. It's a journey her mother took in the early 1930s to visit a friend on an Indian tea plantation. The outcome of the story is clearly implied, brief conversations held decades later are woven into the text. Yet the return to a more humdrum life is not at the heart of the tale. Dreams are, and how they can, at closer inspection, end up so far from the ideal - and still retain their lure.

Indian colonial life could have been paradise. Waltzing out on to the verandah, "The tempo followed them, restoring order, a ris-

ing note of triumph across the moonlit compound, the fire-lit plains, the secret jungles, the winding river, the dark Mughal hills," (134)

London's words sway across foreign landscapes, catch their iridescence, their unfamiliarity, their rhythm and then leave the reader with perfectly recognisable sounds. The conversations in the colony between English plantation owner, English padre, Maisie and other guests are caught with unnerving precision. A few sentences with just the right inflection peel the colonial situation to the core. Paradise is fraught.

In recapturing Maisie's time in India, John London tries to unravel another secret - the mystery surrounding Maisie's mother. Maisie's mother died when she was young. There are no diaries, no photos and few recollections. Maisie both questions and is questioned in short, telling exchanges. The intersecting of narrative lines is done skilfully. Clear answers cannot be found.

Maisie does not mind. She has created her own life, just as she lets her daughter create the story of her journey to India. It's her daughter's now.

Some authors write from a tabula rasa, wholly inventing their fictional worlds. Others look out for the spaces left to them, the gaps in other stories into which they can insert their own. John London, as in 'Maisie Goes to India', is best served with the latter.

A number of her stories can become too rambling. 'The Woman Who Answered Only Yes Or No' is a case in point. Described in the frame narrative as 'a first interview' the story faithfully leaves in all the rough edges, traces the reluctance to move the speaker on to the next item. 'The Woman Who Answered Only Yes Or No' is mostly about filming Chekov's *The Seagull* at a remote holiday hotel. The parallels to Chekov's play are well built in, but the story seeks to make its point twice over, a woman dreaming of acting fame.

London seems to prefer an almost tidal flow of words which, in some cases works

beautifully but in others, as in 'The Angry Girl', lets the story drift out of shape. In this, *Letters to Constantine* is not as even as *Sister Ships*.

The title story, seen in the light of recent publications coming from former Communist European countries, which tell tales of equally bizarre if real psychological persecutions, seems too dreamy. The use-by date for Orwellian stories, however suggestive and gentle, has come and gone.

'Inlet' - occupying a defined space - is possibly closest to the text in *Sister Ships*, a summer holiday told by a twelve year old. The early pubescent world-view is caught with perfection, and again, as in many of the other stories, what could have been the punch-line, is mentioned more or less as an aside.

Whereas in *Sister Ships* London stuck to the female voice, mostly youngish, in *Letters to Constantine* London has clearly extended her range. She now offers protagonists of both sexes, all ages and living at other times.

'Second Stage' takes up where Russian painter Marc Chagall broke off his autobiography at the age of thirty-five (he was to live to ninety-eight). There must be a Chagall painting of a friend at that time, titled 'The Bridegroom'. Maybe it shows Helena, Edouard's future wife, maybe John London invented her to provide empathetic company for the impoverished Russian family in Paris. Neither future nor past intrude in the story, no words about fame and fortune lost or to be won one day. It is as much a portrait of Marc and Bella Chagall as of a few days of ordinary life in Paris, filling in the spaces left at the sides of Chagall's sketch.

In 'Angels' a late middle-aged academic is on study-leave in London with his wife and her friend. He is slowly recovering, or not, from a particularly violent flu. His senses are dimmed, his mind is not:

Maida was on the phone, talking to our daughters... I could picture Rachel or Jane, yawning by the phone, examining her feet,

wondering whether she should wash her hair. The truth was, no time was the right time to ring the girls. Our calls, like those of outgrown lovers, could only be a disappointment, our concern a bore.

In 'Angels' as in 'Maisie Goes to India' times interlink with east, and so do dialogue and observation. These stories move effortlessly and with an elegance rarely found in Australian writing. One can only wish that London's next book reaches us soon, much sooner than the seven years that went between first and second, and that it is a novel.

**Beate Josephi**

**Elizabeth Jolley, *The Georges' Wife*, Viking Penguin Books, 1993, \$29.95 hb.**

In this, Elizabeth Jolley's eleventh novel and the third of the trilogy that began with *My Father's Moon* and continued with *Cabin Fever*, even the title provokes a question. How can one be wife to 'the Georges'? And in the partial answer the novel contains, Vera Wright, central character of each of the novels and sole, meditative voice of this third, is 'wife' to both Mr George and his sister Miss George. Here, the place of the Georges in Vera's life is explored and they provide the narrative link that holds together the fragments of Vera's memories.

It was the Georges who took Vera and four year old Helena in and gave them a home, and it is Mr George who fathers her second baby Rachel, although that relationship is never formally acknowledged. In this initially arbitrarily and curiously formed, yet loving and protective family group, such relationships remain hidden. Vera's desire to be with Mr George always as his wife can be articulated only to him. Yet the novel opens as Vera pushes an old and infirm Mr George in his wheelchair through a barely disguised

West Australian suburban landscape, thinking of the past which he now only remembers in surprising, non-sequential snatches, and closes with her comment that they do not seem to 'be like a couple' and his dismissal of 'such an ugly word'. And the Georges' life is ruled by the qualities that the novel acknowledges at its end as those most to be treasured - trust, courage and kindness.

Vera is by now 'caretaker and sole custodian' of the memories she shares and has shared with Mr George; memories of events and people familiar to readers of the other two novels. They are of her yearning for staff nurse Ramsden; her alliance with the Metcalfs and her sexual awakening; her desire to escape her own family and at the same time her reliance on it, which the relationship with the Georges recreates for her; her fascination and entanglement with Felicity and Noel in this novel, like and unlike the relationship she had with the Metcalfs and a kind of brilliant, diseased parody of the haven of the Georges. As well there are the widows she loves and learns from - Gertrude, the rice-farm widow on the ship, and her mother's widowed friend Mrs Pugh. Everything is doubled and trebled, constructed in the randomness of recollection into complex patterns which are expanded along the associative narrative that stretches over and loops through the three novels.

'The strange thing about living ... is the repetition. It is as though the individual enters the same experience again and again' Vera muses. This repetition, which is typically present within *The Georges' Wife* as well as over the trilogy as a whole, and which has often been noticed as a structural principle of Jolley's writing, one likened to the structures of classical music, gives the trilogy its narrative power. Intricate interconnections between the three novels amplify rather than fill up the spaces that exist within and between them. Jolley's extraordinary achievement is in the narrative control which is evident now that all three novels have been published; in the ability to shift backwards and forwards over the same territory which

changes its aspect with each shift; which is only ever partially illuminated and never fully revealed. Her patterning is thus quite different from the more usual chronological or historical structure of other trilogies in Australian literature.

Differently expressed in each, those patterns move from the yearning forward of *My Father's Moon*, to the immobilisation of *Cabin Fever*, to the 'ruthless self-examination' which Vera undertakes in *The Georges' Wife*, which is necessary both in her work as a psychiatrist and in her contemplation of her life. She is once more alone, made so this time by the growing silence between her and Mr George. Experiencing again the feelings of isolation and homelessness that mark her life, her memories - which now stretch over at least five decades - are made poignant in this silence which is filled by her meditations on the past.

The decisive movement in this novel is the voyage Mr George and Vera undertake from England to Australia. This voyage is one that has been central to Jolley's experience and productive of her writing. On it Vera undergoes another initiation, brought about through the experience of the long voyage which intensifies her sense of isolation and emptiness and which seems to be a disconcertingly uncharted journey, and through her sensual friendship with the rice-farm widow, who makes her aware of her body and who is also the listener to her narrated history which itself becomes part of the voyage.

The present time of *The Georges' Wife* is likened implicitly to a musical term, the neopolitan sixth, one Mr George refers to in the moment of rest following love making. In his reference, Vera remembers Ramsden, bringing together different sexual desires. Ramsden's explanation - 'The neopolitan sixth [is] a composer's device which is said to produce thoughtfulness and an emotional, romantic quality of sadness creating pathos involving a listener deeply' - acts as both a serious referent of the tonal quality of the novel and a joking reminder that it is all a

construct, but that as listeners we have a responsibility to the text, too, as it slips 'from one note in one key to another' just as the chromatic chord that is the neopolitan sixth does.

Although it is tempting to hail *The Georges' Wife* as the culmination of Jolley's writing career I think it would be wrong to do so. It is a celebration, for me, of the unfolding possibilities of that writing, conveyed through the tension of an aesthetic adherence to a narrative principle referred to in *The Georges' Wife* as 'a merging of the actual and imagined'. Vera expresses this as the 'ability to hold onto the vision while being involved in the event which helps to bring about the making of a fiction writer or a poet.' This wonderful novel will not, I feel, be the last of the series of surprises Jolley's writing has held for her readers.

## Delys Bird

**Caroline Ambrus, *Australian Women Artists, First Fleet to 1945: History, Hearsay and Her Say*, Irrepressible Press, Woden, ACT, 1992, \$69.95.**

Caroline Ambrus's study is an important work. It has, on the whole, so far been ignored by the art world but it is a valuable, empirical study which brings forward new evidence, and questions art scholarship that has preceded her. A former librarian, teacher and artist, Ambrus was involved, from 1985 to 1991, in establishing artists' studies and print-making workshops at Woolloomooloo and at St Peters. In 1975, she received a grant from the International Women's Year Committee, to research a bibliography and history of Australian women artists. The result was her first book, *The Ladies' Picture Show - Sources of a Century of Australian Women Artists*. We should be grateful for her industry with this, her second book, published by the appropri-

ately named Irrepressible press.

*The Ladies' Picture Show* was concerned with Australian women artists between the two World Wars, what Ambrus called 'the unacknowledged generation'.<sup>1</sup> It arose from when she attended the Canberra College of Advanced Education in 1973 to obtain a Bachelor of Education, majoring in art and librarianship. Ambrus had wanted to be an art teacher. At around the same time, she became a feminist.

Ambrus, in her introduction, took issue with the views of Bernard Smith, Nicholas Draffin, Geoffrey Serle and others, that the impact of women artists in this period was mainly due to the effect of the First World War and the large number of male artists killed or maimed at this time, thus leaving a vacuum women could fill. For her, Women did well in the 1920s and 1930s because pre-war attitudes to women were liberal.

The rise of feminism from the turn of the century enabled such artists as Thea Proctor, Margaret Preston and Edith Holmes to come to prominence.<sup>2</sup>

Ambrus was pessimistic in her conclusion to her bibliography, citing the views expressed in *Pertinent* in 1946. 'The greatest tragedy about woman who has art in her make up' was 'her premature admission of defeat'. The future for the woman 'who has art crying out for expression in her soul' was doubtful. Collectively, women were 'strangely and weakly retiring, but here and there that spark of burning ambition flames so strongly that a solitary artist flashes on the artistic world like lightning on a summer's evening'.<sup>3</sup>

The question that still needs to be asked, of course, is why are some people resilient, and able to surmount obstacles, while so many merely succumb to the narrowers, the oppressors, those mean in spirit.

1. Caroline Ambrus, *The Ladies' Picture Show, Sources on a Century of Australian Women Artists*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1984, p.11.

2. Ambrus, *The Ladies' Picture Show*, op cit. pp. 12-15.

3. Ibid., p.26.

Ambrus's history of Australian women artists is a cautionary tale that should be read by all women artists, and all female art students, so that they have no illusions about the struggles they may have to undergo, especially if they come from the wrong side of the track, from working or lower middle class backgrounds. It is noteworthy to remark that one of Australia's most successful artists, Margaret Preston, married into a wealthy family which enabled her to travel regularly, thus acquainting her with developments in art overseas. Preston stated that 'unless a young man or a woman has private means or powerful physical strength an art career is suicidal and is better left alone, you become a public pest, living on hope alone.' (p.77).

Ambrus writes from a feminist perspective. Thus marriage for her for women artists is problematic. This is, of course, not unique for women. Cyril Connolly cited marriage, and reviewing, as one of his enemies of promise. Ambrus writes in a polemical fashion. Thus she talks about the boys club, showing the way in which decisions were made by such devices as stacking meetings, with, behind an egalitarian facade, there being a tight closed establishment. She doesn't, given her perspective, show the role men can play as nurturers. In literature, for instance, Christina Stead loved men and wrote little after the death of her husband, Bill Blake. Marriage obviously had its advantages for Preston.

The evidence Ambrus cites, however, is sobering. Clarice Beckett, who achieved in her work a delicate sense of mood, never married and ended up withdrawing from social contact. She died at the early age of 48. Another important artist, Dorrit Black, also never married, with loneliness her fate. She expressed her sense of desolation in poetry she wrote, and was dismayed when one of her promising students married. Stella Bowen lived with the English writer, Frank Maddox Form, for nine years as his defacto wife. They had a child. In 1940, he left her for another woman. From then on, she had to struggle to

earn a living for herself and the child she had with him. Bowen devoted herself to art, her art becoming a hobby, despite him encouraging her to get on with her work, with her lacking the determination to do so. Marriage, and relationships can, of course, be a great distraction, to escape the pain and struggle involved in creativity.

Florence Rodway's career fell 'by the wayside' when she married. The *Sun*, in 1934, wrote:

Unhappily Miss Rodway immersed in the occupation of marriage which has destroyed so many fine women artists, has been doing practically no work of late years, and when one recollects what she has done and sees it before us in a show like this, one's belief in the institution of marriage suffers.<sup>4</sup>

Unhappiness, struggle, loneliness, despair, are not unique to women. They are part of what Andre Malraux called the human condition. As Harry Heseltine's important study *The Uncertain Self* demonstrates, uncertainty, doubt has always been part of the writer's lot in Australia, until Patrick White, from patrician stock, won the Nobel Prize for literature. Even White suffered from doubt, and, as David Marr's biography demonstrates, for a time took up farming, writing little. His American agent kept him going. In art, the story is similar. But some women, like Judy Cassab and Mirka Mora, have gone on, in Beckett fashion, against the odds, Cassab painting amongst nappies, Mora surrounding her studio with dolls to ward off the ghosts of the death of her ancestors in the Holocaust. It is a pity that Ambrus, in her history, did not write about such artists listed in her bibliography as Margo Lewers, Lisette Kohlhlhagen or Edith Holmes, who certainly achieved some success in their lives. Holmes's art, for instance, has meant much for some of the major poets Tasmania has produced. Vivian Smith has fond memories of her, and repro-

4. Ambrus, *Australian Women Artists*, op.cit., p.81.

duced her painting of Mount Direction on the cover of *Tide Country*. He recalls her as 'the most completely intuitive artist' he has known.<sup>5</sup>

Ambrus concludes by warning against tokenism, and stresses the need for women artists to challenge discrimination. What is illuminating about her study is material she lists regarding the success rate of applications to the Visual Arts/Craft Board by gender in 1989-1990.<sup>6</sup> Women did better than men in most categories, especially project grants. However, based on research by Kay Vernon, women were significantly under-represented

in major Sydney art galleries between 1967 and 1979, while, at the Second Contemporary Art Fair in Melbourne 1990, 767 males were represented compared to 320 females.<sup>7</sup> So, despite the Visual Arts/Craft Board's actions, the commercial galleries still showed an obvious preference for the work of male artists.

One can only hope that her book is not marginalised but is included in art courses, so that her findings can be debated and pondered on.

**Michael Denholm**

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5. Vivian Smith, 'Tasmanian Artists', *Island Magazine*, No. 36, Spring 1998, p.79.

6. Ambrus, *Australian Artists*, op. cit., pp.218-219.

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7. Ambrus, *Australian Women Artists*, loc. cit.



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