Sometimes when Mum is talking to dad it sounds like one of the kids at school getting the cane, whish, whish, whish, and Dad, he pulls a face too. Mostly it's about me, I'm bad, or the lawn being so high we might get a goat to mow it down. “Or maybe you can chew it down, Ted...” Mum was cross that morning...

Short-listed for the TAG Hungerford Award for fiction, this is an excellent collection of well-crafted and powerful stories by a writer with a gift for characterisation.
Editors’ Apology

Ken Spillman’s poem ‘Four Elements’ published in the last issue of Westerly, contained two uncorrected typographical errors which changed the meaning of the poem. The editors apologise for this error and the poem is reprinted in its correct form in this issue (15).

The otherwise perceptive review in Westerly, 40:2 (1995) of Maryanne Dever (ed.), M. Barnard Eldershaw: Plaque with Laurel, Essays, Reviews and Correspondence (1995), in the University of Queensland Press Australian Authors series, contains a misleading factual error. Contrary to the review, the central piece of this collection, the complete novel, Plaque with Laurel, (1937), a novel about a writer’s conference in Canberra, has not been previously reprinted, let alone being currently in print elsewhere as the review says. This is in line with the intention of the series, one of the very few of its kind remaining, to bring out of print material back into print and to keep it there.

Andrew Burke’s review in the last issue of Westerly contained a typographical error. The book reviewed was Chao’s, Paper Boat, not Paper Board.

Special Issue 1996
Australian Jewish Writing
Westerly No 4 Summer 1996

The final issue of Westerly for each year is a special one devoted to a selected theme or concept. For the Summer (December) issue of 1996 or 5758 by the Jewish calendar, the theme will be Australian Jewish Writing.
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Cover design by Robyn Mundy of Mundy Design using a painting by Kevin Robertson titled: “Two Women in An Interior” (1998). Oil on Canvas. 45.8 x 45.8cm. From a Photograph by Clayton Jauncay. Printed by Lamb Printers Pty. Ltd.
The Mudrooroo Dilemma

1. Graeme Dixon

The authenticity of the Aboriginality of contemporary Australian writer Mudrooroo is causing quite a dilemma in the Aboriginal community, academic and literary circles. Until Mudrooroo comes forward and either denies the accusations or justifies the deception he will remain the target of rumour and innuendo. Whisperings of these rumours have been circulating in the Aboriginal community for a few years now but have not previously surfaced in the public arena because Aboriginal people are well aware that many of their people had the evidence of their histories stolen through past child removal policies. Therefore it was better to give the benefit of any doubt rather than cause any unnecessary heartbreak to a victim of assimilation campaigns. It is only because of Mudrooroo’s siblings exposing him that members of the Aboriginal community are now speaking of their fears and not for malicious intent.

Ironically, over the years Mudrooroo has become the arbitrator of what is and what is not the authentic style that an Aboriginal person uses when telling a story in the written form. This position was earned by him through his own success in writing poetry and prose that dealt almost exclusively with Aboriginal themes from a perceived Aboriginal perspective. His powerful insight into Aboriginal literary forms has been much sought after for book reviews and social commentary, but he could often be a harsh critic. He is a believer that Aboriginality has a great influence on theme and style. He emphasised that an Aboriginal’s style of writing is a reflection of their Aboriginality. He has been especially critical in the public arena, of Sally Morgan’s My Place, a story that outlines a person’s pain-filled, but joyous search for her history and Aboriginality. It is ironic that Mudrooroo’s own Aboriginality is now coming under intense public scrutiny by the Aboriginal and mainstream communities.
Non-Aboriginal academics and literary people have focussed on Mudrooroo’s work as the basis from which to gauge other Aboriginal writers. The questions they will have to ask themselves are: is his Aboriginality an important or relevant criteria in his writing? If Mudrooroo is not Aboriginal does his writings lose any of its value or worth?

The answers to these questions are vital to Aboriginal people considering the recent controversy over author, anthropologist, new-age spiritualist Marlo Morgan’s commercially successful “noble savage” fantasy Mutant Message Downunder. Organiser of the recent crusade of Aboriginal elders and artists to the U.S.A. to demand an apology and public acknowledgment that Mutant Messages is pure fiction, Robert Eggington, believes it is important for Aboriginal people to reclaim ownership of Aboriginal culture and history and to “out” pretenders. He feels this is necessary to counteract past cultural thefts and historical lies that have been used to oppress Aboriginal people. Though Mudrooroo’s work cannot be compared to Marlo Morgan’s the intrigue surrounding his alleged deception has its similarities to hers. Also, the perception by some members of society that Aborigines are guilty of re-inventing their Dreaming to legitimise Native Title claims makes Mudrooroo’s deception dangerous to Aboriginal people’s public relations.

It may be true that Mudrooroo’s institutionalised childhood caused him to relate to Aboriginal people, but if so for the good of all he should come clean and tell the true story of Colin Johnson.
2. Tom Little and Lorna Little

The issue of the Aboriginality of Mudrooroo (formerly Colin Johnson) has been the source of much discussion, both in the Nyoongar community and in academic and literary circles. In the last few weeks, the rumour mill has been well and truly fired up, and shows no sign of slowing down without some indisputable proof of Mudrooroo’s Aboriginality.

Mudrooroo himself has fuelled the fires by his “Que sera sera” attitude to the situation (see Victoria Laurie’s article in the Weekend Australian Magazine, July 20-21 1996, p. 32). Faced with accusations such as this, one would think that a person in Mudrooroo’s position would spare no effort or expense in defending himself, but Mudrooroo has not availed himself of any of the several opportunities he has been given to do so. Some, having heard the substantial evidence given by members of this family against Mudrooroo, may see this as a tacit admission of guilt, especially since, instead of defending himself, Mudrooroo appears to have gone to ground.

Both the Nyoongar community and the academic and literary community have their dilemmas to face, arising from this situation. It has been said by some Aboriginal academics that Mudrooroo’s writing, while of a high academic standard, lacks the empirical and experiential detail that seems to be common to most Aboriginal writing so that it reads like the writings of the “armchair anthropologists” of the nineteenth century.

Aboriginal writing, like other forms of Aboriginal art, is drawn from the writers’ cultural bases — their land and their family background. Mudrooroo has not had access to a Nyoongar cultural base because of his institutionalised background. If he is a member of the “Lost Generation”, then some compassion is in order, and it also explains the apparent lack of empirical and experiential data in his writings.

A similar argument could be made if, by virtue of the fact that his experience of institutionalisation is so similar to that of so many members of the “Lost Generation”, he has come to identify strongly with the Nyoongar community and has no concept of his true identity, although the question of Nyoongar blood still remains.

However, if Mudrooroo is proven not to have any Aboriginal antecedents, and can be shown to have known this all along, he must endure the calumny that ensues, because he has established himself as an Aboriginal writer and academic and has taken Aboriginal money in doing so. In this, he may be guilty of perpetrating an even bigger myth than Helen Darville because he has taken upon himself the
right to assert what is and isn't authentic Aboriginal writing. In other words, he has stolen the birthright of Aboriginal writers, which is their right to have their works considered on their own merits.

The dilemma faced by the members of the academic and literary community is just as perplexing. By lionising Mudrooroo as the “one true voice” of Aboriginal literature, some non-Aboriginal academics have allowed the works of other Aboriginal writers to be ignored or demeaned in academic circles. This runs the risk, should Mudrooroo be found to be non-Aboriginal, of robbing Aboriginal writers of their due recognition, and of failing to recognise the true diversity of Aboriginal writers and Aboriginal cultures. There is also a great risk of so far alienating Aboriginal writers that they refuse to be part of a system which has so badly treated them, or even worse, begin to write what they think non-Aboriginal academics and readers want to hear.

Further, if Mudrooroo is proven to be non-Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal academics will then have to decide whether his writing is of sufficient merit to stand alone in a separate genre to Aboriginal writings. They must also question whether Mudrooroo has achieved his academic status because of his perceived Aboriginality or in spite of it. That may mean having to reassess their former opinions, theories and attitudes towards the great diversity of Aboriginal literature.

The only real solution to the current situation is for Mudrooroo to clear the air.
Kim Scott in Conversation with Elizabeth Guy

Kim Scott published *True Country* in 1993 with Fremantle Arts Centre Press. In between teaching and parenting Kim has managed to begin writing his second novel, one which responds in part to some of the writing’s of A.O. Neville (Commissioner of Native Affairs for Western Australia earlier this century).

*Kim, could you tell me a little about your background?*

I grew up in the country, south of Perth — Albany way and Esperance, then I went to the Kimberley as a teacher which is pretty evident in *True Country*. Going there was sort of a psychological quest. I asked to go to that sort of community.

*It’s hard to get that place out of your blood once you’ve been there.*

Yeah, well that’s right. It became an obsession. Landscape wise it was great. I had been teaching in the wheat belt before and I was shocked at the racist psychology or mentality there which is something that I have been sheltered from. When I was a kid, I didn’t notice racism so much. Now, the way I look at it is that I’m an end product of these policies that we had across Australia of assimilation, and I think they used to say, ‘biological absorption’. Going to the wheat belt made me think of myself. I wasn’t copping the nastiness that the Noongar people were. Because of that sort of thing, I asked to go to the Kimberley, to teach. So I think True Country is in part about that. The narrator’s movement from relative ignorance to something else.

*You said when you wrote True Country that the “story developed in ways I did not imagine”. I was very interested in that comment.*

Yeah, when I started writing it, I kept feeling that the ways available for writing...
about this sort of thing were mainly the outback — frontier sort of thing. But then when I was mucking round with the Aboriginal English it gave me a way out. Yet if you were a linguist or anything it's not really Aboriginal English but it's got the elements of that in the rhythm. It offered a new opportunity of storying. The narrator was taken over by language and the stories available.

At the beginning of your text you write about the ‘blank page’ and ‘terra nullius’ yet I read True Country as an inversion of that. Indeed there are so many voices and so many stories, the page is anything but blank.

Yeah, that first page came very late in the writing process. It came about partly because of my awareness of the impoverished heritage I have but also because I want to nurture it more. It's like a commitment and having a go, even though it should be much more. And it is also about a spiritual inheritance, a continuity I mean. That's what I get obsessed about. And I'm so aware that it would be better if I had more available to me but because of those historical process — I haven't.

And your editorial process with Fremantle Arts Centre Press was positive?

It was really flattering for me to get someone reading it for a start and to have them talk to me about it. I hadn't really thought it all through, it was a bit of a mish mash and I had to rework the ending. There were quite a few changes.

What type of audience had you in mind, when you were writing. Was it yourself, to an extent?

Yeah especially with a first novel. I mean for me it was a very selfish thing to do, an indulgent thing to do. You see I was working as an English teacher and writing and I wanted to try and write a novel. But I was also going through these other socio-political personal concerns, as well. So they came together. Certainly I was pretty ignorant about who I was writing for and about.

I believe you're working on another book.

Yes, continuing to work on another one. I'm trying to write about a few generations and about the process of assimilation. The guy who was the Chief Protector has written a book which is very nice because I can argue back. I haven't worked it through yet. But has the same sorts of psychological concerns or obsessions as True Country. One of the things that it doesn't have is the Aboriginal English.
With True Country were you arguing back or working in dialogue with the Perez book?
Well actually that was one of the chief motivations for the writing of the book. And those first few chapters are very autobiographical, it was a real shake up. That’s what people were wanting me to do but I couldn’t then because I was teaching and doing all other sorts of things. Books are only a means, they are liberating but they are also confining.

What’s the reception been to True Country?
Well it’s had positive reviews, but they often read it in a way I didn’t. I mean a lot of the reviews emphasise the destruction of the culture. But I don’t like it to be read like that. I thought it was just confronting the things that were the results of historical processes.

I felt reading your book was about moving towards treaty. True Country seemed to be offering a way in which the reader could participate in a negotiation between black and white but also between historical discourses and contemporary reality.

Yeah, I don’t intend those things but it’s interesting because those things are parts of myself really. I think it’s an awkward historical position that I’m in really. It’s reconciling the psyche almost.

There are many images in the book of over-ripeness as if it is so late in the day. Is it getting too late in the day for a treaty?
When I wrote it I thought I had reconciled things a lot more than it would seem that I had. You see I didn’t see Billie as dying. I saw him as continuing some sort of tradition. But a lot of people had seen it as a death. And that might relate to your idea about late in the day.

No, I read that ‘late in the day’ — not as an anxiety but more as a sense of urgency, that we have to do something now. We can’t keep waiting.

Yeah well I can see that but as an Aboriginal person I like all that continuity with the past 40,000 or 60,000 years. But I’m also educated as a white person, so, in a writerly way I have all those voices and I’m attempting to negotiate them. With this book it was a psychological quest, you know? “I’m going to make a story — we’re going to make a story.” I’ve got to make something of this. I’ve got to make something with what’s available to me. And I think a lot of it, throughout the book, is about nurture. Nurture through story. If you believe it, and talk it, then it becomes real.
And Billie's story to a certain extent is like a male rite of passage.
Yeah, and given that it is a novel it is a ritual, a ceremony, a celebration and an empowerment. And it begins tentatively or tenuously but it builds upon itself. True Country brings people together.

To pass through smoke, is that part of ritual?
Well I'm not a real authority on this but it's to do with grieving, cleansing — that's what I believe.

When I lived in Kalgoorlie in the early 1990's I remember a story in the newspapers that corresponds to your account of Franny's death in the chapter 'What Hollow One Sees'.
Yes, the murder in Broome you're thinking of ... Sandy ... Well when I was writing that was an issue and it was very upsetting. I mean that was very strong for me and I knew how the people felt about it.

And does your writing of the murderers' destinies correspond with what actually happened?
Look, I don't know, but that's a really important point in the book — that's when the narrator takes on a commitment. In real life they're the sort of situations and the things in the public discourse that make one very aware of one's identity. The narrators (plural) gather themselves together and there is revenge. We've got to let the power work.

About the 'narrators (plural)' does that come out of your Aboriginal heritage and spirituality or does it come from your awareness of the writerly techniques of multiple voices and what they can achieve?
Well both really. It's to suggest that continuity and spiritual inheritance. Early on Billie is storying with others, he's a conduit for others and involved in all that. And there is no single story as such. No singular position but there is a responsibility. He is informed by other stories but it's articulated through one mouth. It has to do with the language as well I guess.

I read that Aboriginal narrative voice to be Walanguh, because there is one instant in the book where he says, “we, Sebastian, Walanguh, Samson.”
Yeah I had it as the group of them, the people he speaks with and I was thinking about it becoming a larger group — that's not evident in the book (including the
kids) — so it was then about the story being inclusive and empowering tellers and listeners, that sort of thing.

Why is Billie unable to hear his connection to Walanguh?

I saw it as some sort of atrophy. I mean presumably Grandma’s been taken away and so there’s that breakage there causing an atrophy of tradition of becoming aware of this ‘way of seeing’. And that crops up a lot in the book, a way of seeing which is really dependent on the sort of stories available. There’s a certain sort of blinkeredness too, I suppose, a limit that has been imposed on Billie’s world view through education as much as anything.

I was struck by the isolated relationship between Billie and Liz. You don’t hear that much about their relationship.

No well that’s right but that would have made it a different story and changed the emphasis a lot. She was middle class, white, well-intentioned. She offers a different viewpoint. And I think it’s to do with the specific nature of Billie as the narrator, the isolation or dilemma of that sensibility.

That kind of strikes me as someone like you.

Yeah well in many ways he is me, especially in that business of him storying. That’s what I was exploring and he was the way to do it.

I was also struck by the motif of videos and dogs. Are they doing any more than just fleshing out the scene?

No that’s right, gestures to realism and amusement. I did feel awkward breaking out of ‘dun coloured realism’, but social realism is very restrictive, very limiting — especially in the writing of fiction. It seems to be a strong tradition in Australia but it is limiting and difficult to break out of because it makes you feel self conscious. When I write loosely I break away from it quite readily, but when I’m thinking about myself as a writer it’s mainly what I slip into.

I wanted to ask you, Kim, whether you find your Aboriginal heritage something that’s liberating or a heavy responsibility.

Well I’ve always known that I was Aboriginal and when I was a child I was told that I was part-Aboriginal. My father suffered more from racism than what I ever have in my life. When I was a kid I didn’t know what to make of the fact that I was
Aboriginal. From my perspective it meant that you got a hard time. So for me it was some sort of pride of place but private. Since I've written this and entered the public discourse it's moved from a private sort of thing to something of pride with a fair bit of sullen, unarticulated resentment. Being an Aboriginal writer is a burden I think...

Really?

Yeah because I'm aware of language and I think that I'm trapped. I mean, how do I express this sensibility without the English language or New Ageism or sentimentality getting in the way? And then there's the politics that flow from it all, so that your writing can be used as ammunition in the political discourse. Which I'm not very comfortable with because I don't like the idea of speaking for anyone else. So those sorts of things are awkward. But at another level it's empowering. With True Country I never thought of it as Aboriginal writing. I was just writing so I was very pleased when it was accepted like that.

Your Anglo-European descent gave me an entrance into True Country.

Yeah well I do like that idea of entrances, the different ways in. I like the idea of inclusion. I know there's an argument for exclusion for Aboriginal writing but I don't know whether I find that idea very profitable.

A reader doesn't enter your text in an orthodox way — there's an enormous sense of flight, nearly vertiginous.

Yeah that crops up quite a lot and I don't know where that one comes from.

You must have been a bird once. Your totem.
Four Elements
for my sons

He curls in to me,
the fit undiminished by five years,
his space grown with him.

In cool grey hours
the practice of breathing
recalls his struggle for first air,
the grunt & splutter of a small blue face,
contingent upon my resolve.
Now, I lift to the force of him,
an up-draught in limitless sky.

Yet he has brought me to earth,
the landing of fingertips on a feverish brow,
thud of his skull in a fall
& silence before he cries.
These are the wheaten plains of fear,
a rumbling quakeland
which might swallow us tomorrow.

Sleeping, we are safe.
He is the sea,
teeming with submerged life,
moonlit ripples over aqua dreaming,
& I am the zillion tiny particles at his edge,
remnants of ancient shell & worn stone,
determined by his wash.

With his waking, I am recast.
Firelight within has won the night.
In the dawn unfurling there is molten love,
a pliant man, a fluid child:
we relive the furnace of our bonding
that handful of years ago,
rehearse the parting ahead.
Reflections During the Gulf War
"Arab terrorist groups threaten to bomb Metro"

LA MONDE — Feb. 1991

After the war
Paris is not
the same she
says and caught
in the bleakness
of early spring
I hunger for her
GAY PARIS
catch it in my
mind’s eye
then see it sour
as she flees south
and turn in on itself
long before
she dared
the Pyrenees

Her singers on
street corners and
carefree children
had faded into myths
by the time she
followed that
treacherous
guide (eight days
eight nights
toiling through
the undergrowth
of the same mountain)
falling into ambush
so starved and dazed
that even capture
brought relief.

And caution had
long been habit
on the West Bank
when that
Auschwitz-bound
train meeting
twisted rails
screamed to a halt
piercing carefully
deaded hearts
with a shard
of hope

On Place de St Martin
hunger had long
haunted the eyes
of all but the few
while she savours
her reprieve
in a compound
in a town
I can’t remember
ever watchful
in the doorway
with her child.

And when a miracle
salted with the
fearlessness
that too much suffering
sometimes brings
took her and hers
through that gate
to freedom (not
daring to dwell too long
on those they’d left
behind)
the streets
of the Paris of her
dreams were shrouded
in betrayal echoes
of snapping heels
and sudden searches
fetid with the discards
of black marketeers
and empty of Jews.

Paris is not the same
since the war
she says
and afterward I ride
the Metro home
sandwiched between
stiff Parisians elegant
as always
their faces
pale with fear.
Northampton RSL Hall

Fifty years since the last major effort,  
photos line the wall so thick you can't find  
the light switches, and need a fighting  
patrol to locate the overhead fan controls —  
they are behind enemy lines, relegated  
to the irregulars bunkered in the kitchen.

Here a hall is a hall and the walls a portrait gallery,  
war down the generations keeps its hold,  
men before muzzles, gangly in flying gear,  
women in tunic, helmets, ship’s companies.  
Letters from the trenches, fragments from camps,  
skeletons write home of being treated well.

There’s a wondrous official admission  
that lists Brit Butcher Generals of the Front,  
and records Boche admiration of the toll:  
“The English soldiers fight like lions.”  
“Yes, but the lions are led by donkeys,”  
laughs Ludendorff and wheatfields wilt.

They are brief to inarticulate, these volunteers,  
young hands lightly schooled: how is my foal?  
I hope the crop is good, just to let you know I’m fine.  
Taken from one breast pocket, a wad of photographs  
displays an identical pattern of soft perforations,  
where family and friends took three bullets over the heart.
My sister used to dream of the Titanic. Peggy wrestled with that great White star liner city where chandelier crystals tinkled inside floating ballrooms and silver pendulums of giant clocks were rocked into chaos by the perilous sea. My sister saw flesh. She saw goosebumps on flailing arms. Boys touching hands as they sank to black coral. Kids pulled from ice in the swallowing sea. She scorned history books that spoke of the hundred year war, the final histories of kings and lands, witches and plagues, bridges and fire. Her fingers struck the matches, that singed the fading books, that burnt the curling words, The End. No disaster, she told me is ever ended until the people forget. My sister has felt the Titanic move against her flesh by an image seen at night on a drive-in screen. Our house has been the Cape Rose Ocean. The carpet a floor of corals. A hanging gown has billowed in still air. A white python has curled around my sister's sleeping body. The city is never what it seems.

Time Capsule
Long after my sister buried the time capsule in our suburban front yard, we had forgotten all about that year when Peggy kept a diary and hid secret letters in underground tins for posterity. We had forgotten about the time capsule, the day my sister marched through the kitchen with a shoebox and dropped strange things inside it; a potato masher, a dead white mouse, a wind up armadillo, a packet of Silverbeet seeds and a kooky photo of herself with an avocado and mango stuffed up my mumma's bra. We forgot about her little fingers digging a hole for her time capsule, how she never even noticed that a broken whiskey bottle had gouged a great cut into her flesh until she washed away the front yard from her finger and saw the blood. Scrawled in texta on the lid of Peggy's box were the words:
My sister of eight years was recording her own history, sure that someone would one day stumble over these random artifacts and piece her story together. “Girl kills mice with potato masher.” “Kinky father dresses child in exotic Queensland fruits.”

My sister was a busy body. It was natural for her to assume that people would be as interested in her life as she was in theirs, that her time capsule would one day be like a miniature Pompeii held in a curious girl’s hand. My sister pried open diaries and dug stories from Taxi Drivers’ hearts. She collected photographs of people she didn’t even know, an old man with a shadow slanting right across his eye, a woman with six knives on the wall behind her head and a mug shot book of old crims who must have been slitting throats and dealing to the devil when my sister’s floating ballroom sank right to the bottom of that ocean floor. My sister traded at the marketplace. Peggy traded kisses for 1930s garnets, rubbed against sly men with spiky lips and traded extras for an old pair of hobnail boots, believed to be worn by the handcuff King in 1923. My sister masturbated. She told me that when she looked at that crim in the mug shot book she’d find her fingers going down into her pants, and feel his jawline crawling across the zipper of her pink gingham dress. My family called heaven the White City. My sister knew that the man must have long ago drifted up to its streets but that didn’t stop her from placing bets at the TAB, searching the nicotine stained fingers of the old whinos for a three inch scar just like the one in the photo. Unlike my family, my sister saw the White City as just a faint glowing outline of the past, like a backdrop or a shadow behind the new. She believed you just had to find a way of seeing the white city, finding the pale shadowed caves where the old men now hid.

Mourning Ring

My sister lived in a small room in the middle of the city. Flatmates flamencoed on rickety floors and with each stomp a pressed ceiling flower would crumble onto her pillow. My sister had one of those long gothic wigs that grew down to her ankles and from the street below old men watched Rapunzel hanging from her window, smoking cigars and drinking gin from a curling red seashell. Peggy’s room was so small, that if you stood in the centre and outstretched your arms you could almost touch the walls. She told me that to live in a city like this you just had to change the way you thought about space. Maybe this was why Peg was happy to stack
treasures to the ceiling and share her mattress with three chandeliers and a painting of the virgin's heart. She told me she could never live on the ground floor of a building or have a lover touch her hair too much. Hers was the space above her small brown head; the crumbling ceiling roses, the lopsided tin roof and after that the city's tall sky. It didn't matter that my sister's room was so full of treasure that to reach the window one had to crawl underneath giant wind-up clocks or through a broken wire birdcage. It didn't matter that to water Peg's windowbox you had to crawl over a floor ankle deep in tea stained gambling cards. This was Peggy's room.

***

If you saw my sister's eyes the day she traded her hobnail boots for a dead woman's mourning ring, your spine would have rattled like mine and your raised hair cut iron. You would have walked through a city with a barefooted girl, who didn't even see the cut glass underneath her feet or the woman on her doorstep picking locks with a twisted pin. If you had known Peggy, you would have known that this sister had changed. You would have shivered on the the night my sister bought the mourning ring home and I helped her throw everything she'd ever treasured to the people below; the tea stained cards, the crystal chandeliers, the baby spoons and Christmas lights, the birdcage and wig and Mary's burning heart. On this strange night we hurled treasures from the window until our hands were empty and my sister's room bare. We threw treasure after treasure. We threw treasure until all my sister owned was the red satin dress which clothed her, and on her finger, that traded new ring. We stood at the window, watched a skinny dog curl inside Rapunzel's hair and a girl smash a chandelier against her Father's car. I looked into my sister's eye. She looked at her ring.

"This is all a girl's heart needs", she said.

"This is all a girl's heart needs."

Later, we wished that that golden mourning ring would have melted and filled all the empty corners in my sister's heart. Sure, Peggy had made time capsules in the past, believed the Titanic had touched her very skin, masturbated with a book of 1920's crims. But this was different. Soon my sister forgot the smell of her lover's skin and the three legged cat. Peggy walked the streets like a sleepwalker, turned iron keys of unseen doors and walked across fallen bridges. I had to watch my sister carefully, tie our braids together, sleep curled against her back. At night, when I called her name in half sleep, I'd be nothing more than the wind, an unborn girl's voice, in her long ago white city.
Inscription on that Golden Ring

"Cleopatra, the Snake Charmer, 21 years. Died 14.8.1927. God bless her soul."

Pit of Death White City
Sydney
1927

Wear a dead girl's ring today and see Cleopatra's city. Snake pits are seething in the centre of town and "That Man Grey" sleeps with pythons where today the Lady of the Snows feeds the hungry. See Sleeping Beauty lie on a full length stretcher, feign sleep while five snakes ride over her body. See a heart so still you'd think she'd never have seen the puncture marks, two holes bleeding from the jugular, her lover wretching blood into a Kerosine tin. Wear a dead girl's ring today and see a snake crate fall from a George Street cart; destination unknown, contents untitled. Watch an arrest on a travelling train; 98 reptiles in a snakecharmer's suitcase and fifty women screaming as he clicks open the lid. Wear a dead girl's ring today and see Young Tom Morrisey at a shaving mirror; five feet tall, three teeth missing, a diamond ring on his finger and convulsing as he says, "The Green Mamba wins". Wear a dead girl's ring today and see a red bellied black tattooed on a man's sunburnt arm. This fella's rubbing salt into a bloody hole, sliding his razor across skin until the tattoo disappears. He cuts until he can't see the snake scales, the maze of scarlet coils, the beady yellow eyes of his wife's killer. He cuts so deep, that soon the crisscrossed scars look like the dry long grass, the muddy tangled riverbeds of red belly country itself. He cuts deep. Deeper than any man should. He cuts until the snake's long gone, until he begins to believe that what he's done is cut a treacherous path towards his own heart. He feels the red bellied bastard slither inside this wound. Feels it coil up around his lungs and press against his ribs. A year after a red belly bite and this man's heart feels like Winter, a sleeping snake breathing slowly inside him, a hibernating cave safe for a killer.

Wear a Dead girl's ring today and see Cleopatra's moving city. A blind mare kicked on the side of a road, cut jade falling from a woman's lean neck. See a railway track that curls like a venomous snake. Seven derailed railway cars, that collide against your unborn skin. Wear a dead girl's ring today and wrestle with a Red Belly Black. Turn an iron key in an unseen door. Bury your heart, forever, in Cleopatra's silver tin.

Wear a dead girl's ring today and hold my sister's hand.

westerly spring 1996
In memory of


*All of the events depicted in "Pit of Death" are based on historical accounts and memoirs of the Australian Snake Pits 1913-1928.

David Ray

Housesitting in Vermont

The landlord wrote from France to pull the burdocks, shoot the porcupines — they gnaw the house foundations down — and thus one night, hearing the burring of teeth on wood, I picked up the rifle, went out in moonlight so bright that he threw a shadow against the back wall as he waddled up onto the woodpile, then looked right at me, his eyes two tiny gleamings. An easy task, the execution of this order, but never again would I shoot such a creature, regardless of how he took the house down, chewed it to bits. Dying, looking me straight in the eye, he uncurled my father's hands. Very slowly. And I wept for him as I could not do, years later, for my father.
A Moment in Spain

The car is rust and the boy is dead. And yet we rejoiced and still smile when we think of his rescue when the tourist pulled him out of a pool. And after I rewarded that blubbering angel of Providence, offering anything he wished — only twenty — "American dollars, bitte!" — my son would now and then ask if I meant it, that I'd truly have given the German anything, anything he wanted — for saving my son, e.g., the Volkswagen camper we slept in that year, to which we escorted the Samaritan to change out of his wet clothes. "Of course," I would say, "anything he wished, for saving my son," — who left one rubber boot at the bottom. Left or right, red or blue — I can't be sure now, though we had just bought them that morning, then headed uphill to the Alhambra. Blue, I am almost certain. The left, I sincerely believe. And the boot may still be there in the mud nine feet down in the pool bordered by myrtles whose fragrance had made us inhale and exclaim there in the court of the Alhambra, before we looked away from the boy who was still breaking in boots, and his two sisters toddling along. Sixteen years later the loss was completed, absurd and not to be borne. Yet it still seems that the plunge through those blue waters should have warned us — a message clear as a bell tolling. The grief had already begun, and that blubbering German had simply pointed the way, shown how I too would dive after that son, down and down, and someday find his blue rubber boot in the mud.
HERE is a place for each beside her in the dark. A place for the dog whose fur is soft and silky, the one they bought at K-mart on a Sunday outing. A place for the dolphin who is furry too, a memory of the family at Sea World in the holidays. A place for the woolly cheetah her father gave in on, the platypus from her mother’s friend, the old bear who has always been around. Each is there, soft and safe. And silent.

In the kitchen, beyond the dark, her parents.

She snuggles down further in the bed, letting her head come away from the pillow, making the blankets come over her ears. She thinks about the story she was reading before the light went out. There were hard words in the story, long words. She had worked on them. She had taken them a bit at a time, had listened for them coming, listened for the bits moving together, waited till she recognised them. She had worked them out. They were all words she knew, had heard before. They were rich and wonderful words. Their letters came together, their sounds gently giving them away. All in the silence of her head.

In the kitchen, beyond the dark, her parents argue.

She knows the words of skipping rhymes, the lines you jump to. She knows the words of TV ads, of her favourite videos, the lines you laugh and cry to. She knows the words of her parents’ CDs. Leonard Cohen words. Laurie Anderson words. Enya words. Abba words. The lines you dance to. The lines her parents drink to.

In the kitchen, beyond the dark, her parents drink and smoke and argue.

She can hear the sound of the wine glasses refilling at the cask which stands perpetually on top of the refrigerator. It’s a sound like her piss in the toilet. Like her father’s piss in the toilet in the bathroom in the mornings which often wakes her up. She can hear the wine squirting in the glasses like rows of fullstops, like lines
of exclamation marks. She can hear the exhalation of cigarette smoke, like the spaces between paragraphs.

She feels again the soft fur of her animals in their places. She caresses them gently, as they deserve. She puts all of her love into her fingertips and strokes it across them.

'Why do you have to say that?'
'Say what?'
'What you just said.'
'What did I say?'
'You know what you said.'
'I didn't say anything.'
'Bullshit. You always say that.'
'Say what?'
'What you just said.'

She tries closing her eyes. Tries to sleep. Tries to find the silence in the darkness of her bed, in the silence of her head. But the darkness is filled with fur at her fingertips. Gentle fur. The page behind her eyes is moving with letters of the alphabet. Letters arranging themselves. Bits of sound joining themselves together. Meanings emerging, clarifying. Soft bodies, finding their places.

'You know saying that always leads to an argument.'
'What argument?'
'The one we're having now.'
'Are we having an argument?'
'Didn't you notice?'
'I thought we were having a discussion.'
'It's the same discussion over and over. Why can't we sort it out?'
'Sort it out? After seventeen years? Can't you see what you're doing?'
'What I'm doing?'
'Can't you see that?'
'What?'
'What you're doing.'

She reaches her arm out and runs her fingers along the edge of the mattress, around the fur. Each is safe. None is going to fall. She fell in love with each on first sight. At the shopping mall, in the supermarket, at the theme park, in her mother's friend's house. She had wanted each passionately, had known she would be devastated if she could not have. She had felt the surge of have in her, of want in
her. And nothing had changed.

She will want them forever. Will stroke and protect them forever. Will insist
that her father does not lean on them when he comes to say goodnight. Will make
sure that her mother does not rearrange them into patterns they do not like. They
fit together in a special way in her bed, her animals. There is a soft, furry pattern.

'Bullshit.'
'Get fucked.'
'Go and get fucked yourself.'
'Perhaps I will.'
'Typical. Arsehole.'

jump to. Words you laugh and cry to. Words arranging themselves.

The story she was reading is about cats and dogs. But cats and dogs who can
talk, whose thoughts are on the page. Animals who know the world of fur and
violence, who speak their suspicions, their jealousies, their vulnerabilities. She had
difficulty with the word 'vulnerability'. But gradually it had come. Vul-ner-a-bil-it-y.

She listens as the argument wears on. As the wine glass empties over her father's
head. As her mother's head crunches against the kitchen door post.

She runs her fingers over each of them, around the corner of the pillow, along
the folds of the blanket, down the edge of the mattress. They are there, each in its
place, soft and safe. Silent.

'I'm moving out.'
'No, you're not.'
'I'm leaving you.'
'Go on, then.'
'You won't let me, will you.'
'Just try it.'
'And get my ribs broken?'
'I didn't break your ribs.'

In the story, she was up to the part where the dog suspects the cat of stealing the
bone. The dog, who is a policeman, suspects the cat, who is a singer in a nightclub.
It seems right, for her, that a dog should be a policeman and a cat a nightclub singer.
She can see that is right. She is glad her own animals have not grown up yet, have
not left home.

'And get my hair torn out? Get my head smashed again?'
'I didn't smash your head.'
‘Stupid little man.’
‘Stupid little woman.’
Lines you jump to. Lines you laugh and cry to. Lines you dance to.
She feels sleep coming on, a bit at a time, all in the silence of her head. Listens for sleep coming, arranging itself, gently giving her away. All in the silence of her head, with her fingers full of fur.

Christopher Harris

Visiting Rites

Lighter in the grasp the bag of buns is nearly empty too as my borrowed son and I skirt the zoo’s close-lipped lawns and his mother’s name.

His wet finger comes up with crumbs & he drops our half-hour’s food for thought into a litter bin.

Above the bin a mirror’s captioned The World’s Most Destructive Beast. I nod at it but he knows that knows the sound of ranklings hugged close till ripe, roars and shrieks and sudden tight silences where eyes don’t meet and words strut stiffly in a mating dance mirrored back awry.
Christmas 1945

We lived-in at the holiday camp then
where Chef's cake, stuffed with hoarded rations
and with my name and Happy 9th Birthday
scrawled across its frosted turrets,
waited for that first Christmas of peace.

It was like the Palace the month before,
I on the seat behind my uncle,
head through the sunlight roof,
& down the Mall in triumph, nostrils
burning in the cold November air,
every window a marzipan yellow.

Some spoke of comradeship then
when we all marched on together.
I don't remember.

But I do recall the coalman joining us,
sherry glass lifted, as we drank to a better-
something.

Drying them, I pointed out the coal rime
still ringing one crystal rim.
"It's honest dirt" — my mother's laugh
a tinkle like a dud half-crown, not one
I recall later, as we hunched
in overcoats before empty grates.

And then there at last it stood
and the knife pressed in through the battlements
which collapsed to a fine rubble.
Much bewilderment — wartime ingredients? —
but we lived for years, it seemed,
on the icing and the marzipan.
When you wrote your early poems which have been so wonderfully rediscovered by Bill Grono for the Collected, you were already doing experimental things that people are doing now.

I was doing them all by myself then.

I'm wondering about the isolation, and the psyche in isolation: whether it gives you a freedom?

I think it does. There are bad things about it and good things. The good thing about it was that it allowed me to do all sorts of things which in a sense I didn't know I was doing, without anyone saying, "You can't do this, this isn't what you do." I was just totally alone. I think why these early poems work is that instead of being just random associations of words they come from a really deep feeling.
Having had these works rediscovered, do you find they’re influencing what you’re writing now?

I think it’s too soon to know that yet. Maybe. I found it very interesting: some of them I’d forgotten. They came back to me in a vague sort of way once Bill found them. But a lot of them I’d forgotten completely.

And they were from Pelican, the university magazine?

Most of them were. It was during the war, and a lot of little magazines came out. There was a big influx of them, mostly from Sydney and Melbourne — Meanjin, and then Angry Penguins from Adelaide. I found them in the University of Western Australia library and started reading them. I had a subscription to Angry Penguins and probably to Meanjin. So some of the poems appeared in some of those little magazines. There was one magazine from South Australia called Poetry, run by a guy called Flexmore Hudson. It was just a poetry magazine, the only one I can think of which just published poetry. But it was Angry Penguins which introduced me to poets I wouldn’t probably have known about, and painters too for that matter, Nolan and Tucker and all those people. Angry Penguins published translations of Rimbaud and Verlaine, and Lorca.

Did the Ern Malley poems, albeit later, influence you in any way?

Oh yes, enormously. Ern Malley broke like an explosion. There was an American magazine that came out called Voices I had a poem in that — I can’t remember how it got there — but that was when the Ern Malley poems were published in America, through that book. I’ve got a copy of it still.

I read these (I’d read them before anyway in Angry Penguins) and they just blew my mind. I thought, “This is fantastic stuff, this is the sort of thing I want to do.” Then of course the whole story broke; the viciousness of the reaction was incredible. All the conservatives and reactionaries in Australia, not only in the writing scene but everywhere else, clapped their hands with glee and delight. Yet there are some very great things in those poems. Neither McAuley nor Stewart would ever admit it was anything but a joke. But it was much more than that.

It makes me think of lines in your poem on Robert Creeley, “depersonalise the world in abstract words”.

That’s a quote from Creeley.
Were you quoting him ironically?

No, I wasn’t. What had happened was I joined the Communist Party, sort of at nineteen, but then dropped out and joined properly when I was twenty-two, and then the whole force of the thought-police descended upon me. The dogma: all you are allowed to write is socialist realism — which I find extremely difficult to cope with.

I can imagine!

It virtually silenced me for something like eight or nine years. I wrote no poetry really at all. I felt terribly marginalised, shut out from the kingdom. Sounds very romantic, but that’s what I thought. I didn’t know what to do about it — it was like two basic things in my life finally clashed tremendously, and I crawled out from under and became a poet again. Because of that experience of being told that to write about one’s personal experiences was not permissible, I’m nervous about anyone telling me that now. What happened was a whole explosion of poems about my own personal experience, very late on; I was about forty-something by this time, and suddenly I was writing the poems that had lain dormant for years. Involvement with the Communist Party had a disastrous effect on my writing. Now, I think, it’s subsumed into my whole life and I can look at it in a much more rational way. But at the time — I was a dumb person, all I ever wrote were pamphlets and stuff like that, and a couple of absolutely appalling poems which I don’t even care to remember. It was not so much disastrous for me as a person, but disastrous for me as a writer. Except that it gave me experiences; a whole lot of things happened to me which afterwards became very important to me.

Do you think that experience of being spiritually closeted, not being able to express the ‘wild’ side of you, reflects as well in a poem like ‘The Puritans’?

Yes, exactly. That’s what that poem’s about. And a family containing things, things having an allotted space. Yes. But “depersonalising the world”. I’ve come to Sydney, I’ve almost written this book, *Rapunzel in Suburbia*, which is the first full-on book I’ve actually written; and there’s Bob [Adamson] and [John] Tranter saying, “You don’t write about personal experience, you’ve got to abstract yourself. You’ve got to do this cerebral thing.” I thought, “Christ, am I wrong? I’ve just started doing this, I’m being stopped almost before I’ve even begun.” We used to argue about this, Bob and I particularly, till four or five in the morning. I’m sticking my heels in and
saying, “This is what I want to do.” But it did affect me, and that Creeley poem is the example of it, because in there I say, “I want my negative capability.” What I’m really saying is I’ve never had the bloody negative capability.

You say “I am my life.”

But at the beginning I say, “There is no me, no autobiography, no statue to shit on turning green.” So — “depersonalise the world in abstract words” is not being satirical. I’m trying to come to terms with that whole concept of writing, of poetry.

You’re having a conversation here with the concepts of modernity and also popular culture? Yes, the whole sixties thing. When I wrote that poem I thought I’d done something quite different, quite interesting.

And ‘The Puritans’, and the closeting?

When I wrote ‘The Puritans’, I was debating with myself at that stage whether to leave the Communist Party, which I’d been in for twenty-three years; a hell of a long commitment to anything. All sorts of things had happened — the Russians’ tanks had gone into Czechoslovakia, the Hungarians had had their revolution, Stalin’s crimes had all been reported in the Kruschev report. When I wrote that poem I was still actually in the Communist Party with one toe, and that’s about it. I was fighting very hard within it — Merv and I both were. I still believed (he was not so Utopian as me) that perhaps we could change the whole thing from within and make something much more democratic.

So then, the poem was really written out of considerable anguish about all this. Communism was like a religion, it was like being a Catholic or something — not that I’ve ever been one, but I imagine it was. You did feel guilty: you’d given all your youth to this, virtually, and further than your youth. You’d sacrificed a whole lot of things. I’d fought with my family, who were mostly conservative, extremely so (my father wasn’t so much). I’d dropped millions of friends along the way, because the Communist Party was like a closed shop; you went into it and you were friends with Communists and you didn’t know anybody else. This was your life.

Suddenly you were going to walk out, you were going to be alone in the world again. When I joined the Communist Party it was just after I’d tried to commit suicide, when I swallowed Lysol in that incredibly Victorian gesture. [The Party] kind of saved me, it was like the bloody road to Damascus. It sounds ridiculous now, but this is how it was, it was that important. It was life or death. When it came to
leaving I thought, “If I go back into the world without this shield, this system of belief, how am I going to cope with the world? Am I going to fall apart again?” I didn’t know. But then I knew I had to go, I couldn’t stay in this — what do I call it? — an iron maiden. I had to go and take a chance in the world. Luckily by this time I’d gone back to university, I’d started writing again, and so I had another religion, which was writing.

Since we are speaking of the past, do you think that the quality of an experience, of a “spot of time”, a moment, remains unblemished by time, that it remains pure in its own right?

In a sense I think it becomes purer because the dross falls off it, and you’re able to view it from a distance, the very piercing heart of it.

Do you think to give it that extra life you have to place it in a referential framework, as in the ‘Alice’ poems?

Yes, I do think that.

Does that happen generally throughout your work, that “superqualifying”, making the more pure moment stand out?

Yes, I think it does; sometimes it’s more successful than other times.

Among your recent poems, a really effective piece is ‘The Murderers’. The reader laughs as you begin, and is then caught wondering, “What am I laughing at?” It gets grimmer and grimmer. It’s as if someone comes from the future into the past to tell you what to beware of; there’s this qualifying of time by moving time around.

Yes — I love doing this. I like to make patterns of things and I think that’s one of the ways that I do it. Because I’ve lived quite a long while now I’ve got a lot of stuff that I can refer to, backwards and forwards. I think that what happens as you get older — or old! — is that the past becomes remarkably clear. I didn’t realise this would happen, but it does. Like seeing something, not in a glass darkly at all, but illuminated in the most extraordinary fashion. If you can take that and move it to now, you’ve got that patterning, self-referential sort of method which to me is what binds my poetry together. I’ve got to have a binding agency, and that to me is the central binding agency of what I do. So it becomes a pattern of the world, of life.

So instead of a poetry of autobiography which is about recounting what has happened, it’s a poetry about the qualifying nature of time, about how a history actually comes into focus
with its passing — the opposite to autobiography in a way, because it’s reinventing every moment.

It is. It’s also playing ducks and drakes with time. Time, in the sense of static time, doesn’t really exist at all. It’s like a tremendous game.

With regard to the beginnings of your poems, could you talk about your reading influences, as a child for instance?

My family were not interested in poetry. There were lots of books in the house but they were mostly novels and biographies and stuff like that. I led a very isolated childhood, myself and my sister, two kids on a two-thousand-acre wheat and sheep farm — couldn’t go to school, couldn’t get across the creeks because they flooded in the winter. It was only a little school, anyway, that kept on closing. So we had correspondence lessons.

We hardly saw other children except occasionally on Saturdays when we went into the little township, a place called Yealering, Lake Yealering. So the imagination and books were our lives, as well as typical things like riding horses, naming everything in the creek. We made this whole life, and looking back I realise that it was a very strange life in a way, because for me there’d never been a split (as I think there is for lots of people, for Australians) between the mythology of other countries and my own. In other words, reading Grimm’s fairytales, and Hans Andersen’s, I quite unselfconsciously transferred those myths into the Australian bush with no sense of strain. So that the gum trees might become Grimm’s giant.

There’s no cordon sanitaire separation between the Arcadian idyll (which you refer to often in quotes), the ideal Europeanised landscape — and what was there. It was all integrated?

That’s right. It wasn’t an artificial thing. So when people say, “That’s a mythologised, invented landscape”, it’s not, it’s actually a very real, solid landscape. It was. But all these other reading experiences were absorbed into it, quite unselfconsciously, with no sense of strain. Which I think I still do, actually. I think I learnt to do that then, when I was a very small girl, only five or six when I can first remember writing down a poem. A very bad one, but still!

Can you remember it?

No! I used to ‘write’ things before I could write. I used to wake my mother and father up to write them down, they used to do it for me. Pretty amazing when you
Then my mother bought me a book on prosody, and I loathed and detested it. I remember throwing it in a corner in a rage, and she said I was very ungrateful. It was very stiff prosody rules and I was not prepared to accept them at all. That was the beginning of my reading, I suppose. The only books I can remember in the house that had anything to do with poetry were a book that belonged to my grandfather, that was bound in morocco and very fancy with gold-decked edges which was Tennyson's *Collected Works*, which I learnt masses of, off by heart, and it influenced me enormously at the time, and for a long time afterwards I suspect. The other one was Adam Lindsay Gordon's *Ballads*. And *A Child's Garden of Verses* by Robert Louis Stevenson. That was it, really. Then when I got to school at Perth College we had a rather amazing teacher who was an M.A. from Oxford, a headmistress, who taught us English Literature. I got a prize when I was sixteen for English: that rather maligned book edited by Yeats, the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, which I absolutely loved.


*Did you actually use it in your teaching?*

No, never. The book I used was another marvellous book. I was introduced to it when I went to university when I was seventeen — the *Faber Book of Modern Verse*, another fantastic book. Yeats wasn't very sympathetic to Eliot, whereas the Faber book was full of Eliot. Eliot influenced me enormously, just as he did John Tranter. You can even, I think, in my early poems, pick up cadences of Eliot, as you can in John's. Still I find them coming back every now and again. You can't copy Yeats, but you can copy Eliot.

*This is very true, it's the age we live in now, where you can pull things together; Eliot set the tone for the whole century. I wonder to what degree the idea of the twentieth century, as distinct from other eras, affects your work. Sydney to you must represent in some ways the 'New World', coming from Western Australia. Can you talk about that split, the 'Old World' which is essential to your writing, and the 'New World', being able to look out from it and being among the popular culture; how it affects your vision?*

It's odd now, because for nearly three years we've lived up here in the Mountains, and sometimes I get this extraordinary feeling that I've marginalised myself, that I've
come up here in the Blue Mountains to escape from the world of Sydney because I
couldn't hack it anymore. In a sense I think it's true.
When I first came to Sydney I was twenty-six (I came with this lover that went mad)
and it was a tremendous experience; I'd wanted to go to Sydney for a very long time.
I'd wanted to go anywhere out of Perth. I still don't like Perth much — I like the
country — but I can't stand that parochial self-congratulatory, what I call "corrupt
innocence". At least in Sydney it's all up-front, you know what sort of shit you're
in. It's also got tremendous energy, a kind of ozone, whereas Western Australia is
very laid-back.

Don't you think though that for someone with a volatile and vibrant personality Sydney's
in-your-face energetic style can be a bit dangerous?
Yes, I do. I lived there the first time for nine years, and then escaped back to
Western Australia, not because I wanted to, but because I had nowhere else to go
with three children. And the second time, about eighteen years in Sydney. It's now
twenty-one years since I left Perth the last time.

It was enormously exciting to me. I arrived, there were two people I wanted to
know: Robert Adamson and Michael Dransfield. By the time I got there Dransfield
was dead. Robert Adamson was still alive. It took me about six months to meet
Bob. I found him in Rodney Hall's house; we went to dinner there. Bob arrived
with his arms full of beer bottles, and came in and sat on the floor, and we started
talking, and we never stopped for about eighteen years!

There were two strands in my life: one was the theatre, because I've always written
for that, so there were always actors and directors, those people, and playwrights —
which he scorns, he hates the theatre really. On the other side were the poets, and
the singers, musicians, people like that. He [Bob] introduced me to all those people,
virtually. Tranter introduced me to a few but it was mostly Bob. And they came to
our house, and our house was [a meeting place]. It had been, in a sense, in Perth;
our house was always full of young writers in the sixties. It was as if I was living the
myth I'd never had — in my forties. It was terribly suborning. But it was also very
important in many ways; it gave me a new lease of life, I think.

In that group in Sydney in the early days with Tranter and Adamson and the crew, was
there a consciousness of you being a woman poet? Or was it more a matter of just being a
poet among lots of poets?

Much more a matter of being a poet among lots of poets. My daughter Kate [Lilley]
said to me the other day that it always made her sick, even then, that there were so few women that ever came to the house — they were all young men. And this is absolutely true. The same thing in Western Australia really; there were a few women poets, but very few. I feel slightly guilty about it now, because I think I must have been emanating some sort of persona which didn’t attract these young women; it attracted the young men. They’d come to our house and the others didn’t. Did I not make the others welcome? What was it all about — did I want to be the queen?

I think that many young male poets are longing for something to dedicate themselves to, whether they say it or not, and they’re attracted to a powerful feminine figure. That’s very outdated, but I think it’s true still, just hidden under semantics.

I think it’s true. It might sound very vain and self-centred, but I think that’s what I was. I always had very good relations with my students, with few exceptions. I always found no difficulty in relating to people who were twenty years younger than me. In fact, I found it much easier to relate to people twenty years younger than to people of my own age, and still do. I don’t know why; it’s just a fact of life.

How do you feel about the idea that you’re something of an icon to some feminists, in poetry and certainly in other fields as well?

Nervous!

But you really did, in the context of Australian verse, liberate women to say things that they could say but wouldn’t necessarily get published, allowing a generation of younger women to write.

I don’t really believe that one human being can have that much effect on a period or a whole lot of people. I think I had some, sure. The responsibility that that puts upon me as a person is pretty full-on.

It is; but don’t you think that with something like the Collected, that you are separated and put at a safe distance? It finally frees you from those kinds of responsibilities, from answering these sorts of questions!

Yes, but I look at that [the Collected] and it terrifies me! It’s a nice feeling, but it’s a very mixed feeling. A feeling that in some way this is it.

You’ve made a major statement here, whether you like to call it a statement or not. Isn’t that liberating?
I've only had it a week or so! I don't know — I hope very much that you're right and it will do that. At the moment I feel slightly overwhelmed by the whole thing, and pretty nervous. I suppose what I hope that book will do is lay some of the canards: that I can only write autobiographical poetry, that I'm a completely wrapped-up-in-myself, ego-conscious person.

Your very ironic cover has a go at people who say these things.

That's right. Bill Grono sent me as a joke a postcard that he'd discovered in the West Australian Art Gallery, by this guy who did a series of kitsch paintings for the West Australian tourist trade round about the late thirties. We'd been talking about what was going to be on the cover. Covers and the way a book looks are tremendously important to me; I share this with Bob. I think that a poetry book that looks awful has defeated its purpose — it should look fantastic.

I was looking at this and laughing about it, and suddenly I thought, "That's the cover." And I rang Bill up and said, "You know that postcard: you might think I'm mad, but that's the cover." He said, "What?" and then, "Well, I did vaguely think of that but I thought no one would get the joke." He was worried they would take it at face value. I said, "Fuck them, if they take it at face value, too bloody bad." Because I became more and more entranced with the idea as I went on talking about it. Merv was against it, because he said I was sending myself up. I said, "That's the whole point." He said, "You're always sending yourself up." I said, "That's right. All the people who don't get the joke, they're just plain dumb."

You always do send yourself up, and that's anti-egotistical. Surely your work is about defeating the ego. Not about defeating the spirit, but the way people make something solid out of it — "we can market 'Dorothy' as this." Also a lot of people don't realise that you can actually joke and be serious at the same time.

That's right, dead right. The irony of that cover is why I like it so much. This Lolita-like little girl standing there looking very sexy, with her skirt flowing in the wind like that Marilyn Monroe still. All that's there, plus all the West Australian icons — the kangaroo paws and the leschenaultias. I liked it tremendously.

Tom [Flood, Dorothy's son] was saying earlier you do a "Merlin-thing" — one of the entrancing ideas in your work is that of the yellow wheat, the dead plant, growing green again.

"The yellow wheat turned green in winter"
Can you talk about that line, because it seems to epitomise what Tom was observing in his comment?

It's like reversing the cycle; from green to gold, from gold to green. Round the other way.

So the Collected is not an end. Rather, here you are gold and about to turn green again; you've created your own answer, you are a product of writing as much as you are the person who produces the writing.

Yes, but how did this happen? I find this a mystery. Why do people become writers, what happens? Someone comes out of a background where nobody writes anything (I've seen it over and over again), nobody even dreams of writing anything, and suddenly there's a writer. What is this mysterious thing?

Yes. It's remarkable. I'm interested in the source of these things.

What poets do is they take from their backgrounds what they want, and they invent what they haven't got. So it doesn't matter much: whatever's there, they use, and whatever they don't want, they discard. And then they transfer it into some other thing. Whatever it is, it's just grist for the mill.

It's as Kathleen Stewart was saying, the 'bower bird' mentality. Gathering bits and pieces and using them. Which brings us back to the notion of the Collected. Can you tell us something about the arrangement of the actual contents?

When Windmill Country, which was my first book, came out at the ripe old age of forty-five what it contained were poems going right back to when I was eighteen. There was nothing to say that these poems hadn't all been written last week. So it's a most peculiar collection because it's not homogeneous at all. It's just bits taken from all that time before that have survived, and then added on to what I was writing at the time that the book came out, which was 1968. Bill and I, when we came to do the Collected Poems, decided mostly that we would do it by books, which makes sense. But when we got to the very first book we couldn't do this, because it didn't make sense. So we started to do it chronologically. We destroyed that book, virtually; we tore it up. We forgot about it. And I started dating the poems as far as I remembered chronologically. Or that happened when we found them in either the Pelican or the Black Swan or — some magazine or other!

I think I managed to do it fairly accurately; sometimes by remembering how one image carried on to another. There's my one and only religious poem called 'Christ
and the Cock', which came from reading D.H. Lawrence about Christ rising up from the grave. I was able to make the link with that poem — when it was written. (Often they were published at times long after they were written, or not published at all, in fact.) Then there's another early poem, something about "the red cock crowing in Christ's brain", and I knew I couldn't have written that line unless I'd already read the Lawrence book.

So when I'm asking about your reading influences, they're actually so important that in a sense your own verse is 'plotted' by them.

Oh, quite often. Yes. And I think this probably came from the fact that when I was a child. I lived so much through books, because there wasn't any other companionship much, and that was the enlargement in that world for me, or the way to interpret it.

You say you read a lot of biographies now. Do you think that you do that to 'get inside'? In To Kill A Mockingbird there's that line about Jed getting inside someone else's skin, to "walk around with Boo Radley's skin." Do you feel that way?

Absolutely. I'm trying to write a poem now — it still hasn't come together properly — about Frank O'Hara, because I've just finished reading a biography of Frank O'Hara. I've called it 'Another Try At Frank O'Hara', because I've had about seven tries! So far, I haven't got it properly.

It seems this process of removal from yourself to look back at things is the same as going from Perth to Sydney and looking back at that landscape. So there's this constant process of removal to look closer, through your art generally.

So that's why the beginning of the book is structured like that, why it says, 'Another Beginning'. It was another beginning. I started off writing those early poems, and they're there, and then there's this long hiatus, nine years or something when silence falls, total silence, and then I begin again writing some of those poems. The first poem I wrote that ever satisfied me at all when I started writing again was 'Once I Rode with Clancy'. And I think the second one was 'Because There is A Lovely Mrs Burns'.

In your poetry, outside the polemical material that you've discarded, would you say that there's ironically, or referentially, or directly, any notion of politics, as an entity that's manipulable in your verse?
The whole question of politics now I see as a question of power. And I'm very suspicious of power. I think that those people, usually men, who wield power have to be watched extremely carefully. Usually their agenda is extremely questionable. Therefore I think I'm very close to being an anarchist, actually.

The notion of political power you would always refer back to the politics of the body. In the poem, 'Politician', you say, "the old cock lies limp between his legs" — we know the source of men's power. Would you say the untalked-about things, the unseen things, the way the body interacts with another body, are the foundation stones of all political notions? Yes, absolutely.

Moving into something related but different: 'The Mandelstam Letters'. Could you talk about them in the context of your political involvement?

The beginning of 'The Mandelstam Letters' has to go back to a poem called 'Hidden Journey', which was the poem that I wrote when I came back from the second time I went to the Soviet Union, which was in 1965, when the scales were falling and I knew a lot more than I had when I first went, which was in 1952. I thought, "I've got to come to terms with this". It's a poem of intense disillusionment, and deeply critical of what's going on, and of politics generally, that one. It was published in Overland, to an amazing outcry of hatred from the true faithful still in the Communist Party. Quite extraordinary. A woman who had been in charge of Australian delegations in Russia, in Moscow, Oxana Trubaskaya, came to Western Australia with a couple of Russian writers, pseudo-writers really, given that okay by the State. She came to see me when I was teaching at the University (she'd gone around with us when we were in Russia). And she said to me, "You wrote that poem; that's the sort of poem that you put in the bottom drawer, but you never publish it." And I thought, "Exactly. Exactly." That's that mindset, you know? I said, "Not me. Forget it. This isn't Moscow, this is Australia."

It was enormously liberating for me, and it caused a lot of people who were still Communists to loathe me. They considered me an apostate, a Judas, the whole bit. The hatred that happened is amazing. But that was the beginning. That was me walking out on the whole thing, really. Then, again, I read the two biographies of Mandelstam's wife. They're wonderful. This so affected me. I always felt a certain amount of guilt, too, because I felt that I had, inadvertently or not, out of sheer cussedness or blindness or whatever you do, helped to kill these people. Because I had never spoken out. I'd never believed the stories, I'd thought it was all calumny.
against the Revolution, that the Americans had made it up or something. Reading this extremely heartfelt and honest biography by her, getting the whole story, just acted as a catalyst.

I remember I was staying then on the Hawkesbury River in this holiday place, and I went out on the verandah one day and thought, “I must write this poem, I’ve got to write it. And I must write it in such a way that I try various experiments” — like those split lines and all the rest, which I’d never tried before. You can read them across or down. I became absolutely fascinated by all the technical problems of this. I had a whole exercise book full of notes (which I often do, a hangover of being a student) from this book, her biography. Sometimes it worried me because I thought, “Is this a literal translation of what she said, or have I just made a note here? Am I making this up or did she say it?” I didn’t know, and I decided I didn’t bloody care. If I was pinching part of her words, okay, that was fine. So it was a compilation and an appropriation. It’s very much that. I wrote it all in about three days, and then I played around with it for a few weeks or so. Then this competition was coming up and I thought, “I’ll put it into it.” And that’s how it happened.

It’s unusual in your oeuvre, and for me it’s a point around which all your work moves.

It was tremendously important for me to write that poem, because I felt in control. I had a new sort of control of material that I don’t think I achieved before that. I think that what often used to happen in my poetry was it would come with a rush and then it would stop and I would invent several lines to get me off again. It was a drug — a rush, and then it would stop, and then you’d write a few lines as linkages, and then you’d rush yourself off again.

Can you make a comment about what you’ve included in the “New Poems”, and how they relate to what you’re possibly working on now?

I’ve written about forty-three poems so far, and it’s going to be called From the Dark Cottage because I think this is the ‘dark cottage’, and all those other connotations that dark cottages have: death, old age.

In the fairytale of one’s life, one finally ends up in the witch’s house in the woods.

Yes, the gingerbread house. As most poets do, I like to have form in a poetry book. I’m very careful how I put the poems in, the way they relate to each other, and sections. So far, it’s just all random.
Now I'm going to 'wind back' by asking you about the landscapes of Western Australia.
You're using my methods now!

Yes, I admire those methods! To me, the 'golden wheat going green' is my whole poetic philosophy in a nutshell. Not a lot more needs to be said. But getting back to Western Australia: what are your attitudes to the censorship your work has suffered there?

Actually there are two mutilated poems in that collection [Rapunzel in Suburbia], and two that have disappeared altogether. I suppose the average person would say that's not much. But to me it is a constant fury that these poems have been destroyed and that the other ones exist in a truncated sort of fashion. It was a great shock to me when it happened. Rapunzel in Suburbia came out, I went across to Monash in Melbourne to do the first writer-in-residence I'd ever done, and Bob [Adamson] rang there and said, "I don't know how to tell you this, but your ex-husband is suing you for the poems in this book". I thought he was joking: some macabre joke.

But of course it wasn't, it was dead serious. I couldn't believe it. That Lloyd Davies would do this, the person that I'd known. I couldn't come to terms with it at all, it didn't seem to make sense. Because I'm so totally, absolutely and completely against censorship of any kind of anything, that it's beyond my comprehension how anyone can believe in it, I can't understand it. I believe in total freedom. I hate the tendencies toward censorship in the women's movement. It horrifies me. I don't believe in censoring pornography or any bloody thing. Let it all get out there. It's all part of being human. So this was an affront to me. I couldn't fight it, because I didn't have the money, and Lloyd was a barrister and could get all his legal stuff free.

To this day, although people have told me that those poems are extremely cruel, I can't understand why he took them so incredibly personally. As if I was attacking some central part of his being.

It was all extremely painful. Bob was marvellous about it all, and very angry about it, and he arrived in Perth at one stage while this was going on and got subpoenaed at the airport by a couple of guys, and he tore it up in their faces. This is how he was met. They were going to sue him for publishing those poems. There was nothing we could do about that book, so we decided to reprint the book, taking out the one poem which was being objected to, and I wrote another in its place, which was a bit cheeky, but it wasn't libellous. And we brought it out again, in a cheaper paperback. So then he [Lloyd Davies] discovered three more poems that he
objected to, plus the new one I’d written, and said that the whole book had to be changed. We couldn’t afford to print the bloody thing again, couldn’t afford to go to court. We went to the High Court, and bits of it were read in Parliament and God knows what. Rather a strange ending for a poem! I became notorious, and all that stuff, and the book disappeared. It still exists under the counter in some bookshops. No libraries are allowed to stock them, either edition.

That was a great blow because that was the first book in which I came to terms, I think, with modernism. I really engaged with it, and therefore it was tremendously important to me. If you take that out of all the books, there’s a big gap. You think, “How did this poet get from here to here?” There’s a big gap in the middle. I did exactly the same thing as a playwright. I wrote a play called ‘This Old Man Comes Rolling Home in ’65’, and that was a sort of mixture of realism and symbolism that hadn’t quite got together. Then, having come to Sydney I read all the new plays I could get hold of, mostly American and English, and wrote a play called ‘Mrs Porter and the Angel’, which engaged with all the new movements in drama, at exactly the same time that I was writing Rapunzel in Suburbia. So it was all happening in my head then, and it was an enormously important period, and changed everything I wrote from then on.

And the two poets who were central, I suppose, to that whole thing were Lowell and Berryman. Berryman was the main one, Berryman’s Dream Songs which I found enormously liberating. Lowell’s Life Studies.

What does the landscape of Western Australia symbolise to you now? You’ve gone through this process of resurrecting and burying — in your paradise-garden and salt-waste dynamic, where does it sit now?

It’ll always be central. I’ll never escape from it; I’m forever circling around it.
“My dad’s in tractors,” said Jerry, when he was nine.

Where the dad worked was a large building with the name of the company in blocked squares on the roof, you could see it from an aeroplane when you flew over. All around was paddocks. It was here, Mop thought, that the Dad must drive the tractors, although first he would change into something more appropriate than the sharp edged suits he wore, the ties.

“My Dad drives tractors,” Mop told them at school.

“Where? What for?”

“In the paddock at work.”

“Your Dad’s a farmer.”

“No, he’s a tractor driver.”

When they were small they went to Sydney on the train (chocolate sauce on the breakfast sausages! they rolled on the plate. Mop would never forget). The train was called the Southerner Roarer, it bellowed when they left Spencer Street. Sam, who was only young, yelled with it.

They went to Sydney to the tractor display, moved like dwarves through that strange and giant land. Everywhere were leaning glass sculptures, and in between, the tractors. The sun belted down, was broken by the glass, it spilt everywhere, bounced off and blinded you. Yellow and blue, blue and yellow. There were men in white overalls, smiling and leaning, walking around. You could hardly see them for the machines.

Mop felt as if she had only learned to walk, that if it weren’t for her father standing there, she might topple onto her back, gazing up in surprise, amazed to have discovered the world beyond her own toddling height.

They were so big, like monuments, you could tell they would last forever.

“Earth moving equipment,” the Dad called them, Mop could feel the earth
shudder, just his saying the name. It was a good job, being in tractors, if this was what it was all about.

But there was another part to his work. The Dad brought people home for dinner parties, his business associates, strange and corporate men. Some were just awful, and the Mum was not afraid to say it.

The Dad said, “I know, but we have to have them, it’s part of the job.”

“Entertaining people like Jack Newbury?”

“It’s PR. It’s because of the American firm. We’ve got to liaise.”

“I’d like to see what you’d say if I started bringing home some of my customers,” said the Mum.

“Heaven forbid,” said the Dad.

Jack Newbury. He leaned back in the chair and said to Mop, scotch please, a whisky, and Mop saw how his hair was thinning fast, it could not hide that terrible soft pinkness on the front of his head.

“He wanted two drinks,” said Mop to the Mum, “but I can’t remember what they were.”

“Oh Mop,” said the Mum, who was two women, Mum in the kitchen, and Mum in the dining room. At the dinner table, Mop saw her upside down in the spoons, leaning forward, different to the way she was in the kitchen, when she pushed back her hair with her wrists, said, “This pav’s just hopeless, quick Mop, more cream,” and all the while large voices coming through the door.

There was also the wife of Jack. Mrs Newbury had her sunglasses pushed back in her hair, like a fly, she made everything seem so bad. You got the feeling, listening to her, that soon the world was going to end, but while you were waiting for that to happen, you should not trust anyone.

“Not a soul,” said this woman, stabbing her fish. “Not a one.”

The children looked at her, bug-eyed.

“Watch for bones,” said Mrs Newbury. “I knew a man was killed.”

You could see the powder on her face, and underneath, the skin.

“We have to invite her,” said the Dad to the Mum, “she’s Jack’s wife.”

On these nights, Mop could feel their own politeness, they put it on with their uncomfortable clothes. For the evening Margaret and Jerry and Sam were the children of Laurie and Hahn (what nice children!), carrying plates, full, empty, from the kitchen. Because they helped, there were pickings, special dinner things, and coffee sugar (it tasted like hiccups) to be pinched from the black flower bowl.

Once Mop stood at the bench in the kitchen with the remainder of the pasta, ate
every last noodle, that slippery tastelessness. She had to run down the hall to be sick, noodles only half-chewed, up they slid. The Mum didn’t come to rub her back because she was entertaining.

“Whatever’s the matter, Mop?” asked the Mum when Mop returned white and scrubbed, said no to the Mum’s special cake, which Mop herself had decorated, the cherry halves running round and round, in like a snail.

It was Dil Thorne that time to dinner and he winked at her as if he knew. But she could not return it, that chink of skin closing and opening.

Dil Thorne was different, he was nice, a travelling man. First he lived in America, and now it was Japan. He brought gifts for them, baseball caps, now a rolling Japanese woman for Mop, and a little vase.

“What’s that?” said Jerry, “a blowfly?”

“It’s a locust.” said the Mum, “isn’t that nice?”

And it was, the light shone through that vase, it was small enough to hold three dandelions, their nodding heads, and a trickle of sunshine.

“Say thank you,” said the Mum.

“She already did,” said Dil, “kids that age.”

“Thank you, Dil,” said Mop, and he winked.

This long sadness of Dil’s. He winked at you, even out of a still face, a falling downwards face. He was so big, but you wanted to take his hand. As if he wasn’t used to being happy.

“Where is his wife?” Mop asked the Dad.

“She died,” he said, “when you were small. We wanted her to be the godmother of Sam, but then she died.”

“Was Dil sad?” asked Mop.

“He upped roots and travelled,” said the Dad, “he never stopped.”

The Dad had known Dil for a long time, long before they began to work for the tractor company. They met each other when the Dad was new in Australia. There was a photo of Dil on a wall, he was standing up, broad as a barrel even then, far broader than the wall which held him up. This wall was out the back of the mill where they both worked. (If I can’t hear properly it’s because of that Mill, Dil said.) The Dad kept this picture on his desk.

In the photo, Dil was waving: was the man behind the camera the Dad? Anyway, he waved and grinned. At the bottom of the wall were their shoes. You could see it was hot, the sun made the faces of the man dark like wood.

Dil lived in hotels, he stretched out his legs when he was in Melbourne, relaxed
in the wide chairs in the lounge.

"My home away from home," he said.

Dil had hardly any hair on his head, just a dusting of greyness if you squinted your eyes. Somehow, though, it did not matter with him.

"If I had a daughter," said Dil, but he didn't, and always brought flowers for the Mum.

Dil was the godfather of Sam, and sent him special gifts, but there was a famous story with Dil and Jerry, aged eight, who punched one of his guests at his garage birthday party and ran away from home. Dil met him running down the street. They sat for a long while on the curb, the big man and the small boy.

"It's not a habit you want to get into, running away," said Dil. "Once you start, it's hard to stop."

"I don't care," said Jerry, stirring up gutter water, making a storm for the leaves.

"You have to eat grass sandwiches," said Dil.

"Grass sandwiches," said Jerry. The stick stopped.

Although Jerry was too old to take Dil's hand, he came home with him, and the party went on.

"I knew Dil would know what to do," said the Mum at Jerry's party (she'd put ice on the guest). "He always does."

Dil was wise, because he had seen so many things. That's what he said when you asked him.

It was Mop who helped the Mum before the dinner parties.

"I'd much rather be — " said Mop, prodding on cherries. Her fingers were stained purple. "And anyway where are the boys."

"Sam's going to set the table in a minute," said the Mum, "Jerry's helping Dad."

"Why do I have to?" Mop asked, "I can think of a thousand things."

"Because," said the Mum, dashing string from the beans, there they fell, like some old garden, "it is important to support your father. We are a family, we do things together."

"But why," said Mop, "feeding that old march fly."

"You're being childish," said the Mum.

They were not laughing, either of them, everything's coming apart, thought Mop, pushing the cherries close together.

She watched her mother drain potatoes, the careful drop swoop into the sink so that the water ran out and the potatoes stayed.
Do you want me to help or not.
Do you want to help me or not.
“Don’t worry,” said Mop, “I’ll help.” Stabbing cherries. She dripped juice onto
the floor.
“For heaven’s sake,” said the Mum, “whatever is the matter with you. You used
to like helping me.”
Mop thought about that. It was true. Now she would much rather be — but
she didn’t have a plan. “Things were much simpler then,” she said.
“When?” said the Mum. She was beating the potatoes, spinning the butter in,
and salt and pepper.
“When I was small,” said Mop. She signed, she felt heavy and old.
“When you were small,” said the Mum, she was bent into the bowl, “you used
to lie in your bed and shriek because you didn’t want to die. I couldn’t wait until
you were a teenager.”
“I don’t remember that,” Mop said, but she did. She didn’t like to think about it.
And the doorbell came.
“Get that will you,” said the Mum, “perhaps it’s the march fly. Quick, out of the
way!” (a snowfall of peas), “I’ve still got mountains to do.”
A shrug for her, to show how she was unloved. Mop went for the door.
Through the window, she could see Dil in porch light. It lit him up all shadows,
the porch, and the long boxes he carried.
I’ll ask Dil, she thought, about the dying thing. Dil will know.
But she forgot, because someone small stepped out. Mop was staring through
the glass, she was looking at a woman.
Dil winked at her, he came in smiling, put the large flat boxes on the table in the
kitchen.
“Watch the pav,” said the Mum.
“I come bringing gifts,” he said, “for my family. But most important,” they stood
quite still, “this is Rose.”
They all looked at the petal woman. When she smiled, there was her face alight
with it.
“Hello,” she said, “Dil’s family,” and smiled.
Her English was not very good, Dil met her in Japan.
“I hope it’s no trouble,” said Dil.
“Trouble!” said the Mum. She was watching this woman, all breathless like
Mop, it was impossible to sit in the room and not feel her there.
Rose was not her real name. It was Keiko San. She made Mop think of the vase. Not even Mrs Newbury could spoil that evening.

"I am so glad I am not a mother," she said. "Imagine bringing young into the world, dying (for we all must die) and leaving then with this." A sweep, a flourish, she battled with the air. Her hands were older than her face.

And Dil was saying, "We might even start a family. Settle down. I've dreamed of that."

My Rose, he said. If she took my name! But I am happy, Hahn, I am content. Was this how they used to talk as young men out the back of the mill? Mop could see them in late twilight, the hairs on their arms shining in that last concentration of light. Only it would have been the Dad speaking then, Dil, I'm so happy!

Mrs Newbury's voice came over the top of the mill wall, like some raven calling, so Mop couldn't hear them, only saw those men talking, moth-soft their voices were.

The Mum raised her glass, she was all sparkly (not just in the spoons) and said, "To Dil, to Rose."

"To the future!" said Dil. Even though he was a big sad man, the glass trembled in his hand. It did not break, but shone, it was gold glass in candlelight.

Rose raised her glass, and bent her head, many thanks, she said. She smiled at the cake, brought the fork to her mouth. Silver and cherry and the woman's smiling face.

"Mop and I made that," said the Mum, although Rose surely could not understand a word.

Mop and I, Mum and me. Now they all sat together, the family, Jerry and the Dad and Sam, there was Rose, so beautiful, and Dil leaning in to her.

Mop watched and watched.

Not even the Newburys could spoil it. They left early.

"Tomorrow," said Dil, "we will return. It's not often I am here after all. It's not often we can share such things." He raised his glass and drank once more, a big man, a happy man.

On Sunday morning he took them to the reserve, with the long flat boxes. Rose came too, in a jacket with toggle buttons. It was quilted silk.

I will walk, she said in the bow of her head. You play with the children.

"This wind is marvellous!" said Dil. "I'll show you what to do."

He was a big man. He knelt in the grass with the children, down he went, and his body went forwards. But he took a kite from the box, his hands unfolded as the
kite grew, turned out black eyes, a gaping mouth.

“You’ll see,” he said, and when he stood up Mop imagined him amongst Japanese children, thrusting this kite into the air, letting it take the wind, and stream up, a tug. A big man standing in the grass, line invisible in his hands. To the children he would have seemed enormous. (Mop had an idea that Japanese children were very small.)

On that trip to Sydney, they met Dil in the hotel room. He must have flown in from America. Mop went walking with Dil and the Dad, they swung her up, one two! all the steps of the white bananas building that sat high above the water, and Dil pointed to the bridge, and the island where the prisoners used to be kept. He did not look so big to Mop after the tractors, she did not have to strain her neck.

Dil gave them a kite each.

“Now kids,” he said, and sat down to watch.

Down the hill fumbled the legs of the boys, running with their kites, and there was this bird Mop held, she drew her breath, up it swooped, like some eagle. Mop with the sky in her eyes, the wind in her hands. This is it! thought Mop.

“I’m flying!” she called to Dil, to the boys. She shouted to the man in the tossing wind, and flew and flew.

They lay on the hill after the kites, panting all of them, shrunken looking up to the sky.

“It might rain later,” said Sam.

“You don’t get to see the sky in Japan,” said Dil.

“But the sky is still there,” said Mop. She felt safe and small in the grass, on the side of the earth, lying next to Dil.

“It’s there, all right, you just don’t think to look.”

“It’s like Mum’s pav,” said Sam, opening on eye to clouds, the chopped up sky.

“Mum’s pav, that’s what I’m thinking of right now.”

“I’m thinking of nothing,” said Dil, “I’m a tired old man lying in the grass.”

But he opened his eyes. “Where’s Rose?” he said.

Then they all sat up and watched Rose return from her walking. When she came to the trees, she lifted her arm up to the branches as if she had not thought of doing it, withdrew her fist again from a downward handful of leaves, and the tiny fringed flowers, so pink.

So this is Rose.

Ahh, said Dil. His whole face lifted.

The wind came up. It turned their bodies into cardboard sheets. They bent with
it. Mop walked back to the car next to Dil, she took his hand. With the other arm she held the kite.

Wind gusts! Rose must have said.

"It's all right," said Dil, "I've got her!" His voice came booming out. He reached for Rose with his other hand.

Mop held on tight. Without Dil there, she could have been lifted off the hill.

* * *

It is not that day, but another day, when the phone rings, and there is nothing to say it is going to happen. The call comes in the afternoon, when the volume of the rain has been turned up and up, like the dial caught between stations, water roaring. They hardly hear the phone ringing above the rain.

"What is it?" asks the Mum. Suddenly they are all watching the Dad. "Hahn, what's the matter?"

"That was the hotel," says the Dad. "Dil has had a heart attack."

"Dil?" says the Mum.

"Dil?" they all say.

They stand and watch the Dad with the phone in his hand. What else can they do.

"It was massive," says the Dad, and Mop thinks, but he is such a big man.

"Is he all right?" asks the Mum.

But the Dad sits still and rain thrashes down.

After an age, he says, "I'm going in."

Mop's father bent over the bed talking low to Dil, the face of the man so sad and still.

"Poor Rose," says the Mum. "Poor Dil."

They have a special day for Rose, a picnic for her before she goes back to Japan. On that day leaves toss into the sky like curled up kites. You look at them, and your perspective goes, you think they are far away, those leaves, right far up in the sky.

The Dad puts his arm around the shoulders of Rose, and it looks too heavy.

He loved the wind, says Rose, it made his hair electric, the grey fringe all around his head, light and fluffy. She holds out her hands to the wind, the salt and pepper leaves spinning down. He loved your Australia. She is not saying this, because she does not have enough English — how can she say it — but they all see what she means.
What can we do but walk close like this, let the wind tug our hair?
What can we do, thinks Mop. Dil would have known.
In the reserve, where they walk, the wind lifts birds from the trees. With Rose there, they are flung all about, they describe the air with the patterns of their wings.

Martin Johnson

Forking silage

The tines were long and slender.
Each one curved to an alluring point. Sleek rounded steel prongs polished by the efforts of our work. The friction of our jab and heave through fodder flung from the gleaming tips as we bent our backs to fill the feeder bins

our torsos wet with sweat
in the hot sunset.

Thrust, jab and heave went the tines
in rhythm with our thoughts, dulling the danger of distance closing between our boots, and those sharp points skimming the red air between us like stones skipping over the surface tension of a pool

until the waves swallow them up like skin closing over a wound.
On Something

It's as if you're on something:
Drugs perhaps, but more likely
The world, a great big island

Floating in a sea of memory.
Your desert-island discs are
Stacked under the palms, but who

Needs music when you have the
Whispers of waves to put you
To sleep? The footprints by the

Shore could be yours or someone
Else's, but who can tell at
This hour of the day? A ship

Cruises by; you can hear a
Party on board. All of the
Passengers have got dressed up

To cross the equator. They're
Definitely on something
Which slips past you, but you don't

Care. This afternoon you're on
Fire, and for once your beacon
 Doesn't spell out 'S.O.S.'
Family Lore

We know little about our ancestors:  
They are like hapless but well-mannered ghosts  
Sitting at our genealogical  
Table, occasionally exhorting

Us with their silence to remember all  
That they did for us, all we have become.  
My sister's into marathons, she's the  
Only one who runs in the family.

The rest of us wear our bad habits as  
Conventionally as Carmelites.  
I have my father's eyes, my mother's sense  
Of humour: I can see jokes in the dark.

My brother thinks he has discovered what  
Makes us tick in the tall grandfather clock.  
The noble cat merely purrs indifference:  
He's the Egyptian king of our jungle.

Missing You

An echo without a source;  
A fine day when you are ill;  
Memories of childhood sadness;

The night train which never stops;  
A quiet house full of noise;  
Your empty clothes in the air;

Each day a day of the week;  
The story's end imagined  
Day after day after day.
The Same River

Serenity
Is the hardest God: 'Just
Give me everything and
I'm yours,' it says,

A voice you've heard
Once or twice; by the
River, perhaps, or the
Edge of a day

Which seemed to stretch
Into eternity,
When love and indifference
Bled into one.

But were they just
Moments in the story
Which has a hold on both
Sides of the old

Puzzle about
The river? Is it the
Same river? you ask yourself as you glide

Toward the ocean,
Seren e as the water:
A carving exploding
Over the stones.
Lake Louise

I keep the postcard propped against the wooden bowl on the kitchen table until an autumn wind blows it over. The Rockies fall face down, Lake Louise against yellowed pine. Your note is uppermost, the bold strokes a familiar invitation. Look, the lake, the message runs the mountains are melting into spring (Face down on the table) The squirrels are out and the warblers. And then the imperious, Come. I will wait no longer. I flip the card to stare at the improbable blue. We climbed the path above the lake up and up to the snowline, so over-dressed I felt like a stuffed bear. You bundled up and threw an icy snowball. Later you licked at the blood on my ear as we slipped and slid against each other in the hotel shower. I sit at the table drinking port, remember the snowy peaks, the blue triangular lake below. Come, you cry, your hands have written our story sliding from breath to blood. I want to reply but it’s autumn here and nothing changes except the nights grow longer, the mountains have lost their power to move, the lake is all played out. It glitters on the postcard like a splinter.
Post-Modern Blues

‘Life is first boredom, then fear’

—Philip Larkin

Perhaps you’d like to try that opening line
Again because it’s obvious from the way
You dress you don’t come here often or get
Out much anymore. And who can blame you?
Statistics show that even as I speak
Somebody’s being stabbed or shot or kicked
To death outside a nightclub not unlike
The one you’re in. Still, you need to get
Out every now and again don’t you? I mean
It does you good. You can’t stay home all of
The time now can you even if you do run
The risk of getting in a fight and being hit
Or suffering serious injury. Yet there’s
More chance of being run down by a car
Or struck by lightning don’t you think?
Hey you don’t say much do you?

Oh, but I do.
Or, at least, I once did. Now, what’s the point?
Maybe I’ve been married for too long and have lost
The art of conversation. Maybe the method for pulling chicks
Is different now. My ex now marks the spot and I
Find myself in unfamiliar territory, remembering
A street, a house, and lighted windows at dusk.

By now the dinner party guests
Have fallen to impressions of American sitcoms
(Homer himself hath been observ’d to nod...doh!) While the boys at the club are thinking of
Getting down to some serious drinking, being full
Of piss and wind, signifying fuck all.
Oh, our podded lives lead only to the softly spoken
Platitudes of hope. Is that the time?
It seems you no longer settle into a rhythm
You feel comfortable with when the little separations
Begin. Perhaps I’ll try that opening line again sometime —
It might just work the second time around.

Brady’s Glasshouses

Matthew Brady might have made
a killing with his glass plate images
of the first war to be photographed:
by its end, 950 000 men had died,
and Brady’s firm had taken at least
1 000 000 pictures. Honoured now as
a pioneer, at the time he went bankrupt,
and sold the unprinted plates to be used
in glasshouses. All around the newly-
united states, bland-faced young men
looked at each other across the potted
plants, haphazardly, sometimes facing
the enemy, sometimes turning away from
friends, sometimes shoulder to chipped
shoulder with the foe. For years, light
shone through every pane, turning it
transparent and functional at last,
as all those young warriors faded away.
Pots

Left in charge
of the azaleas
I feel them vaguely

to the days
out there on the
rim of summer,

the courtyard and its concrete
whitening with heat.
Classrooms and a screen at night

hold me in their
separate worlds
until, last thing,

I see the roots
as if in X-ray,
tendrils white

as ancient hair
and thirsty in the earth.
I hear them singing

in the pots,
thinly
through the terra cotta,

a cry just on the
edge of hearing
which lifts me slowly

from the sheets
and sets me down here
with the moon,
strooped somehow
    in expiation
    and penitent with can.

The Wave

Sleeping on the western edge
the wind in squalls against the gutters
the surf a shudder

rising through the floor
I dream the stillness of my death
one wave arrested in its fall

and hardened into plastic,
the silence between stars.
And now this one

immeasurable moment
held for me and me alone
before the wave for you who hear it

collapses into sound.
Deborah Watkins

Night-ride

G

RACE got appendicitis at Warrina. We lived in that small country town for some years after David was transferred there. She was only 18 months old. David said he was sure she had appendicitis, because he'd had it once in France, and the symptoms were the same. Doris said she had never heard of anyone so young having such a thing. The local doctor agreed with her. Meanwhile in the small hospital Grace became more feverish and screamed in pain, as they argued.

On the third night after David had shouted at her over dinner and Doris had remained mute, as she usually did, he threw down his knife and fork and flung off and away, leaving her weeping.

I was ten, then, and for the first, but not the last time in my life thought I would like to kill him for going to the pub at such a time.

Half an hour later he was back. He told Doris to get in the car he'd bought and they'd go and collect the child. I was to help the boys to dress and pack the suitcase with our pyjamas and toothbrushes and a few clothes. We watched them go off, and then did as we'd been told, all, for once, speechless.

It had been a stiflingly hot day in early summer and the thunderstorm broke as we set out for Perth.

The car he'd bought was an old ramshackle T-model Ford with a ragged hood and no side curtains.

Doris sat in the front seat beside him, holding the baby, by now comatose, with a raincoat over her head and the child. My brothers and I cowered in the back seat under the old rug David had thrown to us, sweltering but terrified to disobey his injunction not to get wet because one sick child was enough.

David drove like a madman over the corrugated gravel road, water streaming down
his face and right arm. He wore no hat or coat and had come as he was, still in his working clothes.

At Duraddin oaths and threats brought a reluctant storekeeper from his bed to pump petrol. At Grayling an initially truculent, then sympathetic policeman helped him to hose down the wheels which had begun to smoke from the speed and the lowering surliness of the night. From the back seat I heard the mutter that I thought my mother did not, “the child is dying”, and held my breath for so long that I thought I might die too.

Somewhere along the way David mended a puncture and then a blowout, swearing and crying as he did.

We bumped across the Causeway on bare iron rims as the sun came up, and Vivyan was waiting in the De Soto to take them to the hospital and us to the bliss that was always my grandmother’s house.

Deborah had already made the arrangements for Grace to be admitted to an exclusive private hospital for children that existed in Perth then and for an eminent children’s specialist of the time to be waiting there. Her appendix was removed at 8.30 a.m. and we were told that “peritonitis had set in”, and in later years that only the fact of the specialist attention had saved her life. Nothing was said about David’s part in the matter that I remember.

My grand mother paid the bills.

David went back to Warrina on the train the next day. As usual for him, he had been cheated in paying for the car. Before he left he took it to a scrap dealer and gave it to him. He had never owned a car and was not to own one again for twenty years. I doubt if he had a driver’s licence that terrible night.

Grace stayed in hospital for six weeks. David came back at the end of the week, having been granted his annual holiday early and three weeks extra without pay. They rented a house in Subiaco and my elder brother and I were enrolled at the school.

Every day they went to the hospital, and were allowed to look at her through a glass window but not to go in to her. That was the medical practice at the time. It was said the child would be less upset that way.

We had a passion vine that grew by the rainwater tank in Warrina. As soon as we came home David pulled it out and threw it in the rubbish bin. It had been the only green plant that grew in our arid yard.

When Doris remonstrated, he said the Doctor had told him Doris’s appendix was full of sand and green passionfruit. His tone dared her to argue. She said the Doctor hadn’t told her, but no more.

They always spoke the word Doctor with a capital letter.
She leaves the fan on in the bedroom and shuts the door behind her to keep the room cool. It is the only cool room in the house. In the kitchen she pours herself a glass of water, leans against the sink, looks out. Sheep country. Sheep and wheat country. Cracked and hard and dry and flat. Not her country. She had arrived as a teacher and had married a young farmer within the year. After a two-week honeymoon in the South-West he had brought her back here, planting a rose bush by the front gate to remind her of England. She had finished teaching then. It was not an unusual story. It had rained a month before the wedding and the place had been transformed. Waterbirds flocked to sudden lakes, frogs sang in the evening, green grass, wildflowers. She had worn a garland of paper daisies, woven by her students. The headmaster had given her away. It hadn't rained since then. The memory of the flowers fading like the flowers themselves. The garland hangs in the kitchen now, the weary petals scented with cooking smells. She listens to the hum of the scorched earth, the sound of the land singing to itself, biding its time, waiting. It could outwait them. It was barren, all of it barren, all of it. Except her. The baby kicks, taking her by surprise and making her choke on the water, coughing it back into the glass. Outside the saltpans dance in the shimmering haze. Geoff's meeting at the bank was for midday. It is not yet nine o'clock. It would be better if they left. There was nothing here, even the topsoil had gone. Nothing to keep them here but a handful of sheep and Geoff's stubbornness. Maybe when the baby came he would see that there was no future here, not for her, not for a child. A small group of sheep stands pulling at the hayrick. Ewes, two-year olds mostly,
born during the last rain. And an ancient ram that had won a prize at the Katanning Show when Geoff was still a kid. She watches them from the window. One of the ewes is lying down some distance from the others. Crows circle above it. Waiting. She takes a pair of binoculars from the drawer. The ewe is lying on its side, tongue out, straining, trying to give birth in the shadowless paddock. She puts the binoculars down.

It is only two hundred metres to the place where the ewe is lying but she is sweating when she gets there. She is holding an umbrella. The light cotton dress clings to her belly. She leans on the umbrella for a moment and then opens it, shadowing both herself and the animal. She waits. One ragged bird drifts to ground nearby. The hooves appear. Another bird settles beside the first, silent. And another. The lamb's head appears. She looks at them squatting dark and toad-like in the dust, a coven of waiting crows knowing, as she knows, that they have missed their moment, the moment when the ewe's thighs part and the contraction paralyses her, the moment when they can steal that small pink tongue and quench their heavy beaks in the lamb's eyes. She waits until the lamb's mother nuzzles it onto unsteady feet. Walking back to the house she turns to look and thinks perhaps it's worth another try, another year, another prayer for rain.

Geoff returned in the afternoon. He saw the bedroom door shut and didn't go in. He was relieved not to have to tell her straightaway. He took off his tie and shirt, glad to be rid of them. He sat down to think of what he should say. In the drought stricken paddock the kelpie started barking wildly. Geoff picked up his gun, stepped out onto the verandah. And started running, running in his city shoes across the dusty earth.

* * *

She is wearing her town dress. She's got her hair strained back. She doesn't look at him when he starts the ignition. She doesn't speak. The baby doesn't cry, never does. Just gropes blindly for her breast. The kelpie scrabbles in the tray amongst the chairs and boxes. She turns the cab light on to check the nurse's bandages. Twenty kilometres down the road to Perth he turns the windscreen wipers on.
RHYLL McMaster writes of the human dilemma, and her poetry stems from her personal experience of the world. She has won prizes for her poetry including the Harri Jones Memorial Prize for The Brineship (1972). Washing The Money (1986) won the Victorian Premier's Prize as well as the Grace Leven Prize. Two more books have followed — On My Empty Feet (1993) and Flying the Coop (1994), the latter also receiving the Grace Leven Prize. Rhyll is currently working on many poems in preparation for a new manuscript. She was interviewed by Barbara Bursill at Braidwood, in September 1995.

When did you first begin to write poetry?

I wrote my first poem when I was about eight or nine. I was living in Brisbane. It was a poem about a grasshopper, and it didn’t rhyme. I had a sort of grandfatherly/grandmotherly relationship with the man and woman next door and I showed them the poem. They said that it wasn’t poetry, it wasn’t good enough because it didn’t rhyme. To have that said to me was really devastating and so I stopped dead and I didn’t write anything until I was about sixteen. I was completing my last two years at school and I had an English teacher who was really good to me (I must have written a poem for a school prize). She encouraged me by writing letters to me — we never talked face to face about my writing, and I’m still writing to her. I don’t know why I started writing — it wasn’t as if I’d read a lot of poetry, although I do remember getting excited by the poetry we were studying at school, Gerard Manley Hopkins for example. I think it’s pure chance that you start out to do something and find you’re good at it, and that encourages you. I was a child who felt alone and I built up a world for myself that was understandable or acceptable.

Who or what has had the greatest influence on your poetry?
There's an American poet called Theodore Roethke and I did read his work at one time — he wrote minimalist, evocative poetry — but I only read it for a week in my life. Reading novels had more of an effect on me. But there wasn't really anything that laid down a motif for my work.

Who are some of your favourite authors?
Barbara Comyns — it's very black, English fantasy. I like books that touch on the infinitesimal, things under the surface, books about relationships. I think you write out of your life. My growing up was full of tension between my parents, and was influenced by their unhappy relationship. I think because of the type I am and the personality that I have that I responded in a particular way. I think it's all about making sense and order out of your experiences, and I discovered that writing about it was a tension-reliever. It's as if, when you feel the world coming at you as a threat, you capture the objects and make them your own — a typically introverted action.

Why do you write poetry?
I'm sure that I started writing just for myself but I always wanted to show whatever I wrote to the first person who walked past in the room — I suppose that's a way of saying that you want someone to validate what you've done. I've often thought of testing that — if I had nobody to show my poetry to — would I keep on writing? I think I would, so I'm doing it for myself. As I've got older I've wanted more and more to communicate with people and get a response, and getting that response is gratifying. It's lovely to feel that something 'new felt' isn't alienated, that somebody else has been through that experience and has got much the same idea of how the world works — or can give you a new perspective.

How do you write?
Usually on the spur of the moment. I often write late at night when the barriers are down and I might just write on a scrap of paper. An idea or a line will come to me and I jot it down. Sometimes, especially when I was younger, a whole poem would be there, it would just come. When I was about nineteen I was working at the University of Queensland, I had a secretarial job, and I used to write things in my head, going home on the bus. I'd have to memorise the stanzas, and I'd rush home and write it down before I forgot it — sometimes I'd forget a bit and that was awful, as if something had slipped back and was irretrievable. Now I work on things more. I think I've broken through that barrier where, when you're young, you're
unconscious of where words are coming from and you just trust to luck that it comes up. That still happens but now I can fiddle with it and use what skills I have acquired over the years with language, and do it more consciously. I think a lot of writers get writer’s block because they’re in that interim stage between an unconscious force and a conscious one; I’m glad I’ve made the break — to get through that terrible stage where you’re not quite sure if you have command over all that uncommandable material that comes up from the deep.

Would you describe your poetry as personal?

Oh, yes. I figure in almost every poem as the central figure or thinker. It’s my relationship to the world, my relationship to other people, my relationship with my feelings — it’s all very personal. It’s building a world.

Could your poem ‘Figure In The Landscape’ be described as your poetic statement?

It’s a poetic statement but I’ve made a lot more poetic statements since that one. I’m not intent on making statements, though my view of the world often seems pretty conclusive to me! I’ve stopped reading novels, I haven’t read a novel for three or four years. I find that I can’t get anything out of them because now I’m really interested in psychology and philosophy. I read psychology and get ideas, and this is the most interesting thing for me now, that ideas fascinate me whereas before things fascinated me and maybe now it’s the ‘thingness’ of ideas. I think I’ve always been working towards the idea. That poem represents an idea I had, and it made something very clear to me — it’s trying to make sense out of chaos and how you see yourself in the world — it’s just fascinating. It’s the same thing with mirrors; you look in the mirror and it’s a way of perceiving yourself but then again you don’t see what other people see. Nobody’s ever static. Ideas aren’t static, you could go from one to another, and they all lead on forever — so I think I’ve got lots of ‘statements’.

Yes I agree. I think many of your poems could be described as your poetic statement.

It’s interesting that I wrote that poem before I’d read any psychology. No idea is ever unique, there’s no new idea, and I don’t suppose that really matters but now sometimes I’ll write something and then I’ll read, maybe the next day, the same thought written by someone else — it’s very peculiar. It makes me think that it’s hard to transcend being human. Different combinations, but the same set of molecules.
But I think, as a poet, you're able to express what other people are thinking and feeling whereas if they haven't that skill they can only keep it inside of themselves.

Yes, and that's why I'm glad that I do have a skill because I don't know what I would do if I couldn't express myself — and how do other people express themselves? I garden and I bet if I didn't write I'd garden like a maniac because you have to express yourself somehow.

The volume from which that poem comes is On My Empty Feet — an interesting title. It comes from the poem which is in the "mother" series and she says: “for once in my life on empty feet”. She'd had a stroke so she was talking nonsense but I think in a way she was being sensible because I do think she was groundless, she had no basis in her own nature. This is a mirroring once again; I see myself in her and try to look for the pitfalls for myself. I grew up with her personality, and I saw how it developed, and I saw how her misery and low self-esteem marked her entire life. It was like a big red sign — don't go that way. It's curious that with the brain damage, from the stroke, that these unconscious things emerge — she said a lot of pertinent things about herself without really knowing that she'd said them.

Parts of the body seem to be a focus in several of your poems, for example in 'Bath'. One's own body is really peculiar because you never quite get an idea of yourself — it's that mirror thing again. It's all about the peculiarity of life itself. You become an emanation that has bits and pieces, and taken out of context they start to look strange. I'm very short-sighted and I've got a theory that that changed the way I looked at things when I was little, before I got glasses. I was about ten or eleven before I realised that people didn't have two heads because I saw everything in doubles. I like looking at things in miniature, and I like looking down into cellular structures. I'm sure that bad eyesight has something to do with the way you view the world. It's about identity as well isn't it. I've always felt this clash between wanting to be gregarious and wanting to be alone. That tells in body image as well and you can become alienated from parts of your self — you can view them almost dispassionately. Where's the central core?

Why is the speaker of that poem going both forwards and backwards?

You take one step forwards and one step backwards, and there's a terrible confusion, not especially for women, I think men have these problems too. As you get past thirty-five you have to take stock of the second half of your life, and if you don't
suffer through it you're just staying in the one place. So that's a very good image — you're going back and forth — you're still back in the past to some extent but you're also trying to surge forward. It's paradoxical. It's also about going down into your invisible self and coming back up again to see yourself in time and place.

In your poem 'Hands In The Mirror' the mirror becomes the focus for a complex metaphysical debate.

Once again it's that feeling of alienation from yourself and the mirror is a perfect thing to show that up in a concrete way, but it's not absolutely concrete because it's an illusion, or it's an image that doesn't show the real you. You're caught in this web and things can take on a life of their own. You fantasise about what might happen if you let go of reality for a minute. Once again I hadn't read any psychology at that stage and it's very clear now that these ideas have been around forever. It's as if they're inbuilt. I think it's wonderful and terrifying that we've got unconscious minds and that they can well up and sometimes take us over.

How can the speaker of the poem write if she takes off her hands?

I didn't really look at it that way but it's like a movie — anything is possible in a movie — and I think anything is possible in the human mind. The danger is to make all these things concrete, of course it's all ridiculous. I'm almost inclined to the viewpoint that nothing is concrete unless we happen to say it is — we might say everything's concrete on Monday and on Wednesday we say that everything's an illusion — there's some sort of middle course that you come back to in order to live a normal life. There's always that pull between the two.

The image of the mirror appears again in some of the poems about your mother, 'Junk', which is one in the sequence titled 'My Mother And I Become Victims Of A Stroke', speaks of "mirrors with no frames".

The poem's about hanging on to things and I'm a great one for throwing things away. I saw my mother as hanging on to unimportant things and losing the important things. We had frames stuck in cupboards and bits of mirrors with no frames stuck in cupboards and there is no middle ground where you really do see yourself — it's all ferreted away. I think she missed the bus. She got stuck. Firstly, I think it's personality, how you're born, the way you are, that governs to a huge extent what you do with yourself. It's also education — my mother left school when she was twelve and I think that gave her a limited start in life. It's about all those
things you can acquire but in fact, in the end, you’re left with a cupboard full of rubbish. Negatives accrue like junk.

Why did you choose the mirror to connect yourself and your mother in the poem ‘The Mirror’?

I can mirror myself in my mother’s eye, and I can see how I could have been like her, I could have succumbed to that resentment, as she did. For some reason I didn’t, I fought against it. To an extent I was able to look in the mirror and make a choice, and I think you do make choices. The bond between mothers and daughters is one of the crucial things in your life that you have to work out — are you going to be absolutely different from your mother or are you going to be like her, have you got a negative attitude or a positive one? I started off with a negative attitude and I think now I’ve come around to seeing that it’s more about me than it was about her influence on me. In the end you have to take responsibility for yourself and you can’t keep on blaming poor old mum. You keep looking and you see undercurrents and you hope to avoid the worst and confront the depths.

Does the mirror have any special significance for you as a poet or as a woman?

From time to time it’s one of the ideas I’ve used. I wouldn’t say it’s the main focus of my work. I don’t think there is any one focus other than understanding and coming to terms with myself. I have always been fascinated by my own mirror image, and I love paintings of mirrors and of windows in paintings with no-one looking out — so it’s a way of viewing yourself. It’s a way of reflecting back into yourself. Other people might like looking at circles. In a mirror you can examine your own strangeness. When I was young I never felt, looking in a mirror, that the person I saw was me, I could never equate it, and I still can’t. I have a friend, Helen Geier, an artist, and I asked her how she felt about looking in the mirror. She’s a very different person from me and she said that she consoles and re-establishes herself by looking in the mirror. I do the exact opposite, I become confused and alienated from my image. Once again you get back to basic personalities, basic types — I’m introverted and she’s extroverted. It’s to do with the way you view the world, or the way you view the object, whether you feel the object coming at you and you want to push it away, or whether you embrace the object and feel at one with it. I definitely exist in a bubble of self-protection, and I have to build barriers.

Your poem ‘The Difference’ seems to speak of the adage “to thine own self be true”.

westerly spring 1996
I was listening to a radio programme and someone was talking about colour, and smell, and he was saying that when you smell something it relays a colour to your brain. That's the idea that started the poem. Two people look at the same thing and yet see it totally differently, despite the fact that we have this physiological mechanism in common. The last stanza is about the immanence that grows out of the moment — you can hold it just for a second and then it's gone, but you know you’re different from another person. They're both viable ways of seeing things, in fact differences between you highlight who you are and that's very consoling.

*The mirror reflects the truth only when the person reflected is honest with themselves.*

When you try to break through those preconceptions and misconceptions you have about yourself, when you try to get down to the nitty-gritty, you look in the mirror and there's a flash of recognition before the image sets in — they're ephemeral moments.

Would you say that the mirror is connected to the act of questioning identity?

It's also about pulling the fragments of yourself together. The thing behind the mirror that you can't see is like your own unconscious, and the mirror upsets the conscious attitude that you have — you set yourself up to think that you're somebody and then you see a totally different thing in the mirror — and then you have to reflect back and question your identity. It's a circular argument, of course. As I get older reflection is more and more the thing I have to do; the process of compiling yourself, bringing all those fragmented parts of yourself together, into a whole. This can never be achieved but it's the process of doing it that actually counts. I feel a great affiliation with that idea, and the mirror starts the process. Cats always look in a mirror and then immediately look behind the mirror for the other cat's real presence. We're often as primitive as animals.

*The speaker in your poem ‘Seven Letters’ watches their face making shadows.*

I wrote that poem a long time ago. Once again it's connected to childhood and with remembering things — you can spend too much time in the past and as a consequence not go forward. Something I find with my poetry is that once something is written it takes on a life of its own, and often you can't go back and recapture those feelings. I suppose it's about musty old books and other lifeless things — you can get caught in that web and expend a lot of energy on it. Maybe it's about stagnation and blame and regret — things my mother did a lot.
In ‘Edifice’ you bring fairy-tale images into the modern world to describe the complexity of identity.

I’ve read a lot of the work of Marie Louise von Franz, who was a colleague of Jung. She concentrated on fairy-tales and saw them as sets of symbols, little journeys into the self, and used them to understand herself. One of the first of her books, that I read, made plain to me a fairy-tale that had dogged me all my life, and that was ‘Bluebeard’. I was always terrified of that story and Dad would read it to me a lot and I realised, when I read her book, how central those symbols were to my understanding of myself. At the time I’d misunderstood them. In ‘Bluebeard’ there’s a woman, locked in a tower, and she’s going to be killed, because she wanted to know something that she wasn’t supposed to know, and her brothers come to her rescue. As a consequence I always thought because I didn’t have any brothers that I was without resources. It’s almost reprehensible (as a child Dad got a lot of pleasure from frightening me) what that did to my psyche. There are quite a few other fairy-tales that made a lasting impression on me. If only I’d been able to understand then what I know now about the symbolism of fairy-tales, I would have seen the healing message, but I didn’t, and they shaped my life. The message of a fairy-tale is often a journey through a torment or a travail. You have to undergo various sufferings until you come to the happy marriage at the end, and in a way that’s happening more to me now. But I had to suffer through my childhood, all those misconceptions about myself, before I could understand the message from a more positive point of view. I wonder where I’d be if I hadn’t read von Franz’ depiction. So that’s in the poem, that you’re under misapprehensions about yourself — you’re not quite sure about what you’re caught up in. You can become very cynical about this: “if I’m out, I’m not in.” And that’s one way of avoiding the problem — by becoming cynical. I think you have to stick with the suffering, hold on to it until it hurts, and then come out at the other end, eventually, or temporarily. You’re unprepared to deal with what is revealed. I’ve written another poem called, ‘Bluebeard In The Cracked Mirror’ where I talk about this unpreparedness — “On opening the door to murderous secrets, I find the key.” I suppose if one’s intuition is a bit flat then experience is the only way to understand.

In the poem, ‘The Letter To Be Written’, you write of “the mirror of my dreams”.

This poem is about the duality of one’s life, that all those practical, mundane things, which are greatly valued, are at variance with my inner self which I also value. How
do you have those two things without denigrating one or the other? I keep a dream diary and I understand how important that is to one part of me. It's not a retreat into dreams, it's a very valuable space, to be kept sacrosanct, almost. I used to feel that I was almost having to maintain this integrity by stealth, and now I recognise that others are doing it too, in their own way. I do think that everybody has a core of being that they have to keep private.

In 'The Last Promise', the mirror is “taken down / and packed”. What motivated the writing of this poem?

About six or seven years ago I got very sick, I got an abscess on my ovary. Following the operation I got peritonitis, and had to have a second emergency operation. I was so terrified of the hospital because I'd been a nurse and I didn't think it was a terribly good one. I had the second operation with an epidural so that I could stay awake. I thought: 'if I don't remain conscious I'm not going to come out of this.' I extracted a promise from the surgeon that if I didn't get better after the second operation he would send me to Sydney. So I didn't get better, went to Sydney, had a third operation, and still wasn't better. I came back home to the farm, in the middle of winter, with floods, and stayed there for about a week and a half, and then my wound burst open, and I went back for a fourth operation. I was in hospital for a quite a long time, and I almost died. I felt very alone, and I was in this terrible relationship which was getting worse and worse. My relationship with myself wasn't too good either. Those major things in your life really make you start to understand what's what. I also realise, as I get older, that death is an experience that you have to have on your own, in fact it's probably, in a way, one of the most important things you're going to do in your life. There will be no last minute platitudes, and it's about the ending of all relationships, except the relationship with yourself, in order to have a fruitful death. I don't want to die the way my mother died, denying everything. I think she died in emotional pain. I don't want to die that way. I don't know whether there's life after death, I have many confusions about religious attitudes, I don't know the answers to anything, but I do know that there's me. I won't be handing out anything to anybody else when I die, it will be a 'cutting off'. The only reflection I'll be doing is between me and my soul, so the mirror, which is a communal thing, in a way, will be packed away.

'The Pleat' is a poem you've written very recently. The fourth stanza again uses a part of
the body, the hand, to question existence.

But a move is always afoot
to search for the basic material
and a hand with no connection
hovers like a magician —
is the object to be found in earth, water, air?

That hand is like the imagined hand of a God or some separate and reflecting entity, that is in a sense amoral — it is capable of action and decision but it does not decide in the end — we do. One of the things I’ve been reading is about matter, about the possibility of life in matter, and whether the spiritual is connected to the material. It’s a basic question. We live in this world and the old scientific viewpoint was if we get it all down on paper, and get back to the basic pinpoint, we’re going to find the answer. Then we can do with it what we like, we have the right to dissect this thing — that’s what I meant — we want to grab hold of it, and find the ultimate answer, and we brutalise it: like a child inadvertently killing the thing being examined.

Almost without hesitation
for incumbent power,
with cruel disregard for awe, we hack into the material.

We think we have this right to chop things up, and we think in the process that we’re going to find the secret of life, and then we can put it in a test tube and recreate it. All mythologies talk about this tantalising ‘secret lode’.

The idea of a poet writing something but then going further and having it published — is that a desire to share your experience?

I’m sure it’s a great mixture. Yes, it’s wanting a response that’s for sure, but there are all sorts of other self-indulgent things in it. Public recognition — that’s great fun, feeling good about yourself, feeling important, and feeling that you’ve achieved something, that you’ve got as close as you could at the time. I must show you this quote from Jung, that I’m going to put in the front of my next book. He’s talking about the persona, about how we see ourselves and how other people see us: “One could say, with a little exaggeration, that the persona is that which in reality one is not, but which oneself as well as others think one is. In any case, the temptation to be what one seems to be is great because the persona is usually rewarded in cash”.
That's a very good warning for me. But being published is also about making yourself real to yourself. It's connecting the private core with the outside world.

In the past, in Australia, women poets have suffered discrimination especially in the area of anthologies. What do you think is the current standing of women poets in this country? I don't know because I'm not really in the poetry circle — I've kept out of it. Perhaps the struggle to be seen and heard is not an outer one. Rather than reacting to perceptions of ourselves, perhaps we'd do better to simply keep on working.

What do you think is meant by the term “Australian” poetry?

It doesn't mean anything to me really because I've never seen myself in something called 'Australian poetry'. In the beginning I thought of myself as an amateur, and not professional. Now, I would describe myself as serious. I think I always thought of myself as serious but subtle denigrations in society combine with self-denigrations. That's one reason why in the last couple of years I've participated in poetry readings. I really enjoy the public face of it, and I get a lot of feedback from poetry readings. The big picture's meaningless — it's what you do yourself that's important, even if it's only important to you.


Still Water, Guangzhou Theatre

'Look! Look at me!' the girl's body calls
as it settles down at ease
on its slim floor shadow, she holding
the bowls of water
above her, poised to begin her performance.
'Don't spill it, darling!' we sigh, our eyes as huge
as those the dragon
blazes into the theatre
from his red domain on the
backdrop tapestry.

Passed from a hand to a foot, or passed
from a foot back to a hand,
the bowls in their circuit are breathless.

Upstream and sheltered,
no pool is more calm in the great Pearl River.
Held in the strongest hands a spirit-level
can tremble slightly,
but not these bowls of water
which this girl's spirit levels
however she moves.

When at last on her feet and bowing
into our waves of applause,
she is suddenly modest, smiling
as if to play down
her easy-limbed presentation, her triumph
of body and mind we can hardly believe.

But is she human?
Can she now be one with us
who sip the mere everyday
from the Bowl of Life?
AGAINST some elements in life there is no insurance. No guarantee. I know. I sell insurance. Fire. Life. Accident. Make a good living. Very good. Against even the aberrant, the bizarre, the earthquake, the landslide, the freak of nature, there is some shoring up. But against madmen, mad women, against the crazed masked maniac of Montreal, there is no solace. And no one underwrites love. I discovered this on our last holiday.

Holidays. That break from the normal, the relaxing, non-stressful absorption of pleasure after hard work. I never believed in it. My wife had to insist on this trip. She wanted to see where our son lived while he was at McGill though I don't think he wanted his parents around. She'd also heard that Leonard Cohen was in Montreal. She's got all his records and tapes. Forced me to come along. A rush to get to the airport two hours early, God knows why, then a wait in a dreary outpost, no port at all in the travel storm. We're cornered. Captive market to pot-boiler novels, costly food and expensive souvenirs. Flying jam-tight to Montreal, knees up to our chins, Transart charter, 4.1/2 hours of unnatural posture locked in a frail aluminium tube, whizzed like a spear at 600 mph, 37,000 feet up from the rock-hard earth. Enough to give anybody pause. Though the insurance statistics are comforting, flying is cheap, nasty, brutish and unnaturally long. Fed like babies with plastic cutlery and plastic food on trays. A sob movie about a sick kid. $4.00 for earphones! Forget it! My wife solves it all by curling up into a foetal position and stealing away under a tent made of two blue airline blankets. We fly on. Only the hum and vibration tells us we're moving. I feel an intense stasis. Have I moved forward?

I was a poet once. Hung about bars and coffee lounges in Vancouver. Read with the rest of the pack of long haired tender loin poets. Smoked pot as the images
swung in the air. Thrilled to the publication of a brief lyric in radical little magazines, earnestly xeroxed in basements, names like Balls Out or Tisk. Years of fervent adoration of the Muse. Another fickle God. Scraped a living out of tree-planting, house painting. Met my wife. At first she was sycophantic, almost adoring. But the words were an empty drum echoing only in my head. She got pregnant. I got a job. Then insurance. It was easy. Very easy. Talk to people about fear. The future. The possibility of disaster. It sells itself, human insecurity. Then I began to fall for it myself. The logic of actuarial possibility. Life and its accidents foretold, planned, provided for. Take no chances! We all live above a yawning chasm. I provide the fences, the brick walls, to prevent us falling in.

The plane drones on. Soggy detestable quiche for lunch. My son is excited about his return to Montreal, to McGill, to the hype of city life. My wife wakes up once, asks excitedly where Leonard Cohen lives in Montreal, finds out from our son that he’s rumoured to live a couple of blocks away from Rue Marie Anne. She pulls her tent over her head and disappears. I don’t understand my wife’s obsession with Leonard Cohen. When he was in Vancouver on tour she took my son. Front seats. He had to restrain her from jumping on the stage. My son told me this later, with acute embarrassment.

At home, she plays a tape of the tone deaf singer endlessly in the living room. Drives me mad. Poetry’s about loss. Lost homes. Lost in the cosmos the poet wanders endlessly, spinning frail webs of language to make up golden chains and ladders and parapets to hold us all in. Or so they think. Basically it’s an economic game of snakes and ladders. Grants and residencies. Readings and workshops. Most of them are small, scheming, ruthless rats living off the strange aura of alienation, of dreamy other worldly perceptions the great unwashed world has of them. I had a moment of revelation after a reading on Hastings St. Five of them in the fly speckled Modern Café. Look alikes. Small intense men with little scraggly beards and glasses. Five Ezra Pounds. Dropping each other’s names in their poems. Five glasses of Perrier. Five xeroxed copies of their latest tomes eager to swap. Congratulating each other. Like, maybe that third poem of yours was, like, I really heard that poem.

I couldn’t handle it. I walked out into the West Coast drizzle down to Gastown. And right before my eyes, a Volvo and a Chev screeched and collided head on. A great smash and tinkle of glass. I knew it then. Insurance. That was the way for me. Poetry? No.

We fly on. Hours, it seems. 7.5 landing. Montreal, humid in August. But the
warm moist air is quite cheerful. At least the madman was not on the plane. His brother or cousin, however, is waiting for us in a rusty yellow Toyota cab at Dorval. A gloomy presence in the driver's seat, he merely unlatches the trunk for our bags without a backwards glance. His hair is a massive mop of dreadknots covering even his face.

Let's wait for another cab, I suggest.
But my wife swings her bag into the trunk. So does my son.
He looks fine to me, she states firmly, you are so paranoid.

We zoom off leaving a trail of burnt piston rings and smoke behind. Hunched tensely over the wheel, the cabbie spins us wildly into the traffic on Decarie Blvd. We're going the wrong way, says my son politely. No response. Hey, Driver, we're going the wrong way! The driver unleashes a string of cusses in French. Tabernac! Hostie! Chalice! The driver's head hunches farther into his simian shoulders. He seems bitter that his judgement has been questioned. Then with a jungle cry he swings the steering wheel left. We skid and tip, hit the median, bounce once, wildly twice, bang into each other in the back seat, doughnut once and roar back down Decarie the other way. I do a quick calculation of our accident insurance. The driver swears savagely under his breath and beats on the steering wheel. I'm stunned. Even my wife is disconcerted.

Please drive me carefully, she says quietly. The driver responds by roaring in and out of traffic lanes, blasting his horn to some crazy reggae beat. He drops us off at Marie Anne with a skidding stop. Puts his hand out for the fare without looking at us. As I bend forward to put the $30 in his hand he turns quickly, pulls back his locks with his left hand, gives me one savage glance. His face twists as in pain or angst, reveals two vertical red stripes from his forehead down over his large nose, dark eyes and cheeks. It is my first vision of madness in Montreal. He grabs the money and roars off. Am I alone in this perception? My wife, unmoved by all of this, stands on the sidewalk of Rue Anne Marie. In the sunlight I notice for the first time that her blonde hair is etched with silver, that her once perfectly round face has tiny sags on the cheeks, at the throat.

Lovely, observes my wife of my son's 4 1/2 apartment. I just love the tiny balconies, all wrought iron. And so close to everything. Well, let's get our stuff inside and get out and see things.
I'd like to sit down awhile. Have a cup of tea, I say.
Oh no, she cries. With all this to see? Don't be lazy!
She strides into the apartment. I bend to lift our bags, thinking what a huge fire
risk the whole block is. And at that moment the madman rides by on a mountain bike, wild hair, sipping from a bottle in a paper bag, shouting imprecations to the world from behind a Montreal Canadian's goalie mask. I stand a second, watching him career down the road, no hands, waving excitedly and yelling to the sky. I put the bags inside.

We look around. The place is a mess. My son's sublet is a woman called Suzanne. She'd taken off it seems.

She is definitely not a good housekeeper, says my wife.

My son reads the signs quickly.

I'm off to see some friends, says my son. See you later. Maybe tomorrow. My wife and I look at each other as he leaves. There's just us now. No referees.

Let's eat, says my wife, I couldn't stand the airline food. I just need two minutes to change. She rushes into the bathroom. I wait. I always wait. I am a patient man. I wait.

Outside the front window the madman rides his bike by again, balanced this time upright on the crossbar, hurling curses at the wide blue sky through the red and blue Canadian's mask.

An hour later we lock the front door.

Let's walk left, she cries and steps forward brightly.

She strides off. I follow. She ducks in and out of shops. Picks up plastic kitchen stuff. A colander. Soap saver. Salad set. I'm carrying this stuff in plastic bags behind her as she dashes like an inquisitive poodle into gay book stores, art shops, hardware stores. At one bookstore I see a copy of a poetry book by a West Coast poet I used to know. On the fly leaf is inscribed, "To George with undying friendship & the Muse". Pretentious enough. But the undying friendship is pretty typical, considering the rat sold his friend's book. But that's poets. They'd hustle their grandmothers for a spot on Morningside.

She stops outside an art nouveau furniture store. There's an old chair tarted up with swatches of coloured leather, pink, green, red, purple patches hammered in with brass studs.

That, she breathes loudly, is me! She runs inside. $1500. The owner is a heron like young man with a tiny ruff of spiky hair, a round belly and a long nose.

No! I say.

What? she cries. She turns to stare at me.

No! Be practical, I say, How could we get it back to Vancouver?

She turns on her heel, dashes out and down the street. I follow, carrying two
plastic bags of kitchen junk.

On St. Laurent she finds Georgeo's Pizzeria.

Charming, she cries, we'll eat here. I follow her in. Strangely, the menu is all Greek food. We order. Halfway through our souvlakia the madman appears at the door of the restaurant, yelling through his mask. A Japanese white mask. A Noh mask. With painted tears. Black pigtail. The waitress rushes to him, begins soothing him. Or trying to. He swears. We pick up on a lover's quarrel. They argue. She postures. He curses and dances woodenly about.

He is a typical male! my wife announces just a bit too loudly, bristling at his abuse of the waitress.

None of our business! I add hastily, aware that my wife is about to rear up and tackle the situation.

Of course you'd say that, my wife says sourly, I need more coffee. We are not receiving good service!

Finally the madman throws his hands up in the air and shuffles off as if his feet have been bound from birth. The waitress, unnerved, leans against the door, lights a cigarette, and watches him disappear. My wife rises from her seat, announcing our departure.

No tip, she says firmly, that young woman must learn not to enjoy abuse! She storms past the waitress. I drop $20 on the table and follow.

My wife is expressing herself in her dress. Black tights, long red shirt down to her bum. Purple belly pack. Floppy purple hat with sequins. I'm in dull jeans and faded denim shirt and jacket. I walk half a step behind her. Five days of this, I think. Can I handle five days?

We walk down St. Laurent Street dodging the flow of Montrealers and tourists, past the Double Deuce, the Pub Laurent, Bifteque Laurent, places where Leonard Cohen the long nosed lyricist has been rumoured to occasionally appear. My wife insists on checking out each bar as we pass. Ignoring the sideways glances of patrons, the offers of service from bartenders and waitresses, she parades into each nook and side room eager for a glimpse of the singer. Like Elvis sans voice, the singer does not materialise.

I reflect upon this, thinking that if I chased down Michelle Pfeiffer or Sharon Stone in my wife's presence I would be considered immature, male, sexist, pathetic, undignified. Inappropriate behaviour. That's one of her favourite phrases. It leaves me floundering about for whatever might be appropriate. Like the word silly, it's a great gob stopper.
We do not find him on St. Laurent, turn off and head up another street. Halfway up a hill sweating along behind my light footed wife, we hear a huge insane chuckle burst over us. We look up. Above the Comedian’s Museum, a huge baby face with a rosebud mouth cackles a loud speaker invitation to enter.

They even have a centre for it here, I offer. A real Mad House.

Laughing is healthy, corrects my wife soberly. We stand a second or two gazing at the Museum. Out of the corner of my eye I catch motion. Lookout! I yell and pull my wife aside as Groucho Marx in moustache, glasses and flying coattails roars past on a skate board, cackling in an obscene fashion.

Don’t be so dramatic! she remonstrates, he was completely in control.

I think about insurance here. No wonder Lloyds of London is in jeopardy. Half of Montreal is mad.

We walk up and on. Ten blocks later on a seedy part of St. Laurent street with sex movie houses on either side, a group of young people stop us. They surround us. Beg. Insolently. Half green hair, half shaved. Rings in eyebrows. Safety pins through cheeks. Faces half painted white and black. Leather and studs.

Give them some money! hisses my wife. They’re poor.

A face, half red half black, ferocious, big nose, dangling a silver ring, pushes in through the skinheads, cackles at us, grabs two dollars, disappears. It’s the madman again. I hand out more dollars. The crowd chants at us. Stie! Stie! Surrounds us. Grab at us. I push my way through. Jab one purple faced eye. He screams. My wife pushes away a girl with blood red hair. Hands grab at her purse, my wallet. I shove one off. He cries out. I do not like your tone of voice! my wife yells, shaking another indigo haired young woman. A police cruiser pulls up. The mob points at us and yells. The two policemen bundle us into the back of the police car.

Now we’re safe, cries my wife. They’ll arrest all those thugs! She goes on about crime on the streets. The two policemen get back in, drive us a few blocks, turn into an alley. We sit for a while. Then, without turning around, one policeman, the driver, holds up his right hand, lightly snaps his fingers.

What’s he want? whispers my wife.

An insurance claim payment! I say.

Again the policeman snaps his fingers. The passenger policeman holds up his baton, taps it lightly on the windscreen. The policeman who’s driving turns around. He’s wearing one of those Brian Mulroney masks. He puts out his hand. $100 later, we’re back on the streets, watching the police cruiser roar off. For a second, I feel like screaming curses at the sky. But my wife is undaunted, pulls out her Montreal city map.
The quest continues. Ben’s! she cries. He might be at Ben’s. She rushes forward. Hails a cab. We find the restaurant miles away on St. Catherine. Two smoked meat sandwiches. Served by a snotty waiter. Small triangle of rye bread and tough beef. And expensive. Plastic everywhere. Neon. Garish. What’s the appeal?

If you were famous like him, my wife says dreamily, you’d have your photo up there. She points to Poet’s Corner. A row of photos. Overposed. A grimy lot. As if the poets wore the masks of their trade for the photographers. She does not eat the meat. Smells off, she says, consumes the rye bread with mustard. Leaves the meat. The waiter sniffs at the tip. I look up at the poets on the wall. Gamblers on immortality the lot of them. Guaranteed losers. Average income less than what I pay my secretary. A little trickle of sadness runs in my chest. Could I have been up there? I'll never know.

He’d never come here, she says, not with this food. I follow her out and into the streets again. We encounter a tourist mall. We walk between posts barring the entrance for vehicles on Prince Arthur Street. I doubt there are any Montrealers here at all. Tourists like us hover about stalls of trinkets, Thai silver rings, watch a quick portrait artist flatter a middle aged woman with pastels, T-shirt stalls, Ecuadorian sweaters and shirts, Salvadoran shoes and sandals, Somali leather belts hung like dozens of dead snakes. Tourists sit on white plastic chairs outside Bistros, sipping vin bien ordinaire, watching other tourists walk by, all of them convinced this is really very Montreal. Others exploit this ignorance.

Street musicians with open instruments cases salted with Loonies and two dollar bills. Magicians with red and green flowers miraculously sprouting from loose sleeves. The madman appears again. He is a white faced Charlie Chaplin, walking stick, top hat, redoes a little number with a red rose, duck footing up to my wife, pleading, working his eyes, little body quivers.

Give him five dollars, my wife said, taking the rose from his obsequious hands. He’s so cute! He kisses her hand. I give him five bucks. He ignores me. Struts off.

Damn, my wife says, sniffing the rose, it’s plastic! She deposits the offending object in a nearby dumpster and strides on.

My wife plunks herself down on the curb right in front of a violinist playing bits of Bach or whatever. I recognise the tunes. My son played them ten years ago, after a year or so of expensive lessons on the violin and piano. We did not know then perhaps, like this young man’s mother, that one day he too might become a street musician, squealing out simplistic Mozart, making an honest living in Montreal. I
thought too, of the violin gathering dust in the upstairs bedroom, and the Heintzman's yellowing keys in the living room. Familial investments in culture? Write offs? Or does the murderer of Mozart make more money than me?

He's good! cries my wife pointing at the violinist mutilating Mozart. Give him some money!

A stir in the crowd. The madman appears. Growling like a St. Bernard. Couples and groups skid away from his presence like a school of herring dodging a slow but mad dog-fish. He bursts out into the street. Two feet away from Mozart he begins to dance. He wears a long Cossack coat, a Comeddia del Arte mask, a ferociously happy clown. His wild jig shakes his whole body. He holds a bottle in a paper bag in one hand, flaps the other high in the air, whirls about, dances right up to my wife, shakes his crotch at her, yells wildly. She laughs loudly. She seems to recognise the madman. I step forward. Why, I'm not sure. His dance intrigues her, draws her in. Maybe it's his mask. But when she begins clapping, he freezes. He stops dead. Cries into the night holding his arms high in supplication to some God or other. Runs off into the park. The violinist finishes with an off key improvisation. I throw coins into his open violin case. My wife shakes his hand enthusiastically, and walks on.

I follow her into the darkened park. Knots of young people. Around benches. Leaning on trees. Roller skating endless circles on the empty ice rink. My wife sniffs. What's that? Redolent. Heavy. The sweet smell of grass. Local or imported? From the 3rd biggest cash crop in B.C. Island air? Lesqueti Lullaby? Gabriola Gold? The sweet buds of Texada? Hornby Hash? It was a West Coast smell. I thought of Vancouver Gastown poetry readings in old factories painted in psychedelic colours. Mid 60's. The coil and roll of dope smoke as the earnest words hit the air. Half a dozen Cohen look alikes slouching in black leather jackets, looking soulful and existential at the back. A sound poet with long hair dressed in a coat of many colours. Like the Russian in Heart of Darkness. Three earnest young women in berets, beads, granny glasses and long skirts in the front seats. Or was it all that bad? Should I have stuck with it? Did I have the talent? What was I doing here in Montreal, following a flipped out spouse all about Montreal handing out hard earned cash to maniacs. It had to be love. Or some rut so deep I couldn't see over the sides.

Half way through the park she suddenly decides to go home. Just like that. She remembered the mess in the apartment. Strides out, her mind focused on clean up, clear out, straighten up and order, order, order. I know that mood. It's
unstoppable. My son’s apartment is small. Two tiny bedrooms, a small kitchen, hallway/lounge and a bathroom. My wife storms in the front door rolling up her red shirted sleeves as she goes. Fortunately my son is still out. His sublet for the summer has decamped. There are letters for Suzanne, from the C.B.C. Unpaid rent and light and telephone bills. A rotten, cheap act. I’ll end up paying them. Remnants of her three month free ride rot in the fridge and under the sink, aging garbage in a plastic bag. Clotted milk, dark green carrots. Black potatoes. A bilious hue on what might have been cheese or other monstrosities. My wife goes at these horrors with Greek ferocity. I sweep the hall a bit, realise my level of clean is about to be surpassed one hundred fold and walk out to the front stoop, light a small cigar. A small vice.

Across the street a group of men move in constant argument outside Manuel’s Epicerie. Black singlets, baggy shorts, T-shirts and jeans, they move like a Greek chorus en masse to and from the shop entrance intermingling, breaking into adversarial groups arguing back and forth in two groups, then disperse only to form into groups of gesticulating argument again. Then a change. A groaning wail of accusation. Men draw together in a growing circle like seagulls around a herring boil, all yelling, pointing and shouting. And in the centre the madman wearing this time the mask of a Greek tragedian. The shouting grows, the circle closes tighter, the Greek desclaims loudly, passionately, until with a wild howl he leaps out of the ring and runs frantically down Anne Marie into the gathering twilight.

My wife meanwhile is taking a shower after first devastating the bathroom with Comet cleanser. Her scream from inside brings me rushing to the bathroom. I throw open the door. She stands there naked quivering in anger, one hand clutching the shower curtain.

She points accusingly at the shower taps.

They’ve been switched! she cries. By that bitch Suzanne!

I explain that the c on the tap is actually chaud or hot. Of course she knows that and waves me out of the bathroom. I hear her singing as her shower begins again.

Then I hear two voices. My wife’s and a gravelly monotone, almost tone deaf joining in. I throw open the back door. There is the madman in his Greek mask up against the bathroom window, peering in and singing along. I jump down three steps but the madman slips by, laughing maniacally, and speeds down the back alley and away. I run to the bathroom. My wife is enraged.

I was enjoying the duo, she cried, before you interrupted! She slaps at me with a towel.

86 westerly spring 1996
And what he saw was my business not yours.
I retreat. She takes a last swing with the towel. You do not own my body! She
slams the bathroom door shut.

The phone rings.
Strange. I thought it was disconnected. I pick it up.
A heavy voice. Is Suzanne there?
No I say.
I've lost her. Go and find her for me! demands the sand paper voice.
Piss off! I say and put the phone down.

That feels better, says my wife, appearing in a bathrobe, rubbing her hair with a
towel. See if you can get that T.V. working. I want to watch the local news. Maybe
they'll mention him.

The T.V. set puts out a blizzard of white moths.
Can't you get the news? cries my exasperated wife.

I find the antenna torn off behind the old set. The tin spokes are twisted
together in the shape of a swastika. I jam it in place. The only channel it brings in
is blurry French. A group of dancers in bright motley sway and sing. A Pierrot
appears, red-rosed, red cheeked, sings in a gravel voice. My wife leaps up.

It's him, she cries.

A fizzle of electricity. The swastika antenna falls off again. The T.V. screen goes
black.

Oh, you can't get anything right! yells my wife, I'm going to bed!

She storms off, slams the bedroom door.

I am left to ruminate on the detritus of this holiday. I step outside, light another
small cigar. The yellow moon rises smokily over the city. I can't blame her. I
stopped being exciting at 25, poetic at 30, interesting at 35. Insurance. I was aware
of every possible danger in life. Imagined fears closed me down. Perhaps she's
cashing in our policy. At least my son is out in the seething mass of partying
Montrealer enjoying himself. At times, I've learnt, every perception, observation,
comment, suggestion and judgment a man makes is quintessentially wrong in the
ears of one's spouse. One endures these times, puts them aside in consideration of
the good times. Good days insure the bad, perhaps. I get myself a cold Molson,
take a sip. It's curious that a man can love his wife and yet wish her tumbling under
the wheels of a semi-trailer all at the same time. Life insurance, like poetry, is really
about loss. Fear of loss. Yet we all lose. And the coverage on love? Not written.
Have I become a man and put away childish things? Have I become merely
insensitive — cold? I should learn to accept loss. Grasp it. Grow from it. Enlarge my emotional field with it. That’s what my wife says. Life is all growth. Or is it all loss? Have I become a masked man myself? Mad as any Montreal madman?

Then I hear it again. The off key monotone voice. Close by. Then my wife’s voice joining in. First we take something, then Berlin. The madman again singing a duo. Probably at the bedroom window. Strangely I’m beyond caring. My presence is certainly not wanted. The song ends. I hear laughter. I begin to feel the chasm opening at my feet. There are no fences, no walls I can build to protect against this loss. I see now that love is the energy lost to entropy in a mad, decaying universe.

I walk back inside, go to the window, catch a glimpse of two figures outside. They’re singing. No. Baying at the moon. He has a cape and a Phantom of the Opera mask, his arm around the other figure. My wife turns briefly and I catch a brief glimpse, white in the moonlight, of the mask of Antigone.
THE street outside is quiet now. The heat is fading with the passing sun although the night will still be warm. There is something in the distant sound of sirens echoing off hot concrete — to him it feels like people could climb onto their roofs with bottles of beer and wine and drink in the rough twilight.

Inside the house he is frying potato. He has not cut the potato into thin strips like chips. Instead he has cut thin slabs with the skin half-heartedly scraped. While he cooks these slabs he stares out through the window which faces the front yard. The window is propped open but there is no breeze.

He has spent most of the afternoon camped out in the front yard which is a large, level area with grass kept green by the caretaker’s hose. At the very front of the garden is a concrete path and beyond that a series of stone-walled terraces lead, like a giant’s staircase, down to the level of the roadway. He has spent the afternoon staring down into the passing cars and trams. He has watched the children in the schoolyard on the far side of the cutting. He has watched people walking the footpath on the far side of the street as if they walked through his own garden.

Now he watches the ragged edges of the potato turn brown in the hot fat. He thinks about an incident he saw that afternoon. It was during the peak hour, when the traffic was banked up from the lights at the top of the hill to the church at the corner. The cars all faced away from the city; heading out to the cool, green yards of the eastern suburbs. A small, white Toyota tried to ease its way from the right lane to the left. A horn sounded and was answered by another. The traffic stopped crawling and obscenities were shouted. Suddenly two men were out of their cars and punching each other. Other drivers tooted in derision but were ignored. The two men stood there on the bare bitumen between the lanes, slugging it out like a couple of old boxers.
He thinks about it while he fries the potatoes and it seems the silliest thing he has seen from his yard. He has seen plenty from his perch above the road. Once an old man crossing the road was hit by a speeding taxi. The man had bounced off the bonnet of the cab and landed crumpled on the footpath. The driver of the cab, a middle aged Greek, ran over and abused the old man. An ambulance arrived and carted the old man away. The cab driver went with the police.

Now he turns the potatoes and steps back from the stove as the fat spits. He leaves the potatoes and wanders around the room. He takes up two books lying on the floor and piles them with the others on the table. On the end of the table is a portable radio and beside it a small, black and white television set. It is still bright outside; the pink light is filtered into slices as it passes through the slats of the blinds. The smoke and the smell of burning fat fill the room and are illuminated by the narrow bands of light. He tries, but cannot rid his mind of the image of the two men, one of them surely fifty or more, the other in his thirties, whacking each other with bare, balled fists. He has seen men fight before, seen drunks at the football fall over when their wild punches missed. Once as a child he watched a crowd gather close around two men as they wrestled on the concrete footpath outside an hotel. But these guys in the street were different. They were sober and stood upright as they dodged and jabbed and landed some solid punches. He switches on the radio and listens to the passionless voice of the newsreader. A Palestinian has shot a diplomat in West Berlin and Israel has retaliated by bombing Lebanon. The leader of the English opposition has survived a challenge and speaks confidently of achieving government. He turns down the radio until he cannot make out what is being said but can just hear the muted voices amid the sounds coming from the road. He takes the pan from the stove and sets the potato pieces on brown paper to drain.

He has not spoken to a soul all day. He has slept late, eaten a sandwich at about four, and for the rest of the day wandered about feeling as if he has smoked too much nicotine. He feels as if he is contained in a fragile bubble, like the one that surrounds him when he walks the streets after watching a good play. In this state solid, everyday objects take on a special kind of existence; buildings become three dimensional instead of flat-faced and ordinary; the trees in the park each has a particular green shade, and the air beneath each of them obtains a quality peculiar unto itself. Above all he feels as if the ground has moved somehow closer and he notices cracks and dips in the concrete that he might see on other days, but which he would not then think remarkable.
He shakes the potato from the paper to the plate and sets it on the tray, next to the teapot. He carries the tray to the door and passes under the painting of the old man with folded hands and a sparse, grey beard. It occurs to him, as he passes beneath it, that the man in the painting is probably now dead. He knows that the man was once a doctor, but at the time the painting was made had worn no shoes and was paid two bottles of gin for posing. He often watches the old drunks in the park opposite and wonders if he might end up among them in another twenty years. He crosses the short, hard buffalo lawn in bare feet and takes up his position above the cutting. The school yard is empty and a solitary light is visible in one of the upper floor classrooms. It is an old school with a bluestone base, red brick walls and white-framed multipaned windows. A huge walnut tree grows slowly in the middle of the asphalt playground. The sun is gone but the sky still holds a pale colour. A shroud of smoke hangs over the high-rise towers of the central city. He can make out the dome of the Exhibition Buildings in the distance. The street lights are dull purple, and dim. The traffic has settled down to a steady but speedy stream in both directions. The inside of a passing tram seems as brightly lit as an operating theatre.

The two men had fought almost right in front of where he sits now. They had held up the traffic and created a long clear passage all the way up to Power Street. Other drivers had blasted their horns and shouted either encouragement or abuse. He had watched blood appear on the face of the older man and seen him stagger as the other guy landed heavy blows to the chest or stomach. But the older man hadn’t backed away. He mostly stood up straight, dressed in a pale shirt and dark blue business pants. Had it been a cooler day he might still have worn a tie. The younger man had bright red hair, cut short but still curly in a tight bunch on the top of his head. Neither of them was heavily built.

He eats his potato slabs and pours a cup of tea. He drinks it black and without sugar, then rolls a cigarette. He thinks the telephone is ringing, but pretends not to hear. It might well be the phone upstairs. He tells himself this not because he believes it, but because it helps to head off the inevitable question of who is trying to call. He hides from this thought because it threatens to burst through from the world of talk into his fragile bubble of quiet. He remembers taking a girl to see a play by Harold Pinter. After the play he had walked out silently as if in a trance and stared up at the spire of St Paul’s which seemed to be stretching away from the floodlights and up into a space which was not connected to the real world. He had felt a sudden understanding, a completeness unattached and inexplicably different.
He had lost the sense of self and longing that anchored him to the rude and unforgiving earth. Then the girl had spoken. The trance had been broken and he had turned on her angrily. She had not understood why and he could not have explained it.

The one thought still haunts him. Why would two guys hit each other like that? Sure it was hot and the traffic thick. It was steamy and humid and easy to get short tempered in weather like this. But these guys had been hitting each other hard. It was as if they had agreed on the rules to the fight — there was no clinching, neither of them tried to drag the other down. It wasn't a brawl. It was a fight and it must have lasted five minutes.

He finishes his cigarette stubs it out on the grass. There is more tea in the pot so he pours it. He hasn't had a fight since High-school. His nose had been broken before he had punched the other boy in the side of the face and the boy had crumpled. He can still see the eyes of the boy though he has forgotten the name long ago. The eyes had a look of astonishment, as if the punch was the last thing they expected. The boy had not got up and some fool had called a teacher. "I did it," he had said, without pride or shame, a simple statement of fact.

The cars have their headlights on now, though it is still light enough to see clearly. The air is gritty and the tram tracks shine. Damien. The boy's name had been Damien Wilkinson. He wonders where Damien is now. Then suddenly the men had stopped. A few shouts had been exchanged and then they had climbed back into their cars. In maybe ten seconds the traffic had moved on and there was nothing to confirm what he had seen.

Now he watches the traffic and the two teenage girls walking down the far side of the street. One of the girls sees him watching. She is wearing shorts and a T-shirt. "Hey, sucker," she shouts. Suddenly she lifts her shirt and shows him a pale, rounded breast. The two girls break into laughter and run to the church at the corner. He stares after them and feels rudely re-attached to this unforgiving world. The light in the school dies suddenly, accompanied by the sound of breaking glass.
Kristopher Saknussemm

One Cold Morning Once

In the starlight rooster scratch
of rickety houses, cold rises
out of creeks and ponds
penetrating weatherboards —
working its way into
the wedgewood and the wicker,
the wishbones and the widows
of a disappearing world.

Wolf spiders in woodpiles
and billy goats tethered in lost toy yards.
Country kitchens painted a faded
yellow and green, where you can see
your breath in the morning
on far too many mornings.

Hallways panelled by grandfathers posing
with barn-weary grindstones and riptooth saws.
Another generation gone into the ground
or the sky, barely leaving photographs behind —
faces on the walls that are themselves
falling away into the earth, into the air...

Into the immaculate frosts of railroad dawns
when every single piece of steel glistens
with a brittle, brutal clarity.
A seemingly perfect  
ly calm morning —    
cool quartz moon above the cattails, 
shredded silk trying not 
to tremble in the still blue air.

When out of the Moses reeds    
I see a giant darter bird materialize —    
as if to its own great surprise as much as mine —    
and almost painfully    
try to rise above the marsh stalks —    
frozen momentarily    
in an uncertain stall    
of stilt leg-long neck lack of coordination — until    
without even knowing how    
its secret self tears free    
and leaves the blur of the awkward bird behind    
ghosting across the wing-filled water gone.

And suddenly I see that my canoe    
has floated out from shore and me —    
slipping away softly    
like the mind from the body    
on the edge of sleep.

A crow cries on the far side    
and I can't decide if I should laugh    
or curse, because the crow and I both know    
I'll have to swim for it —    
like the darter, forced to follow    
in the wake of its own wild wings.

Imagine a naked man paddling after an empty boat!

Out beyond the deepest water    
my other body calls to me.
Mantis

Too green to be real,
somnolent yet alert —
like intelligent, articulated leaves.
I've seen them in Asian movies,
usher ed out of bamboo cages
to fight to the death,
gleaming eyed old men with missing teeth
betting on the combat.

They remind me of Ming the Merciless
and the Dragon Lady — or perhaps
priestesses and priests in some secret, demonic sect.
But whenever I find them, soft and curious,
on the sharp stone steps of my garden,
I remember they belong
to that holy order of nothing
at all like anything I've ever seen.
The Other Man

Just what I was trying to do with or to my two men strapped to the mast I must have been one or two glasses of red past remembering.

Even so I managed to name Turner & Kipling — Turner for sure with canvases of little or nothing but spray strapping him to the mast but day broke much later than daybreak on my own question mark over Kipling & out of the clearing away & stacking of dishes — out of the washing up floated old Rudyard without a mast to strap himself to or be strapped to. Then in the histories & biographies under Kingsl, Kingst, under Kipling there was no one hanging onto a mast as if it were the British Empire not even a floating mast, a straw let alone anyone engaged in the S & M (minus the S) of being strapped or strapping.

All day, then, Sunday into Monday in filing cabinets through manila folders in drawers, on book shelves even in waste paper baskets
I looked for not just another man
not just any man among millions chained & manacled to
some part of the wood & world for
centuries under sail

but for the man
not Turner, not Kipling
the man whoever he was —
the other man strapped to the mast.

Near Forty

he was kept awake by his many dreams
in the early morning
the hours of which
he did not know in the semi-darkness

his dreams were about the past
things he would never have finished doing
people he would have stayed with forever
things and people he had freely mixed up

and the future never for once was there
while the present grew pale with the dawn
watching him closely
dreaming away his life

rarely there was poetry too
wordless and breathless
hanging on the edge of memory
in a colourless space
Rodney Hall in Conversation with Susanne Braun-Bau

RODNEY Hall was born in England in 1935 and came to Australia after the second world war. He has published eleven volumes of poetry and four novels as well as a trilogy. In 1982 he received the Miles Franklin Award for *Just Relations*. He has edited several collections of Australian verse, written a study of the artist Andrew Sibley and a biography on the writer John Manifold, who also influenced his own work. He was chairman of the Australia Council when Susanne Braun-Bau interviewed him in Sydney in 1992.

What made you turn from poetry to writing novels?

I didn't change, that's a common assumption. I've always done both, or at least I always did do both. I've stopped writing poetry for the last twelve years. I began my first novel when I was seventeen, and it took me three years to write, and it was never published. Then I started another one, the only one set in Europe, in the Mediterranean, called *The Ship on the Coin*. But I also wrote all that time for radio so I was doing prose as well as the poetry, but I was getting the poems published, and I was not getting the novels published.

Have you published the novel that you started writing when you were seventeen in some form or another?

No. I have all the old manuscripts and I think I might one day be able to rescue something out of it but I'll wait till I'm old. I've got too many new ideas. I want to get them down and when they stop coming then I'll go back to an old thing like that and see if there is something to rescue and if not it's best to put it in the fire.

How do you see your task as a writer? — What kind of ideas do you want to convey?

Well, I do see a very specific task. I am tremendously interested in the creative
energy of the reader. It always interests me that every time a novel is read, fiction does a very special thing with the reader. Every work of fiction is always made new by a new reader. And the best fiction sparks the most personal and energetic image in the reader’s mind. So good novels in other words liberate the reader into the reader’s own imagination. Now that interests me tremendously and to do that, you have to tap into that energy. You have to tap into a new energy in yourself every time you start a new book. Every new book is a completely new challenge for me. They’re all very different. If I’ve done one, I don’t want to do another like that. I’ve done that. And also because my reader will think: “I know how to read this book, I know how to read this author. I’ve been through Just Relations, so I know how to read The Second Bridegroom.” But in fact The Second Bridegroom requires you as the reader to read in quite a different way. Each of my books is like that. There is obviously the style which is mine, which is in all of them but I want to do new territory each time. So, I’m always a beginner. I never plan any book. I never know what the story is or where it’s going.

So you don’t have a synopsis of the novel planned before?

No, absolutely not. I have a knowledge of the themes. I knew with Just Relations that I wanted to write a book about — the land as a character, as a living moving character.

Yes, I see what you mean. Are you thinking of descriptions of ‘the Mountain’ for instance?

Yes, the Mountain itself as a character. And I knew I wanted to do something that showed that it is possible for the ‘invading people’ — roughly speaking, that’s the European people — to be deeply part of this country. I love the land. Australia as a land is something I’ve travelled in almost every part of and I very deeply love it and I want to find a way, as the Aborigines found a way over a great length of time, of seeing the land as a creature, as another person in a sense. So, I knew that I wanted to do that, but I had absolutely no idea of what was going to happen and I never plan ahead. I手write in notebooks with a pencil and I only write on the right hand page; and on the left hand page if I have other ideas I make notes to myself. But I almost never read them. You might have done that yourself —

Yes, just the act of writing is enough to remember —

Exactly — just making the note is enough, it helps to hold the idea. I’m very interested in what we forget rather than in what we remember, because if we
reminded everything in our experience, we wouldn’t know anything.

That sounds very cryptic —

It would be too much, we would not make sense of it. We only make sense of it, because some things we forget. I can remember the embarrassment and shame as a three years old child of not being able to learn to tie my shoes. Now, why in all the million of things that happened in my life would I remember not being able to get the loops right, you see. But that is obviously important for me or I wouldn’t remember it. I don’t have to work at that, because my forgetting has done the work for me. And that’s what I want to trigger in the work I’m doing.

Then you are not writing for Australian readers primarily. This experience is possible for someone with a different background as well, isn’t it?

Oh, my goodness. I do very badly in Australia. There is my German edition of Captivity Captive which has sold five times as many copies in Germany as it has here. America is much bigger than Australia for me. Even in Britain, which is not good for Australian literature, because they still have a colonial attitude to us, I sell more than I do here. Even in Canada I do better than I do in Australia.

Do you have an explanation for that?

No, I don’t want to know. You see, David Malouf is an example of someone that is not true of. He does wonderfully well in Australia. And he does very well in England, not nearly so well in America; some of his translations do well, I think the Dutch one does quite well of Harland’s Half Acre. It’s a funny phenomenon.

Would you think that the presentation of consciousness is a major topic in your work?

Oh yes, absolutely. Some books, like Just Relations which is told in the third person, are full of that, because I can go into the minds of the characters. Whereas in a book like The Second Bridegroom it’s impossible, because we are trapped inside the character’s own consciousness, but of course I’m exploring that, because he’s a fictional character.

That’s what I just wanted to suggest, then you are presenting him, because he is presenting himself through your imagination —

Yes, it’s a very interesting device to be trapped inside your character’s experience and consciousness. I’ve done it twice now, or three times — I’ve just finished a new
book — and they are now a trilogy: The Second Bridegroom is the first novel of the trilogy; The Grisly Wife, which I just finished is the second one; and Captivity Captive is the third in the set. And they’re all different people speaking, but they are all in the first person. I will have the draft of this new novel ready in two weeks time and I'll send it to London, New York. I do simultaneous publication, so it goes to Melbourne, New York and London. I don't change things much, I'm not a writer who works with editors very much.

So you don't do much revising?

Some books I do huge revises, but not much with the editor. It's partly my musical background, I suppose. I write the novels like I write poems. I make the shape of each sentence contrast with the next one. I listen to the music of the sentences. When I present a novel, it's been polished and worked at — so I don't do much with editors. Especially American editors, who are very very good, do make very helpful and valuable comments. They have a much higher standard than in Australia. But then it's not little things in the word thing, it's usually a concepdonal thing, which I then go back and work out.

Having discussed the presentation of mind and feelings in your work, do you think nature imagery is important to present the world of the imagination?

Well, it is in The Second Bridegroom and Just Relations, the books I mentioned already. The biggest of my books and in many ways the most difficult, is the one that followed Just Relations, it's called Kisses of the Enemy. It's a heavy burden, but I'm very fond of it. It is a city book, a political book. The only piece of countryside is the desert at the beginning. It opens out in the desert, in Central Australia. Or it opens in Sydney and then it moves to the desert and there is no other country or natural imagery in all of it. It's all to do with politics and buildings and cities.

But there is still landscape imagery that can be used to convey things of the psyche. Then it's the city that creates a certain atmosphere and —

I see what you mean. That's very important. But I don't use it like for example David Malouf does. He does it beautifully, and he uses precise pieces of furniture, little individual details of the brand name of a product or something. He's got a very good eye and ear for that. And he puts these little specific things in. I don't do that at all. I like it in his writing, but it would be quite out of place in mine. Whether it's the city or the country, it's the big part of the environment that interests me, how
that shapes us. And David I think is interested in how the shape of the room shapes us. That doesn't interest me.

Well yes, when you describe a mountain for instance, or a certain house, I always have the feeling that you learn something new about a certain character as well, — about the character who is watching or thinking about the object.

Oh yes, it's always like that. In that sense of the question it is always the case. Yes, I see now how this ties into your theory — all the things are perceived, none of the things are just objects. That's very good! It clarifies it for me. All David's objects are really actually objects. None of my objects are objects. They're all perceived objects. Yes, they're always how it impresses in the mind and is remade in the mind.

So would you agree that houses have symbolic value in your novel Just Relations for instance? There is this strange character, the knitting Bertha McAloon, actually it's a remarkable character portrait. What did you want to suggest with her obsession?

I think it is what it gives you. Actually it's very hard to talk for me about Just Relations. I can talk about any of my other books better —

Why?

It's because I absolutely love that book. I've never read it again. But it was the joy of my life — I spent five years writing it and I never had a day of trouble or anxiety with it. It was a sheer pleasure to write. Nothing that I've ever done was like that. I loved the characters, I loved everything — all the details. I had terrific fun. And each day I'd get up and I'd think; “Well, what will I do now. What will these whole people do next?” So I had a wonderful, wonderful time writing it and I'm not very good at talking about it for that reason. All the other books, much as I got into them and enjoyed them in other ways, are easier to talk about.

Are you consciously experimenting with narrative technique in your work in general?

Slightly, yes. I have to say honestly — yes that's right. Why I was doubting is because I spent a very long time dedicated to writing without being published. I mean, I was very disappointed, it wasn't that I didn't want it. I left school on my sixteenth birthday and I went out to work and I was already writing. By the time I was twenty I decided that's what I wanted to do. It was six years from then before I had even one poem published. I'd written about a thousand poems and I'd written two novels by then. And I had nothing published, nothing anywhere. So I had a
very long period of failure in the publishing terms, in which I learnt a craft. I did not just write things. I set out to teach myself. I read every book I could get on the subject of prose, poetry, everything. I wrote, I'm sure, an enormous amount of rubbish, but it taught me a technique. I think that I have a very polished technique and I can do anything I want to do. I have a musical example, because I was trained as a musician. It's like a pianist: I can get all the notes. So in the writing terms, I know I can do that.

Actually, I was thinking of experiments with narrative techniques in order to create new ways to present reality — like Joyce did, for instance. I mention Joyce, because Salman Rushdie wrote that Just Relations is reminiscent of Joyce and even compared it to his Ulysses. Have you read that novel? Would you see some parallels to your work?

Oh of course, I'm very much in the tradition. I don't think we ever do anything new unless we absorb as much as we can of the tradition. And we now with translation we are able to absorb traditions from other countries which is a tremendous privilege. A hundred or fifty years ago it was impossible. We only had translations of classics. So we get modern novels from all over the world and I think that is tremendously important. And of course it's all very stimulating. So I see what they trigger in me. There is an example given by the New York Times critic looking at Just Relations. He did quite a big comparison with Gabriel Garcia Márquez, with One Hundred Years of Solitude. Now, that is a wonderful, wonderful book. Their point was, when they are talking about magic realism in English, we have hundreds of years of magic realism. It was not invented by Gabriel Garcia Márquez. In English for a start we have Peter Pan which is a nineteenth century children's fantasy in which the children fly. One of the great classics — it is not a very good book, I must admit — being Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, which are all about people growing big and small and getting down rabbit burrows. It's all pure magic realism and it's what we were all given as children. European fairytales are full of magic realism. So what I'm trying to say is that the new things don't give you an idea: "Oh I'll do something different." What they do is they say, "oh we've already got that in our own tradition, but we haven't made use of it." I've had it since I was a child. But until we read it in somebody like Garcia Márquez, we don't realize what we've already got. So I'm interested in that. I read a lot of new things. I'm a very impatient reader. I read every word, I'm a slow reader, and if I'm not in the world of the book after about five pages, I don't bother about it.
Would you like to comment in detail on the concept of reality and fantasy in your fiction. I find that reality is often undercut by fantastic elements. Do you think this is important for your work?

No, I think it isn't undercut. I think it is an aspect of reality, it is a way of showing reality. I mean Bertha is an example in Just Relations. Bertha has been swimming in useless circles in the dam. It's an expression of her profound frustration and her anger that she finally flies. It's an expression of her, it isn't in that sense to me a fantasy.

I found her really interesting, also her obsession with knitting —

Yes, she just turned out to be a knitter. When I was writing, I discovered that she was knitting. I am interested in the concepts of art. I am very suspicious about books about writers. I have a real hatred of books about writers. Who wants to know about boring old writers. I am also not interested in books about artists, painters. We've got one great funny book in English. It's called The Horse's Mouth, written about 1948 or something by Joyce Carey. Wonderful, wonderful book, but that's an exception for me. I mean Patrick White's book The Vivisector about a painter, I can't stand it. I'm sceptical about the arts or artists as subjects. But I'm terribly interested in the process of art itself. So in Just Relations for instance, Fido is an artist in a funny sort of way, painting on the window. He's doing what art does with the landscape beyond, because he's making a world out of the imagination through what he does in his painting. He makes a world of the imagination, because he is shut away from the real world. It's a substitute world. And it's also the same with Bertha McAloon. She has a substitute world through the art of knitting, she has created a substitute house and substitute people. So that there's a sort of joke about art, because the book is a work of art, I hope. So there is a joke against myself while I'm writing it; that art is always this kind of substitute life that nevertheless is a release.

To come back to landscape once again. I was surprised when you said that you love the landscape and have this positive relation towards it. Because in your novels it's rather desolation and man's loneliness and it's often — depressing?

That's an interesting question — the reason for that is that the mountain and the land in Just Relations is entirely a perceived land, it's entirely them. They can't love it in a way, because it's them. They can only experience it. There is no division.
Whereas in *The Second Bridegroom* there's a complete division. The man in *The Second Bridegroom* has no way of absorbing this strange land into himself. So those two books are absolutely opposite in the way they treat the land. And interestingly it's almost exactly the same piece of land, Susanne. These two books are set within my imagination about twenty kilometres of each other. The reader wouldn't know that, but this is the place I got in mind for each of the books. They're not absolutely real places, I've moved them — there's a real mountain that's the model in *Just Relations*.

Which mountain is that?

It's called Mt. Dromedary. I've moved it a little bit inland and I've changed its shape and manner and I've done lots of other things with it of course, but it is roughly speaking a model. Where *The Second Bridegroom* takes place is an absolute place. It's an exact description of a real place just about half a kilometre away from where I live. When they walk and come to the great valley, that's Kangaroo Valley in New South Wales. So he's walked about two hundred kilometres over the year. So that's another very specific location. It isn't something I've imagined. I actually tried to look through his eyes at a place I know.

I would be interested to know if you have any childhood recollections as far as the Australian or English landscapes and nature are concerned?

There are. My mother was an Australian who went to England to study to be an Opera singer. She then got married and had children and we were born in England. And we were there in the Second World War, before we came back to Australia. For example there is Vivien's memory in *Just Relations*. She's brought up in the war and she's been told that something is going to happen that is called 'peace', and she doesn't know as a child what peace is and she wakes up in the middle of the night and there is this huge sheet of flame. It's reflected in the room and she wakes up and thinks "Oh it's the peace". That was a memory out of my childhood of being bombed in England. That's a straight memory. But I don't use real people for models, I only use an imagined world. In all my books, all the poetry, it's very rare that there is an actual memory.

So you do not consciously use autobiographical material in your work?

No, almost none. And yet everything is almost autobiographical, because I've remade it in my imagined way. But I don't use memories, because I don't know
what's interesting in them. Whereas when I invent things I know what's interesting in them. I'm not a reporter, I'm not interested in what really happened, or what I went through. I'd rather leave that to the unconscious — the subconscious. I work out of the subconscious. I'm much more interested in the subconscious.

Actually, that's a phenomenon about your characters. Is it correct to understand the way they talk rather as a means of presenting their thoughts?

Well yes, that's why I use that punctuation in Just Relations. Instead of using quotation marks it's just a dash. The idea of that is, because the dash begins the speech, it doesn't finish it. So it moves out of speech into thought without any break. Whereas in The Second Bridegroom of course it's all quotes, 'cause he's writing letters. But in other books like Captivity Captive for example, it's ordinary punctuation. That's a different way of doing it.

At the end of part V the people of Whitey's Fall and the government officials have their committee meeting and then suddenly the weather changes, the wind stops and they all die. Why did these people have to die, what did you want to convey there?

That's curious — it's interesting you ask that question. It's possibly the only thing I'd ever want to change in that book, which as I say I really love. It never occurred to me quite what it does to the reader until one of them — not often reviewers tell you anything about a book at all — but one reviewer expressed — disappointment. And that made me think of it a bit. I don't know why I had them all die, because I don't plan things and I don't challenge the ideas that come to me. If it feels right, I put it down. Now I look back that's the only passage in the book I think I would probably change — it might be to do with the length of the passage. I could explain to you what I think is the weakness of it, is that it's too easy. The solution is too easy.

But of course they all return.

Oh yes, of course they return, they never die. It's like the bones of the singing — it's just the way the technique is used, I've got a funny feeling that I took a quick way out.

Do you consciously make use of telling names? For instance the name of the new place they settle at, is called 'London'.

Oh, it's an Australian joke. You know, they think they invented us and in fact we're going to invent them.
Yes that's what I thought, that this might be read in a postcolonial context.

Oh yes, that's absolutely right. The whole book is about the first generation of postcolonials. These people are no longer colonials. They're doing all the original creating. Yes, they go and discover a place called London. It's a useful reminder for the English-speaking reader that Australia wasn't invented by the English.

So would you say that writing is an intuitive process rather than an intellectual one?

Well I don't want to separate all that. I think that it's also an intellectual activity. I get back to my definition before — I have to surprise myself. I would be absolutely unwilling to enter into a discussion that suggested that writing wasn't an intellectual activity, I'm sure it is. But it's got that element, we were talking about, of 'forgetting' in it. Gabriel in The Second Bridgroom has his name Gabriel for obvious reasons of many kinds, ones which I would leave to the critic to talk about, so I leave it to you. You'll do something wonderful. But let me ask you a question. What do you think happened to Gabriel in the middle after the murder, what do you think happened with the murder?

Well, I thought this was the concept of magic realism again, that —

No, don't be a critic, don't tell me anything critically clever. Just tell me what you thought physically happened, not literary things. Real things. What did you think happened to him? Was he murdered?

Well, I guess I have to believe in what you wrote and so therefore he was not murdered.

Yes, right. But what do you think — don't mind me quizzing you, because I'm very interested to know what you think. What do you think in fact did happen if he wasn't murdered.

Well, maybe he was in a state of coma, and just very nearly dead.

Yes, wonderful. You wouldn't believe how the critics in this country have managed to turn triple somersaults to avoid just what you've said. That's exactly what it is. That's exactly what I had in mind. So he has such severe brain damage when he comes back. He's lost the power of speech.

Let's return to Just Relations briefly: I think there are sinister undercurrents in the way you presented Whitey's Fall. For instance Billy repeats that he really hates this place and this only changes after he meets Vivien.
There is the pun in English — Whitey’s Fall: the fall of the white man. It’s actually built on a wonderful place name in Australia, one of my very favourite colonial place names. It’s a natural feature, it’s a ridge called ‘Wilson’s Downfall’. It’s on the border of New South Wales and Queensland and I’m very very fond of the idea. One wonders who Wilson was and in what way it was his downfall. I like that kind of name and that was unashamedly a play on ‘Wilson’s Downfall’ and I have my Whitey’s Fall. I like things that are mistakes, that it’s actually Water Fall and not what we think at all. So Whitey is only a person’s name, that sort of game play, I do a lot. Just Relations is all totally that. As you probably realized, the whole book is a game about the search for the golden figure. It plays a kind of game with mythology. But it’s not parallels in the sense of following anything, apart from the fact of a few incidents like the clashing rocks. It’s more a game of the personalities and what happens when you enclose people in the truck, as the Argonauts were in the ship. It’s more a game about a kind of psychological interplay rather than a game of literary forms.

Yes, this and also the depiction of country towns reminded me of Thea Astley’s work. She also has people who are quite cruel to each other. The desolate atmosphere of isolation and decay seems similar, too. Is this how you see a ‘typical Australian country town’?

Well, I have to say after reading The German Lesson of Siegfried Lenz and after reading Günter Grass, they’re not things specifically Australian. Cruelty in small towns is pretty universal. But the thing I would say about Thea, I would say roughly the same thing I said about David Malouf for different reasons. I think there is an essential difference in the way we approach — and this is not a qualitative distinction I’m making, Thea does deal with the real table and the real house and the real town and I get back to the point that I never do that. My houses, and tables, and ashtrays are the psychological phenomena of the perception so they’re reperceived and that’s what people keep calling magic realism.

In Eudora Welty’s work the landscape seems to be in dialogue with the human mind too, and thus achieves a universal meaning.

In fact, it was Salman Rushdie, subsequent to the article you were talking about, who asked me if I had read her. And I had to my shame never heard of Eudora Welty. I subsequently read her and I think she is fantastically good. And she does do that, you’re quite right, but it’s very American, isn’t it? But then all the American reviewers always persistently make connections between me and the Southern
American writers. I'd only ever read one Faulkner novel and that was *As I Lay Dying* which I thought was a wonderful book. I'd just begun reading *Light in August*, which was infinitely better, when the first review of *Just Relations* came out in America doing a full comparison with *The Sound and the Fury* which I had never read a word of and I now won't. They've spoilt it for me.

Do you have some favourite authors?

I have favourite books, I don't have favourite authors. All my favourite books I fall in love with while I'm reading them. I just have a sort of galaxy of favourite ones. Every time I come in contact with them I think this is the world I want to inhabit. In contemporary literature which I read a great deal of, I would think the books that I would want to put in that little pantheon would be: *The German Lesson*, *The Autumn of the Patriarch* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. I would certainly put *Fifth Business* by Robertson Davis in it. I would certainly put *The Riders in the Chariot* of Patrick White in it.
AD came from the paddocks early today. He had been checking the crops, a job I thought would keep him out there until after sunset. But he came back to the house at five.

I was inside with a crook arm. Couldn't work all week. So I stayed with Mum and watched her do the house chores. Feed the chooks and geese. Didn't know. She's nearly as busy as Dad and I are.

Mum and I talked about it. We think Dad should retire soon. Settle down in the house, watch TV and that.

Last year's crop came through in November, carted away three weeks earlier than the year before. It brought us the biggest wheat board cheque we've had in ten years. But there was no time to celebrate. Back to the seeding, back to the sheep. Mum banked the cheque in town so Dad and I could stay and do the seeding. And it was like there had never been a crop sale, no break in the days when the sweat almost stings as it covers our shirtless backs.

After reading through the latest Geographic, I sat in my room looking at the calendar we got from Mundaring Service Station. My birthday was a few weeks ago. Turned forty-one. And Dad's sixty-six next week.

Mum's already planning his birthday dinner. Same as last year's. A cake, after a big roast lamb - bought, not one of ours - and the pick of her vegie garden.

Not bad, Dad's birthday. Better than mine.

For my dinner, we had the usual for a Wednesday, then Mum and Dad asked their usual questions about finding a nice girl in town. Asking whether or not McFadyen's girl at Toodyay is already married. Would she be suitable? No, I always tell them.
No, it's not for me. She's not for me.

I sat on my bed thinking about Mark. The farmhand we hired a bit back. Only lasted five months. Forgot to lock the paddock gates one time too many. The flock wandered out and a prize ram was hit by a truck. Poor Jaxson. Fathered half the lambs last year. And now there are none; that lot were all carted away to the butchery.

Poor Mark. Dad lost his temper with him. Told him to pack up and go.

I used to sit with him some nights. We sat on wicker chairs on the porch of his shack. The workers’ hut, which no one had used in years.

We would talk those nights. Well, he’d talk, and I’d listen to him while we each drank a can or two of light beer.

He was only nineteen, but knew a lot. Sometimes I would ask him questions.

“Tell me about when you lived at the beach. Did you swim every day?”

“All the time, Frank. Man, it was good. Calm in the morning, frantic after lunch. You’d love it.”

I was never sure if I would love it or not. I saw the ocean once, when I was just a kid. I hated it. Looked like some big, blue barrier, end of the earth, of the world. Nothing open or fresh about it. Just salt and sand and too many people.

Tonight, Dad brought Dana the new calf up to the back paddock. She’s growing quick. Don’t know where she’ll end up, yet. Butchery or calving herself. Depends how she gets on with the rest of the stock. We might breed her with one of Patterson’s bulls.

The Pattersons are our neighbours. Pair of oldies, like Mum and Dad. But they have a granddaughter. Lives with them. Been there about three years. She never liked me. Sent her off our land once. She was swimming in our dam, so I threw stones at her till she got her clothes on and left.

Mark and I swam a few times in the dam. Usually on a really hot night. About December. I’d never been there by myself at night, but I was happy to go when Mark asked me. Said he might get lost if he didn’t go with someone.

Used to try to drag me in before I got my gear off. I didn’t like that. But once we were in I used to like play-fighting with him. I might have been older than Mark, but I’m stronger too. I would drag him under and keep him down until he tried pulling me under too. I would only let go when he got so angry he bit me with his teeth on my stomach or my leg.

Then we would walk back to the house, and have a quick tinnie at his place.
before I’d be too tired to even check the gates were locked before bed.

After dinner tonight Dad told me that Dana will definitely be butchered. She’s
to be freighted tomorrow.

Pity, the one cow I only ever wanted to keep. Mark was the one who birthed
her while I watched and gave him pointers. He was scared about it, but I told him
what to do and he did it. He obeyed me, everything I said.

“Do you give them names now?” he asked me.

“Yeah. I normally get to name them, even though Dad doesn’t like the idea. You
can name this one.”

“Can I call her Dana?”

“Sure.” I told him I had big hopes for this calf. That if Dad would let me, I might
start a cattle group of my own. She could be the start, mother and grandmother to
a whole line.

“You could look after them,” I told him. “We get a new cattle-dog and you can
be in charge. We’ll use one of the far fields and build a house out there.”

“Dunno if I’ll be round long enough to see Dana bred,” he mumbled, then went
to find a blanket for the new calf.

I was tired that night because the sheep had been moved to the front field. Mark
wanted to go into Toodyay for a drink, so I reminded him to close the front gates
after he drove out.

While he was gone I went to his shack. I got in using the spare key from Dad’s
chain. And I looked at his modern clothes and his hair gel and his magazines. I
went through a shoe-box of photos. They all had writing on the back and most
seemed to be taken in Perth City.

I must have fallen asleep on his bed, and I was scared when I heard his car roll
up. I went out the back way and hid underneath a window.

I could see him in there, making coffee for that Patterson girl. And he was
opening a beer for himself. I couldn’t hear what they were saying but I did see them
kiss. And I saw him take off her shirt and her bra before the lights went out.

I wanted to smash the window. To grab that girl and chuck her through the
door. To kick her all the way down the drive and make her walk back to the
Pattersons with cuts and bruises all over her pretty face. And then smash that beer
bottle over Mark’s head.

I crept away, instead. Checked on Dana. Then I went to the gates, undid the
chain and quietly swung them full open. And I watched as a couple of the sheep
wandered out.
We’ll be taking Dana tomorrow. Dad’s already prepared the truck, and told me to go to bed early. He wants an early start.

So my hopes for a line of cattle go down the loo. My hopes for having it managed by Mark and myself disappeared after that night.

Dad’s shouting woke me up the next morning. “The sheep are wand’rin’!” I went down after dressing.

“That damned fool lad! Knew he were a mistake. Shoulda known!”

“But Dad, he was never lazy. Must have forgot. I reminded him, though.”

We got on the bikes and rounded the sheep off the road. Took the best part of the morning to secure them back in the field.

Then we found poor Jaxson the ram. On his side in a ditch, blood sticking to his wool. Poor Jaxson.

I went to have a shower, and when I came down again Mark had packed his car and was about to drive off. I watched from the front windows as the dirt flew up. Dad chased after him shouting curses.

We got up early this morning. Last day for Dana. I went to sit with her while mum and dad had breakfast. I didn’t want her to go, but I was not going to ask Dad to let me buy her. Besides, we all needed the money. The final payment on the new tractor was due this month. And Dad said he couldn’t afford it after paying Mark’s redundancy and tax and super.

I tried not to vomit as I sat with the calf. Skipping breakfast always makes me sick.

Dad was busy getting together some papers for the bank, so I backed the old truck round for him. I’m usually not allowed to drive it, though once he did send me out carting sheep when I was thirty.

Dana was loaded with some of the lambs, and we drove off. While we were on our way, I was quiet. I was wishing Mark were with us. He would have had something clever to say about why it wasn’t sad losing this calf. He would have given me a quick punch and told me to cheer up.

Dana was left at a storage place in Midvale, then we went on to pick up the fertiliser Dad had ordered.

After that was loaded and the cheque was signed, we were on our way to the bank.

“You sure you wanna be farmin’ all yer life?” Dad asked me.
I was surprised by his question. Never occurred to me that he wondered what I wanted to do. "Sure. What else is there for me?"

"You know, if you wanna build up this farm for yerself, you do't alone. You don't need 'ployees."

"I know. But I think Mark would have been good on the farm."

"He let the flock out. That ram's dead. That's what I mean. You can't truss the 'ployees. They don't have to care as much. You havta do things solo. You get yerself a wife for the house and you do the work. 'Tis the way it's always been."

"I know, Dad."

While Dad was at the bank I went for a wander through Mundaring shops. I looked at the people as they stared at me. Young people, standing around in groups, laughing. They didn't know about Dana. They didn't know that a cow either gets mated or gets eaten. No other choice for these animals. Sometimes they're just too dumb. One of these very people might eat Dana. I wanted to punch in the head of some long-haired guy in a suit, 'cause he looked like someone who might eat my calf.

I met Dad outside the bank. We found the truck and headed homeward.

"How 'bout buying a lunch-time drink for yer old Dad?"

"In Toodyay? Okay."

We went into the pub. From the bar I bought two beers while Dad did the rounds, gossipping with all the other farmers who came in for their lunch-time drinks. Friday lunch was always busy.

I said hello to Bert Phelps as I found a table for Dad and myself.

"I'm pretty hungry, Dad."

"Go and get yerself somethin', then."

I asked him if he wanted some lunch too, but he was happier waiting for Mum's cooking back at home.

I ordered a pie and chips from the food counter and stood waiting, wishing I remembered to bring my beer with me.

"Well, well." Someone grabbed my arm tightly from behind. I turned around, and there was Mark.

"Mark?"

"Why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"You know you left the gates open. I know I shut them and there are witnesses, too."
I just stared at him. I didn’t know what to say.
“You should try and get a life, Frank. Loser. You cost me a job, you know. But it doesn’t matter, I’ve got another one already.”
“Where?!” I asked, frantic to know.
“With the Pattersons. And at least their place is a damn sight more interesting than yours.”

That Patterson girl came up then, and tried to take Mark away. “You leave Frank alone,” she said to him.

“Get away, you disgusting bitch,” I said to her.

The punch knocked me right to the ground. I just stayed there. I didn’t want to fight Mark.

Besides, Mark had left and the girl was following him out, apologising to the barman.

I got up, took my plate of food and went back to the table, trying to pretend that nothing had happened. Dad would never have seen. I sat, one hand covering my swelling cheek.

I was too upset to eat, though. First Dana ... now Mark attacks me. I didn’t say anything on the way home, and went straight to Mark’s shack after we had locked up the truck.

I lay on the bed that was Mark’s. I must have fallen asleep, but I know I dreamed about a line of cattle and Mark rounding them, riding shirtless on the motorbike.

When I awoke again, I knew I was only dreaming. I started thinking about Dana, and I knew I was right about cows. They get mated and they get to live. Otherwise eaten.

I got up to head back to the house, thinking maybe I should call the Patterson girl myself and apologise. Invite her for tea. Mark, too. Especially him.

But I also thought about getting one of the rifles, and taking myself off for a long swim in the dam.
The open wound on his body envelopes his memory, while his words and his actions become sign-posts, which he cannot read, leading toward the womb of his desire, into the cavity where the silence of his Past meets the agony of his Now, in the tightly cramped space of unknowing, of grieving for what he can no longer see, or feel. John looks at the Priest standing in front of him, and feels unworthy, feels shameful. He wonders if the Priest can see into his soul, can see his evil heart. He wants to cringe away from the Priest, but something holds him there. Perhaps, fear. He can see the Angels lining up behind the Priest, carrying their canes of retribution. He is not forgiven, he cannot forgive himself. His forehead itches. He scratches. There is nothing remarkable in that.

The black-robed Priest thinks about a crown of thorns, the marks of His Despair. Yet, he cannot see that despair on the brow of this white-robed patient standing shakily in front of him now. The Priest holds his right thumb upright, smeared with black, and waits. In his left hand he holds a small brass box, from which he draws the ashes. The patient is obviously agitated. The Priest will never allow himself to forget, not even for one glorious moment, where he is, and who he is. And thinks about moving on to the next patient. But, no. The man is making the Sign of the Cross.

John is thinking about the pecking order of Angels while he Crosses himself — "... and of the Son...", sounded familiar — as the hesitant hospital Priest hesitates before anointing his forehead with ashes. It must be Wednesday. For a moment John thinks that he can see a world beyond the glass window at the rear of the Chapel. It must be Wednesday.

Outside, in the hospital grounds, a morning sun smoulders slowly between the granite and the green. There is a crack in the red glass Cross on the wall near the
entrance to Casualty. John stares at the crack. The Cross. Feels confused. Wants to cry, but doesn't know why. So, he doesn't.

John rubs his forehead. Scratches at a sore there. A scab, blackened by the Priest's ashen touch, comes away beneath his long fingernails.

John's eyes follow, as the Priest moves toward the end of a long line of patients. He startles himself by thinking that he might be in danger of reading meaning into this. Absurd. He looks away. When he looks back, the Priest has gone.

An orderly, dressed in uniform white, enters the Chapel.

"OK. Come on fellas. Time to go back to your ward," said the orderly, as if he were speaking to children. Inmates all.

The patients wander out into a long corridor. Artificial lights lay flat in the ceiling like the white lines on a concrete road. The floorboards beneath the linoleum tiles creak under John's feet. John bounces on his toes as he edges toward the door at the end of the corridor. Dancing on a springboard. The water runs deep. John puts his hands together and makes like a dolphin diving.

A tiny dribble of blood snakes its way into the corner of John's left eye. John stops what he is doing to wipe the blood away from his eye. Starts scratching at his face below his eye. He feels his skin give way. He looks at his hand, at the bloodstained tips, the skin beneath his nails.

At the end of the corridor the small band of illuminated patients cluster together to watch the orderly retrieve a key attached to a long chain from his trouser pocket. When the door is opened, John tip-toes past the orderly. The orderly smiles. John turns to see the orderly's smile but it has gone, or never was. John is not sure about what was, or what wasn't. He puts his hand to his face and when he takes it away his palm is covered in blood. He stretches out his hand, palm up, for the orderly to see. The other patients are pushing into each other, trying to get past John, who is blocking the doorway.

"Come on, John. Get going," orders the orderly, as if John has nothing that the orderly might be interested in knowing about, or seeing.

The ward is circular in design. The door through which John has just entered leads into another corridor which, in turn, leads to a circular room, called The Circle Room, where a TV and some lounge-chairs are bolted to the floor. Doors radiate from The Circle Room into private rooms, toilets and bathrooms, a Treatment Room, and a Nurses' Station. There also is a large, spacious Doctor's Room which is left, for the main, unused. John remembers that he would like to be a Doctor when he grows up. Then, forgets.
John makes his way across The Circle Room.

Almost sponge-like, John places his face against The Circle Room’s one window. He looks out. He no longer sees anything beyond the glass but a blur of colour. He enjoys the warm stain the sun has left on the window. John wonders what it would be like to be a window, but cannot imagine a window which does not break.

He moves away from the window. Yet, something catches his eye, draws him back, and he brings his face up close to the window to peer at it. He is looking at the blood he has left on the glass but he does not see his face. He can only see the blood that is coming from his open wound.

John is searching for his face but he cannot find it. His face is an open wound. All he can see is the wound. And he is bleeding.

John moves away from the window.
He feels cold. Hot. Cold again.
He flaps his hands across his arms and bounces up and down on his toes.
He feels like he is being gripped by icy hands. He tries to push the hands away.
He sees a woman. His wife. She is on the lounge with a rifle in her hands. Someone is holding his shoulder, holding him back. He wants to help the woman but she is leaning forward over the barrel pointed at her head, her left hand is gripped around the muzzle, her right stretches toward the trigger...

John feels himself falling, diving for the rifle, there is an explosion of flesh and the world has turned red with blood, he is covered in the woman’s blood, the top of her head has come away like the slaughtered calf’s, he is shaking, his bloodied flesh is trembling violently, he is trying to wipe away the blood, but it is all over, all over his face...

John tears at his face as if there is something there that he cannot remove, he is screaming, “Get it off! Get it off! Get it off!” He writhes on the floor of the ward, his hands gouging and clawing at his face. Two nurses are trying to hold him but he lashes out and hits one of them in the face. The other patients sit or stand where they are, or move away, or begin pacing in agitation. There are moans. Someone is shouting, “Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!” over and over again. John is still screaming, his face buried in his hands. More nurses, mostly male, begin to arrive, running into the room. The other patients are rounded up and herded out of The Circle Room.

“We’ll have to sedate him.”
“He’s got nothing ordered.”
“Shit!”
“Let him be, for chrissakes. He’ll stop in a minute.”
"He's upsetting the others."
"We should do something to quieten him down."

John sees his wife. She is pushing her way through the nurses. He stops screaming, a look of horror, the wide eyes and stretched mouth of hysteria, is written onto his face like an open wound.
"It's not your fault," she said.

The nurses reach down and pick John up, walk him from the room. John does not take his eyes off his wife as he goes. His head turns to see her smiling and waving. John has left the room.

A dark room. John thinks that he should wake now. He can sense the darkness of the room without having to open his eyes. It is an unfamiliar darkness. He can feel the stiffly starched sheets of a hospital bed beneath his bare buttocks.
"So, you're awake," said a firm but melodic male voice.
— Was it near his right ear?

There is a smell in the room, of mercurochrome and sulphur. There are voices, distant, feminine, finding a way through the dark to where he lies, but they are not for him.
"Yes," said John, not yet fully awake.
— Where did that voice come from? Where am I?

John could not remember how or when he had come to be in this place. Did not know where this place was. He felt disorientated. He opened his eyes, looked left, then right. Could not see who had spoken.
"And ... I guess you will be wanting to go home soon," said the voice, almost a sigh.
"Yes ... but where...?" asked John, not sure whether he was awake or asleep.
— I must be dreaming.
"You're not dreaming. I'm here, right beside you," assured the voice.

Then, a light, small and lampish, appeared beside John's bed; near the head and against the wall. The light enveloped the mild face of a man who might have just woken from a very long sleep. As if making words visible, the face spoke.
"I won't leave you," the man took John's hand in his own, "ever."
"I never asked you to stay."

John and Leni stopped outside Gus's, at Glenbrook, to get some gas before driving on to Sydney. John stood at the rear of the car, holding a nozzle and looking
distant. He was looking toward the city, at the way an orange-brown haze hung over the CBD like a premature sunset. Leni was in the passenger seat fiddling with the CD. John could hear Laurie Anderson but he did not know what she was trying to say.

It was one of those black cat nights
The moon had gone out
and the air was thin.
It was the kind of night
that the cat would drag in.

The road down from the mountains was slippery. John tried not to go too fast. Towards the bottom, just before they came into Emu Plains, there had been an accident. They stopped. Got out to see if they could help. When Leni reached the first car, which was crumpled into a telegraph pole like a wet tin can, she couldn't see anyone in the driver's seat. But she stood there, frozen to the spot. John could hear crying, people's voices, as if he were a long way from here. He was holding a small child, no older than three, or four, who had been thrown from the vehicle and splattered on the concrete curb. John was covered in blood. Leni walked to his side, said, "There's no head on it." John looked down at the child. The child was not headless. He looked at Leni, questioningly. She pointed to the car. "There's no head on it."

Did I drink some poison
that I don't remember now?
Is there blood on my hands?
No, my hands are clean.
Did I do something in another lifetime
that was really really mean?*
The music came from their car.

Three months later, at their home in Leura, John watched Leni put a rifle to her head. He cannot remember her pulling the trigger. He remembers the music. Remembers the words.
A small bullet, a piece of glass
And your heart just grows around it.

shifted gear, and grumbled mechanically away. Metal falling through space. Through the fantasy of waking. A car. A metal trolley with metal trays. Jangling closer. A tambourine sky. A wheel needing to be oiled, oscillating, squeaking nearer, no further from there, stopping outside his door.

A door opens and the bass light of dawn.

"Wakey, wakey. Rise and shine!"

A white-capped nurse wearing a navy blue cardigan enters the room. Switches on the lights. Crosses the room and draws back the curtains. Reveals a long balcony window. Beyond, a city, the bruise of dawn making it appear grey and yellow like cat urine on old paper. The nurse walked out and returned with a metal breakfast tray.

John sat up. Was surprised by how easily he could do this. He smiled at the nurse. The nurse smiled back.

Nurses, busy, urgent, light with touch, soft on voice, peeled away the hours of the day for John. They came and went. Intermittently. Not doing anything in particular. Simply checking. To see if everything was OK. As it should be. And John watched, and waited for the lights to go out.

When darkness returned John lay back and listened to a symphony of nocturnal noises. Day shifted into reverse. The continuity of care hung in the balance like so many stars on the horizon.

Footsteps in the hall reminded John of the way humanity goes over the same old wounds, day after day, in the same tired old shoes. Then, he fell asleep.

It was still dark when John woke.

He was not alone.

"I can't see you," said John, knowingly.

"I am here, John. And everything is alright," said a man's voice. "Go back to sleep."

"I can't," matter-o-factly.

"You will do what you want to do," said the voice.

— I will do what I want to do.

"That sounds like something I would say," said John.

"You did say that," said the man.

"I don't remember saying that," said John.

"I remember you saying that," said the man.

"Do I know you?"
"You know me."
"Turn on the light so I can see your face," John ordered.
The lamplight came on.
John turned his head on the pillow, blinked, waited for his eyes to adjust to the light. Dreamily, he said, "No. I don't think I know you."
"Then, I must be your Guardian Angel."
John tried not to laugh but did anyway.
The man smiled a kindly smile.
John looked at the man. Searched his eyes. He felt as though he had seen this man's face somewhere. Couldn't think of where.
— Perhaps, I've seen him in dream. No. That couldn't be it. I've met this man before. Why won't he tell me his name? He obviously knows mine.
"You know my name."
John turns away. Thinks about a name. A face to go with it. Something lost, or not found. He falls asleep in a sea of faces. Occasionally, he sees his own.

There is a graveyard in Katoomba. In the centre is a circular garden. A rose garden. Leni is here. And John. John kneels in front of the small bronze plaque with Leni's full name on it. He puts his face in his hands like he is dragging away tears of sleep. He sighs deeply as he does this. His hands come together in front of his body and for a moment he looks like the praying Jesus in the Gardens of Gethsemane. But he is not looking up. He does not see the white bird which circles high above. He does not see.

His face is a diary. Names multiply like wrinkles on its surface.

John sat up in bed. Not fast, nor slow. He just sat up. He didn't feel as though
anything were holding him down. He felt as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. That his suffering was over.

Released, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed. Righted himself. Looking ahead he saw a mirror on the bedside chest. Saw his own face staring back at him. Smiling. The wounds on his face have healed.

"And where do you think you're going, John?" said the nurse, as she entered with his breakfast tray.

"Home. I'm going home."

And did.


Rod Moran's *Listening to the Train Passing* ends with "Notes Towards a Self-Portrait", which presents the poet as passionate about his "restive art", worshipping a "private Muse" but "As public as a poet must be" and ultimately "a blind man, trying to see". This strikes the notes to be heard in the previous 65 pages of a fine and varied book. The poem is both serious and mock-serious; Moran is a poet of considerable humility but that doesn't stop him attacking those who lack such a fundamental quality. A substantial number of lines in the book are concerned with satire, including the whole section "Targets and Trajectories". At times Moran's metre and rhyme can be uncertain, as in "Pam Ayres is Banking Her Latest Cheque", but he can also be incisive, for example when evaluating one intellectual's "refined literary sense of hate" ("One Type of Literary Intellectual"). Moran is not a savage satirist in the manner of Juvenal or Pope; his great gift in satire is wit, apparent even in the titles of his poems. "The Author Calls a Press Conference to Announce that He is Dead" ends:

(The text of this small statement
was not authorised by me.
I am not really present.
I'm in Paris, dead, for tea).

Perhaps Moran's work in journalism has encouraged his propensity for both satire and observation. *Listening to the Train Passing* includes a good deal of observation of other people's lives, personalities and inner compulsions. This can be detailed, as in consideration of the German poet George Trakl or "Aldo the Limeburner", or it can be quick and incidental. In "Travelling Through the Wheatbelt, Meditating on History":

At apogee a satellite circuits,
beams another bulletin to the/bar.
A farmer's droll about the/Middle East.
Something is consummated/in a car.

These lines succinctly present a dry, laconic awareness of the haphazard
juxtaposition of worlds across space and across time which is a feature of life in the 1990s. Against the increasingly mechanised lives which people are forced to live Moran sets sensory awareness, especially of birds — black cockatoos "dance a surreal flamenco/dizzy in the casuarinas, beaks like castanets" — and "the chemistry of all ineffable hope" ("What Waits Behind the Shadow"). Moran’s is a voice of decency — a profoundly undervalued quality in Australian literature. He is a poet of unquestionable integrity, alert to pretentiousness and fraudulence in politicians, socially prominent figures, literary critics and intellectual poseurs.

Philip Salom is a poet more inclined to seek wisdom through persistence in his follies. *The Rome Air Naked* is testament to the value of Mrs Lori Whiting’s gift to the Australia Council of a flat in Rome for the use of poets. Salom’s six months there seems to have been a complex experience — the poems reveal a mixture of fascination and loneliness, intensity and fatigue, intellectual richness and sexual deprivation: early on he declares that "everything I see is full of distance" ("Report from Rome"). In some ways Salom’s separation from the society and language he knows — particularly from the latter — drives him in on himself. But he is always a poet of restless intellectual energy, inclined to look outward for references and contact points. The book includes many love poems, if that is the right phrase for poems which begin with love but spiral out from there — Salom’s are tornado poems, spinning out and swirling everything in. Salom is a poet given to rapid changes in attention rather than seeking still points in the turning world or the eye of the storm.

*The Rome Air Naked* is a livre composé — or should that be libro comporrendo? — rather than a collection of individual poems, and in its physical form draws on the windows world of modern computers. Poems are spaced in various ways on the page, some centred and surrounded by excerpts from letters (many of them evocative in their own right), some providing sections of the poem in different outlined rectangles, some playing with line lengths and spaces within lines. In some ways this provides the reader with "the ache of surfaces" (75), a condition into which Salom was thrust. However, something deeper is going on too. "Nothing’s certain" (75) he declares in one blunt sentence, and this is the condition of Salom’s poetic world anywhere, anytime. It is something Salom thrives on; "why not/measure the universe by imagination?"
he asks in a poem, which begins with memory of Ovid, titled "Transformations": "Or metamorphosis. This is the right country for it." The book is sealed by the return of these lines in a window on the book's second last page, in a poem titled "Contraries and the Long Curving Back of Space-Time". Characteristically, this provides a unity which questions the concept of unity, a sealing which is an opening out. While Salom's is a poetry that swirls around his own voice much more than, say, Moran's, it is an inclusive poetry. Difficult as his time there was, Rome's mysteries, sirens, mafiosi and Catholicism, its tossing together of present and past — its magnificent, bewildering complexity — seems to have been simpatico. In Salom's Rome "art is longing and exact" (95) while the life on which it draws is longing, chaotic and inexact.

Edwin Thumboo has been a crucial poet for Singapore, not just for the quality of his own work but because, beginning to write when he did, he helped Singapore's poets believe in themselves and in their own country's concerns as appropriate subject matter, particularly for a poetry written in English. A Third Map: New and Selected Poems is, then, a very important book in the South-east Asian region (Australia included). The Map omits Thumboo's first book, Rib of Earth, but includes ample selections from Gods Can Die and Ulysses by the Merlion plus fifty pages of new poems.

What is immediately noticeable is the authoritativeness of Thumboo's voice, from the opening poem, "Words", in which words are seen to be "dangerous" but just "words". Their plainness "complicates", but that is because of "us". In describing their "plainness" Thumboo is aware of the complexities of language and of languages, of speech communities, natal/Semantic loads, empires... This poem, "Language as Power", sees English as transmuted positively in the Singapore environment:

Wordsworth in the tropics/
daffodils mutate.
... a fresh
Vocabulary, equal, reconciling/
Englishes...
A calculus for fellowship of/
language
As power, as making, as/
release.

This poem plays with the Bible's opening sense of the Word ("Then the Word begot TEFL, TESOL...")), a contrast with Thumboo's usually urgent sense of purpose.

Coming from a city-state in which "all is made redone rewritten reinforced" ("At Mandai"), where "sunsets melting into trees/Now glare back
reviews

from many office towers" ("Grand Uncles"), and "Full of what is new" ("Ulysses by the Merlion"), Thumboo is determined to stress that "words are knowledge. Means, deep vital memories/Of what we were, and are". The conjunction of "were" and "are" marks the core of his work; Singapore's pace of change means that a claim for the "coherence of our lives" is "bold". The history of Singapore has given its poets an unusually public role to play. In seeking a "way between the private and the public argument" ("Gods Can Die"), Thumboo finds their convergence in the theme of memory. "The new breed in search of/Gleaming jobs, the computer-mind/Turn memory shorter than the land's" ("Evening by Batok Town"). The land's memory is short because Singapore has been so changed. Thus, for departing friends Thumboo always urges return ("The Leaving", "After the Leaving...") and each of Thumboo's poems can be seen as "A pulse from the crypt of memory which, O City, great with ambition/You would be a strange invention" ("Scene"). This is a book whose importance extends beyond the narrow boundaries of a small Eurasian island.

Dennis Haskell


The Angry Penguin: Selected Poems of Max Harris unites work from the poet's five collections with significant journal publications and some previously unpublished material. Beautiful to look at and hold, the selection rests between an insightful and informative bio-critical introduction by Alan Brissenden and a fond afterword by Harris's early friend, Alister Kershaw.

Brissenden walks a particular line on Harris's verse, one that is perhaps a little too easy to follow. It goes like this: a precocious iconoclast and voracious reader, Harris's early poems are both thematically and stylistically about coming to terms with literary modernism. They are convoluted, densely allusive and rhythmically experimental. Often compelling, sometimes cringe-making to the contemporary reader, they are, after all, mostly undergraduate poetry. OK so far. But then there's a hitch, and it's called Ern Malley. When Harris emerges some thirteen years later with a collection called The Coorong and Other Poems, it is the new paired down version, the lyric Harris who has turned to deal predominantly with those poetry biggies: love and death.

westerly spring 1996
It is indeed more than tempting to read Harris as someone who got burnt by modernism. It is also necessary to give weight, as Brissenden does, to the consequences of the Ern Malley scam. It did undoubtedly discredit Harris and John Reed's work as publishers, but it also contributed, as he notes, to the "consolidation of conservative opinion against radical art and literature" (Introduction, xiii). But it is hard to see the tough-minded Harris falling for this too. Much of the feeling and mystery of the early Harris, the strangeness of ordinary things, and characteristic rhythms, are in fact carried on into the later work (see for instance "Love's Metaphysic", 98), just as there are intimations of the later more focused decorous verse in works from the earlier collection, as in the last stanza of "Words to a Lover":

Know that we are lovers,  
and as such,  
are grown gravely old  
and do not expect much. (6)

There is, in the poet's words, "a voice that persists" (8).

Broadly then, this selection presents the reader with a certain story about Harris's poetry that moves from the early modernist style through to a quiet metaphysical lyricism; with a bit of a by-pass through some very regional short-narrative poems in the middle period. This latter group of tired, cerebral bush wacking tales, from the collection A Window at Night, are particularly memorable. In the wry Wordsworth in the Barossa (p76), the "sullen Silesian" lass's fate and labours are far more tangible than the sublimated cares of the solitary highland lass. This is about economics after all (which Harris studied during the way) and not only the poet's eye:

George Fife Angas brought her to/  
the Valley,  
For Silesian women were famed/  
as shearers of sheep;  
Their hands clicked neatly down/  
the palpitating bellies,  
And besides he found their/  
wages cheap.

Despite their ironies (or maybe because of them), there is something very loving about the poems set within South Australian history and its landscapes.

Whilst the early Harris was largely a poet of the in-scape, defining his work from the more nationalistic school of the Jindyworobaks, landscape, or more precisely the poet in nature, is an important feature of his work. This is transmuted through the Romantic tradition, part-humorously in "Wordsworth in the
Barossa”, but more seriously in an earlier poem “The Prelude” (20-22), an anti-pastorale. In the later works nature becomes more spare and woven into word meanings themselves, for instance in the use of symbolic flower names. The weather, always an important part of Harris’s private imagery, is increasingly invoked as a measure of the existential, as in ‘Blessed Wednesday’:

The weather it was wiser this present/ Wednesday.  
It went missing, as they say. The/ weather is the inner 
And the outer part of us,/ past or present. It is also 
An envious entity. It makes the rules,/ and these rules
Are all about pain. When you are/ of our age 
We waken to the day, hoping it will/ be rare and median (103)

Retained arrestingly in the natural imagery of the middle to late work is Lautremont’s chance encounter, the domestic and the wild bent to one another’s shapes:

Purple ironstone, and eagles/ above
With talons as delicate and/ deadly
As a teacup handle. Like love (59)

Most beautiful among the last poems in the selection are those to Harris’s wife (‘Sleep Demeter’ and ‘Spouse: 1942-1992’) and the poem ‘Love’s Metaphysic’ written to the memory of the reeds. There is a Keatsian quality to the late love poems, in sense not in form, and a sort of Keatsian creed too, that: Love is the one certitude of the soul (102).

Reading Max Harris’s poetry, and particularly the young works, pulls the reader up and makes one realize just how pedestrian a lot of contemporary poetry sounds. Interestingly Harris and Reed commissioned works by poets and painters to be published together. It is not surprising then that much of Harris’s first two collections read like the visual accompaniments to an absent surrealist scene. Their spaces hold mysteries and significances, a feeling that something is about to happen. To read Harris’s oeuvre is to participate actively in a poetic world peopled by de Chirico, Eluard, Herbert Read and Eliot, to name but a few. Just as part of the project of the Angry Penguins was to locate Australian culture within the internationalist tendencies of modernism, the context of Harris’s own work is largely unAustralian. Not only has a selection of Harris’s work been too long in coming (he did not live to see
it himself), a scholarly collected edition is very much needed.

In the end it is hard to resist Brissenden's Max Harris. The last poems, especially those on love in old-age, do shine very brightly. They are poems made almost white by a closeness to the end of life. The impulse towards a precise lyricism may have been as much a function of mortality as Ern Malley.

Lucy Dougan


Early in *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You*, Germaine Greer records a discovery in an official file on her late father. He had spoken to an interviewer of nightmares in which there was "danger impending for his daughter due to cars rushing at her at incredible speeds". This moment of emotional crisis in Greer's narrative — proof at last of her father's love — came unexpectedly to mind as I was reading Chris McLeod's collection of fifteen stories.

Dreams feature often in these stories, which speak predominantly — as I read them — of fear of loss, fear of imminent disaster. Two of the stories, 'Our Room' and 'The Sky World', hint at the deaths of children in road accidents. The narrator of 'Our Room' watches his sleeping wife (lover?) and recalls the death of his son, the result perhaps of his own loss of concentration at the wheel. The narrator of 'The Sky World' seems to have lost his wife and daughter when a truck, out of control, careened into his wife's car.

In 'Darkness' a man has moved to a rural town with his fourteen-year-old daughter, and recollects how she nearly died at the age of five, from pneumonia. His marriage has ended, he has recently lost another relationship, and now he fears danger to his daughter, outside in the dark. Atypically, this story appears to conclude reassuringly, with the sound of his daughter's radio in her bedroom indicating her safety. In the title story, conversely, the focus is upon a daughter who fears that her ability to foretell the future has somehow caused her father's death.

In two stories which could be read as companion pieces, 'The Crow Season' and 'Promises', the loss suffered is that of children whose parents break up the familial home, in order to start new lives with other partners. Set in Greece, 'Dust', one of
the most accomplished of the stories in the collection, portrays a boy whose mother has been forced into prostitution to support him, after the disappearance of his father in war.

I have been referring to McLeod’s writing as ‘stories’ but this is for want of a more precise term. A number of these pieces eschew narrative development and closure, reading instead as meditative sketches on an image or idea. ‘Nights in the Forest’ is more properly a brief prose poem, using as its starting point the myth of Artemis and Actaeon. In ‘Chrysalis’, a woman named Shelley appears to be talking to a therapist. A piano teacher in an unsatisfying marriage, she seems to be experiencing trance-like states, which she associates with a hive of bees in her garden. The story ends without resolution, Shelley recounting a dream.

The mode of ‘Ether’ is closer to ‘Absurdist Theatre’, the narrator being driven out of his own home by his large wife and her cats, a tree spontaneously growing in the centre of what was the marital bedroom. ‘The Way Things Are’ is spoken by a deserted wife, who is expected to cook for her revenant husband every weekend, and who exacts a careful revenge, the precise nature of which is left open to speculation.

This is writing which is often cryptic, sometimes enticing, and which asks the reader to enter the realm of the irrational. Sometimes the effect is horrific. In ‘Promises’ a family stops its car to move a cat which is sitting in the middle of the road.

In fact, you move closer as the man places his hands beneath the cat, lifting it, trying to; but its underside is rotten, is filled with worms. The man’s hands slip from — through — the body and you see him step back, gag.

(That McLeod changes the worms to butterflies a moment later doesn’t help.)

Occasionally frustrated with this collection, I nevertheless enjoyed its unusualness, and do not intend to damn McLeod with faint praise by saying that I hope he is intending to move on from very short fiction to a more sustained project.

Heather Neilson


Dr Johnson once lamented that “A man who has not been in Italy is...
always conscious of an inferiority, from his not having seen what it is expected a man should see. The grand object of travelling is to see the shores of the Mediterranean ... almost all that sets us above savages, has come to us from the shores of the Mediterranean” (Bosworth 160).

Bosworth’s book (or books, since there are several between one set of covers) is by a professional historian, written for historians, but, like Sam Johnson, we are all interested in Italy, and the book has much to offer the general reader. Do not, however, expect a history of Italy between 1860 and 1960. You are supposed to know that already — who beat whom at Caporetto, or Adowa, or Vittorio Veneto, what the Ten Thousand were up to, and what the March on Rome was about. The bulk of the book is about the interpretation of events. There is also a critique of contemporary historiography, and this is surprisingly good fun, conducted rather like a western shoot out, with a great deal of bucking and weaving, quick shots, rapid withdrawal, taking cover behind inverted commas, and fancy footwork. Other disciplines, and many individuals, also come under fire: the economists, for example: “From a naive reliance on the “market”, by its very nature never a source of free competition except in the self-interested illusions of some contemporary monetarist economists” (85). Gabriele D’Annunzio is drilled between the eyeballs: “that fin de siècle world expert in self-dramatisation” (95). The sociologists sustain several direct hits, as does poor Harold Nicholson, “minor English diplomat, politician and litterateur” (15), whose comment that Italian foreign policy was one of “incessant manoeuvre” is dismissed as a “battery of confident and even peremptory conclusions” (16), although the point seems to be illustrated by the two succeeding chapters.

This book airs most of the popular cliches about Italy and the Italians. First, the cliche is viewed with mild distaste, then taken apart. In the end, some of them are endorsed, others qualified in very interesting ways. One of the latter is the view that the Italians are not a war-like people, or at any rate, not good at it. This gets the full range treatment. The extreme contempt comes from the Germans: Goebbels noted in his diary that “the Italian people is not worth a row of beans” (53). Field Marshal Keitel said that “the only Italian army which cannot betray us is one which does not exist” (73). Bosworth’s own observations and turn of phrase often endorse this view “In the First World
War, too, the navy would prefer
inaction, a preference which changed
little thereafter" (65), but he is not
alone; a colleague writes that "for
twenty-five years, the Italian navy had
been preparing for the wrong war
with the wrong enemy in the wrong
way" (65). In Ethiopia, the Italians
had "a military victory whose rapidity
astonished most foreign observers and
all Italians" (48). But, then, the
Italians still remembered their
humiliating defeat in 1896 at the
hands of the Emperor of Ethiopia at
Adowa. Mussolini, we are told, didn’t
know what to make of German allies
who ‘meant what they said and did
what they meant’. Mussolini had
promised Germany in the Pact of Steel
that he would be ‘ready’ by 1943 —
“what he actually meant, of course,
was that 1943 was a long time off and
that many things would happen
between now and then” (52).

The Americans thought that the
Italians were an army of opera singers.
But Bosworth has three qualifications.
One is economic: the armed forces
themselves were grossly under-
resourced, pay pitiful, equipment
antiquated. But it strikes far deeper.
Until the last few decades, Italy was
not an industrial power, but a poor
agrarian society, with a meagre
infrastructure and none of that huge
productive capacity of the other
combatants. Another is that Italy was
so new as a nation state — loyalties
were still regional (one wit said of
Garibaldi’s invasion of Sicily that “if
one village welcomed him, the next
rejected him out of hatred for the
welcomers” (19), and such loyalties
were slow to change. A third
qualification is, however, that the
great defeat at Caporetto, and World
War I in general, had a unifying effect
in forcing a sense of nationality: “more
Italians found their identity than ever
had before” (67). Some Australians
might make a comparison with
Gallipoli, although Bosworth does
not. The impact of television has done
more to spread standard Italian and
the sense of a national identity than
anything from 1860-1960, but that
lies outside Bosworth’s time frame.
His final qualification to the cliche is
part explicit, and more implicit. Italians
are individualists, as was
Garibaldi. They do not take well to
discipline. But they do not lack
courage, as the many who risked their
lives to care for Allied personnel
captured behind the lines showed so
magnificently. They do not make a
disciplined army. Why should they?
Italian loyalties are often more
intimate, to those they encounter as
individual human beings, be they
children, neighbours, allied soldiers,
tourists...
Another set of cliches taken apart relates to Italians as migrants. The continued mass migration from Italy during the century under review is seen as the “most obvious failure of the nation state” (116). With rapid increases in prosperity, it came to a halt rather suddenly in 1970, when the birth rate also fell sharply, and Italy became itself an immigrant destination. The ill-fated forays into ‘empire’ in the preceding century, in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Libya, had been futile attempts to ‘solve’ the emigration problem by finding space for the unemployed proletariat and poor peasants, but Italy got ‘the bone of the joint’ in Africa, the colonies lost money hand over fist, and poor peasants very sensibly continued to emigrate to France or Germany, the Americas and Australia instead.

They found a mixed welcome. Germany and Switzerland classed them along with the Turks as ‘guest-workers’ until recently; as late as the 1960’s, signs saying ‘no dogs or Italians allowed’ could appear in parts of the Germanic world, and in Australia, social scientists could define Italians as one of the black races (132). They could also be despised at home. Prezzolini, an Italian intellectual, said of his countrymen in North America, that ‘they are not Italians because they have never been Italians. Here they have taken on certain American habits, but at base they have remained southern peasants without a culture, without learning, without a language, people for whom the moment of ‘Italianità’ has never arrived. They leave Italy before being Italians. They have settled here but have not become real Americans” (137). Against the exclusivism of this understanding of Italy, Bosworth explores ‘the Italties’, and sets against the intellectual, the story of one such migrant, Emma Ciccotosto, who settled in Western Australia. Her story is told in brief, with the conclusion that “she still radiates a certain sort of Italian culture”. It mingles materialism, generosity and hospitality, good or abundant cooking, a willingness to touch and to sing, to argue and to talk, a fierce determination, a truthfulness, a narrowness, a literalness, a loyalty, a power, a love, and, above all, a sense of her own human value” (143).

This book covers a lot of ground, as a review cannot. It has a range of Western Australian references. It has a strong subplot. There are good stories. There are two brand new historical laws, which make it remarkably good value for money. It has some key questions. It has an implied conclusion, which I like and share. Of the local references, we hear of the Italian communities from
Molfetta and Capo d'Orlando, and of Emma Ciccotosto. The book, moreover, begins "In Perth, Western Australia" in Kings Park in which "can be found the unique fauna and flora of Western Australia — raucous parrots, nocturnal marsupials, tortured 'kangaroo paws' and giant gums" (1). What this has to do with Italy (or rather, 'the Italics') I leave you to discover; but note the language. The only 'gums' are Eucalyptus citriodora, an east coast species, and E. cladocalyx, the sugar gum from South Australia. And how can those elegant velvet flowers of Anigozanthos, designed by Jacques Cartier or Versace, possibly be seen as 'tortured'? Clearly this is NOT the author's village, although he has lived here for ten years. He shows sympathy, affection and understanding for attachment to place, like that of the 'Italian' paesano, so long, it seems, as it is not this place. He sees himself, in his own words "as a small boy with his nose pressed against the window of the sweet shop called Italy" (x).

The key question of the book is complex. "Why was it that a nation, whose policies, instructive in their crass brutality and cynicism or exemplary in their manipulativeness and corruption, which was frequently defeated and more often scorned, should nonetheless prosper both in the direct economic sense and in the minds of those who, in so many ways, were influenced by its cultures? Through most of the century under study and in the three decades since 1960, Italy (or perhaps 'Italy') has been 'in crisis'. And yet, amid the troubles of dictatorship or depression, war or ideological battle, most Italians somehow preserved, at least some of the time, an attitude of love and charity towards their neighbours and themselves and thus well embodied what Jonathan Steinberg has so wonderfully defined as the 'banality of good'"(13).

The answers to this question are the whole of the book, but the positive conclusion runs right through it, beginning with Bosworth's own image of "that sweet shop called Italy". It is beautifully expressed by Samuel Butler. "Who does not turn to Italy who has the chance of doing so? What, indeed, do we not owe to that most lovely and lovable country?" "Nothing struck me more than the easy terms on which everyone, including the waiter [at the inn where he stayed] appeared to be with everyone else" ... "because the general standing of good breeding is distinctly higher than it is among ourselves" (58). What the Italians value are 'rapporti umani', we are told. They are world leaders in design; take food...
reviews

seriously; their special skills are in the arts of living, especially the minor courtesies that make the days pass so pleasantly in Italy. These are the values the book endorses and evokes, at times wistfully, from Nedlands and Como (alas, it would seem, the wrong Como).

George Seddon


Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in 73 pages? Is this book the product of an antic disposition, or is Charles Edelman really mad? Neither, as it transpires. It is a pithy, witty, and penetrating book, perfectly pitched at thoughtful high school students and university undergraduates, the intended audience of the enterprising series, Horizon Studies in Literature. It will also gain the respect of more hard-bitten Shakespearian scholars for some provocative and lively suggestions.

Unlike many books of its kind, Edelman's is not primarily a survey of the ideas of others, but an original argument. The bases of the argument are built up carefully and unobtrusively, allowing readers to enjoy the scenery and learn a lot along the way, but it snaps shut with the precision of the mousetrap. It centrally involves establishing that Hamlet does not delay, and that there is virtually no evidence in the play that he does. Edelman writes, "We find no delay, in the sense of procrastination or hesitation, in Hamlet ... Millions of words have been wasted on what could perhaps be considered the greatest red herring in the history of literature" (35). First, the history of the play's reception shows that up to the Romantic age Hamlet was seen as "a man all too ready to act" (5), precipitate and even rash, and that the Hamlet who was incapable of decisive action was an invention of Romantic critics as late as the nineteenth century. The dominance since 1800 of the novel as a form over the action of the stage, contributed to a psychologising and intellectualising of the prince of Denmark, all but obliterating the man of action known to earlier playgoers and readers. Secondly, Edelman examines the history of the textual transmission of the written versions of *Hamlet*, and cogently argues that the Folio text is the one that represents Shakespeare's most mature theatrical intentions.
This makes the play considerably shorter than the one usually studied today, and more theatrically compact and compelling, and, conveniently for Edelman’s central argument, eliminates virtually all internal traces of Hamlet’s self-condemnation for procrastinating. Thirdly, the vexed question of Hamlet’s ‘madness’ is swept away by a studied concentration on the text, which reveals that his erratic behaviour is unremittingly a product of an assumed, antic disposition, a political strategy to flush out evidence of Claudius’s guilt. As such, it fails, for Claudius does not stumble. Fourthly, the critical ‘problems’ about the hypothetical time schemes and Hamlet’s age are argued away as the construction of critics who know too little about the theatre and too much about novels.

Edelman’s application of common sense and close scrutiny of the text are refreshing, and provide an ideal approach for students first encountering a sacred cow like Hamlet, or rather like the twentieth century critical tradition of the play. Eyes are fixed firmly on its proven, riveting theatricality. Of course, in the process, some questions linger. How, and why, did the incriminating soliloquies creep into the textual line if not into the theatrical? Are we just to forget that Shakespeare ever wrote some of his most remembered lines? Why is Shakespeare so explicit about Hamlet’s age, if he intends the question to be totally irrelevant? And, on another tack, what is the force of the feminist arguments about the streak of misogyny in the play, or about the centrality of Ophelia’s stage affectiveness? This play about revenge has a curious habit of taking revenge on critics who are categorical about anything in it, and its radical ambivalence and inconclusiveness will guarantee that the questions will keep being asked.

In dealing with Hamlet on stage and in film, Edelman sustains his admirably debunking stance, and draws to good effect upon his own practitioner’s experience of acting. He opens up possibilities for new versions, unencumbered by the cobwebs and distractions of older critical traditions. This, in itself, is a remarkable contribution.

R.S. White

Brenda Walker (ed.), Risks,

The riskiness that gives impetus to this
collection of writing brought together by Brenda Walker is both rule-bending and ethic-challenging. In both cases, but in quite different ways, it is the quality of opacity that defines riskiness. There have to be blocks which cannot be slipped over, around or under. They must stop the reader in the reading track and force a consideration that is larger than the writing itself. Entertaining reading is at pains to remove these blocks. They are the sign of trouble in that the last thing the writing intends is to set up stumbling blocks. A piece of writing that is closed in its function has no risk attached and the writer who introduces risk will confuse the audience, anger and irritate them. But a piece of writing that sets up the stumbling blocks as part of its structure is a more complex and potentially more fruitful exercise in reading. That is why such writing wins literary prizes and is studied in literature courses, instead of the well-written entertainment that is read for a different kind of pleasure but which has no blocks upon which to stumble and then build.

*Risks* opens with Brian Castro's 'Shanghai Dancing', a piece that intersperses photos with blocks of curt but evasive narrative into a sequence the nastiness of which is disguised by the obliqueness of its glance. I always have trouble with Castro's particular style of risky writing because it works from the masculine mode for the most part, and in exploring the territory it seems to enjoy the dirt of the terrain. In this story about a man remembering his family alongside a sexual affair with a Chinese photographer during a return stay in Hong Kong, the details have the odd, off-centre, slightly drug-induced kind of import, as though if you don't get it, it's because you're not tuned in to the at the edge vision. The images are never exoticised, a la William Burroughs for example, but flattened beneath a tone that is a parody of beat-style credibility: "Later, over a cognac, Carmen told me she was capable of anything. She had left Shanghai for Beijing, she said, with the intention of never returning, but here she was. Back again."

Castro uses an elliptical form of description as his stumbling blocks to tease the reader with an incomplete, elusive meaning. A complex story, with dark family things, secrets, violence, sex, betrayals, the whole bit, is packed into one of those plastic snack trays — the ones with little compartments to keep the celery sticks out of the avocado dip, and the biscuits dry. I want to be nasty and say that if you're into substitute snacking, then you'll enjoy the
riskiness of ‘Shanghai Dancing’. But I
know it’s my unease at stories that use
new ways to rework old attitudes that
is causing this reaction. And this
makes it interesting to compare
‘Shanghai Dancing’ with Tom Flood’s
piece, which starts with a photo, too.
Like Castro, Flood reduces the soup in
which the chunks of meaning float, so
there’s not a lot to wash down the
meaty bits. To work out what’s going
on requires patient, cautious, slow
reading, a shanghai dancing reading.
Called ‘Apostrophe’, it’s about a
“pickled fucking foetus”, a twin never
born, and the obsessive trinity she
forms with mother and sister. I think.

It opens with a description of
Barbara Stanwyck seducing poor old
sucker Fred Macmurray in the movie
Double Indemnity, but I have the
feeling I’m just not clever enough to
work out why. It’s a great start,
nevertheless, and the rest is just as
word-by-word impressive; there’s
even a good joke about how short
stories “don’t mess with the story like
in a novel”. The topic is pretty nasty
here too, with its opening photograph
of two women sitting on a couch, the
older woman holding a jar with a
foetus in it on her lap, and glaring at
the photographer with a look that I
can’t exactly read. Tom Flood reads it
as obsessive defiant tragic angry hurt,
I think, and that’s what his carefully
anarchic piece is about.

My acceptance, you see, is
grudging. I do admire what Flood’s
done here, and am grateful for the
risks he takes, satisfied that he is
melding content and form for the
sculpture to express his idea. And yet
I turn with greedy pleasure to the
stories of Joan London and Gail Jones.
They are about women from history;
they are written with confidence, and
they have the energy that is less risky
than urgent. In this matter of risky
writing, is it the driving force behind
the meaning, the need to
communicate, that makes it work,
perhaps? Joan London works within a
convention, in the same way as Brian
Castro does, the convention of a story
that is part-mystery, a narrative about
the most banal and fascinating topic
known to human beings, sexual
infidelity. Photographs again here too
(this is definitely the innovation that
has stuck the fastest from the
outreaches of new narrative form),
and used with dexterity by London.
What writing teacher does not know
how fertile is the photo to provide for
the growth of an idea, and the two that
frame Joan London’s story, called ‘The
Photographer’, are gloriously rich.

Gail Jones’ story is called ‘The Re-
incarnation of Madame Tussaud’. It
has the matter-of-fact charm that
comes from a topic so good as to be
irresistible. What makes it risky is the jaunty way it makes dangerously arty, consciously poetic turns of phrase sound perfectly natural, as though artifice really were nature's own device: "She was like a battlefield upon which large forces sweep and recede. She was like the lunatic for whom objects like scissors have special interest. She was like the moon, a restless shape, and sometimes a blackness..."

There's humour, too, in Gail Jones' risky writing, as there is in Simone Lazaroo's piece, 'Fragrant Harbours'. Here the humour is Castro-esque, a kind of bold hard dare-you humour; a risk in itself, I suppose, but probably not of the kind I've been trying to understand, since it shifts the challenge over squarely onto the reader, and thereby provides itself with a haven from which to send out the message. The stumbling blocks are manipulated too knowingly for there to develop that cautious sympathy between reader and writer which is, for me, the most intriguing kind of riskiness. Interestingly, none of these stories make the banal response to the idea of 'risk': none get into the oohs and aahs of frothing pink bits and the most flamboyantly energetic side of human desire. Which is to say, there's no sex, per se. Sex, per say, there is, especially in John A. Scott's 'Paris', written in his characteristic skinny column down the middle of the page, which has the immediate effect of making you think you're meant to focus just a little more carefully on which words go with which others. This is not risky so much as pushy.

Even pushier is Beverley Farmer's 'Notes towards The Scream'. This starts with a paragraph describing how one viewer might read Munch's painting, a visual description of the colour and then form, and goes on to string together snippets about painting and writing, and musings about nasty things. Among all the pieces here, this one makes the most fuss about distancing the reader, closing in on itself and speaking as though the only reader is the writer. Such a risk became fashionable in the wake of stream of consciousness experiments — and here we are back at Joyce. The pleasure for a reader must come, if it comes at all, from your being absorbed into the writer's pool: "If I am absorbed in Munch, it is not through any great love of the work, whose incarnate hysteria repels me — the willed excess and cerebral fevers that insist on imposing themselves like a rash, a pulpy outgrowth on the canvas, in the pigment — impure, an affliction. Drawn in against my will?"
Frivolous though the observation may be, it is a fact that Paris and France are more associated with risk than any other place in this collection. Scott's Parisian love affair is very Seine; David Brooks loves the place and its crazies, like Van Gogh; Gail Jones lingers on the Quai for a glimpse of Voltaire, and Gillian Mears hangs out doing louche things against the historic walls of the Latin quarter. It may be de rigueur for Australians aiming at risqué to absorb the Gallic, simply because it was Paris that was at the eye of the storm of change throughout the first half, say two-thirds, of this century, writing wise. Gillian Mears has a go at understanding the Australian relationship with risk in her piece, 'Southern Hemisphere Human', and although the form of the writing is very different, there is something of Beverley Farmer's demand on the reader happening here, to allow that osmotic process of absorption into the pool of the writer's self. This is the chancy game of confessional that has become so popular in Australian 'fiction' at the moment, its popularity drawing strength from the fact that readers have given it the nod. Drusilla Modjeska is the leading proponent of the form, but think, too, of Elizabeth Jolley, Dorothy Hewett, Andrew McGahan. And here we are, again, at Helen Demidenko, to remind us that there are rules to the risk in this genre.

Both Mears and Kim Scott, in his extract from a work-in-progress, work at a crossroads; you have to keep checking the direction you want to go, towards the writer or towards the writing. One of the puzzles of literary criticism, never to be solved as far as I'm concerned, is why the uncertainty matters, and how it matters. Does it matter whether Gillian Mears' real sister really did have an affair with her brother-in-law, causing a real rift with her mother who really died without it being resolved? Strangely, the story hangs on this extra-textual question, and that infuses the writing with either an extra set of criteria for judgement, or a set less.

Why it matters less in Carmel Bird's composite piece about events, their meaning and their recording is crucial to some understanding or other about the reading experience. The something might be that old fashioned thing called authorial trustworthiness. The other might be the element in writing that makes a reader sign on the dotted line of the contract to say, yes, I'll listen, really listen, to my best ability, to what you're saying and in the way you're asking me to listen. This is not always acknowledged in risky writing, and it is, I would say, where the line between
success and failure, even good and bad, must be drawn. But of course, that line is drawn by the reader, and what people are prepared to sign up for and to is bewilderingly wide-ranging.

Using the same stumbling block technique as others in this collection, Bird’s ‘As high as an elephant’s eye’ is a collage of observations, structured around a conversation between two people and prompted by reports and photos about ‘Oaklahoma’. It has the appearance, then, of being discursive, free associative, a cosy fireside chat between a couple of friends. Again, the benefits of genre smudging can be seen here; one of the best examples of the form that tells a story in a bright light while in the shadows can be seen gradually the profile of the narrator is Julian Barnes’s Flaubert’s Parrot. By using the colloquialisms of a narrator, who could be her, and her interlocuter Ken, Carmel Bird provides the frame for her picture, so that the tragedy and dilemmas she is exploring are at least contained in a space that has some limits. It is a device that invites and prevents free fall.

I’ve not even approached, in this attempt to understand the risk in writing, on the elegant sadness of Sara Dowse’s ‘Sass’, the surreal parable of Marele Day’s ‘A Man and His Dreams’, or David Brooks’ slyly humorous slip into the mind of Van Gogh. Brenda Walker’s own story, ‘The Arabesque’, illustrates neatly the risk of resonance, and both the seductive compactness of the form and its dangerous elliptical ease. That’s a whole new topic in the nature of risk, which shows, I suspect, what a prescient notion it was to offer up such a topic to a group of writers such as this. It works much better than the useless epithet ‘new writing’ and it’s probably time to put to pasture the once helpful idea of ‘experimental’ writing. So let’s risk again please, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, et al.

Rosemary Sorenson
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