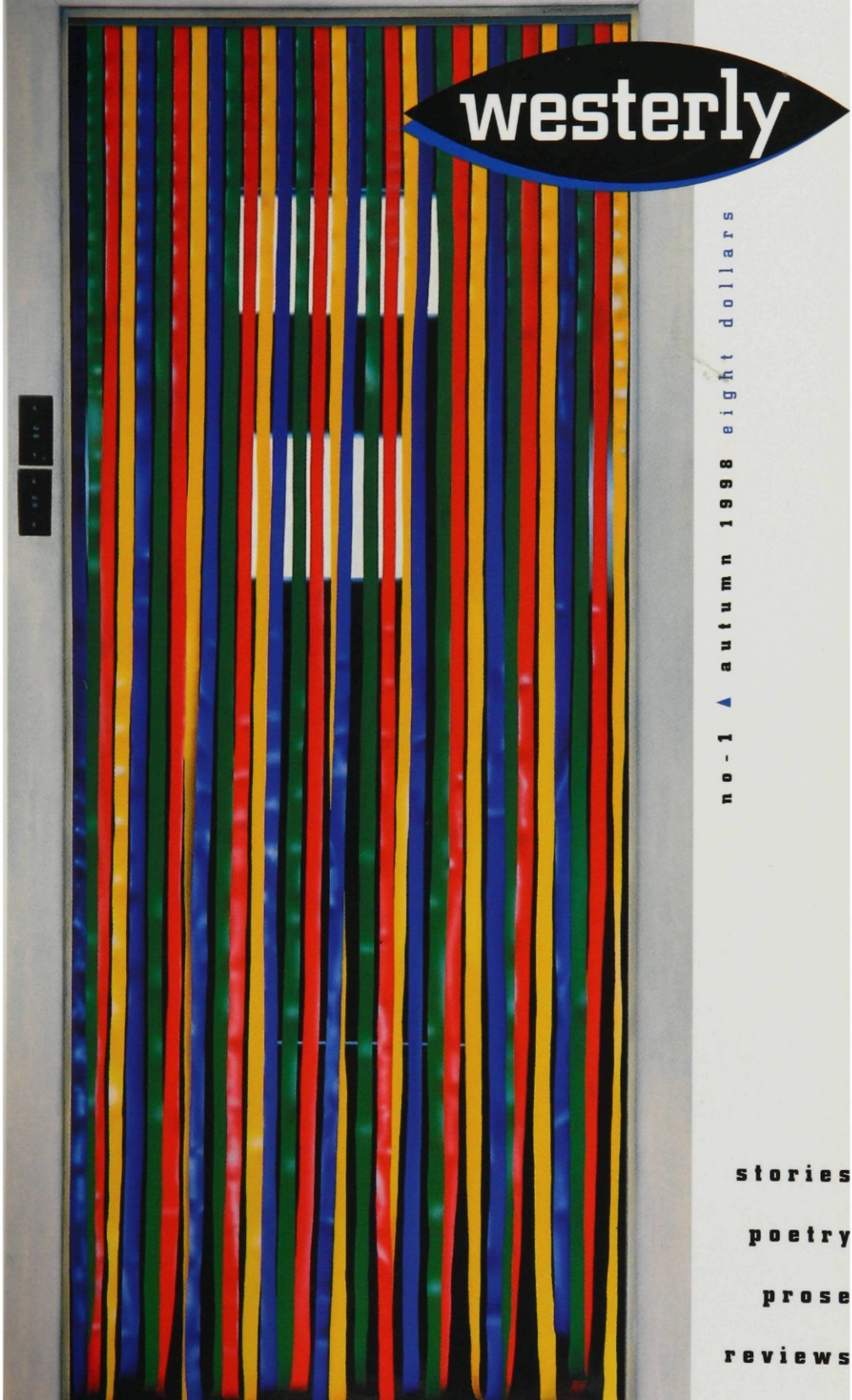

westerly

no-1 ▲ autumn 1998 eight dollars

stories

poetry

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reviews

The University of Western Australia

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

PROFESSIONAL WRITING

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WESTERLY

Volume 43, No1 Autumn 1998

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Poems

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Cover design by Robyn Mundy of Mundy Design using Ken Wadrop's painting *5 O'Clock Shadow*, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 1978, 212.0 x 99.5 cm. The University of Western Australia Art Collection, purchased with funds provided by the University Senate in 1978.

Articles

Reviews

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Each year, the fourth issue of *Westerly* is devoted to a selected theme or concept.

The Summer issue of 1998 will be

A Young Writers Issue

Special Guest Editor will be poet and short story writer **Andrew Burke**, and Young Editors, **Sarah French** and **Shaun Tan**

Poems, short fiction and articles relevant to young people's concerns and culture are welcome. Writers must be under 30 at January 1st, 1998.

In 1968, *Westerly* published a Young Writers Issue featuring many young writers such as Andrew Burke, Nicholas Hasluck, Viv Kitson, Rhyll McMaster, John Romeril and Michael Wilding, who have since gone on to make their mark in Australian literature as playwrights, novelists, and poets.

The editors encourage every Australian writer under thirty to submit their best work

before August 31st, 1998

WESTERLY

a quarterly review ISSN 0043-342x

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Notes for Subscribers and Contributors

Correspondence should be addressed to the Editors, *Westerly*, Department of English, The University of Western Australia, Nedlands, Western Australia 6907(telephone (08) 9380 2101, fax (08) 9380 1030), email westerly@uniwa.uwa.edu.au. web address: http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/westerly. Unsolicited manuscripts not accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope will not be returned. All manuscripts must show the name and address of the sender and should be typed (double-spaced) on one side of the paper only. Whilst every care is taken of manuscripts, the editors can take no final responsibility for their return; contributors are consequently urged to retain copies of all work submitted. Minimum rates for contributors — poems $40.00; reviews $60.00; stories/articles $90.00.

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Three *Westerly* Indexes 1956-77, 1978-83 and 1984-88, are available at $5.00 each from the above address

Patricia Hackett Prize

The Editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to *Westerly* in 1997

Michael Wilding

for his stories 'The Black Rocks' and
'Nephew's Story' that appeared in the no. 1 Autumn,
and no. 4 Summer 1997 editions respectively.

Barbara Brandt

Dusk comes early

I. Office Pool

The pool has gone: river bed tiled with baked mud,
cracked, uneven, curled at its edges.
This dimple is umbilicate, footsize,
others are the eyes, and genitalia of the Earth.
Rocks resist the mantle. This mound's a breast.
Another thrusts its bony skull through the crust
like a baby's head crowning.

II. Castaway

A strange bird,
pinion feathers laced with dried clay,
is landlocked amongst the rocks.

III. Settlement

The road to the end of the Gorge
is eroded at its edges.
Bitumen, blue-chipped and fractured across its heart,
has taken on the semblance of the creek bed's broken tiles.
The road, in sympathy with the river,
is withdrawing underground.

IV. Dusk comes early

In the playground: monkey bars have dribbled rust.
Some rungs of the Jungle Gym
have taken on the russet of the Earth,
others have tarnished green.

Rope swing decaying.

Sign:
Small community
Smaller children
Please drive carefully.

The playground is empty:
a powerhouse guards the gates.

Sarah French

Terminology

1.

Do I start with other lives, or do I start with mine?

Foster mother separates the *Real* from biological
yolk from egg white—it's a cookery lesson and
"Parenting is not in biology, it's in the commitment."
I splash sticky-yolk flowers on the kitchen wall.
She whisks transparency into snow.

2.

There are questions not to be asked
so my tongue is thick with them.

The social worker does everything for my own good. Once a month
she comes, unknitting her perm with fingers.
Brings files, my answers, for her eyes only
spread out on a floral lap. All I want is to see
a face in which I recognise my own.

3.

When we finally meet I'm too old for steaming open secrets.

She medicates herself with cigarettes
half-a-bottle of wine
smiles a quick seduction
at the waiter
when he reminds her
this is the non-smoking section.

Biological mother tells me I look like my *Natural* father. But
my stare
pins itself
to her face
obsessed with finding
a mirror in it.

Shane McCauley

Fallen Pears

Small green pears that have dropped
During who knows what night
When the house was abandoned,
Young yet blotched like all aged things,
Bird beak scars dead and deep,
Pattern of their falling suggesting
That chaos, haphazardness, is indeed
Measurable, death an unreasoning sleep.
There is no fighting the ground that
So unpossessively grows into them,
And their not-quite-sweetness sinks
Into sour appetite of unrecollected dream.

Hometown Boys

My concept of Arcadia
is of a finely illustrated book
devoted to the promotion of
neglected composers and their works.

Nomination: Arthur Benjamin
whose symphony has just appeared
on a rare label compact disc
thirty years after his last *da capo*.

This makes me want to publicise
my own death and imagine
a spinning silver paraphrase
of my name forever playing.

Now I have it—our hometown,
mine and Arthur's, and my father talking
of Arthur's dad, Abe Barrington,
leading Brisbane bookie.

We grow up and we go away
like Ariel out of his tree
and all our singing is to pay
the price of our sequestering.

You city fathers, on alert
for dangerous signs in offspring,
keep them well away from keyboards,
don't let them down the garden with a book.

You have made a daily paradise
fit for anti-heroes to grow old in,
rusting tin and bougainvillea,
an abattoirs and esplanade.

And if they head for older latitudes,
despair's industrious estate,
you doom them to Jamaican rhumbas
and late-night programmes on the radio.

At home they had unhappiness's boarding house
with asters blooming among fallen pegs
and an eternity to frighten life in—
ambitious boys infected by the sun

Who knew there was no blocker equal to
the ruthlessness of hope—somewhere
ahead of love and independence
they heard the Erl-King Fame's deluding song.

Two Part Invention

just eyes and genitals,
organs of too much pleasure
Robert Gray—'The Sea Wall'.

The hermit, the rabbi,
the bran-crunching ruminant
at Number Thirty-five
have much to say of feeling—
you can pick this up
from esoteric reading,
from the radio or words
on loose-wrapped topping
from Health Food Stores,
but what has it to do with
principle, or with pleasure
which our poet says bemuses
by its sheer excess?

There's no undoing what's been done,
only forgetting, which there's lots of.
Yes, a cliché, but you've noticed
that just deciding what to write
on vacant pages of a book
or stud into a screen
might make a shape more
permanent than happening,
could perhaps be art,
the chill side of remembering.

The eyes are managers,
the genitals a workforce
but what do journals say?
—How shall we live
when all work disappears?
We shall be botanists
of ecstasy, cataloguers
of a countryside unwilling
to know itself, Crashaws
of the shoreline, witnesses
of airspeeds bristling
with insightfulness.

Build me a hideout, eyes and organs,
and I will watch the manners
of clouds as well as girls.
In the meantime take this book
of misapplied transcendence
to your heart: it will do as well
as any Bible to impart
the serious principle of dubiety
which is the other side of beauty,
the one which never shows itself
to analyst or synthesist of heaven.

Initium Sapientiae Timor Domini

All the Latin in the world's inscriptions
will not sweeten the evasions of this little hand.

So wrote the glorious Shakespeare,
'Tex' Shakespeare, teetotal evangelist, that is.

Inside the church geometry prepares
to be as close to heaven as to gravity.

And will its whiteness, brightness, symmetry
yield right of way to the gods of Latin?

Which reminds me I prefer Stravinsky's *Nightingale*
in French (I learned it as *Le Rossignol*)—

And this despite my aversion to that language—
as Death leaves him, the Emperor sings 'Bon Jour à tous!'

Does that include the Lord of this inscription
which I chose because I wanted a Latin title,

One I could translate at sight,
unlike the abbreviations on so many tombs?

Though Borromini killed himself, I feel
he's like Stravinsky's Emperor,

Saying 'Good Morning' genially each morning
to the world at the foot of his bed,

The Angel of Death having just relented.
One morning I shan't be able to write

About Borromini, Stravinsky or myself
And the world will miss some valuable redundancies.

Here in *San Ivo* I began to feel
the necessity of praising worldly power.

The reason? To leave something behind you
when you go: one good church deserves another.

To know the beginning of wisdom is the need to work
and to endure the rage this brings.

Everyone is so ambitious—what on earth
were all those massacres and slaughters for?

Was it to add another patch to the great quilt
of authority? The stitches of an envy?

Someone has given me a book of poems,
Schlegel Eats a Bagel, part of the higher joking.

The same is overwhelming. Pray for me, Borromini,
on your unhappy craftsman's scaffold,

Tell me that style is all important
and beside the point. Inscribe the truth:

All poetry is language poetry, but
not all language poetry is poetry.

Lau Siew Mei

Cutting the Tight-Rope

Light trickling in through the cracks in the curtain. A cold morning and a tattered mewling from the cat outside the bedroom door. She slides her arms around his head and says, "I'm getting married."

All he can think of to say in his sleep-drugged waking: "Will you be taking the cat?"

"Yes," she says. "Of course. He's a Persian."

"The cat?" he asks, befuddled.

He does not cry then, only later. He decides it is for the loss of the cat.

On the day she tells him she is getting married again, he is in the process of writing a story. "It's about you," he replies, evasively, when she asks what he has scattered over his desk. He picks up his papers and shuffles them, as she sits and looks, cat-eyed.

This is how he likes to think of her: in a snapshot. She is perched on the kitchen table in the soft grey dress he bought for her at the Christmas sale. Her small feet clad in black boots. Her voice telling him, "Last night, I dreamt I was chasing a leprechaun on the balcony, round and round."

They had met in an art class which he had attended to expand his horizons from the hardness of words. He had not gone beyond the colourists.

He stretches out his hand, picks up her sketches tossed on the floor of the bedroom and stares into Picasso's eyes.

He remembers when she first showed him her drawings. Portraits of naked humans; some nature colourings. The one that stays with him is the blue papaya

tree; he remembers thinking: "I hadn't realized it before but the true colour of a papaya is blue."

"When I was six," she told him in one of her confessionary moods. "I drew a picture of a man on top of a woman with his penis sticking out. It had words coming out of his mouth, 'Can I drink your soya-bean milk?' My mother saw the picture and she went, 'What is that?' She made me tear it up."

He glances at her pencil sketches stuck with blue tack on the walls of their lounge. "I like that one very much," he says, feebly, trying to win her sympathy.

She takes it down from the wall. "I'll give it to you," she says.

He holds the thick paper in his hands and thinks of the octopus committing suicide which she had given him in the early years of their friendship. It was after a quarrel.

"You like Su Ann better than me, don't you?"

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do."

He had kept the sketch carefully for years between the pages of a book.

It would be her second marriage. She had kept the first a secret until it was over in six months. Two years ago, he went to England on holiday and stopped to see her where she was studying in Manchester. It was then she told him.

That night, he had a dream. He was in a pink boudoir and a woman sat at the dressing table, combing her hair. It was hell, and he could not escape.

"I tried to fly but the ceiling would not go away."

"I think the woman was you," he told her the next morning. "She was using the tortoise-shell brush you have."

They became lovers after her return from England. Their first night, she said: "I'm still a virgin, technically."

"Even after Chris?"

Chris was the man she married and divorced in six months.

"I didn't let him put his penis in."

"Surely...," he said, unbelievingly.

She said, "Oh, but he couldn't do anything, could he? It would be rape."

"I love you," he mutters, aware, as he says it, of the artifice of the three-worded time-worn cliché, yet feeling it deeply, therefore convinced of its truth.

"If you love me, why do you always talk of your fantasies of other women?" she retorts. "I feel it is a disadvantage to be yours. I should be the other women."

He recalls with a sharp swift blow of memory one evening their watching television and he had commented on the various tits and bums of the beautiful women parading across screen. She moved over to his chair and began to hit him. He remembers his annoyance. He hit back.

"Memory is a trick of fantasy," she says, watching his face.

He mulls over his typewriter as she busies herself picking up things. He reads aloud: *She is speaking to an unknown man, possibly him, possibly about one of her lovers.*

"I put my hand on his thigh and I touch here and touch there and he starts telling me things."

"Then what?" he says.

"Then I write them down. In my journal. He gets very frustrated."

"You make me sound like a slut," she comments.

"In my epitaph it should read, 'She saved his soul but went to hell herself'," she murmurs. She poses naked on the floor as he splotches enthusiastic colours onto a canvas.

Night.

Their bed is narrow and they lie very still to avoid touching each other.

"I don't think I can talk to you," she says abruptly. "I don't think we get along. You don't know what I'm going through."

He remains silent, knowing her tirades.

She lies quiet for some time then says, "I'm afraid."

"What of?"

"Myself."

He feels detached and wonders if her accusation has some element of truth. He closes his eyes and tries to fall asleep.

Tomorrow she will begin to pack her things.

Chris Newton

Sharks

First Shark

Patrick barely remembers. He and his mum and dad were walking on Point Lonsdale Pier. The shark was lying there with the blank eyes of a Roman statue. The mouth was like one of those theatre masks, the frowning one. His dad said the skin was rough as sandpaper and Patrick wanted to feel it and see but he said no it might still have a go at your hand. There was a pinkish trail of blood out of the side of the mouth. The fisherman was leaning on the railing of the pier looking at the horizon and licking his fagpaper and Patrick's dad asked him what kind of shark it was and he said 'Seven Gill' and didn't look around so you could barely hear him. He counted with his fingers to see if this was right and it was; there were seven. The shark died while the end of a symphony played on his mum's trannie. He was hooked.

Sharkphone

The Sharkphone came in a huge box with a picture of a white pointer on it. It was so heavy that Patrick could barely hold it up long enough to read what it said on the side:

> This box contains on revolutionary Sharkphone! The ultimate in form and function. This life-sized shark's head and phone, completely modelled on the notorious white pointer, will make your standard telephone receiver look fishy. Just follow the step by step instructions and install your Sharkphone yourself. Watch the jaws of the shark move up and down as your friends and relatives speak. Yes, this man-eating mouth (actual size) will realistically lip sinc all callers and comes with all the features you'd expect from a standard phone—but with what a difference! Please read the safety notes carefully and do not try to remove the protective panel.

The diagram made it really easy because it started by showing everything that you should have in the box. Usually when Patrick got something like this there was something missing and nobody could be bothered taking it back and it would lie in the shed and everyone would forget about it. But this time everything was there and everything fit together perfectly.

One of the best things about the Sharkphone was that the eyes of the shark were the actual buttons for receiving a call or hanging up. When it rang Patrick had to press the right eye and when he wanted to end the call he had to press the left eye and the simple push-button dial folded out of a console from the lower part of the head.

Paul ran back to his house to give Patrick his first call and soon there was this white pointer in his bedroom speaking in his best friend's voice. Unreal! Then Patrick forced his mother to go to the local phone box and the shark took on her voice and from deep in the mouth Patrick heard the sound of traffic too.

Bum Eater

After Patrick saw the Seven Gill (*Notorynchus Cepedianus*) at Point Lonsdale he pestered his father to tell him about sharks. He had to know. Patrick's father was from Queensland and had been a lifesaver at Burleigh Heads. He told Patrick a story about a shark called the Bum Eater.

One day the members of the surf club were practicing for a big surf race and they were swimming back towards the shore and they were all trying to catch a wave because whoever got the first wave would win the race. But some of them used to play a trick. If anyone got a wave and somebody was behind them, that somebody would pull at their togs to stop them catching it. So, as this guy took off on a wave he felt his togs being pulled back, so he swam really hard and managed to get the wave right to the shore. He got out all wrapped that he'd won his heat. Then he looked at his leg and saw a red line meandering down his calf.

It turned out he'd had his whole bum bitten off by a shark and he hadn't even noticed until someone pointed it out and he went white and fainted. They just managed to get him to hospital before he bled to death or died of shock.

A day later a local fisherman hooked the shark. They knew it was the one because they found shreds of the man's togs in its gullet—no bum though. This man has two legs attached to his back. He can still sit down.

Paul's Theory

By his twentieth birthday, Paul had developed a shark attack theory which he explained to Patrick while they were bodysurfing not really between the flags because there weren't any at Fairhaven. They were waiting for waves and Paul reckons that being attacked by a shark is really unlikely if you look at the statistics (which Patrick had) but nonetheless something that's always in the back of your mind. It'd be special if it happened, not only because you'd be down in the history books as a victim but also because this would be the most radical thing that could ever happen to you and it'd be so horrific that all your attention would be focused and centred on the shark as your life passed before you and you'd know obscurely that you'd be on the news that night and maybe on a memorial plaque at the beach. You are being eaten alive! What else could be more important? Nothing. Nothing else in the world would matter. It'd sort of be really relaxing.

The Red Sand

There was a beautiful bay with soft white sand, like cream around the feet. This beach was the favourite swimming place for young women, who would take off their clothes and let the water slide into all the parts of their bodies.

For some time, the girls could swim in safety but one day a girl went swimming and she was never seen again. This was distressing, but her friends said she was a bad swimmer and should not have gone alone. When this was almost forgotten, another girl disappeared, this time a strong swimmer. Again, it was not until this was forgotten that yet another girl was never to be seen again.

There was a local fisherman with thin wrists who had been watching the beach since the disappearance of the second girl. He had seen a mysterious looking stranger hanging around under the palm trees but each time he had tried to approach him, the stranger vanished. This fisherman with the thin wrists decided to go with the girls when they next went swimming. He took his sharpest spear and stayed close to the bathers.

Soon enough a shark came circling and finally swam straight for one of the girls. The fisherman raised his spear and bent back his wrist. The girl saw this and it reminded her of a sudden kink in one of the trees around the swamp near her home. His wrist was brown and shone in the sun, then it flicked forward and drove the spear through the sharkís gills. The fisherman dragged the shark onto the white

sand, which soon became red with the blood of the big fish. Shortly after this, the fisherman with the thin wrists returned to the palm trees and found the stranger under the trunk of the biggest tree, dying of stab wounds. He did not speak, and when he died, the fisherman left him there and went to get some friends to help carry the body back to the village. When they returned, the man was gone and there was a large rock in the shape of a tooth or a blade.

WRITERS' GRANTS

In the most recent funding round Western Australians, who constitute approximately 10% of the population, received about 6.5% of the Literature Fund of the Australia Council grants. Some well qualified Western Australian writers missed out, which is unfortunate to say the least, but one reason for the mismatch in percentages is that the rate of application from WA was low.

Do WA writers not apply because they don't believe their work will receive a fair hearing? Because they lack confidence in their own work? Because the grant process or closing dates are not publicised? Please write and give us your views.

And in the meantime why not apply? Closing dates for Literature Fund grant rounds for individuals are:

New Work	**15 May**
Development	**1 September**
Fellowships	**15 May**

For further details contact the Australia Council, phone: 9950.9000 or 1800.226.912; fax: 9950.9111; email: ozco.gov.au

Mary Ann Hughes

The Complexity of Aboriginal Identity: Mudrooroo and Sally Morgan

At a conference on Aboriginal Writing, held in 1985, the question was asked of Jack Davis: "Some people say that Archie Weller isn't really an Aboriginal, Faith Bandler isn't really an Aboriginal. What do you define as including Aboriginal writing in Australia? How does it encompass these people?"[1] This question has remained a preoccupation for both the Aboriginal and Anglo-Celtic communities in their assessment of the right of individuals to represent aspects of Aboriginal culture.

Paul Behrendt explains the Commonwealth definition of Aboriginal identity, that "An Aborigine is someone of Aboriginal descent who identifies as an Aborigine and who is accepted by the Aboriginal Community as being an Aborigine. The qualification of acceptance by the Aboriginal Community has recently been deleted".[2] This definition still leaves unclarified the divisive problems that Aboriginals continue to wrestle with in an attempt to define themselves and Aboriginal culture satisfactorily. The knowledge that there are various ways of being Aboriginal does not seem to overcome the continuing attempt to project a coherent identity onto the group.

The problem is not a simple one. For example, the concept of Aboriginal identity joins together various groups of people from all over Australia whose traditional backgrounds represent different racial types and different cultures and languages. This variety of backgrounds has been complicated by the different levels of contact with the Anglo-Celtic culture. Moreover, as well as the original variety of Aboriginal peoples and the differences which began to emerge because of the

1. Jack Davis, & Bob Hodge. eds. *Aboriginal Writing Today: Papers from the First National Conference of Aboriginal Writers* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985), 16.
2. Paul Behrendt, 'Aboriginal Sovereignty Australian Republic: A Catalogue of Questions and Answers' in *Voices of Aboriginal Australia—Past, Present, Future*. Compiled by Irene Moores. (Australia: Butterfly Books, 1995), 401.

geographical isolation of some communities and the contiguity of Anglo-Celtic and Aboriginal communities in other areas, there is also the manipulation of identity by both economic and political forces. For example, think of the cultural shifts that must have occurred when groups of Aborigines were forced onto reserves with other groups with whom, often, they were traditionally in rivalry. And even when this policy of apartheid was halted as a result of the 1967 referendum, no political forethought was given as to how this sudden freedom would affect Aboriginals. As Gary Foley explains "In 1967 in NSW there was a rural recession. Even for whitefellas it was hard to get work (1995, 269). The result was that the Koori population of metropolitan Sydney went from 5,000 to 40,000 in 1969. Three quarters of the entire Aboriginal population of NSW at that time moved to Sydney".[3]

The diversity of Aboriginal identity has always been present and is continuing to evolve, but it would be simplistic to dismiss the real emotional and psychological need to establish a secure identity. Dr Barbara Nicholson at the Aboriginal Research and Resource Centre at the University of New South Wales used the example of the forced removal of Aboriginal children from "family" which occurred between 1883-1969, a policy which has affected the family and kinship structure of almost every Aboriginal. For many dispossessed and alienated individuals the search for identity, and the consequent regaining of knowledge about ancestry and kinship is often seen as a form of empowerment.

However, although there is a compelling need to establish Aboriginal identity at an individual level it is complicated by the question of who should be able to represent Aboriginality at a public level. The dangers of this preoccupation can be seen quite clearly in the recent questioning of Mudrooroo's identity. In the article "Identity Crisis", published in *The Weekend Australian* (July 1996), Victoria Laurie relays information that Mudrooroo's sister had gained about the family history. She suggests that Mudrooroo's antecedents were Anglo-Celtic on his mother's side and African American on his father's side rather than the family having any Aboriginal ancestors.[4] Victoria Laurie's article was followed by a flurry of pieces in *The* West *Australian* with titles such as "Aboriginal goes on to black list".[5] Victoria Laurie denies Mudrooroo's Aboriginal identity with the following words: "the all-important question of his mother's identity is left unexplored; so too, by implication, his

3. Interview with Gary Foley by Adrian Pisarski. 'Gary Foley Speaks' in *Voices of Aboriginal Australia—Past, Present, Future*. Compiled by Irene Moores. (Australia: Butterfly Books, 1995), 269.
4. Victoria Laurie, 'Identity Crisis' in *The Weekend Australian*, 20 July, 1996. 28-32.
5. 'Aboriginal goes on to black list' in *The West Australian*, 23 July, 1996.

Aboriginal credentials" (32).

However, the question of Aboriginality cannot be resolved simply by referring to a biological inheritance and the dangers of such an attempt are drawn to our attention by Laurie herself:

> the controversy of judging a person's "real" Aboriginality could trigger a minefield... Isn't it the obverse side of racism, coming after humiliating decades in which people's ethnicity was decided by white officials using labels like "full-blood", "quarter-caste" and "octoroon", or racist notions of how a "real" Aboriginal person should look? (32)

But while Laurie acknowledges the problems inherent in a genetic labelling of an individual's identity, the article she wrote has become newsworthy precisely because it aimed to achieve such an identification.

The information about Mudrooroo unleashed bitter accusations by both Aboriginal and Anglo-Celtic critics which implied that Mudrooroo was a "career Aboriginal". Yet, it is hard to imagine how the young Mudrooroo could have avoided thinking he was Aboriginal. This child, living alone with his mother, and grouped in School with other Aboriginal children, must have found it emotionally very easy to impute the source of his segregation onto his mother, whatever the genetic reality. And the natural conclusion in a small Western Australian town would have been of an Aboriginal connection. Without the evidence of a genealogical tree, which his sister was only to look into much later; without the evidence of the father himself; and with such a short almost impressionistic time with his mother, how could a young boy see any difference between his own situation and the situation of so many Aboriginal children in the same area? The identity Mudrooroo has claimed is the one he has experienced from early childhood, lived through in orphanages with other Aboriginal children, lived through because of experiences which even Victoria Laurie describes as a familiar life story of Aboriginal youth: "the 'coloured boy' of indeterminate origins had become an angry young black man, hardened by poverty, family separation and jail, an experience shared by so many of his Aboriginal inmates" (31). It would have been an illogical inference and a form of social suicide given both his colouring and the life experiences he had for him to dismiss an Aboriginal inheritance. In fact the denial of Aboriginality was thought by many to be a betrayal of the Aboriginal community. It would certainly not be the most logical conclusion, coming from a small town in the West Australian wheatbelt country, to decide that his genetic inheritance linked him to African America.

The debate over Mudrooroo's identity has not focussed on the issue of the experiential truth of identity but on the idea of "coloured", as the colonial mentality would understand it, the idea that the soul and the body, that identity, can be dissected and pinpointed in an anthropological understanding of the term.

Mudrooroo's experience is not isolated. Laurie's article suggests that his "forceful attacks on other people's Aboriginality have made him a sitting target" (32). His criticism of Sally Morgan which was echoed by various other Aboriginal and Anglo-Celtic critics at the time My *Place* was published is a much quoted example. In his book *Writing from the Fringe* he writes "Sally Morgan's book is a milepost in Aboriginal Literature in that it marks a stage when it is considered OK to be Aboriginal as long as you are young, gifted and not very black".[6] Yet, to be fair, in another chapter of *Writing from the Fringe* Mudrooroo writes of his own first novel, which is often claimed to be the first Australian Aboriginal novel:[7] "the introduction in effect questions the aboriginality [sic] of the text and we are justified in seeing it as flawed"(174). The criticism of a range of Aboriginal fiction within *Writing from the Fringe* suggests that Mudrooroo's position is a political strategy for promoting Aboriginal identity. As Mudrooroo also states "Aboriginal Artists are socially committed, and therefore [should] have this commitment firmly in mind when they write" (24).

While the motivation to identify Aboriginality at the level of the individual and to promote a vision of Aboriginal culture may be a complex psychological and political need, such an emphasis on identity comes at the expense of many Aboriginal artists whose differences in background and creative expression create confusion over their rights to be considered Aboriginal. For example the persistent attempt by critics to identify Aboriginality links it with the past and this becomes the way in which Aboriginal writers are coerced into seeing their creative role. For example, the text, *An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and New* is consistently praised by critics, including Mudrooroo, as an authentic Aboriginal text. And there are a diverse range of tactics which authenticate Labumore's text. Labumore, as the author, repeatedly identifies her authority to write, and the editors in their editing decisions and their presentation of the book also concentrate on a process of authentication. Labumore, a writer from Mornington Island, begins *An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and New*, "I am a full blood Aboriginal".[8] This initial statement

6. Mudrooroo (Narogin), *Writing From the Fringe. A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature.* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1990), 149.
7. Davis & Hodge, *Aboriginal Writing Today.*

of her race in biological terms is then consolidated by the way she presents her material as the transmission of a cultural heritage and her own goal in writing as being to preserve a knowledge of this tradition. This focus of the narrative confines Labumore's experience and could be read as an anthropological structure with Labumore as a native informant adding to Western knowledge. This becomes apparent in the emphasis on detailing the myths, modes of healing, foods and crafts of the Lardil tribe as it was before and in its first stages of contact with Europeans. Also, Labumore's nostalgia for an earlier time, with herself as carrier of this past tradition, invokes an uncertainty and lack within the present and, consequently, presents Aboriginality in a way that dangerously constricts the roles through which it can be represented and understood. For how is it possible for Aboriginality to be seen as positive when a nostalgic representation defines the past as more complete.

Labumore's intentions can be read as positive despite the magnetic pull towards positioning herself as "other" which the available literary conventions encourage. The editors also confirm Labumore's "difference" despite the integrity of their intentions. The use of a map at the beginning of the book presents the geographical isolation of Labumore's home country and is thus a way of confirming her cultural "purity" as speaker. The photographs used throughout the book are a strange mixture of the autobiographical and the sociological. For example, some pictures (eg. 202, 206) are family shots while others, such as the opening photograph of the author crosslegged on the ground making a wooden doll, and the photograph showing chained Aboriginal men being taken in for murder (47), present both Lubamore and the Lardil people as objects of knowledge. These and further choices the editors make confirm Labumore as a "speaking" but not as a "writing" subject. That is to say, Labumore does not control how she is represented but becomes the victim of a representation that continues to control her.

A first person narrative which is more straightforwardly autobiographical is Ruby Langford's *Don't Take Your Love to Town.*[9] In comparison with his comments on Sally Morgan, Mudrooroo describes both Langford and Labumore's work positively. He states "If it was not for the neglected masterpiece, *An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New* by Labumore (Elsie Roughsey, 1984) Black Australian women's literature might be seen as advocating assimilation..." Of Langford's *Don't Take Your Love to Town,* he writes: "This is Koori literature and the

8. Labumore [Elsie Roughsey], *An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New.* (Fitzroy: McPhee Gribble, 1984).
9. Langford, R. *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (Ringwood: Penguin Australia, 1988).

life story at its best. It shows what can be done with the genre without being political" (150). However, while he does not qualify his praise for Labumore's text, presumably finding it authentic ("not advocating assimilation"), he does then qualify his praise of Langford. His concern appears to be with how to classify a text that fails to highlight its Aboriginality in an explicit way. Mudrooroo appears to be trying to heighten a political consciousness of Aboriginality. In basing his preferences on Labumore's more explicitly authentic text, however, he consequently takes part in the common practice of categorising Aboriginal experience.

Anglo-Celtic and Aboriginal critics' continued belief that their role is to measure the authentic identity of Aboriginal texts allows them to assert their individual control over the identification of Aboriginality as they negate the conscious creativity of the writer. I would like to use Tim Rowse's comparison of *My Place* and *Don't take Your love to Town* as an example of a common response when looking at fiction by Aboriginal writers. Tim Rowse claims that in the immediacy of Langford's style we receive a comparatively better version of Aboriginality than that which Sally Morgan presents in *My Place*.[10] Rowse praises Langford's text as a less self-conscious presentation of Aboriginality and it seems to him implicit that this text therefore offers a more definitive version of Aboriginality. He writes of Langford's text "I impute less intended artifice in her mature writing of herself.... A sense of 'who I was' issues from the record of the life: it does not precede and shape the record" (15). However this implies that it is the critic who can shape and impute meaning to a text by a writer who does not know her own meaning. The control the critic has over formulating this quest for an authentic Aboriginal identity can be seen when Rowse explains what he sees as valuable in the Aboriginal autobiography. He states that it is "auto-therapeutic" which suggests negatively that its value is merely personal. At a later stage in his article he says that Langford offers "a collective statement of Aboriginality"—and he goes on to say that "Considerations of 'value', [I presume he is referring to the works aesthetic value] cannot be detached from our understanding of the wider cultural and political mobilisation of indigenous people". This suggests that the value is not inherent in the texts artistic integrity but in its political merit. Finally he reasons that "Aboriginal autobiography has the potential to be of enormous documentary value to those outside the writer's milieu" (27). It seems then that in the very act of praising Langford's text he has destroyed its resonance as a creative work and relegated it to the powerless status of a

10. Tim Rowse, 'The Aboriginal Subject in Autobiography: Ruby Langford's *Don't Take Your Love to Town*'. *Australian Literary Studies*. 16.1(1993): 14-29.

document for those "outside the writer's milieu" (27). Rowse, in the process of hierarchizing the two texts, *Don't Take Your Love to Town* and *My Place,* attempts to establish some definable quality of Aboriginal identity. However, Rowse is unconsciously adopting an ethnographic valuation of the two texts rather than a literary one.

The problem of identifying Aboriginality is that the attempt to represent it as a particular experience excludes all other Aboriginal experiences. It is also, of course, a nostalgic attempt to define Aboriginality as some pure essence which can only be distilled in an evocation of a time and way of life before white settlement. But, of course, this excludes every Aboriginal living today. The motivation to establish an Aboriginal cultural identity at a public level can be a constructive political goal but in looking at the attacks on writers like Sally Morgan and Mudrooroo, the dangers of defining identity too narrowly also become apparent. The emphasis on identity also encourages Anglo-Celtic critics to continue to comment on Aboriginal culture without having to understand it. It allows them, if unconsciously, to continue to objectify Aboriginal culture.

I would stress that while it is impossible to hope that individual artists can adequately represent an entire culture, this does not mean they do not shape the culture of their community. As with artists in any culture, each Aboriginal writer embodies an ideal of their community within their work. However, this symbolisation does not have to be recognised as a truth about the community but as an individual interpretation, an interpretation that can be identified with, or strongly argued against. This does not diminish the value of the text for that community because the work becomes part of a dialogue and a process of cultural evolution. While the critical response to an Aboriginal writer continues to be seen merely in terms of identity then constraints will continue to operate that deny the evolution of the community and therefore limit the possibilities for development.

Mikhail Bakhtin makes clear the limitation of this response:

> In our enthusiasm for specification we have ignored questions of the interconnection and interdependence of various areas of culture ... and we have not taken into account that the most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries of its individual areas and not in places where these areas have become enclosed in their own specificity.[11]

11. M.M. Bakhtin, 'Response to a Question from the Novy Moi Editorial Staff', *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays.* ed. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist. Trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 1-9.

Joy Dettman

Two Gifts For Annie

Today is Monday. The sun is red. Strong wind carries the breath of smoke, of fire. I am late for school. On Monday and Friday I am always late, for on these days I carry the basket of eggs to the grocer and wait at his door until he comes with the key. He takes the basket and the note from my mother and I run the two blocks to school.

This morning I arrive in time to join the line of sixth graders marching onto the verandah. I march behind Marlene. She is older by ten months than I, but I am a head taller—taller even than most of the boys.

I am wearing my red cardigan, my hair hangs long, thick, black. It draws the early heat to my head. I look with envy at Marlene's hat and at her freckled bare arms as I slip into the shade of the class room.

My wooden desk is smooth, cool against my legs. I lift its lid, and hiding behind it, study a small man seated in front of the fireplace. His features are pinching him, tight as shoes saved for god on Sunday. I know he is here to observe and assess me, but he is staring at Robby West.

Robby is thirteen, older, taller than I. He fears neither man, god, nor school inspector, but lolls in grade four, determined not to learn —and succeeding.

The man turns to stare at Jenna King, and at the other shiny black faces our headmaster scatters amongst the whites.

The last headmaster sat the Aboriginals in a group, close to the door, this man would have approved of the last headmaster. He doesn't like Mr Fletcher.

Mr Fletcher is as fat as the stranger is thin, his face is round, pink. I think his throat is uncommonly dry this morning for his tongue peeps out from behind his lips, and he swallows, moistening his throat. A thermos of brandy, always at home beneath his table, is missing.

He passes me the examination papers. His dull green shirt is clean, but perspiration soaked already. It smells of brandy.

"Would you like me to light the fire, Burton?" he asks me.

My cardigan is a red rag waved before an angry bull.

"Go to the cloak room now. Remove that sweater and get that hair off your face."

"No thank you." I make the words with my hands. Three brief things. Only inside my head do words run free.

The stranger sniffs. Twice. It is a habit. I watch him. He repeats his twin sniff every minute, on the minute. I smile as I watch the hands of the clock try to race his sniff to the quarter hour. Too mean to perspire, he sits unmoving, his narrow nostrils pinched together conserving bodily fluids. His skin is dry, a patchy red, a flaky grey; a malnourished rat he is ready to pounce on me.

"Take up your pens." The man sniffs. The hands of the clock jump to the quarter hour. "Start now." He sniffs.

I look at the paper placed before me. Careful not to blot the page I write the answers in my best script.

Midway though I steal a glance at the stranger. He is staring at me. But his eyes slide to the side like fat on a hot fry pan as they meet with my own eyes.

Quickly I drop my chin and returned my attention to the history paper.

I do not hear the call of "Time."

Marlene elbows my elbow. "Time Dummy."

She is helpful. I like Marlene. She calls her brother Deadeye. He lost his left eye at the age of six. She calls Mr Fletcher Brandy-legs. Nick names are a part of life in my little school, but the stranger does not understand. He is from the city. He makes a note in his black book.

"Time," Mr Fletcher bawls and stamps a foot. I feel the vibration on the wooden floor. We all feel the vibration on the wooden floor when the headmaster stamps his foot!

"Scoot. Go run your heads under a tap and clear the brains. Scatt, and allow me to clear mine—and get that confounded cardigan off your back before you re-enter my class room, Burton."

He waddles across the playing field to his house, faster than he has moved in many a day.

I spend my lunch hour in the tiny cubby hole library reading the dictionary. I see the headmaster and the stranger return to the class room. They ignore me.

"She is not accepted by her peer group. To continue educating her within the normal school system would be detrimental to her well-being." He sniffs. "My report will be to that nature, Mr Fletcher."

"Peers? Look at her. She reads that dictionary as some read the bible."

"I have no argument as to her ability to handle the work. I speak of her psychological well being. Is she out in the playing field with the others, Mr Fletcher?"

"Ha ... Mad dogs and Englishmen..."

"The girl will be better off with her own kind ... and why has she not been fitted with a deaf aid?"

"I don't believe she needs one. I explained this in my report."

The inspector claps his hands. I concentrate on my books until they turn away. A sniff, a small tight smile. "I'd also like to discuss your handling of the Aboriginal students. You must find, that parents of the white..."

Mr Fletcher's fist thumps the table. The inspector's sentence cut short, he forgets to sniff and a droplet of moisture glistens on the tip of his nose, threatens to fall.

"To place that particular child in an institution at this stage of her development would be a criminal. I believe given time..."

"And you have heard my opinion, Mr Fletcher. Now, the Aboriginal problem. Whites sit with whites, the blacks sit with other blacks." He sniffs and the droplet is saved.

"I have no Aboriginal problem. In my school they sit where I sit them. They like it, or they lump it. To get back to the Burton child."

"I can only agree with the department heads on the matter."

"Brain like a steel trap. So bogged down in red tape, you're incapable of seeing the obvious. The girl's lip reading skills are outstanding ... too outstanding. Her use, her swift understanding of manual speech is limited."

"Which only proves that you failed in your duty, Mr Fletcher. The break should have been made years earlier. The longer we leave it now, the harder it will be for her."

Mr Fletcher's tongue is eager to strip the stringy meat from the stranger's bones, but he stops short, licks his lips. He smiles, suddenly aware that he is bashing his head against a non-giving wall of red tape incapable of original thought ... which is also incapable of acknowledging his own addiction.

I am smiling too. We, my keeper of knowledge and I do not fit well into pigeon

holes.

The man leaves. Mr Fletcher looks at the clock. His chubby cheeks dimple. With four minutes remaining to the bell, he hurries across the playing field to retrieve his thermos.

By mid afternoon, when the sun is burning into the classroom through the western windows, he is reeling.

"Get that cardigan off your back, Burton," he demands. "And tie that confounded hair back."

I shake my head.

"Shall we give her a choice, class. The sweater or the black board? Which will it be, Burton?"

"The board. The board." The class play to him, urging him on.

"Then, indeed you shall clean the board, Burton. Your peers have decided. Peers are important in this world; however, the choice is now yours. The sweater or the duster."

I pull my sagging socks high and walk to the front of the class, holding my skirt down with one hand while reaching for the top of the large black board.

Big as an elephant and silent as a mouse, his finger is on the pulse of his class room, and of this town. His eyes, blurred and magnified by the thick lens glasses he wears, see all, see the slim line of calf between my socks and skirt.

"You shall be elected permanent black board cleaner. You no longer need a chair to reach the top. Someone has been putting fertiliser in your shoes, Burton."

"Chook dung," I write there with chalk. "We got plenty."

The class laugh. The fat man is pleased with himself. He believes he alone has created me. The last headmaster didn't make me come to school ... now I never want to go home.

The arithmetic papers handed around, he warns, "Not a whisper not a groan. Don't even breathe until I tell you, you can." He takes up his thermos, and tea cup, he puts his feet on the table and is at peace.

I am writing answers to questions about a train travelling at sixty miles an hour with fifteen minute stops at four station. My elbow is on the paper, my chin is resting on the palm of my hand while words play in a place of sanctuary, in a part of my brain that sometimes overflows onto scraps of paper. The blank scribble paper handed to me with the text, tempts my pen. Then the nib drinks deep and I forget about trains and stations.

I write

"Inspector: Person who inspects state aid school ... as per Oxford dictionary. Big man. Closed eyes. Closed mind. Closed heart.

A weed unearthed by city mind
a noxious thing, of certain kind,
ripped from the earth then left to die
in different soil, neath different sky.
Still strong grows the weed and it grows tall
While flowers fine may wilt and fall
and I will grow too my roots in new sand
For I am a wild weed of this land.

He does it every time. He is behind me, snatching the paper from beneath my concealing hand. The sharp nib point digs into the page, almost rips it in two.

"You will remain after class, Burton."

My sigh says it all. The red cardigan is prickling, smothering me. I have to go back to the grocer's to pick up my basket, and the sugar and the tea traded for our eggs. The walk home is long.

I sit on in his class room at three thirty while the room clears. I watch the headmaster, wait until he turns to me.

He glances up.

"Do I note a spark of defiance in those inscrutable eyes, Burton?" he asks.

My reply is a shrug and his attention returns to his table and to his pencils. He sharpens each one to a fine point, testing each point with a chubby index finger.

"Remove that cardigan, Burton," he says minutes later.

"No" I shake my head.

He rises with effort, waddles down to my desk, takes my wrist in one hand then with the other pushes my left sleeve high.

The bruising is vivid. Thin red welts cut across my forearm in a cross. He nods satisfied then repeats the action on the other sleeve.

He shakes his head. "Take it off. What do think you are concealing, child?"

My eyes down, I strip off the prickly woollen cardigan and ball it on my desk.

He purses baby lips and shakes his head at the deep cut on my upper arm.

It is still red, raw, sore.

"So," he says. "So, what is a weed, Burton?"

"Weed?" I spell the word on my fingers my eyebrows raised in question.

"Yes, a weed. Give me the definition of 'weed'."

"Plant. Just grow. No care," I sign.

"And despite adversary, Burton. An apt analogy. A weed is the last plant to die in a drought and the first to show its head after the rain. A weed is a survivor—Australia is full of weeds. They are the sustainers of life."

He sharpens two more pencils.

I remember the first day I watched him sharpening pencils. I love pencils and blank white paper. He bribed me to remain in his classroom with his fat exercise books and his pencils with their fine sharp points.

He is speaking again.

"Do you know Burton, you have sat in my class room for the best part of three years. Teaching you has become something of a challenge to me. I hoped to learn what went on behind those inscrutable eyes. Give me the definition of inscrutable."

"Mysterious." He nods. "It does, Burton, it does indeed. You are no fool, so answer for me a question and please don't take me for a fool. How did you come by that bruising."

"Fall over?" I sign.

"A likely story. You insult my intelligence, however, let us see if we can do any better with this one. You were in the library when the school Inspector and I returned to the class room after lunch. We were for the most part hidden from your view. Given the optimum conditions I would consider him to be impossible to lip read; yet you knew his decision."

"No," my head denies vehemently.

"Then explain yourself," he bawls, and I spring upright in my seat.

"I warned you of the importance of this test. Your morning's work was neat, exemplary. This afternoon's appears to be written by a different hand.

"Answers right," I defend.

"Answers splattered by a spider puddling in an inkwell, while you write your little ditty—the content of which proves to me that you did indeed know our inspector's decision. Deny it you may until you are blue in the face, you frustrating damnable child."

Almost cringing from his anger, I slide to the side of my desk, one eye on the open door. The fat man signs and pours himself a drink.

"You can hear...something. Can you hear my voice, child?"

My head denies his question.

"A weed ... a tall weed with its roots in sand! Perhaps it is better that you leave this hell hole, Burton. Get out of the sand. Perhaps there is a life out there for you."

My head continues the denial as he slides the drawer of his table open and starts rummaging there.

"Do you have a dictionary at home?"

"My brother. Leave in high school locker. Sometime make bring home."

"But you'd have open access to a bible."

I nod. My elbows on the desk, my chin resting on my palm.

"Have you read your bible?"

My reply is a gesture, right finger and thumb measure the approximate thickness of pages read.

"Open your mind to me, child. It's a brilliant mind, locked inside a concrete cage. Did you enjoy your taste of the bible?"

My hands work hard. "Got no history. Got no story ... no nothing how man live. Just rules, rules, rules ... all the same, ten, twenty, hundred time say, same rule. Song of Solomon different. Little bit like Shakespeare."

"So the tall weed has been reading Shakespeare."

"My brother, got high school book. Bring home all time for me for make homework for him. He no like even little bit. I love. I love best middle bit Honey Breath."

He knows the words, this keeper of knowledge. He speaks them slowly, his expression altering, a sadness creeping into his round moon face, and when he is done, the silence grows long.

"If I had started earlier with you perhaps. But it's too late now. That is the story of my life, Burton. I have always been just a little too late. Head master of a two roomed school in a one horse town. Head master with a drinking problem." He sips from his tea cup to prove he speaks no lie.

"I hate this town, Burton. I landed here in 1958. I had a wife and a son then. I despise this town—its dust, its flies—but mainly its people. My wife and son are buried here. I can never leave them. If they put me out to pasture, I have no place to go, so what do I do? The doctors tell me that alcohol kills and I say—Ah, but slowly, too slowly."

"You wife, you son die."

"It's a fly trap, this town, Burton. One of those filthy, sticky, pink things you see hanging in the cafe. You know, you see one when it is new, it holds a strange fascination, but as the months pass it builds up a covering of flies and dust and one day ... one fine day you look up and see your self dangling there. You're stuck fast, no longer even struggling, and the interesting thing about it is that it's hardly sticky any more, yet still so hard to break away from."

He removes his glasses, places them on the table. I see his eyes, free of their magnification. Blue. Misty blue—like an Autumn sky when it knows a long cold winter is coming.

"I understand," I sign. "I understand. Like you in a trap. You think, Oh yes, better old devil I know; new devil sometime worse. Maybe not worse."

"Perhaps you are right." He rubs his eyes with finger tips before replacing his spectacles. "Off you go child. Take this with you."

From his table he picks up a small blue dictionary, offers it to me as I stand and replace my cardigan. I am slow to move towards him.

"It was my boy's. It still has his name on it." He opens the book and with a fat finger, touches the script on the flyleaf.

"Tell me Burton, is it fair that polio should steal into this town and pass by the Aborigines' camp, skip over the West's with their uncountable hoards, then take my boy?"

He fondles the tiny book for a moment more then he tosses it to me.

My hands are sure. They catch and hold this precious gift.

"Perhaps there is a good lesson to be learned there, Burton. Man must never place all of his eggs in one basket."

I am familiar with egg baskets. The book tucked beneath my arm, I sign. "People say two basket carry more egg, make better balance, but, sometimes people fall with two basket, break many egg. Make big, big trouble."

My hand unconsciously traces the shape of the bruised cross on my arm. Quickly I snatch the treacherous thing back, quickly I make it sign words. "Thank you for book. I wish I got big word for say thank you. Not say what heart feel. I will treasure your boy book forever."

"Forever is a long long time, Burton."

"Yes, forever. Forever. Sorry for messy write. Sorry for ... everything," signing I back away, the book clasped to my breast.

"Good afternoon, Burton."

I run to the grocer. He has swapped the eggs in my basket for tea and sugar. He hands me a brown paper bag filled with broken biscuits.

"You." He points to the bag and to me. "For you. For Annie."

Two gifts for Annie?

I dawdle the long two miles home eating broken biscuits and reading from my book.

Cecily Scutt

Re-making

My mother paces the gloomy hallway in stockinged feet. Her fingers clutch each handle of the jarrah linen cupboards as she slides along. Between each step she stops, clenching her teeth around her third knuckle.

"The children," she yells at my father's retreating back, "don't have any food!"

I am standing with my brother by the yellow formica bench. Too-hot kettles have burned paler rings into its top. I dart to the fridge as she rounds the corner, while Jimmy crouches down behind the bench.

"Look Mum," I swing the white door open. "There's stacks of food, plenty of food."

She looks through me. I stand in the pallid light of the fridge bulb, cold air gently settling on my skin. Packets and plastic weigh down the sterile shelves.

"How could he leave?" she gasps. "There's no food, there's no clothes for the children!"

"Muuuum! He's just gone to work. And *look* at all the food."

She stares at me coldly. Her eyes are pale brown. "You don't know anything," she says, and turns back into the hallway.

This has been happening for months.

My mother has become a proclaimer of impossible truths. I stand there in the ice-scented air and shiver at her ability to see right through the atoms of the plastic, to disperse its shiny molecules into the void. At six, I would have touched the slightly sweating packages, confirming their continued presence. At fourteen my eyes are enough. I narrow my gaze and the food re-constitutes, flying from the corners of the world to solidify here, in our fridge. There is enough.

I walk out onto the burnt grass of the lawn. I grind my toes into the baking

sand. The sky is white, and empty.

I think of the time when I was four, lying on cool tiles while my mother put calamine on the baby's rash. Resting my head on an old sofa cushion til the gritty fabric got too hot. Underneath the lifted weight, a giant insect, moving fast towards my feet. I screamed, my mother screamed. Jimmy had never stopped screaming.

It was a scorpion, Mum said, having killed it with the dictionary. It could have killed you.

My father said that night that there are no scorpions in Australia. It must have been some kind of mantis.

In the dry garden, I try to re-make the insect in the sand beside my heel. I narrow my eyes, looking for the curving sting, the clutching claws. But it twists and shifts under my gaze.

I would like it to have been a scorpion, and nearly killed me.

That night, the fridge night, my father rings the doctor, and the doctor rings the hospital. The hospital rings my father and I help him pack her bag. We have done this before, too.

"You don't understand!" says my mother, on the way down the steps. "I can't leave now, the house is leaking. The children will get cold." But she gets into the car by herself, this time.

"Don't worry Mum," I say. Her fingers are always icy, and they shake. I stand between her gaze and the house, holding up the walls, the ceilings.

The chemicals in her head are wrong, my father tells us. This makes her sad, and sometimes she thinks strange things. The doctor will give her pills, and the chemicals will go right again.

Perhaps it is her chemicals that dissolve the packets in the fridge, acid eating away our clothes so we stand in rags and scruffy shoes. Chemicals dark and rich as Coca-cola, dissolving a baby tooth left overnight in a glass.

Later, I will take acid and share this vision—watch the floors buckle and the ceilings corrode. My face in the mirror withering and aged. Understand that we are only bones.

There is an age, they say, before which a mother can cajole her child over the optical illusion of a chasm or a cliff. Come on baby, she smiles, and the infant happily

toddles into the empty air. Only a few months later, the child won't follow. It sits there on the edge of the cliff, crying and stretching out its arms, but it won't step off.

My mother in the hospital hugs me tight when we come to visit. Her eyes are clogged with hospital make-up. "My lovely daughter," she says. "Let's have a real girls' talk. Tell me all about school and your friends and everything."

Dad always buys us chocolate on the way home.

Now, in another house, I squint across my knotted hand. The phone wailing behind me more news of family disaster. My gaze is narrowed to the abrupt blue path of the pen. I write, in the end, to re-constitute the world.

And yet, also to hear the voice across the chasm.

I know there is food. I know there is no food. Perhaps madness is only a shifting of contexts.

Let me tell you this story. I have flown around the world. I have watched the nightly news. I have read the number-studded pages.

The children don't have any food. Are you listening? The children don't have any food.

John Kinsella in conversation with Bruce Dawe

Les Murray has described him as "our great master of applied poetry". Bruce Dawe has received many awards, including the Order of Australia, the Patrick White Award, the Christopher Brennan Award, and the Dame Mary Gilmore Prize. Dawe is the author of many volumes of poetry, the most recent *Mortal Instruments: Poems 1990-1995*. The fifth edition of his collected poetry, *Sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems 1954-1997*, has just been published by Addison Wesley Longman.

Many of your readers originally came across your work at school. I certainly did. Sometimes Gladness *is de rigueur on upper-school syllabi. You have also worked as a teacher, and written poems about that process. How do you see the relationship between poetry and poetry-as-it-is-taught-in-school?*

I've never made any conscious distinction between the two. The teaching of poetry in schools is, after all, variously done, sometimes good, sometimes not so good. I've been a visitor at schools where they loved poetry; I've also been to schools where they didn't. Often it's the false assumptions about it that get in the way, and these are very widespread in the general community, although perhaps less so now than they were when I was a young hopeful...

Were your own teachers influential on your writing?

One teacher in particular, my English teacher at Northcote High in the forties, George Stirling. He gave me texts to read (such as Gwendolen Murphy's *The Modern Muse*) which were far more interesting than the set texts such as *The Poet's Way, Stages I, II* and *III*.

Should all verse taught in schools be didactic, or is there a place for the poem-in-itself?

No, I don't think all poetry taught in schools should be didactic. For example, I think there is some wonderful surrealist poetry which is open to various interpretations, and there are numerous poems which invite a range of responses such as Blake's 'The Sick Rose'.

Do you feel that the structuring into categories of a book like Sometimes Gladness *limits the reading or interpretation of the poems?*

The latest editions of *Sometimes Gladness* are chronologically ordered, as is *Condolences of the Season*, and the note at the back of *Sometimes Gladness* reminds readers that categories (if we mean themes) are not mutually exclusive or definitive, in any case. Earlier editions did involve categorisation, but I never really assumed that teachers were likely to be very inhibited by this. Many American prose texts for teaching purposes also set up categories similarly.

In your 'teens you wrote under a Welsh-sounding pseudonym and are said to have been influenced by Dylan Thomas. Your poetry has clearly steered away from this. What led you to become a more socially-critical poet?

Probably the social criticism of the sixties, although I was much earlier interested in political and social processes, reading Koestler, Orwell, Silone in my late 'teens. Doing a Political Science sub-major at The University of Queensland furthered this interest, of course; living in Melbourne during the Ryan hanging and the early part of the Vietnam War also helped.

In your most recent collection, Mortal Instruments, *you write about the 75th anniversary of the landing at Gallipoli with a critical distance on the media's attitude. In that poem you write, "There is no need to go to Gallipoli / to see how Gallipoli happens". In a much earlier poem in* Sometimes Gladness, *"The Victims", you refer to a newspaper reader sipping "morbidity's nectar from the flowers of fact". You've been an ongoing critic of the media-driven age and how it invites us to abdicate responsibility and become voyeurs. How might poetry intervene in this process?*

Like many critics of particular things, I'm half in love with the things I criticise at

times; I know the appeal such media phenomena as TV have because I've felt it, too. This means that the writer will be starting from a position of partial sympathy with the target he/she is attacking. I'm not such a Puritan as to be unaware of my own temptation to be morbidly interested, although Puritans, after all, while aiming at Godliness were keenly aware of the fascinating guises the Devil appears in (see Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown').

Advertising and television also spring to mind as regular points of contention, together with journalists, "snipers in pursuit of an angle", as you say in the Gallipoli poem ('On the 75th Anniversary of the Landing At Gallipoli'). You have written of the world as being "a bottle stamped PROPERTY OF THE DISTRIBUTORS" ('All Systems Go'). Is the language of poetry directly opposed to the language of advertising and the corporate vision it peddles?

Not at all; it may well have to take on, assume some of that same language of Madison Avenue and Mojo if it is to satirize corporate excesses. Some of the most effective strategies for attacking such targets may require the artist to put on the mask of the con-man, the *alazon* (that's why Moliere is so wonderful: he enjoys stepping inside the cadaver of the miser, the misanthrope, the charlatan...).

Advertising seems to rely on behaviourist beliefs, that humans are simply stimulus-response creatures a la Pavlov's dog. How does your vision of the human condition sit in relation to this?

I've never really thought about a vision of the human condition, John. That's too wide a term for me to handle with my limited cutlery, I'm afraid. There are obviously occasions when a mechanical response to external stimuli can be a blessing and/or a necessity. But those who seek to establish total control over human beings on the basis of B.F. Skinner's assumptions in *Walden Two* are bound to be disappointed.

The idea that television and home are a cushion against the facts of brutality is a recurring motif for you. You also strongly object to the commodification of history, of courage etc.

I'm not sure what you mean by "commodification" here. Certainly, all those ways in which the stuff of human endeavour is seen as potential selling-points for this or that commercial product is lamentable, and the extent to which this trivialises the sacred and the profound is sad, too, but there has always been an Uncle Festus at the

coronation, hasn't there?

Ken Goodwin, in Adjacent Worlds, *says that for you, central to the human condition are "imprisonment, emptiness and frustration, which exist in equal quantities". It seems this emptiness, especially with reference to Australian society, is often a spiritual one. You often use sport, particularly football, to explore this void, to look at the Australian rituals that replace spirituality. Do you think secular practices can bear the weight of a nation's spiritual needs?*

No, I don't. But then, what we do is to deify the secular in one form or another, isn't it? Great is Diana of the Ephesians; great is Diana of the works of charity; ELVIS LIVES! Gary Ablett is God ... I believe there is a desire for the transcendent in human beings which will manifest itself, willy-nilly.

Have you ever been directly involved in football or is it an outsider's view? After all, you are a Victorian....

I played a game or two, in my late 'teens, for a local team in Fitzroy called the Fitzroy Legion (or was it the Fitzroy Stars?). I was enthusiastic but that's about all, running myself into the deck very quickly. Cricket was the game in post-school years which I most enjoyed: I played with a V.J.C.A. team called the Merri Park Cricket Club for some years, as an opening bowler.

Your vision of human behaviour seems sometimes almost fatalistic, drawing on images from nature to convey human failings and experiences, such as the fall of a tyrant being the fall of a tree in a forest ('Mortal Instruments'); "the spider grief springs in his bitter geometry" ('Homecoming'). How inevitable and natural are our evils and our suffering?

I'm Augustinian rather than Pelagian in regard to human nature, and honour, courage (personal and collective) above everything else. Too often we build, metaphorically speaking, our homes on the slopes of Mt Vesuvius and then are startled at the result. I am full of admiration for the person who takes citizenship seriously (the cost can be very high). "What is this Athens of which all men speak?" the Persian Empress enquiries of a messenger. "They bow to no man and are no man's slaves", was the reply.

Could you comment on the concept of the phrase "Mortal Instruments" as you use it from the quote from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar*?*

The quotation is from Brutus before the assassination of Julius Caesar, reflecting on the momentous question of the planned killing. One of my great heroes is Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, leader of the July 20 bomb plot against Hitler—for me he represented all those who have fought against tyranny, ancient and modern, from Brutus to Aung San Suu Kyi and Ken Saro-Wiwa. Von Stauffenberg, incidentally, and perhaps not coincidentally, played the part of Brutus in a school version of *Julius Caesar* as a boy at school...

Your poems on the Vietnam war are regarded as classic anti-war poems. You have also written more recently on the Gulf War. Has the poet's role changed as the nature of war has changed, and the nature of how we receive information about it? (CNN filming arrival of American troops in Somalia). [Poems: 'The Gift of the Gods', 'Homecoming', 'The Dark Room', 'Situation Report...']

Well, yes. Vietnam was rightly called "the living-room war", because of the extent to which telling images of that war were relayed to us nightly on television. The American military learnt much from the media coverage of that conflict and its impact on Middle America. Poets and others wishing to dramatize aspects of future conflicts where there is media censorship on Gulf War levels will have to sift the sands more diligently for less...

How legitimate is commentary by the non-participant?

I don't see the problem ... Stephen Crane never fought in the American Civil War, but that doesn't invalidate his imaginative recreation of it in *The Red Badge of Courage*. Shakespeare didn't live in the times of, or participate in the struggles of Coriolanus, Caesar, Mark Antony, etc. And even if you question Plutarch's objectivity or that of Froissart or Holinshed, these figures are still vivid interpretations without which mere facts would leave us all the poorer.

Getting back to the role of the poet, in Mortal Instruments *you have a poem called 'Reading Poetry in Public: Two Metaphors'. In that piece you talk of the "poem sleeping under the ashes of type-face" and how is can be rekindled in each experience of reading.*

You remind the poet that he or she is not the fire, and that the interference of the ego will "chill" the life of the poem for the reader. How do you see this in the light of the cult of personality that is required to attend literature in the modern world?

I don't see any close relationship necessarily exists between having a certain sort of personality and being possessed of artistic ability. But I've taken part in enough poetry readings to understand how easily one might be lured into thinking that the ego, with a little stretching here and there, ought to be elastic enough to cover all sorts of otherwise obvious shortcomings in the works themselves. And there is no question that many poems which seem flat and lifeless on the page, take on added dimensions and new life when presented by an adept performer. Roger McGough, for example, has to be heard rather than merely read, to be fully appreciated.

Sic Transit Gloria Mundi

for my wife, in her final illness

Never to come home again, the house cries out...
Never to garden, to garner again with those grey-green eyes
the flowers, never again to comfort others in so many ways,
to phone, to bring the true care of your loving heart
to those who sought you out; your last sickness
you fought head-down with a grace that invariably troubled
visitors seeing your arms' flesh shrink from your bones
which shook with the force of your will as you aimed
the leaden spoon at your mouth when not altogether rejecting
mashed potato and jelly as you went on working through
the cruel kindness of your condition, the morphine-masking pain
that wasted you away—or, rather, *tried to*, since nothing
could ever deflect the javelin of your purpose which we, marking
its arch in the heavens
from your hospital bed and, earlier, at home,
were always struck by: your wit, your humour
following you to end, what could we do but trail after?
"She's so independent," the nurses said, and we agreed;
if you would only give in, we thought, if you would only,
in the exhaustion of your frame,
wave once the white flag from a window! But no,
that wasn't your way, now or then, and we knew
the haunting that harrows those soldiers who see
the besieged hold out when all of the earthly odds
seem stacked against them...
Oh darling, reading those tales
of struggle in Stalingrad, how could I know
they would come closer to home and be with me here, at four in the
morning, and you
in the October Factory of your life,
fighting from floor to floor, head sunk on your chest,
not in surrender but rather as one

who will never give in, whatever curtains are drawn
to screen the passing of the funeral parlour's men from neighbouring wards.

The rooster crows, the cats on our bed await you, beneath the bed
the young dog thumps and thinks;
lights on Mt Lofty burn for the coming of day, a currawong calls
—writing this by your bedside light (my own went *Kaputt* months ago),
later, after mass,
we will go once more to the battleground
blurred by the smoke and the searing invisible flame...

The Iconography of Drought

Screwed up by the sun, held together
by maggots, dehorned and castrated anyway
it stands like a rotting ship struck by lightning.
The eye is a window to unmoving space, the
brain inside defrauded. Any birthmarks
are made by a whip.
And yet nothing is forever, this universal
victim will not be knocked, it was not
mummified in the belief that God is a drover.

Sidney Nolan

The colour and texture of The Dry
seem to deny fuel for fire though sparks
tessellate the dark hide as if its bones
are burning, or the pasture
is shedding its invisibility and erupting
like hot tongues, lashing out at the rainless storm,
declaring green fields the camouflage
of the "uncomprehending" who can't solve a riddle
despite the answer staring them in the face.

Worst drought on record? Taking it back
like war footage—the mystification of contortion—
the punters thinking over their tea or beer
that these beasts might have had souls,
that the abattoir might not have been
up to scratch: their bones crossed and sticking up
like totems. But then "surreal", a word they'd
not heard before, blurred the images: not beasts
at all—these were of another world!

This small drought was massive to us
a farmer says, dumping skin and bones
on the tray of his truck. There were so many
the crevices were choked with their
dumb spirits. At night you'd sense them
flooding out over the malicious ochre
just to give themselves space. Had some hero
up here last week taking photos, telling me
their expressions were excruciatingly beautiful.

A splash of blue paint might bring
irony if there were room for it. Yes
even scoured sockets have sight. In London
it has them saying, "Don't you feel close
to it? As if it's going to twist and squirm
out of the frame and onto the carpet."
And it being such unseasonable weather—
cold and raining in mid-summer,
a hint of drought straining at the fence.

John Mateer

These Moments: Mt Victoria

Nameless they are to me
those tall trees with sloughed bark hanging
from their lighted branches
Nameless to me they have grown into their aged space
vast with the subliminal creek's spluttering
and pollen-dust cast from ferns over our heads
into rising mist into silent cloud
And vast with ants mosquitoes hunting
meat unprotected by hair and flies
and the somersaulting black sliminesses
of leeches yet to settle and engorge themselves
on our blood And vast with emptiness and echo
in the lyrebird's calling that's always changing

On the morning after having slept
in the living mountain we peered down through foliage
seeing the ridge of other mountains
and the white cloud glowing at their feet like an ocean's edge

And on that afternoon I slept my eyes
pools of clear water crossing the path And that
evening I asked my other half what she
saw behind her eyes "Just black" Like soil

The Unimaginable

North of the falls I am silent.
Silence is the sun. The sun,
undoing knots in my ears,
is a punctured fireball
and we grow from that.

There was a night sky.
Thick moonlit clouds bristling
with ionized quiet. Then
lightning cracking up,
the demiurge's belly-laugh.
Is speech that? There

was a flood in this gorge on
whose unstable ground I camp.
Cliffs became its riverbanks.
Trees as old as my knowable family
toppled, roots kicking at the sky.
Rocks shorn of their mossy beards
were older, reborn. In this

void, this muteness, a log is
shedding bark over dark fertile mush.
Beetles, joined end-to-end,
small with large, are stepping in sync.

This silence, this place, as
unimaginable speech. A path
I overlooked. A skink, basking.

This Voice that isn't Mine

This voice louder than any of my thinking
louder than the tent sparked alight roaring in my dream
louder than the 300 year old charred trees
splintering in their ghostly flame...

I have no speaking voice. I witness the up-turned trees
with gravel between their thighs. This
is a forest of 'new growth'. This is a 'neu bau'
in old Berlin. As the apparent sun arcs

down behind the trees, their shadows slant and slide
across my chest, across my heart, slicing the dictator's brain.
I will not think. This voice is loud enough.

The Guide

He tells them, "My name is Milton."
He drives the landrover like a tank.
He watches the rhino with the eyes
of a lover and the elephant with the eyes
of a husband. The poachers set snares.
He collects them. The tourists take photos.
He allows them. His bosses speak siSwati.
He could mock them. It wasn't he who spoke
the poem of "grass that grows for sharp teeth
and rivers that flow for us all." It was he
who stopped the landrover at the dam's edge
and asked the foreigners to look for the python.
It was there he told them, "They are always basking here,
That is why the grass is sleeping."

The Gallimaufry

III

Something should be scruffy about sonnets
The poet somehow getting it oddly wrong,
In this coyly mimetic of life itself.
(There being at least one dud in every packet.)
We keep on having the vote in a ruddy hopeless
Election—the bastards will get back in,
And if they didn't they wouldn't be true villains.
At least they ought to make a total mess,

Particularly, alas, of human beings,
Voters with your tidgy hopes and fears,
Archaic believers in, say, full employment.
A snowball in the plutonic fires would have
More hope than you, yearning electorate.
Dark suits in Parliament will screw you all.

XI

Compared to enormous nature
Art is really pretty small
While beside the reams of art
Criticism turns out tiny;
And in the grey critical sea
Theory—only a droplet,

Much as our cloudmarbled planet
Is tiny in awful space,
Humankind microscopic on earth
And scholars, however well paid,
A small primitive clan
Like mushroom growers
Or Irish wolfhound breeders
With their own wee set of rules.

XV

Back with a sonnet again, lamb to the slaughter
It could have been something half decent, say
Townscape in deconstructive disarray.
The form is Italy's revenge, according to Mr Porter
Who lives faraway, over the snotgreen water,
In a land where government gets dodgier every day.
We live three coffees from Port Phillip Bay
But Sydney has firmly taken hold of my daughter.

These are what Jamesy called the middle years,
Getting a little bit slower round the traps
But cuter at handling gaucheries and fears.
Of course we know where the whole thing is heading, chaps,
Out of the sunshine, galumphingly downhill:
The very thought is a non-addictive pill.

XXIII

Back in the drowsy, non-addictive city,
Nightmare cars purring down gigantic streets,
Old men with hose or foxie, tennis balls
Endlessly bouncing off convenient walls.
Just up the way, judging from the ringlet spirals
Of silver beet and all those feral fronds
Of parsley, it would seem that our contadino
(Compulsively neat) has fallen really ill.

It's alarming: clutches coldly at my heart.
His microcosmic urban farm has flourished
Neat as pie for all these little years,
Each crop weeded and well-nourished,
Rotating in the best virgilian way
Onion, tomato and red pepper seasons.

XXV

The doorbell squeals, like destiny,
Something clatters in the letter box,
You can hear the steady traffic surf.
Through open window a scent of phlox
Mingled with jasmine. Gardens are
My sturdy simulacrum of dream,
But the pain of history is addictive
Locking us into a dying scheme

Which the politicians might call progress:
A menu for horror, some would say;
As for its meaning, the stars will tell us
While we plod on through another day,
A cheque from God might never arrive:
The expulsion from paradise means ... we strive.

The Camels at Silverton, New South Wales

the camels are probing through the blue day, with gigantic woollen heads,
there is an amused exploration of the land I stand on,
by a greasy face down through the clouds that could bump me off,
I send up my desire to them, *'look into me, I am a thing that concerns you,'*
I appeared to be palpable, there was a twist of the great sandy neck,
a revolution of the oily curly head, the high fleecy pride of its long stretch,
dipping down to earth in a prehistoric pull and tug, soft eye, the camel's
soft eye,
a yielding dipping eye, a mild, restful, tranquil eye and the breeze
ruffling along the course compacted camel fleece,
you could rest all day in the eye like shade, you could swim there in the dry,
benign camels, a civilization of camels, a camel's way of life, how I love
them, soft-eyed, turned down in brown lashed sympathy, subdued, low
quiet,
melodious, I fear they have been too soft with me,
pale, pastel delicate frames, herbivorous dozers, dusty cloud watchers,
water storage vessels along the horizon of broken crumbling roads and hilly
tussocks,
the soft drug in them, woolly fleecy sandy greasy oily dusty pale, pastoral,
the camels nuzzles are soot, the colour of stained chaff bags,
the camels of silverton with hides like thick curly fleece, that hold the
distance,
darken the fine lines running along my fingers,
the camel's movement towards me down through the air is monster,
mighty and tense, nervously I take the risk and stay to touch,
soon our faces are rocking together, in a cuddle with camels like rugs on
rocks,
what I like about it, is that the camels are off duty,
they are walking along the road in a group of about five or six,
grazing together, they don't have to give me this warmth from themselves,
I have no food to offer only a camera, but they aren't trying for food, camels,
until something put the wind up them and they move off over the trackless
scrub,
it was good to touch them and be touched by them inwardly,

there could be nothing nicer to do in the late afternoon,
than to hold the great sloping sandy head of the world's deserts,
my arms wrapped around a camel's neck, its lashes on my cheek and
forehead,
their hushed lazy brown eyes, and the way they pose as still as that,
as if to pick up everything the breeze brings this way,
their gentle sandy lips, the size and inland grace, I belong to the five grazing
camels,
and gave away all my worldly thoughts to be in their presence, this space,
until they reached down and touched me,

The Bare Hills of South Australia and Winnininnie Creek Stones

i

these mainstream stones from winnininnie creek are ongoing,
caught in the current of a seasonal creek to be carried away,
like the road above the bridge at winnininnie creek,
how it caught the cars, truck and caravans and carried them off,
down through those bare hills of south australia in the bare month of june,
like the sun was caught sinking down beneath the bare hills,
the sky was opaline, it was quietly violet as the shadows touched down
in gullies,
one bare hill leaning against the other and moving into the other,
the winter green eyes of grazing kangaroos shone upon,
were looking back up from the shadows into those bare winter hills of
south australia,
with the stone cottage ruins crumbling like granite, spilling and rolling,
the slow ricochet of rock upon rock, of hill upon sun of sun upon hill,
orange rocks beginning to contract and split so frosts can fill the spaces
in-between,
feet ache from inside the car the fingers snap frozen,
the sheep are running down the hills, they are trying to outrun the frost
newly shorn, cut to the bare skin and stamped with the red number they
try to outrun
the frost, they reach one end of the paddock and then they run back again,
they scatter like termites, alight with the cold,

ii

trees dot the distant hills, lit up into silhouette by sunset, swept away
into chill of dusk,
the next morning they have come back into colour from the night they were
swept into,
those bare hills are exposed, naked, vulnerable, begging for the thickest
frost, the coldest nights,
they are turned into the ground with the ice on their bald backs, bare hills,
they are simply bare hills with the shadows of evening creeping into them,
falling gently into their dry old gullies, smooth with what passes
across them,
the hills are giant smooth stones beneath the sky, they are a stage on which
to run your story,
like the water polished elongated pebbles of winnininnie creek,
the well worn rocks of the dry creek bed that float face up in the palm,
then turn shyly on their sides, to fall back through fingers of your hands,
to join the other stones,
you can feel the current through the stones,
the stones are flowing, after the river has dried up, the stones are waiting
for flow,
stones of action and reposition, saying '*we progress and relocate*,'
the stones are telling your fingers and your feelings about the currents
in a land
that seemed so still, that the frost could bite it until it fell unconscious,
hypothermic,
the river stones are telling you the activity of the landscape, about its trend,
mood and tendency,
this place is taking course, is taking a moving picture of itself,

iii

the red sandy creek beds are lived in by river red gums out near broken hill,
along the barrier highway, the mulga parrot is flying smooth and low,
parrots, galah, a mallee ring neck, john found the feathers in rocks from the
river bed,
blues, reds, greens, yellow clays, bird rich remnants, birds that had flown
away down river

across the round creek stones, brighter with the water flowing over them,
we each hold round rock with others floating on them in the left palm,
I can feel the creek flowing through stone, long after its white water has
dried up,
the stones echo its flow, they are miniature aboriginal implements,
of unknown origins,
the shape of them and how they fit in the palm, smoothed by the river water
then the sand,
blasting along the creek bed, or pushed forward by the fluro green feathers
of a
mulga parrot flying low, along this one stone, which is a deep
orange day closing,

iv

bare hills with evening shadows creeping into them, falling gently into their
dry old ridges,
I held the round creek stones in my shirt like an apron pocket opening,
a twig collector,
I used to hold walnut pods in the rainforest of the atherton tablelands,
in the same way
and felt the power of the walnut trees, growing up towards the sun inside
the shell of the
abandoned pod, so that when the pod dropped down into the mulch
on the forest floor,
to be eaten up by the ground, it would send its old remembered message
of pushing up,
back into the walnut tree, to remind it of its firm struggle for sunlight,
bright parrot and sky,
it had been a good day of bird feathers and smooth river stones, one to
put the world at ease,
the shadow of the e.h. holden is traveling beside us, up with the sunset
lighting up the grass,
photographers of the outback always try to brighten everything up,
using filters, colour lenses
but this has been bright enough, our faces have turned warm navel orange
with the sunset.

Kurrajong Tree With the Warm Bright Hat of Leaves

the creamy timbered kurrajong tree wears the warm bright hat of leaves,
out along western side of the great dividing range, as far north as
Coonabarabran,
its wood is light and malleable, of an open natured texture, no matter what
the weather,
with a softwood interior and the heart of green, it helps me forgive the idiots,
this planetary blaze on the large pink trees with the purple grey networks,
this living skin for the rain to run down, to soak into the feet and moisten
the hat,
of kurrajong leaves brighter than a desert,
if I'd had the branches of the kurrajong tree wrapped around me as a baby,
I would have ventured much farther out into the world, than I have,
knowing that worlds away the bottle tree branches would be warm and
stable,
something to fall back into when I was tired, but there was no one,
the broad ripe fruit had opened early, in a long slit of horizon along one side,
to reveal the fatty seeds, embedded in a hairy mass of prickly fibres,
I developed the tight grey bark of the trunk, a drought resistant fibrous
inner bark,
no one ever once looked at me with love in their eyes until I got a dog,
I came to life, in a stand of kurrajongs on the red brown earths and
rocky hilltops,
the clouds broke through the sun to pour their rainy light on me,
beneath the bright warm crowns and opalescent shade of kurrajong trees
in a cluster,
once I ventured farther enough away I never went back,
the old bottle tree provides good shade and rests in silence through
my thirty frosts
and in the end myself, the sun, the nectar, the broad ripe fruit.

Brenton Doecke

How to Read Pioneer Sagas: Miles Franklin's *All That Swagger*

Why bother to read pioneer sagas? Since the war critics have generally dismissed the pioneer saga as belonging to the moribund tradition of Australian nationalism. Is it possible to imagine a time when writers like Miles Franklin, Brent of Bin Bin, or G. B. Lancaster will be read with much pleasure again?

I am not about to argue that their novels have some endearing traits which should secure their place in some late twentieth century version of an Australian literary canon. The main focus of this essay will be on Miles Franklin's *All That Swagger*, a novel which has been variously described as giving "the saga its characteristic shape and qualities",[1] as setting "a fashion in Australian writing (a 'saga' method for a Penton, a 'history' method for a Dark)",[2] and as "typical of the 'chronicle' novel".[3] Accordingly, I shall treat *All That Swagger* as the paradigm or exemplar of the pioneer saga (it would, of course, be necessary to look at other novels to appreciate the complexity and diversity of this form). I am not making any extravagant claims, however, about *All That Swagger*'s readability today. When Danny Delacy, the central character in the narrative, talks about "the moind"—"It's all in the moind, me brave Johanna!"—I always feel like casting the book aside. To describe this as 'resisting' or 'refusing' the text is something of a euphemism: Danny should have drowned while "swimming the Yackandandah" (one of his heroic feats that subsequent generations of the Delacy family never tire of recounting).

But the pioneer saga has a significant place in Australia's literary history

1. Harry Heseltine, 'Australian Fiction Since 1920', in *The Literature of Australia*, Ed. Geoffrey Dutton (Ringwood: Penguin, 1964; rpt., 1976), 203-204.
2. Ray Matthew, *Miles Franklin* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1963), 29.
3. E. Morris Miller, *Australian Literature from its Beginnings to 1935: A Descriptive and Bibliographical Survey of Books by Australian Authors in Poetry, Drama, Fiction, Criticism and Anthology with Subsidiary Entries to 1938* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1940, rpt., 1975), 504.

precisely because of its changing fortunes. One need only glance at early reviews of *All That Swagger* to discover a radically different "regime of value" or "reading formation" from the standards and assumptions of critics in the post-war.[4] T. D. Mutch described Miles Franklin as qualified "by right of birth" to write "the sagas of the Australian pioneers". "In not one page," he wrote, "is there to be seen any evidence of overseas influence". The characters are "as really Australian as the eucalypts that forest the slopes and gorges of the Murrumbidgee hills, or the creeks that flow from the snows and springs on their summits." "Here," affirmed Mutch, "is the heart and soul of Australia in literature".[5] In *The Publicist*, P. R. Stephensen (writing as "The Bunyip Critic") loudly acclaimed Miles Franklin's "grand new novel" as "authentically Australian", and in subsequent issues he constantly extolled the book's "healthy Australianism".[6]

Such enthusiastic praise is in stark contrast with the way critics in the post-war period have viewed the pioneer saga. A watershed in this respect is signalled by A. D. Hope's 1956 essay, 'Standards in Australian Literature', in which Hope describes such fiction as belonging to an "adolescent" phase in Australia's literary history, when writers were obsessed with "what is specifically Australian rather than with what is specifically human". There appears, writes Hope, "to be a natural affinity between pioneering a literature and literature about pioneering the land".[7] This is a familiar gesture which has subsequently been repeated by many critics, who refer to the pioneer saga only to dismiss it. They invariably commend those novelists who have been able to avoid the pitfalls of this form, and lament the careers of those writers who, after perhaps showing early promise, retreat into the "convenient formulae" of "historical romance" and the "safe sentiments of bush realism and social idealism".[8]

The fate of the pioneer saga (and historical fiction generally) provides a small

4. For "reading formations" see Tony Bennett, 'Texts in History: The Determinations of Readings and their Texts', *Australian Journal of Communication*, Nos. 5 & 6 (1984), 3-11; "regime of value" see John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995).
5. Mutch, T.D. 'Stella Miles Franklin', 'The Red Page', *The Bulletin*, August 19 (1936), 2.
6. See P.R. Stephensen, 'The Great Australian Novel', 'Experiemnts in Australianity: The Bunyip Critic: A Monthly Causerie',*The Publicist* (November-December, 1936): 9-12; 'Experiments in Australianity: The Bunyip Critic: A Monthly Causerie', *The Publicist* (January, 1937): 3-7; 'Queen Victoria is Dead!', 'Experiments in Australianity: The Bunyip Critic: A Monthly Causerie', *The Publicist* (February,1937): 3-8.
7. A.D. Hope, 'Standards in Australian Literature', in *Australian Literary Criticism*, Ed. Grahame Johnston (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962), 7.
8. Cf. Adrian Mitchell, 'Fiction', *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, Ed. Leonie Kramer. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981), 119, 106-107. Brian Kiernan, 'Xavier Herbert: Capricornia', *Australian Literary Studies*, 4.4 (1970), 360. Laurie Clancy, *Xavier Herbert* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), 46.

window on debates within Australian literary history for much of this century. Typically, the enthusiastic reviewers of *All That Swagger* equated literary merit with nationalist values. This assumption was argued in more 'theorised' accounts of the pioneer saga and the historical novel, such as P. R. Stephensen's *The Foundations of Culture in Australia* (and in his work as "The Bunyip Critic"), Rex Ingamells' *Conditional Culture*, and the war-time publication, *Australian Writers Speak*.[9] However, although post-war critics like A. D. Hope, James McAuley, and Vincent Buckley consciously eschew nationalist values as a valid frame of reference for literary criticism (prompting John Docker to construct his great divide between radical nationalist critics and critics of the "metaphysical ascendancy"), it is significant that they share with nationalist critics a notion of literature's "growth". Within these terms, they simply reach a different evaluation of the pioneer saga, seeing it as a sign of Australia's "adolescence" rather than "maturity".[10] This suggests that a more tough-minded, 'ideological' reading of the pioneer saga may contribute to a better understanding of changes in the dominant literary categories and assumptions shared by writers and critics in Australia.

However, rather than reconstructing the relations between Miles Franklin and nationalist critics like P. R. Stephensen, I intend to place *All That Swagger* alongside another significant nationalist text published in the 1930s, namely W. K. Hancock's *Australia*.[11] By comparing *All That Swagger* with the political and social commentary in Hancock's text, I hope to draw out some of the permutations and nuances of nationalist discourse during the 1930s, and thereby delineate the ideological character of Franklin's novel. Both *All That Swagger* and Hancock's *Australia* can be read as examples of nationalist discourse, and yet there are significant differences between these texts which are worth exploring.

9. Cf. Brenton Doecke, 'Australian Historical Fiction and the Popular Front: Katherine Susannah Prichard's Goldfields Trilogy', *Westerly* 39.1(1994), 25-36; Brenton Doecke, 'Challenging History Making: Realism, Revolution and Utopia in The Timeless Land', *Australian Literary Studies*, 17:1 (May, 1995), 49-57
10. See A. D. Hope, 'Standards in Australian Literature'; Vincent Buckley, 'Utopianism and Vitalism', *Australian Literary Criticism*, Ed. Grahame Johnston (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962), 20; James McAuley, James. 'Literature and the Arts', *Australian Civilization: A Symposium*, Ed. Peter Coleman (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1962), 126-127, 130-131.
11. Brenton Doecke, 'P.R. Stephensen: "Fascism"', *Westerly*, 38.2 (1993),17-28.

W.K. Hancock's Australia: An Intertext for *All That Swagger*

In 'Standards in Australian Literature', A. D. Hope asserts that "Australians for the most part form an homogeneous middle class", with "little in the way of a real proletariat or a wealthy leisured class". Thus he objects to literature in the radical-nationalist tradition, since "more often than not" it presents the "real" Australian as belonging to the lower social orders and thereby gives a partisan account of Australian society.[12] During the post-war decades, Hope's view of Australia as a classless society became a commonplace. As it happens, this is one of several national self-images articulated in W. K. Hancock's *Australia*,[13] and it is one significant way in which Hancock's arguments about Australian society contrast with *All That Swagger*. Hancock's vision of national maturity has Australia quietly paying its debts and maintaining its ties with England. *All That Swagger* provides an alternative image of Australia's coming of age, when a new "ethical order" shall be established, and the "hoarders" and their "money-bags" overturned.[14]

Although Miles Franklin may not have been equipped to respond to Hancock's account of Australian society at the level of economic theory or sociological analysis, *All That Swagger* still amounts to a forceful critique of his views. The dominant image of society in Hancock's Australia is one of a unified whole, consisting of individuals whose interests are ultimately one. Franklin also entertained a vision of Australian society as an harmonious whole. In 'Our Crowded Canvases', an article published in *The Bulletin* in 1936, she describes "genuinely Australian" novels as expressing "a community of differentiated human beings each with a speaking part in an inclusive comedy". Because she conceives this ideal retrospectively, however, as belonging to a "deeper culture of intimacy in the round" now threatened by "the motor car and the aeroplane", there is an element of conflict in her vision. Her thinking is dominated by an antithesis between what she sees as the mediocrity of modern industrial society and the communal values that were supposedly a feature of life the bush. She rejects a society where people are treated as "the masses".[15] In comparison with Franklin's nostalgia about the bush, Hancock's "Whig view" of

12. A. D. Hope, 9.
13. Cf. R.W. Connell, 'Images of Australia', *Social Change in Australia: Readings in Sociology*, Ed. Donald E. Edgar (Melbourne, Cheshire, 1974).
14. Miles Franklin, *All That Swagger* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1936, rpt., 1981), 416. (Page numbers hereafter included in the text.) Miles Franklin, 'Our Crowded Canvases', 'The Red Page', *The Bulletin*, (October 7, 1936), 2.
15. Miles Franklin, 'Our Crowded Canvas', 2.

Australian society may seem decidedly progressive. But the contrast between "progressive" and "reactionary" does not exhaust all the nuances of each writer's work. Tim Rowse demonstrates that while Australia involves a series of inclusive gestures, and ostensibly delves into matters of concern to the Australian nation as a whole, Hancock "implicitly supported pro-imperial and anti-working class responses to the crisis of the Depression". The Whig view of Australian society shared by Hancock and his associates "lent support to the acceptability of such a view as that of Niemeyer's Economic Mission of 1929".[16]

Whether we look at her articles and reviews, or at novels like *All That Swagger* and the Brent of Bin Bin cycle, Miles Franklin's writings during the 1930s are clearly in conflict with the times in a way that Hancock's work is not. The narrator in *All That Swagger* describes Danny Delacy as "a pioneer of Australian democracy in its levelling aspects, which later socio-economists were to discredit as obstructing to intellectual progress" (66). The view here attributed to "socio-economists" is an apt enough summary of Hancock's treatment of the radical-nationalist tradition. In *All That Swagger*, the narrator draws parallels between the crisis in the 1930s and the depression of the 1840s, during which "the wiseacres" of Danny's generation "were assured that the Colony would prosper on stringent economy, especially if labour could be procured for the veriest subsistence wage" (60). Danny is amazed at the lack of reason shown by those "who want us to be brought to the knees by the economy". "Doesn't it stand to rayson," he asks, "that what we want is more consumption of commodities, not less; and the way to further that would be to double all the workers' wages instead of halving them"(60).

Danny states "the obvious", "that instid of economy to right things", they should "experiment on what extravagance and distributing things to the needy would do" (60). "It was," observes the narrator, "beneath his vision that the human race—most inefficient of mammals—three or four generations ahead would still be unable to feed and clothe and care for its members with adequacy ..." (61). Such direct references to circumstances during the 'thirties suggest that *All That Swagger* is more than a nostalgic trip back to pioneering days. The novel endeavours to articulate values for the present and to assert the relevance of Australia's pioneer heritage as an answer to existing social ills. As we shall see, although a liberal intellectual like Hancock is far from unsympathetic to the bush tradition, he combines the values

16. Tim Rowse, *Australian Liberalism and National Character* (Malmsbury, Victoria: Kibble Books,1978), 81, 89,92.

associated with the pioneer legend with a "mature" perspective on Australia's growth as a nation, with the result that such values lose any critical force vis-a-vis social and economic conditions during the 1930s.

"Ink and Water" Nationalism

With its maps showing the extent of the known artesian basins and the distribution of sheep and cattle, Hancock's study provides an account of Australia's development familiar to anyone who has been through the Australian school system. His celebration of individuals like Macarthur—"the authentic founder of Australia's independence"—[17] as well as Sturt and Farrer, is the stuff of school text books. Rather than conceiving Australia's economic history in terms of the growth of a modern capitalist society, Hancock sees it in the form of an ongoing struggle with the natural environment. The country's arid expanse has set its "economic frontiers" (15), beyond which individuals venture only at great risk. On the basis of this account of Australia's economic growth, Hancock offers his own version of the legend of the pioneers, referring to "that adventurous race of men who first dared, with their flocks and herds, to invade the unknown interior of the continent" (9).

Hancock is careful to point out, however, that the image of sturdy individuals pitted against frontier conditions does not necessarily accord with the situation of Australians in contemporary society or even represent an accurate picture of circumstances in the past. When he considers the goldrushes, he notes that later generations of "democratic Australians" have looked on them as "the one epoch in their past in which History has fashioned for them a mirror, so that they may behold themselves reflected as they would be, as they surely are" (35). "They have," he writes, "acclaimed the diggers as their Pilgrim Fathers, the first authentic Australians, the founders of their self-respecting, independent, strenuous national life, the fathers of their soldiers" (35-36). But while such language shows that he sympathises with this ideal, he also observes that "even in the gold-rush period, more than 100,000 assisted immigrants entered New South Wales" (37). It is a characteristic gesture. Although Hancock affirms the Australian legend and its democratic and egalitarian traditions, he always qualifies this story by noting the other paths which Australia has trod, involving government assistance and the dubious policy of protectionism.

17. W. K. Hancock, *Australia* (Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1930; rpt., 1966), 2. (Page numbers hereafter included in the text.)

Through expressing such reservations about Australia's democratic traditions, Hancock explicitly argues a conception of national maturity that is distinct from the loud claims made during the 1890s about Australia's status as a nation. The "bold pronouncements of independence" from Britain heard during the 'eighties and 'nineties come in for ironical treatment (48). For Hancock, England is "the Mother Country", against which any "posture of rebellion would be ridiculous" (48-49). It is, he writes, "not impossible" for Australians "to be in love with two soils" (51). All his implied prescriptions for Australia's future development involve reconciliation of this kind, as he weighs up the alternatives and then makes considered judgements that steer a path between them. He concludes his account of the settlement of Australia by suggesting that, after all "the violence" which occurred through "the impatience to possess", there now exists a "true partnership" between the land and its people (23). He describes the British Empire as a "unique political fellowship", in which "as nations we are independent", but "as a family we are members one of another" (227).

Not that Hancock's conclusions are always optimistic. He associates the Labour movement's project for social reform with attitudes of "a generation ago", when "economic and social problems seemed easy to solve". While there are now "practical men" within the Labour movement who insist on the priority of "parliamentary methods", the movement still harbours "idealists" who "wish to press on with the work of transforming society". The dispute between these two groups can only be resolved when everyone gives due weight to "economic conditions". Australia is now beginning to learn that its economic and social problems are "difficult". With this "new knowledge", the Labour movement may succumb to "futile anger" or be consumed by "a spirit of revolt"; but it could also try "new habits of thinking and planning". Hancock concludes: "Perhaps the auguries will brighten once more for Labour and for democracy when they begin to understand that their triumph is not predestined" (188).

Old Danny Delacy's "vast realisation", as he sits admiring the country around him for the last time, "that he was free of eternity, that he was at its centre, that it flowed all around him", may seem so remote from such a pragmatic assessment of Australian society as to defy any comparison between them. Danny, indeed, feels that he has "no one" with whom he can share his vision. Everyone else—except perhaps Harry, his youngest son—is governed by "the rules of common sense" (301). Read together, Hancock's *Australia* and Franklin's *All That Swagger* show the contradictory character of nationalist discourse during the 1930s. No easy

generalisations can be made about Australian nationalism at this time. From Danny's vantage point, Hancock's analysis accords with "the rules of common sense". Yet Hancock also comes around to affirming a common national tradition, the content of which is more or less the same as that affirmed by *All That Swagger*, and it is instructive to dwell briefly on how he does this.

Despite questioning the extent to which the pioneer legend actually corresponds with reality, Hancock himself invokes this legend at important stages in his argument. He conceives of society as consisting of isolated individuals, whose class or partisan interests are subordinate to their struggle to survive in a hostile environment. The "predicament" of the pioneers is that "they are separated from each other by unheard-of distances which, somehow or other, must be bridged"; they are also "strangers to each other", having "broken every familiar association by their voyage across the sea" (52). "Collective action", however, "is indispensable if an obstinate environment is to be mastered", and in "this scattered and shifting aggregate of uprooted units", such action can only be achieved through the State (52-53). Thus Hancock explains the Australian voter's "excessive dependence on the State" (52)—a seemingly contradictory phenomenon, given the legend of the pioneer's resourcefulness in difficult circumstances—but it is also revealing of his own understanding of each individual's relationship to the "collective". He conceives the objective structures of modern capitalist society as springing from the need for individuals to form some kind of association in their battle with the environment. Indeed, he retails the Australian democratic view that the State is "a vast public utility, whose duty it is to provide the greatest happiness for the greatest number" (55). The paradox is that the origins of this notion are "individualistic, deriving from the levelling tendency of migrations which have destroyed old ranks and relationships and scattered over wide lands a confused aggregate of individuals bound together by nothing save their powerful collectivity" (55). The individual Australian has a tabula rasa for a soul, and is firstly a citizen before having sectional or partisan interests. When each individual is multiplied seven million times, a community results.

In the penultimate chapter of his study, Hancock again shows his distance from radical-nationalism by declaring that "the period ... of Syme, Deakin, Higgins, Archibald's *Bulletin*", and "the youthful Labour party" is "closed" (243-244). He sees himself as writing at the end of "the first experiment in a national 'form'", and at the commencement of "many centuries of experiment" yet to come. He sums up "the exuberant, egotistical, idealistic nationalism of a generation ago" as "the sign, not

that the Australians had already become a nation, but that they wished to become one". Turning to the present, he describes Australians as having "not yet come of age", for "nationality consists, not merely in political unity, but in spiritual achievement" (244). However, he can still commend the original *Bulletin* for striving "to make Australia articulate" (255). He can praise Henry Lawson's stories because they brought "self-recognition" to Australians of that time (256). And, as we have seen, he is not entirely dismissive of the images and legends of the nationalist tradition: the battling pioneer, the experience of life in the outback. But these symbols and paradigms all exist in a general realm, forming a mass of national images that only loosely relate to social conditions in which "men do not find it difficult to change their house or town or class", where "there is no class except in the economic sense" (232). It is—to borrow the terms of P. R. Stephensen's description of Vance Palmer's writing—an "ink-and-water" kind of nationalism.[18] In comparison with Hancock's views, Stephensen's and Franklin's nationalism may seem bumptious and crude.[19] Yet there is also something to be said for their aggressive partisanship, for the way they tried to articulate a nationalist creed in order to change society.

Nationalism for Eccentrics

Some of the main characteristics of the pioneer saga are evident in the first chapter of *All That Swagger*. The story begins "one hundred years from now", when "young Daniel Brian Robert M. Delacy, born in the year of Waterloo, was stretching towards eighteen" (2). A reminiscent mood is evoked in the opening paragraphs, with the picture of "old Fearless Danny" thinking of the time he said goodbye to his parents and left Ireland. The narrative, however, consists of more than his memories. We are invited to share a retrospective view a century hence in order to survey "the generations of Delacy". We are made conscious of the steady march of time, of the continuity between past and present, which enables us to embrace our glorious pioneer heritage, as it has been passed down to us from one generation to the next. This is indeed a novel that asks its readers to respond collectively, to think in terms of 'we' instead of 'I', to become imbued with a sense of 'our' national identity.

18. P.R. Stephensen, 'Are Australians Decadent?', 'Experiments in Australianity: The Bunyip Critic: A Monthly Causerie', *The Publicist* (August, 1937): 5-10.
19. Cf. David Walker, 'The Palmer Abridgement of Such is Life', *Australian Literary Studies*, 8:4 (1978): 497-98

Such, at least, is the standard account of the pioneer saga, and it seems adequate as far as it goes. There has never, however, been an Australian nationalist creed that has embraced everyone's interests. *All That Swagger* reveals a number of contradictions which render its version of the national project a limited and partial one. And this is not an insight to be won only through resisting the text, through refusing its large claim to articulate authentic Australian values: the novel itself raises the question of the problematical status of nationalist sentiments and aspirations. When Danny Delacy reminisces at the start of the story, the narrator describes him as "conversing with himself". We are told that "rarely was there an understanding listener" (1). And, as we have noted, his final "realisation"—"that he was free of eternity, that he was at its centre, that it flowed all about him" (301)—is one he can share with no one. His values are out of place in a world ruled by "common sense".

At one level the novel registers the steady march of time, with Danny Delacy's story matching that of Australia's development. His progress from "parent of nestlings to middle-aged man maintaining his manhood among maturing sons" runs parallel "with the progress of the colony" (98)—to this extent the novel might be described as the Australian "success story".[20] Yet Danny's achievements hardly form the foundations for the prosperity of the second and third generations of the Delacy family. On the contrary, the Delacys' story is one of steady decline, as the values and attitudes of the old pioneering days begin to seem increasingly inappropriate to Australia's present. Danny himself is never acquisitive enough, and his "vast realisation" is a poor legacy to his family, if success is measured in material terms or by the rules of "common sense".

For Harry Heseltine, *All That Swagger* is Danny Delacy's story; with his death, the novel "sinks to rest with an unconvincing attempt to transfer the swagger of the horseman to the aeroplane pilot, the rider of the skies and the new man of the twentieth century".[21] There is, however, an ambiguity about the narrative's structure that cannot be explained in these evaluative terms. The attempt to transfer the swagger of the horseman to the aeroplane pilot is combined with an emphasis on the fragility of links between one generation and the next. Danny dies, "thrust aside by his sons as childish" (1). Harry is powerless to help his own son, and when he tries to communicate his understanding of Old Danny's qualities in a letter to his grandson, Brian, his wife appends a note excusing him for his foolishness (375). The

20. Cf. Heseltine, 204.
21. Heseltine, 205.

other link in the chain has been Brian's father, Darcy, but he has died at an early age, after his backbreaking efforts to begin anew on a small selection with Clare Margaret. That Clare and Darcy have had to begin again, when in many ways it is far more difficult to establish a property—"they had less than Johanna had started with seventy years earlier" (331)—is comment in itself on the family's progress.

All Danny's insights, and the values he shares with Harry and Darcy and Brian, are seen against the background of the Burrabinga property's decline. As the eldest son, Robert Delacy has epitomised "*all that swagger*", taking everything for granted, and imagining that the world as he has known it will last forever. He is unable to run Burrabinga in an economically sustainable way, inevitably falling victim to "the British-Australasian Properties Limited". Burrabinga becomes the property of people who "did not know a merino from a corriedale or a comeback, nor a brigalow from a swamp gum or a kurrajong"; and "they abominated the Australian accent" (366). There are forces at work outside the control of pioneer families like the Delacys. At one point the narrator observes that Australia's progress towards nationhood meant that "numbers of old pioneers were swept away like rubble" (332).

Rather than a formal flaw, the way the narrative is strung out after Danny Delacy's death shows the problematical nature of the pioneer heritage. This is not to say that the story involves a very satisfying contrast between the values of Danny's generation and the "common sense" attitudes of the present. We need only think of how the structure of the pioneer saga is introduced and then undermined in *Capricornia*. *All That Swagger* hardly presents the bitingly critical view of Australia's history that emerges in Herbert's novel. The structure of the pioneer saga is not posited in order to be interrogated. It figures, rather, as a pattern or order that might have been accomplished, as the story that might have been told, had the moneybags not held sway in this country.

Because this ideal of national unity is articulated in adversity, it often appears to be a quirky or eccentric thing, something on the margins of social and economic discourse in Australia. Danny's pioneering is described as a passion which took him beyond the confines of society and "common sense" considerations of "profit". There was "a compulsion on him to push farther out, to do, to be, to put something into life and country, without envy of those who might pillage fortunes in his tracks". It is, the narrator concludes, "in a man's stars whether he is a giver or a getter, and the two are separate as marble and mud" (30). In affirming his faith in the future, Brian (who as an aviator embodies the pioneering spirit in the twentieth

century) rejects "this ludicrous system of exploitation which wasted food while people wearied in bread lines". He believes this system "had long since been brought to judgment and condemned and was being superseded despite all false beliefs, all the specious pleading and lethal armaments of the brigands who still clung desperately to key positions" (414). Just as Danny is one of the "givers" who is at odds with the "getters", so Brian's brand of nationalism expresses the values of one group in society rather than a popularly accepted ideal. All Australians can share in the pioneer heritage, but for this to happen, the "givers" will have to defeat the "getters".

Why should we read pioneer sagas?

By placing *All That Swagger* alongside W. K. Hancock's Australia, we have been obliged to confront the contradictory character of nationalist discourse during the 'thirties and 'forties. This in itself amounts to a significant move beyond post-war readings of the pioneer saga, which generally see pioneer sagas as no more than uncritical celebrations of nationalist values, refusing to differentiate amongst the range of positions available to nationalist writers and critics during the 'thirties and 'forties.

And yet my reference to *Capricornia* may finally appear to undermine the general thrust of my discussion. Post-war critics have tended to read *Capricornia* as signalling a move beyond the criteria and assumptions shared by writers and critics in Australia in the 'thirties and 'forties. They posit the pioneer saga or chronicle as corresponding to "traditional expectations or images concerning reality", and value *Capricornia* as indicating "a new direction in the literary process".[22] What, however, of other pioneer sagas, those texts which at best have provided an interesting historical background for reading the 'great' Australian writers, or at worst are consigned to literary oblivion? What of books like Miles Franklin's *All That Swagger*? Have we come full circle, then, resuscitating the pioneer saga simply in order to conclude that it has indeed had its day?

But such a tidy scenario fails to do justice to the complexities of Australian literary history. This picture of a change in the values and assumptions informing literary production in Australia is complicated by the fact that *Capricornia*'s innovative character was recognised only much later, when critics began to explore its distinctive formal qualities. The innovative force of Herbert's novel should be

22. Cf. Hans Robert Jauss, 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory', *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Trans. Timothy Bahti. Introd. Paul de Man (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), 12.

conceived, less as a quality within the text itself than as a moment in the history of its reception. Prior to this moment, *Capricornia* was read in an entirely different way. Both *All That Swagger* and *Capricornia* were, indeed, prize winning novels, and they were originally acclaimed for the same qualities. P. R. Stephensen, in his guise as the "Bunyip Critic", greeted both *Capricornia* and *All That Swagger* as "grand Australian-type fiction that cannot be denied the name of classic ".[23] Miles Franklin herself was sensible of her links with Xavier Herbert. According to Colin Roderick, she believed Herbert "had learnt his tricks from her".[24]

My own reading strategy, when confronted with a pioneer saga like *All That Swagger*, has initially consisted in refusing to entertain any notion that it contains memorable scenes or characters. When placed next to Hancock's *Australia*, it becomes readable in an entirely new way, as a statement about the possibilities of Australian nationalism. However, there is no good reason to disbelieve early critics when they marvelled at the book's "realism"; as one critic remarked, the story was "especially strong in characters: one at least of its people—Danny Delacy—seems certain to take a lasting place in Australian literary tradition".[25] Such empathy is, after all, only possible on condition that one invests a certain set of values in the text, nationalist values which critics in the post-war period disclaimed, when they chose instead to focus on what was "specifically human" rather than "specifically Australian".[26] As with the notion of literature's "growth", one can detect in this shifting estimation of the "life" or "vitality" of pioneer sagas a set of realist assumptions about literature that were shared by both radical nationalist critics and critics of the 'metaphysical ascendancy': it is simply that post-war critics ascribe a different view of "life" to Australian novels, with the result that some novels that were formerly judged to be full of "life or vitality" are now deemed to be stereotypical or wooden, whilst others are celebrated for their "human" qualities.

Reading pioneer sagas therefore provides more than the necessary historical background against which our reading of the 'great' novels in Australian literary history can be placed. We are, instead, confronted by questions about literary value and canon formation—questions that underscore the situated nature of our own reading of texts, obliging us to scrutinise the assumptions that determine our own reading.

23. P.R. Stephensen, 'Experiments in Australianity: The Bunyip Critic: A Monthly Causerie', *The Publicist*, (January, 1937), 3-7.
24. Colin Roderick, *Miles Franklin: Her Brilliant Career* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1982), 157.
25. See 'Red Page', *The Bulletin*, July 29, 1936, 2.
26. Cf. Hope, Mitchell.

Dean Kiley

How to Host a Rape

You'll be leaning back, shoulder-blades suction-cupping the wall. You're the right distance from the dancefloor, on cruise control. The air's pneumatic. The floor's got a pulse, hectic Richter heart-attack, safe on base.

You'll be still and relaxed but sweating anyway under banks of hot lights sucking on current from strangler vines of cable and flex. You've drunk exactly enough to feel vastly benign. Wanted and sexy.

This is your place, your people. Almost family, but with more incest.

Like home you love it hate it miss it refuse it. All these pumped-up Popeye poofs. Vaulted abs in cathedral torsos with double-parked Volkswagons outside.

Still. It's a mixed crowd. Once you stop bidding for the renovated bodies. You can safely be anything or anyone here. Everyone gets to be young, restless, bold and beautiful. For at least one song.

Summer, the season of Raybans and poofter-bashing, is drawing to a slow close. You knew someone who got beaten up last year, but then he tried to walk home in the early hours alone. You've never even been jeered at. This is a small world with bouncers and a taxi rank.

You're here to find someone. Like just about everyone else. Surtitled looks. It's either easy or impossible. You've done it before or watched hopeless as it happens to the undeserving or seen it on limp porn. This time it's easy. He wanders over

looking for somewhere to ash, thanks you for moving the ashtray two centimetres.

From *You look bored* to *Wanna grab a coffee?* in the agreed minimum of words.

Club cafe car and bad driving in a small bubble of unsaid Yes.
You'll start—after two drinks, a stilted tour and several minutes of disposable chat —with a blowjob. You're not very good so he pulls you off and punches you. Rips your half-unbuttoned shirt over your shoulders, down your back, pins your arms. Rams your forehead into the lino. You can see a piece of diced onion. Jeans down to your ankles. Your name's in his mouth next to a porn script. You lift your head, he slams it back down. Shake it to dull the buzz, he slams it down. Moan when he shoves in, he mashes your soft face down in Pine-O-Cleen and a charcoal-grey diamond pattern. Move again and he'll hit you.

You're not you. You're not here at all. You're a weather balloon high above your body, this thing distant and dead below that won't do what you tell it to, won't move. You feel not even numb, just nothing.

It's over. You wake up and hadn't dreamt.

You'll be a sodden foetus, knees at chin. Your eyes will melt down your cheeks. You'll be sobbing. And ashamed of this. Where in you can you find the space to be ashamed of this?

You're drooling spit, dribbling blood all over the place. You're obscenely aware of your arse gaping open and raw, sucking air like an angry baby. There's shit and blood on the lino. And you're embarrassed. Embarrassed for fuck's sake. All you want is to be clean again, clean and covered up.

He wipes you down, nurse-firm, with a hand towel. Don't flinch, stay still. Can't look at him. He's saying something with *sorry* in it. Wipe your face with the padded leftovers of the tissue in your left pocket. Do it. Get dressed. Don't turn around, you can't afford to let him see your face. You hear him go to the toilet. He shuts the toilet door. Why does he do this? But you're gone. Out the door, throw yourself

down the steps and out the street. Run. Go on, just run, it doesn't matter. Run till you find a main street then slow down to a numb stumble.

Think. What're you going to do? You remember his name, at least the one he gave you. You could find your way back there. Can you remember his face?

Maybe you should ring someone. You'll find yourself listing the people you know you wouldn't go to for help.

It's 2.56 am and who's left to call ... for rescue from what? A few cuts and bruises, a shopworn arse. You don't even need a doctor really do you? do you? Just a shower, bed. *HIV test* flashes on and off just outside your peripheral vision so you ignore it. One after the other anger terror disgust blame take and shudder you.
Walking is a lip-bite effort.

Just say this was rape
Just say this has happened to you
Just say... No
Just say nothing. You won't be believed.

Fuck it. You'll go to the police anyway. Stand in a room of robberies and bashings and break-ins and car thefts and drunk drivers and prostitutes and druggies and call yourself a rape. Sit and wait for the dentist. Don't look at anyone. Put your fists between your legs and stop shaking. You haven't done anything wrong. Don't be so fucking nervous. Hang on. Hold on to anger.

Then you'll sit and watch in delayed shock as the skeptical man with the badly-chewed blue biro you somehow can't take your eyes off turns rape to assault to rougher than usual handling to a small domestic. The policewoman who usually handles this kind of thing isn't around and can't be contacted. You will not be medically examined. You will not be referred to a crisis or counselling centre. You will not get coffee or tea or sympathy.

He, then a huddle of them, will ask again and again in different words

This was a quee— gay nightclub right?
You sure you didn't know this man?
But you went home with him anyway?
And you were 'maybe a bit' drunk?
So you were there to have sex, that's why you went with him?
And you started but *then* you changed your mind?
He didn't have a knife, some other weapon, make verbal threats?
And you didn't hit him back?

You will be told that if sodomy hadn't been decriminalised something could be done.

You will be told to go home and clean yourself up, have a think about it and come back if you're really sure you want to press some kind of charge.

You do and no ... you don't. You close up, shut down. Hide in bed, in tranquillisers. Let the machine answer calls from worried friends, your boss. You'll forget to eat and sleep. Nothing matters much except getting through the next hour without thinking. Doesn't work.

Back you go over and over to then, there, the things you did and couldn't. You chose him, wanted it. Went back to his place. Knew nothing about him. Asked for and got. If you'd said something— at the start— told him what you wouldn't— then maybe— maybe he'd have— you shouldn't have— but WHY?

And in the shallows of insomniac nightmares there'll be no answer either.

Your choice, your fault. Coward.

And in your useless dead hands that did not fight back there'll be no reason either.

You'll want to kill him punish fix, absolve the both of you. You'll sit nursing instant coffee and yourself, trying to imagine yourself into him. Telling yourself he'd never be able to find you here. Not convincing yourself you did the right, the only, thing—and what else was there to do?

And in your colour-magazine psychology you'll find no resolution either.

By the time you've stopped thinking it'll be too late to do anything about it. It will won't it? Much too late.

So you'll come back to life. You'll always almost forget.

You'll stay impotent for two years. They'll call you a cock-teaser as they throw you out of their bed, as they doorslam from your flat. And they'll be right. But it's your own cock you'll be teasing, tricking yourself into situations where sex is the logical conclusion, to see if it
if you can do it.

Nothing.

For months everything will be a failed detour round him—what he did to you what happened what you didn't what you let him do to you. By now it's not even you anymore. When you finally talk about it it'll already have become a story. You'll tell someone who's become almost suddenly a good friend. Because they have no place or stake in your past.

Late and drunk one night, you'll vomit this small hard fact. And an eye-witness look will take over their face. They will say and mean all the platitudes you never believed but need to hear anyway. And they will hug you like a kind chemotherapist. And now it's safely over they will ask you all the *Why-didn't-yous*. And now you're safe you will start for maybe the first time to understand why not.

When you see him again time will Stop and Rewind and your body will remember even if you don't want to. You'll be on another dancefloor and his face will just be there. You turn viciously inside-out like a rubber glove. Wry strangers are helping

you onto unsafe feet. Another tragic drug-fucked queen. It takes all you've got just to straighten up out of porcupine-ball.

This isn't you.

You'll get your current sort-of boyfriend to help you corner the fucker and then you'll smash his identikit face wide open. You'll go up to him and see if he remembers you and can tell you why because by now that's all that matters. You'll grab him and hustle him outside before he knows what's happening and then you'll make him sit and listen as you indict him for your therapy, the crossed wiring between sex and emotion, the boyfriends who tried but couldn't wait for you to get yourself together, your Oprah intimacy problems, your permanent mistrust. You'll just go up and face him and see what happens.

No you won't. You'll do nothing. Run. Wash the fear off in the shower. Coward. Now curl back up and sleep it all away.

Nothing's changed.

You're nothing.

Brendan Ryan

St Kilda Beach, Thursday Afternoon

a boat pulls a floating billboard
past the Stokehouse Restaurant
Ford Landcruiser, the intelligent 4x4
a new generation yawns
clinks their glasses
and makes an offer
for the view
to be extended

Poem

walking back to your house
past shift-workers rubbing windscreens,
past beat-up Holdens and Corollas
crawling down back streets
with techno music throbbing,
past men staggering home from pubs
along paths ruptured by tree roots,
flooded by jasmine.
I'm thinking of the day ahead,
the Fitzroy Town hall spire
silhouetted against the starless morning
and you asleep,
soon to be woken
by the beer on my breath
the stories of friends
and all the things
I've been meaning to tell you
we both knew I couldn't

Lake Mungo

after 110ks on a red sand track
we move closer to the heart
of abandoned soldier settlements
broken cattle drays, dry lake beds

we pass Mungo Lodge—
an oasis of bungalows and trimmed lawn
in semi-arid desert
where mail arrives weekly
by water-tanker
on a round trip
between Balranald and Ivanhoe
the driver keeping your bills
in the glovebox
until the next load
of tourists
fly out

our brief is to shoot the dunes
at sunset, frame their shadows
turning ochre, lunar gold
with a swivelling moviecam
track the ridges
of a character's fear

a heat haze claims the landscape
the Walls of China hover
and separate the memory
I'm entering

the sky drifts off
dead trees rest where storms deposit us
I move around our camp site
chasing shadows, watching them twist
across the dirt

the Walls of China vary
from hardened clay turrets
scarred by westerly winds

to curving slopes interrupted
by feral goats

gnarled trees cling
to shifting edges

our conversations turn to water
snakes, childhood

here, you can walk for miles
and still be at the centre
of an ancient plain
that cares less for your presence
your rolls of film
than you care
for a road without billboards

you need something familiar
to anchor your thoughts—
a disintegrating relationship
Kundera's *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*
a photograph of a friend who has died

the temperature climbs over 40
the scrub is alive in silences
flies crawl over my sunglasses

in Belah and Rosewood country
shearers' huts have been undermined
by rabbits

and we are left
with the burial sites, remnants
distances in a relationship
that had you pinned
to the floor, dodging fists
screaming how can anyone
live here!

we keep our film in the esky
a wrinkled rockmelon
is attracting blowflies

the water container
is beginning to swell
something more than light
is falling against us

like a kangaroo ramming its head
against a chicken wire gate
we rush to escape
before rain turns the road
into slush.
the car slides
across
the corrugations
everything falls from the dashboard
the windscreen wipers scrape
against our shouts of water
wanna cigarette, shit look
at those rain clouds!
we drive on
past a 40s Rolls Royce
facing east—the tyres
shot through with weeds
the scrub turns
a deep shade of green
the Walls of China tremble
inside three rolls of film,
their history of bones
recording the contours
of a landscape eroding
a sky flaming
over a saltbush plain

400 metres of smoke

when I arrived at the house
flames were lashing the windows
I heard furniture surrender to violence
and was reminded of bones snapping.
I didn't recognise the sky
or the people I loaded into the car
the mother turned away, crying
for the toys her children
wanted to play with.
I slipped the gear lever into drive
and coaxed my parents' car forward
into smoke.
I felt the texture of bitumen
before running the car off the road.
One of the kids asked, Mum
are we going to die?
nobody believed her reply
when the darkness swept over us.
I swung the wheel back
on to the road and wondered
how much heat can a tyre hold?
I tried to remember those patches
of bitumen where the school bus sagged
the angle of a bend,
and the line the bus' shadow
formed around milking time. But
I was out of my depth
after 400 metres, driving blind
over grass and ferns
groping for a road I'd taken
for granted, a road the mother knew
would take her back into intimacy
and the nights kept ajar
by what she thought was smoke

Wendy James

The Purse in Her Hand

She had the purse in her hand when she walked in.

The purse was in her hand when she walked in. I remembered, you see, but too late. Just after putting Jimmy down for the evening, right as I was making my last peek-a-boo face around his door before closing it, I had this sudden and vivid recollection of Maryan swinging that purse, of the glinting arc its silver clasp made as she moved through the light, of the faces that turned towards her, as they always do, magnetised, hypnotised, when she walked into the restaurant.

Darling, she said, and her voice was so high and so light that her greeting, though it was meant just for me, seemed to embrace the entire restaurant. *Darling*, she breathed, and bent to kiss my uplifted cheek, *it's lovely to see you here. I'm so glad you could come and oh God, I'm sorry I'm so late, an awful morning. I hope you haven't been—not too long? Good, that's good. I feel better now. You haven't had a drink yet? Oh surely one won't hurt the child, silly girl. Waiter. A bottle of—you do like champagne? O God yes, an awful morning, everything that could go wrong...*

I don't remember noticing the purse after that, though, whether she put it under the table or on top, or lay it in her lap when she sat down. When Maryan's around you don't seem to notice anything, or even anybody, other than Maryan herself. Not that she's beautiful, or especially well-dressed, or even particularly interesting when you stop to consider it, but she's got this certain—perhaps it's what what our grandmothers would have called *It*—this certain something that I can only describe as a power to make the rest of the world, the parts where she isn't, seem colourless and dull. Flat. Anyway, I can't remember seeing Maryan's purse after that, and of course it would never have claimed even that single moment of illumination if it hadn't disappeared.

At the end of the meal there was our usual argument about the bill. *Of course I'm paying. My treat, let me.* And of course I'd agreed—with Maryan you can't not.

You can do the tipping...don't leave too much. But when she went to pay, there was no purse. *Oh Christ, I can't even remember if I brought it with me. Christ. Did I have it this morning? Think. Think. Think. When I walked in? Think, Maryan, think.* I couldn't remember, nor could our waiter or the Maitre de or any of the people sitting close enough to take part in the questioning, the attempts at reconstruction. *Oh, look, I must have left it at home. Or in the car. Sorry, this'll have to be your shout, can you manage...?*

It wasn't in her car, and she hadn't left it at home—I rang concerned from Mum's when I collected Jimmy. But then I did remember, just like that, at the end of the day: and that image of Maryan's purse in her hand came to me like some sort of vision—it was so vivid, so definite, so unexpected.

I went straight down to tell her. Perhaps I should have phoned. But Jimmy seemed peaceful enough, and Maryan's house, her rear garden, backs on to our unit courtyard. From the kitchen window I could see over the back fence, could just make out Maryan sitting, as she always does on these warm evenings, under the wisteria with her husband. Maybe it would have been simpler and more sensible to have made a quick phone call; but there was such an intensity about my memory. A revelation! To give such news over the telephone seemed banal, an anticlimax. Anyway, for whatever reason (and maybe it *was* just the prospect of seeing Maryan, of having a friendly chat over the back fence, of being a part of that comfortable, companionable scene, that compelled me), I went straight down to tell her.

It was still evening, clear and with that intense quiet you get in late spring before the cicadas get going, and Maryan's voice seemed to ring through the entire suburb...*really don't see what else could have happened to it. I know I had it with me when I walked in. She must have taken it when I went to the ladies. That great bloody handbag of hers. Oh, of course she took it—she didn't even flinch at the cost of lunch. Christ. That'll teach me...*

I heard a faint crying sound, then, light and high and far away and remembering Jimmy and the empty house, I hurried back.

Philip Salom

The Glass

Thinking back on some things can be like
hand-me-downs in reverse, from the future
they fit, you know what's in the pockets
but as schoolkids we talked up differences
and how some kids were lost in them
like swamps. Artauds of the playground.
And this girl had pale skin and black hair
but the kids knew all the words for her
meant one thing: the girl with the glass eye.

No one could look at her without looking
for the glass eye inside her black eyelashes
and with her small face and thin body in her
fourth-in-a-row hand-me-downs she was
close to doll-like, as if the artificial,
the glass, had spread to the rest of her.
So when we were playing marbles
we knew one more thing of her strangeness:
we knew the weight of it, the glass,
imagining this weight in her eyelids.

They lived out of town, the eight kids
and their mother who with her pale skin
and her black hair and glasses was 'almost
beautiful', and with her handsome figure
almost voluptuous, but she had married
a nowhere man and a drunk who lived these
like two professions, and he was good
at both of them, who worked, if he worked,
elsewhere for months on end.

She had responsibility and family,
which is almost belief, while he kept
conviviality and booze. When it suited
he'd return, seeking perhaps the power
of her body and its reminiscences.
As kids we didn't know about force
or alcohol, except in the silences,
or was it charm, had he some
odd display of magic he could turn
for her—we'd never really seen him—

so that he left her carying a pale
bruise, or kiss, nine months of it
almost every time. From her dark
weatherboard house she'd walk
into town and carry shopping back
on foot, like a story, through gossip
which tried to make her poorer:
she was the glass eye of the town,
slipped in and out of someone's
memory, sexual and extraordinary.

Looking for Arthur's Mum

She won't forget her white hair or the white
morning lying on the table like the only

ironed thing inside the house.
She feels like a teenager dizzy after dancing

why or where she has forgotten, the floor
like a shone shoe in her memory of it.

Her table's made of skin, the time is
air, remembering a young man's body,

the old ghost standing at the door
the sound between his fingers

clicking like an abacus. One by one
he worries at the endless, the begun.

When Arthur walks right through him
the air smells like boiling vegetables.

He's been grown up for thirty years
sawing wood until his unwashed face

has turned to jarrah. He sleeps and works
the grime, in ten more years he'll turn

to coal. The neighbours hear them shout
but inside the rooms no love or hate

can answer whether they do or don't,
in matters of sleep, live as mother, son.

And that, so long ago. And now they've
gone, leaving us the endless, the begun.

A young man stands in the ruined doorway:
Now that you mention it, I do remember

hearing something. She'd been dead
for weeks before he told anyone.

She woulda stuck to the floor. Arthur's
gone but no-one knows where. And then

his face turns white. *You mean, she was,*
she and he was... in here?

He Learnt the Wood

He learnt the trade in long open sheds like sheep auctions
or dolphin aquariums, barking each day back by weight
and balance, each log fed into the sawblade and shattering
his dreams. He learnt to shout above the saw-bench
his voice high and tensile like a saw-blade biting in then
clearing the wood.
What does he drink to put up with this?
I've seen him push the blocks until he seems
to reach into the terrible hive
like a kind of death
the paleness cut in half like a conjurer's assistant.
He came here in his truck, red and sounding like guns,
but if it was slow he was on speed, fear
was splintered over him: halfway up the hill
his truck had packed it in, clutch plate gone,
and he was stomachfalling backwards in angel gear
the brakes like a sawblade smoking through jarrah logs.
He'd rammed into a ditch, the front wheels lifting
like the eyes of someone stunned. He took the long
way round, swallowing like someone on tablets.

As the wood slid safely down the steel into my yard
he looked up into the trees like someone inconsolable
the wind heaving in the foliage like uplift
in an aria by Caruso.

Lorraine Marwood

Looking at my daughter's weather

Turn to the back page
isobar closeness
I look at my daughter's weather
town clouds and town rain
grey and brick-faced
billowing. She makes an interior
weather, wind and a sky
rainbowing from horizon
to horizon. The sky that kept
her eyes heavenwards
when she was a girl.

Now she has trouble matching
weather patterns, the autumnal tones
of her rented room
blur and juxtapose
the consistency of seasonal rhythms.
There is a dampness that defies
even the heatwave days.

Still I try to tell her
that one word keeps
the rotation going

but she has to have her own
translation, melt her own hail stones
skid on the frost at her own doorway.

Alsfeld

Under the pagoda
and a settling after noon
my friend explains:
'The pink blooms
will drive my father mad again.
See how lightly they wing the breeze—
these blossoms—
pungent with waiting-to-fall'

[serviette in hand
silvered knife and fork

the wait for the smooth silent
slice

Florence Nightingale
in his hip pocket]

'He will hit my mother
behind the sausage pantry
after she has spread the table'

[her arms wild, flaying
free,
preferring the pain
than being passed over
clinging to the bloodied swab
she will whisper:
my heart is deep-fried ice cream]

'And, tomorrow
he will take us to see
the fort that guards Alsfeld'

Sue Gillett

Beyond National Imaginings: Adventuring in the Motherland in Sue Woolfe's *Leaning Towards Infinity*

In memory of my daughter, Hannah Rose

> *And it came to me, as I stood on a concrete roof garden far from home, that this is the way of daughters, to struggle against their mothers, to become their mothers, whatever happens. To be like them, to be them, to be instead of them.*[1]

> *We must find, find anew, invent the words, the sentences that speak the most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, with our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours and that of our daughters.*[2]

Zeno's paradoxes

Very early in *Leaning Towards Infinity* its fictional writer, Hypatia, interrupts her mathematical mother's narrative with a digression on four famous paradoxes originally put forward by Zeno two and a half thousand years ago. According to Hypatia, Zeno was a friend of the Sophists and he believed that the world of sensation is an illusion. His paradoxes attempted to "discredit everyone's belief in the sensory world" by demonstrating that "motion is self-contradictory, or at least a succession of stills." His paradoxes are called The Dichotomy, The Achilles, The Arrow and The Stadium. Hypatia describes these proofs:

1. The Dichotomy. **There is no motion** because that which is moved must arrive at the middle (of its course) before it arrives at the end.

1. Sue Woolfe, *Leaning Towards Infinity* (Sydney: Random House, 1996), 158. All further references to this novel will be given within the text.
2. Luce Irigaray, 'The bodily encounter with the mother', in Margaret Whitford (ed.), *The Irigaray Reader*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), 43. All further references to this essay will be given within the text.

2. The Achilles. The slower when running will never be overtaken by the quicker; for that which is pursuing must first reach **the point from which the fleeing started**, so that the slower must necessarily be some distance ahead.

3. The Arrow. If everything is either at rest or in motion in a space equal to itself, and if what moves is always in an instant, **the moving arrow is unmoved**.

4. The Stadium. Two rows, composed of an equal number of bodies of equal size, pass one another on a race-course as they proceed with equal velocity in opposite directions, one row starting from the end of the course and the other from the middle. Thus a given time equals its double. (12)

Leaning Towards Infinity is fascinated with the figure of infinity which inhabits these paradoxes, especially as it offers an analogy with the paradoxical figure of desire. Between two objects, one representing a point of beginning and a point of departure, the other representing an end point, a destination, an impossible relation exists in that the two can never meet. The gap between is endlessly widened in spite of pursuit, forward motion is simultaneously forced backwards such that movement does not move. The novel imaginatively translates Zeno's insertion of the infinite between moving objects into the space which divides women from their mothers and daughters, the obstacle which impedes their pursuit of this relational identity.

Based in mathematical laws, Zeno's paradoxes find their justification and support in the logical requirements of a theoretical discourse, which is divorced from the empirical evidence of the senses. Indeed they are paradoxes partly because of this clash between theoretical consistency and sensual experience. As in Zeno's paradoxes, the impossibility of the meeting of maternal and daughterly desires follows from the requirements of a patriarchal logic, a logic which underpins and joins the imaginary and the symbolic realms. This logic, providing the theoretical edifice for the laws and exchange systems of patriarchal societies, can proceed only upon a disregard of the empirical fact that women carry daughters within their bodies and give birth to them from their bodies. Maternity presents an unrecognized figure in which the space and movement between objects take different paradoxical forms. The condition of pregnancy draws a question mark around the numbers one and two, and all operations involving them. It also challenges our conventional understandings of space: the bodies are connected and separated, dependent and autonomous, neither consumed nor consuming.

Beginning her life as a daughter born of mothers, a woman's eventual movement towards the possibility of motherhood is, of necessity, reliant upon having been a daughter, and yet this passage finds no echo in patriarchal theories which begin with and consider only the origin of man. As in Zeno's first two paradoxes, a woman's movement towards a future in mature female identity is stalled, unable to reach its endpoint, compelled backwards whilst attempting to dream forwards; infinitely backwards towards the place of origin. Bereft of a theory of her origin to support her existence the daughter lives an alienated relation to her sex, suffering from inarticulate longings for her first home in the first body, for recognition from her mother who is hardly nameable as the mother of a daughter. Where can she find refuge? She has, perhaps, three options:

1. She is offered her father and by extension the social fathers as the ultimate creator, forgetting the wordless memory of the enfolding womb for the 'compensatory' language of the paternal cultural order. But unlike her brother, who can perform this sacrifice of the mother without himself falling victim to this gesture of repudiation, (which is not to say that the gesture is without its costs), the daughter can build no alternative home upon that razed territory. Her place within the father tongue still mourns for a language in which to elaborate her loss, which is both a loss of her mother's body and a loss of her own sex and relations with her own sex. The worst possible words Frances can hear are these: You know what's wrong with you? You're your father's child. (Juanita to her daughter, Frances. 79)

2. She may refuse the father tongue and the father land as her new dwelling place, seeking refuge in silence and madness.

3. She may seek to rediscover her female inheritance through the effort of articulating this ancient desire, thereby reconstructing a culture where woman-to-woman relations are not devouring, rivalrous, competitive, but modelled on the recognition and appreciation of the mother's gift of life. Irigaray asserts that "we have to discover a language which does not replace the bodily, as paternal language attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal." ('The Bodily Encounter', 43)

This third option is the one taken by *Leaning Towards Infinity* as it traces the

permutations of Frances' belief that "the only real adventure for my life will be to become my mother" (Frances, 90). It is through the most serious play with the formal language of mathematics and particularly the concept of infinity that the mother-daughter couple investigates the nature of its desire. In search of the perfect formula through which to express their daughterly yearnings these brilliant mathematicians invent new theorems, and ultimately Frances finds an entirely new kind of number.

Mathematics and the daughters' desire

Six generations of women feature in *Leaning Towards Infinity*. From eldest to youngest their names are Great Grandmother Johnson; Violet Johnson; Juanita Fernandez; Frances Montrose; Hypatia Montrose; Zoe Montrose. The story focuses mainly on Frances, who is also the main narrator, Juanita, remembered and re-evoked by Frances throughout her narrative, and Hypatia, who tells us at the outset that she is the writer of the novel, including the writer of her mother's narrative and her own interruptions to that narrative. So it is Frances' story which is central, but that story is intimately imbricated with the lives of the generations of women on either side of her—her mother (and her mother); her daughter (and her daughter). Two of these women are mathematical geniuses—Frances and Juanita—and mathematics is meaningful for them not so much in terms of a genetic inheritance but as a metaphor for the daughter's infinite and inarticulate longing for her mother. This is what pulls Frances into mathematics, it is the compulsion of her life:

> I'll admit it now: I was the envious daughter of a mother so beautiful she shimmered into light. Was it envy that pulled me into mathematics, to be better than her? Or was it adoration? Or were the envy and the adoration part of each other? (21)

Mathematics, desire and identity intersect in the matrilineal histories of these characters. When Juanita is seven years old her mother takes her to a convent to be raised by the nuns. The ostensible reason for this abandonment is that Violet has been left a widow, her Jewish husband murdered. For ten years Juanita has no contact with her mother: "No letters, no holidays back home, no visits" (14) and prior to this total exile bodily contact between Juanita and Violet has been rare: "the last time she'd touched the girl was when she was seven and leaving for the convent, and the time before that was when she was a baby" (18). It is during the period in

the convent that her gift for mathematics is discovered and under the nurture of the nuns (who realize that Juanita's gift can help them financially) her talent flourishes. The love Juanita feels for mathematics provides a substitute for the loss of her mother as well as a denial of the emptiness created by this abandonment. She literally takes refuge within a mathematically fabricated world. It is a reclusive world, seemingly sufficient unto itself, supported by a withdrawal from the outside world of people-connectedness. Juanita is no stranger to Zeno's paradoxes. What attracts her is itself paradoxical. She had "an intuitive idea of how infinity lies between each number" (16). Zeno's infinity unfolds towards an infinite *contraction* of both space and time, but Juanita's contemplation also sees in the theory a way of keeping a space open. "So a door never shuts" (16) she says, significantly to her mother. The infinite regress may signify the impossibility of meeting, but Juanita chooses to interpret this in terms of the prevention of closure. The infinite allows contraction to become expansion, stillness to defeat death. Juanita makes these interpretations in the face of her cloistered existence and against her mother's incomprehension, expressed here in her reply to Juanita, "Doors go like that after rain." (16) Doors *have* closed for Juanita. Her beloved father is dead and her mother has closed her own door to her daughter, even before the convent. But in mathematics Juanita can escape those events. Time never catches up to itself. She creates a foothold for herself, a way to survive loss, through the pristine purity of a formula in which the past never arrives at the present. She stays in the before-time. Eventually this dwelling place will become her madness. Juanita ends her days in a mental institution, still hiding with her father from his murderers.

Juanita's mother, Violet, does not appreciate her daughter's aesthetic relationship to mathematics. It is a secondary language in which the traces of a wounded connection to the mother can be read, but tragically it is a language which is not shared between mother and daughter. The longings of its syntax remain inaudible. Violet is practical and opportunistic with regard to Juanita's mathematical skills which for her represent only the chance to make more money through gambling. She puts her daughter to work calculating odds to increase her success at the greyhounds. It does not help, which leads Violet to dismiss mathematics: "If you want to know what dog is going to win, you don't go to Einstein," (21) she says. In coming home to her mother Juanita is neither received nor sustained.

For Juanita, mathematics is an ascetic passion—cold, pure, self-sustaining, insulating, a denial of relationality. But for her daughter, Frances, Juanita *embodies* mathematics and mathematics is as beautiful as her mother's body—indeed it

represents a way back into this body. Where for Juanita mathematics replaces her mother's body and stands in for, or covers over loss and desire, for Frances it is more like the uncut umbilical cord, or the nourishing breast: the relation expressed by mathematical formula is not merely metaphorical. Like her mother, Frances is a mathematical genius. The unfulfilled aim of her life is to have her mother recognize this likeness. Mathematics is to be the mirror which reflects their kindred identities. But Juanita chooses her son, who resembles her in appearance, to be her follower, despite the fact that he has no interest in or flair for mathematics. Frances' brother is to be the next mathematician. Frances is to inherit nothing at all. Her desire is, in reality, a desire to have her desire met. Her tragedy is that her mother never turns towards her yearning, never echoes it, but leaves it stranded in an infinite abyss, with mathematics seeming to offer the only way of giving some definition or pattern to the contours of this hollowness, the only possible route back.

Frances is the narrator of the greater part of the novel, but her narration is invented by *her* daughter, Hypatia, who interrupts in her own voice occasionally in order to comment on this narrative, to inform us about future outcomes beyond the scope of the main narrative, and to incorporate her mostly complaining letters which were written to her mother during a significant period in which the latter's story is told. In other words, Frances' narrative is a daughter's imaginative attempt to tell her mother's story, a story which, for the main part, situates this daughter largely outside of the mother's desire. Perhaps there is also a parallel between Hypatia's adoption of her mother's voice and Frances' wish to become her mother. But the parallel breaks down at those points where Hypatia's interruptions remind us of her separate existence. Her complaints which express, in their turn, her desire to be the object of her mother's desire, are separated out from the main narrative, still attached to it through interspersion, but recognizably different. There is a generosity in this gesture, as it frees the mother's subjectivity from her own, allowing the story to exist in terms which are not dependent upon the daughter's need, but without annihilating this need, giving it its place in a dialogue between the two narrators.

It is Hypatia who breaks the pattern which has characterised relations between mothers and daughters in the generations preceding her. She recognises that mathematics in her family has represented a one way flow of desire from daughters towards (or at least in relation to) mothers, a desire which, like Zeno's non-progressing line, cannot move in the direction of the future. Hypatia has no time for mathematics, a passion which for her represents separation. In her complaining

refrain that she was not loved Hypatia sees that the daughter's desire *in* the mother excludes the daughter *from* her mother's desire. It is the birth of her own daughter which catalyses this realisation. The greatest passion and anguish which mathematics expresses in this novel is the passion of the child, and this conflicts with, or even prevents, the mother's passion from emerging. As Frances says to Hypatia, "Look, I said to you. A baby's crying mouth is the shape of infinity." (Frances to Hypatia, 51)

Of the so-called "bottomless nature of an infant's mouth" Irigaray writes:

> But this buccal opening of the child and all desire become an abyss if the sojourn *in utero* is censored and if our separations from that first home and the first nurse remain uninterpreted, unthought in their losses and scars. ('Bodily Encounter', 40)

Irigaray relates infinite desire and the infinite repetition (and fear) of loss to the absence of cultural representations of the umbilical cord, its mediation between child and mother and its inevitable cutting. Either the cut is endlessly replayed, as if it had not already happened, or it is denied, forgotten. In either case the result, at a cultural level, is an imaginary sacrifice of the mother. For women this presents a paradox, one which Hypatia confronts: a woman always starts out as a daughter. But, starting from a point of exile she can never reach the place of the mother. The mother's is an identity always ahead of her, as well as behind her, the source and goal of her journey. Does this mean that the mother is an impossibility, an ideal, because in becoming mothers we remain daughters, even as we give birth to daughters? That the daughter is confined within an infinite, abyssal space between her origin and her destination, unconnected in both directions and lacking the means of expressing these ruptures? So preoccupied is she in her quest for identity in the mother, Frances forgets that she is herself a mother. Frances has won the right to attend an international mathematics conference in Greece. Her intention is to present her mother's theorems, which she has completed. It is to be her ultimate act in becoming her mother. Here, in "the country of the people who invented proof", as Frances puts it (152) she will prove that she is her brilliant mother's brilliant daughter. But something unexpected happens. The very public, disrespectful, anti-female realm of the conference is not the place to receive or ordain this gesture towards completion and unification. Her mother's body is not safe here—it would be torn to pieces, interfered with, ridiculed by egocentric academics who would

have no care for or understanding of the symmetry between her mother's breasts and the beauty of a developed theory. Frances absconds from the conference, drops out entirely, and in the following four missing days of her mathematical history Frances discovers, or invents, something really new. It involves numbers and it also involves reconfiguring the paradox of a mother's identity.

The lost continent; finding the mother's desire

Frances gets lost in Greece. Deliberately. She jumps into a taxi, hands the driver all the money she is carrying and signals for him to drive. He stops when the money runs out. She is by the sea, in a remote village many hours from Athens. She meets a man who can speak English. As in a fable he tells her of an old woman who had borne fourteen children. One after the other, as they arrived, each of these first thirteen children were sold by the woman's husband for goats. Each of these thirteen babies was a daughter. The fourteenth was allowed to stay. He was a son, the chosen one. Frances makes her way to the woman's house and is accommodated in a dark and ramshackle boatshed. It is here, within the shelter provided by the old woman, that Frances' life will turn around and find a new beginning.

Frances sees in this Greek mother, Joanna, an opportunity to play out a crucially unresolved scene with her own mother. The scene involves the onset of her first period when Frances asks Juanita, who is peeling potatoes in the kitchen, if they can do the task together next time. Juanita reluctantly agrees and holds herself rigid against her young daughter's excited embrace. However, the anticipated pleasure of taking her place beside her mother in a performance of domestic intimacy, is never fulfilled. Now, in her fortieth year, on the other side of the world, she insinuates herself into the kitchen of a stranger and stubbornly insists on being allowed to share in what for her has assumed the status of a ritual activity—peeling potatoes. For both women catharsis is soon to follow:

> Daughter, she said. The word was almost unsayable in her mouth. She pronounced it with such difficulty, the way I've always done. She went to the sink, washing her hands in the silver run of water. She dried them, and came towards me. She pointed her finger to her chest.
>
> Joanna, she said. Daughter.
>
> Joanna! I shouted.
>
> I told her my name. In all our time together we hadn't needed names.
>
> Daughter, she said again.
>
> I sighed.

Are you telling me you're someone's daughter?

Daughter, she said again.

I'll have to teach you another word, I said laughing.

She opened the box and took out a fold of tissue paper. Inside was a tiny dress of finely wrought, exquisite lace.

Daughter, she said.

She moved her hand as if she was still making the lace, as if she'd never stopped ...

... She took out another fold of tissue paper, another dress embroidered with a geometric design in blue and gold, another, another, each one painstakingly beautiful, each one a sad pool of colour in the room.

She had laid out the twelfth dress and was unfolding the thirteenth when I said:

You made thirteen different dresses.

The most painful things come slowly.

For thirteen daughters, I said.

You lost thirteen daughters, I said.

We held each other so closely. (331-2)

In Joanna's mourning Frances recognizes a direction of desire the reverse of that which has structured her fruitless efforts to usurp her mother's identity. Now, hailed as a living daughter amongst these material memories of daughters lost, she is liberated from her self-defeating quest and is able to step into her identity as a mother. She remembers and reads her daughter Hypatia's letters to her. She had taken these letters with her to the conference but avoided looking at them. In the wonder of her changed context she takes them up. What she reads, or perhaps it is the way she reads, allows her to echo Joanna's words, saying "I have a daughter" and to acknowledge, with a shock of recognition, her daughter's desire, so like her own.

My daughter, I repeated.

The words seemed big, almost unsayable.

I've never known her, there's never been any space for her, I said. And all the time she's been wanting a mother. It's me she wants. Can you believe that? ... It's as if my daughter's just been born...

As if a nurse in the hospital has just come in, and said ...

As if the nurse said ... This is the real beginning after all. (333)

What flows from this exchange between two mothers is a major shift in the direction of desire, a reversal takes place such that the mother leans out towards the place of her daughter, finding herself in the process. The whole scene, which has the tone of

a duet of epiphanies, unfolds around the structure of a call and an answering response: I have a daughter, you are my daughter/ I have a daughter, she is my daughter. It is a mutual interpellation into the subjectivity of maternal and matrilineal desire. There is a simultaneity for Frances about recognizing her own daughter and having her daughterly desire finally met (even though this response comes from a mother who is not her birth mother). Significantly, too, it is the absent place of the lost daughter which this ancient mother offers for Frances' identification. This is the unnamed, unmarked place which has been eluding Frances as it has eluded other daughters of patriarchy. And for Joanna, the woman whose thirteen daughters were sold for being daughters, Frances verifies her reality as the mother of those women, embodying and sharing her loss. This site of theft and infinite grief and longing is Freud's dark continent, buried under the dusty layers of the classical Greek and Judaeo-Christian intellectual and spiritual traditions.

Frances' expectation in attending the mathematics conference in Athens and publicly displaying the brilliance of her mother's original work, was to fulfil her belief that the only real adventure for her life would be to become her mother. "I'm here to give credit to my mother. To rescue her. To rescue me. To rescue us both." (158) This rescue occurs, but not through the public forum she expects. Instead, the means of rescue is an encounter with a woman who is neither her real mother, her compatriot, nor an acknowledged mathematician. And yet this Greek woman does not simply represent otherness, the foreign, through which self-definition can be achieved. She is a Demeter figure, grieving for her daughter Persphone, stolen into the underworld, an archetype of the repressed mother and the severed matrilineal inheritance. Although she is a contemporary figure, she is redolent of myth. Frances has stumbled into the home of the imaginary mother, the mother who has not spoken for so long, not because she is mute but because her history and culture have silenced her. She represents the path which was erased, the body which was sacrificed, the birthplace which was denied as ancient Greece reinvented itself as the paternal cradle of civilisation's sons. It is only after a re-union with her that Frances can return to the Conference, to the foundational site of knowledge it represents, and in a gesture of symbolic power, imitating the ancient Greek fathers of mathematics, draw the second of her new numbers in the sand of Athens. Yet it is not simply the pre-symbolic mother who gives her this power but a mother like herself, and a mathematician after all, whose geometric skills have been lovingly embroidered into the designs of her daughter's dresses. Those thirteen dresses teach

Frances to count anew.

Women are born of women (as are men) and their first home is the mother's body. But patrilineal social organisations, and the founding myths of patriarchy, recognise only the line of descent between fathers and sons. As Luce Irigaray writes:

> Our societies, made up half by men, half by women, stem from two genealogies and not one: mothers—daughters and fathers—sons (not to mention crossed genealogies: mothers—sons, fathers—daughters). Patriarchal power is organised by submitting one genealogy to the other. Thus, what is now termed the oedipal structure as access to the cultural order is already structured within a single, masculine line of filiation **which doesn't symbolise the woman's relation to her mother**. Mother-daughter relationships in patrilinear societies are subordinated to relations between men[3].

As an amateur mathematician, working in relative isolation outside the established—which is to say patriarchal—traditions and institutions, Frances is also free to be guided by the obscure mathematical language devised by her mother. Her lonely engagement with this eccentric mathematical logic brings her into an imaginative embrace with her mother's carnal body, gives her the tongue and the lust of her mother, inspires her geometrical method. And yet it is not so much an alternative language of the feminine that is here invented, as a sensual inhabiting of a formal language such that its physical, sexual form becomes potent and visible. The shape of the mother's breasts haunts the figure of infinity. Zeno's paradoxes are not solved but reconfigured such that the infinite swells towards rather than shrinks back from the object and the future, pushing uncontainedly beyond the edges of the imaginable, past the impossible point where Zeno's thought stubbornly resists. If I did try to put this in terms of a model to set beside Zeno's, instead of flying arrows and racing competitors it might contain potatoes and breasts, a daughter's letters, those things that matter.

3. Luce Irigaray, 'The Neglect of Female Genealogies', in *Je, Tu, Nous*, (trans. Alison Martin). (New York: Routledge, 1993), 16.

David Buchanan

The Sounds of Swimming

Seven hours ex-Auckland sees
our *Australiana* weatherboard
set in a Fremantle February.
Fresh water is confined to taps
and *aqua vital* and the colour green
to faded curtains, children's books
and your eyes that almost sigh
at our backyard's flat sun-bleached austerity.
Little fresh will survive such light.

A remote hot night
finds me stretched across
our Tasman-wide bed—
survival swimming.
All sound sinks just under
the surface of fitful sleep—
my legs scissor-kick
then roll to float on my back.

There must always be
this journey,
since each southland
is elsewhere to each hand—
like a music vanishing
a spirit of an echo
reaching across such distance
our touch never joins.

Jeff Guess

Girl Sewing
(after the painting by Margaret Olley)

She holds fragility between her fingers.
Out of an ancient legacy, works not
to put things back, but at repair.
The studied rhythm of her hands—late
from the morning headlines, rustles like so
many pages—deep in years. Amongst
fold and stitch, sets her lips in the slow
certitude of her industry: patience
and persistence. Not for a seamless mend.
Youth is not wasted on her years. Between
the lines of tack and time comprehends
the pattern on her knees, of what now seems
a delicate task in contradiction—
that tears apart the second it is sewn.

Russell Forster

Death of this day

The world is perfect, from the birdshit on
my bonnet to the moment before now
and I'll never complain in it again.

Every tangled memory, every steaming shame,
every grateful lover, loving their own name
stream like a kite tail from my rear-view mirror.

I bore along the highway, freer with every detonation,
expecting the ascent I'll never have:
you can't see the summit when you're on it.

There's the slug dint in that limit sign,
my turn-off must be here. The sun is consciousness
and because there are no clouds: cold night.

Against entropy
For Laura and Juno

I

One more outburst like that
and she'll have an orgasm.

Don't look at the curtains and count,
call up the big bang and see

the snake suck in its tail.
Scales balanced in silver bubbles.

She recommends bulimia, but
your savagery is already crystalline.

We've farmed her centuries now so
from my flattery some order flows.

While she swirls this design in a mirror,
I'm hot at it—perched at the drawing board.

II

Leaning in that shop front alcove
there are three of you.

A tarnished nickel window frame,
a flattened fag butt and a short black skid.

What has your lipstick to do
with the life of a cigarette?

Is it time's synthetic;
a gesture from the eternal forest?

And which one of you should I address?
The one swelling with hope,

the one dying for sublimation,
or the one that loves lists?

The universe has found a new centre
I said. A baby. Holy smoke.

III

Desiring hope has me winning out
and the day is priapic on a teaspoon.

Now there's three of us I may as well
Wear my jeans rolled up too.

Orions belt wrapped round my head
And no-one can blame me for this!?

I've still got bits of Carousel stuck
to my face and smiling makes it worse.

Still, you've known this all along.
Give the child your quiet mind, my arena.

IV

What is finished must have a sheen.
You speak to me from hollows

and I relate my passion for hinges.
When we meet again we'll be one

vase or two faces. Move me
and I'll give you flowers: grow on me

and I'll polish the windows. Is that our
baby or the wardrobe door squeaking?

V

What stylus plays these fingerprints
or am I imagining this melody?

Snow flakes, water drops, steam.
A stem of events on a pin head of time.

Still, it's mine as much as I signifies
the space containing this dream.

I will, if I'm able, not collapse tonight.
It's too magnificently serious.

Like our baby, reading my face. She sees
beyond me and hears my memory playing.

VI

Today, mending the house, I felt all my hopes
hanging on one nail: baby, I'm a romantic!

Then such a heavy buzz. A cicada
kazooing clumsily on frail wings.

And I didn't know what to think.
Forgiving green, it went off in search

of a cue. Behind was me, feeling that
if the said universe is to disappear

up its own arsehole, I want cicadas
crimping the scene.

the last day

(caloundra, january 1997)

The ocean here snatches whole bookcases, pots
and pans from deep within drawers and the occasional
unwatched child, swept away in the space

of a kiss. Old men passing by, looking for lost
gold in the shallows, are sometimes there to save them, grasping
a tiny arm or ankle, swinging the small body

back from sand and the delicious swirl of death, lips
cold and straight as the rulered horizon in draughtsman's
blue. The gulls cut there, like compass points drawing

fresh circles around days otherwise passing, wheeling
cries of wreaths for the tragedy of the last day, only
here and there landing to leave

cross-shaped prints on the wet shore—a portent for the lovers'
shared third eye for when followed they go
nowhere; stop dead at the wave's

most recent curling trace or discontinued at the very
centre of the beach from where the holiday itself lifted
off into the sky...

leaving the window

"he would be guilty of murder
if at the time the deceased left the window
he had an intent to kill her
or cause her grievous bodily hard
or had acted with reckless indifference to human life."

Only a quarter of the world's leaves
fit in this corner of the window
where I huddle eavesdropping on my neighbourhood
A man screaming words; a woman screaming;
living rooms

(is it with television or real life that the sound
is more likely to end somewhere?)
And how far does pain travel?
We measure ... and measure again
the value of bodies; injury and suffering;

distances between towns and the size of cities
(if not the enormity of their thoughts)
Leaving the window I turn my back
on the many small crying rains of history
Upon the recitation of stars

On all of those falling with none to see
and wish upon them
Tomorrow in the street I will step over their bodies
never letting slip my heavy basket
Never taking my eyes from the sixth floor windows

Taking my anger to market
Some days are simply spiritless
with no orders from the moon delivered by tides
and refusal by the sky to lie symbolic as a backdrop
to the anger of women

Memory Of A Milking

A school excursion, a farmyard journey
To cold hills, the farmer our host
Feeding us lunch in his dining hall,
Floorboards, glowing with toffee sheen,

Warped and snapped, foot firewood
Beneath children's black booted feet.
Peas steamed in the forty watt glow,
A wardrobe radio, with facia map, stood

Solid, warmly exuding valve voices sweet
Into my ear. I imagined that I was
A captain with a mutiny of men, lunching,
Temporarily spared drowning til perhaps tea.

I took part in nothing, occasionally paled
(Sheep knackering), never spoke, made no friends,
Yet understood the sound of the zinc stroke
Of hot milk injected into a pail.

Sleeping bags nestled in the hay, we slept.
The warm scent of animal piss,
Their hooves, the earth, fur and brindle hides
Sweetened the metallic air. Quietly I wept.

Peter Constantine

The Inheritance

Yoko dipped the thin paintbrush into the sake cup, whisked it briskly, and, scooping up a drop of crimson paint, carefully brushed it onto the lips of the dead woman. She rubbed the cheeks with a heavy pearl-white foundation and blotted them with pink powder. She used liquid mascara to darken and curl the eyelashes, and drew black streaks above and below them so that they extended beyond the slits of the eyes.

Her aunt had died early that morning. In her will she had left Yoko a gas station, a chain of massage parlors in Honolulu, and two hotels down by the harbor.

She had died in the guest room during the night. It was to have been a short visit of two or three days. Her mansion was being renovated after a fire started by a careless cigarette had swept through the living room.

Yoko knelt down by the futon on which her dead aunt lay. It was hot and humid, and Buddhist etiquette demanded that the family sit with the body that evening, with funeral and cremation set for the following day.

She grabbed her dead aunt by the shoulders and as a precaution shook her hard.

A Japanese doctor would have to be called, a Japanese funeral parlor chosen, a death certificate filled out. One priest would have to be reserved immediately for the evening at home, and another for the ceremony at the temple.

The blinds of the musty guest room were still drawn from the night. Her aunt's perfume, expensive and bold, hung in the air. By noon an elegant calligraphic death notice with cursive brush strokes had to be placed on the front door. The whole Japanese community would study it. A single tilted stroke, an erroneous dab, could ruin Yoko's social status. A torrent of telegrams had to be sent to relatives and friends, summoning them to the ceremony. Yoko bent forward and shook the matriarch again.

What kind of coffin should she be laid to rest in—fir, pine, cypress? And how expensive? A cheap coffin would be a scandal and an extravagant one frowned upon. Yoko bit her lip. Her morning-gown was suffocating. She wondered how much you were supposed to tip the priest after the funeral ceremony. She prodded her aunt's cold cheek.

By eleven-thirty Yoko had changed into a black kimono, given her maid a hundred-dollar bill to sit by the body, and driven over to the Cow Island Temple to buy some death water.

It was a large, modern temple complex. A bronze cow endowed with magical properties stood by the main hall. Its eyes, benevolent and bovine, gazed out at the expressway beyond the trees. After Aunt Mariko's hip operation in the late seventies the cow had helped heal her, and she had become friendly with the head priest, donating a fortune to touch up the temple's copper roof. But now the head priest was off on a business trip to Maui, and Yoko hastily bought a quart of death water from his assistant.

By noon she was back at the house. The coffin had arrived. She poured the death water into a large tupperware bowl and put it in the refrigerator to keep it fresh until the rest of her family could drive in from around town.

"It was so sudden!"

"Poor Aunt Mariko!"

"She was only eighty-six!"

"That's quite young these days!"

"Grandmother lived to be ninety-eight!"

"Well, she did have a full life."

"Yes, she lived life to the fullest."

"Kenji," Yoko whispered to her husband. "Bring the death water from the kitchen."

The relatives stared at her blankly.

"Let us do *chozu*," Yoko said.

She knelt down with her knees pressed tightly together in the tight folds of her formal kimono. Her husband decanted the death water into a big Meissen salad bowl he had brought in from the kitchen. Her sister followed him with a silver soup ladle.

He bowed stiffly, first to the dead woman and then to his relatives, and, filling the ladle to the brim, carefully poured a string of drops onto Yoko's hands, her lips, and then her hands again. She dried herself on some paper towels that lay folded

on a tray by the dead woman. The family followed her example.

Yoko wrapped a thin strip of white woollen cloth tightly onto the tip of a wooden chopstick, coiling the fabric over and under and tucking in the ends. She dipped the chopstick into the water in the bowl and brushed it over the dead woman's lips.

"Now we will dress her!" she said. The men bowed and left the room to join the children, who were watching The Magic Schoolbus on television.

The women quickly cut the seams of the matriarch's nightshirt and peeled it off. They sat her up, rolled her forward, back, and then forward again, dressing her in a white funeral kimono, the *kyokatabira*. They tied it according to ancient Japanese custom, right flap over left. Yoko remembered how as a girl she had once by mistake tied her kimono in burial fashion, and how her mother had run out into the yard, screaming: "She's tied it like a corpse! She's tied it like a corpse!"

The women rolled the dead aunt off the futon by pulling at the sheet on which she lay. They turned the coffin to face north.

"Where's the *momen*?" Yoko asked her younger sister, who began digging nervously through the big black bag she had brought with her. She fished out a piece of folded cotton cloth and brought it to her. Yoko took it and spread it out on the bottom of the coffin.

She turned back to her sister. "Give me that *Elle*."

Yoko opened the magazine, took out a paper triangle from between the pages, and pressed it onto the dead matriarch's forehead, tying it in place with a long ribbon.

The women quickly pulled white *tabi* socks and cotton-and-straw *zori* sandals over the matriarch's feet. Grabbing her arms and legs, they lifted her into the coffin. Her head lay too far back, and Yoko noticed that her eyes were not quite shut. The old woman, she suddenly realized, was smiling at her. It was a faint, sardonic smile.

Aunt Mariko had made a fortune during World War II, and Yoko remembered how as a teenager, in the late forties, she had seen her aunt for the first time: rich, successful, and in very high white heels, marching down the gangplank of an ocean liner that had come to Honolulu from Osaka.

The dead aunt's smile began to vanish and turn into a frown. The frown became stronger, and Yoko saw her sister turn ashen. The aunt scowled, then glowered. Her eyes twinkled with malice, and the two women stumbled towards each other. The old matriarch's head lolled further back, and her mouth fell open.

"*Iya da*!" the screamed. The door flew open and the men rushed in. On

television a shrieking pig in a white hoopskirt, a golden crown on its head, was wielding a large blowtorch, trying to break into a safe. Yoko bit her lip.

"I need more jewellery," she heard the pig shout. The children laughed.

The men couldn't close their aunt's mouth.

"Push up her chin!"

"Press down on her head!"

"Squeeze her cheeks!"

The mouth wouldn't stay shut. Yoko stared at her aunt. The dead woman looked perplexed. Her mouth opened again into an angry grimace.

"She hated me because I am refined," Yoko thought.

Her brother-in-law pushed the old woman's jaw up again.

The matriarch's face hardened into a wide yawn. She looked both cunning and surprised.

Yoko called the Cow Island Temple. The priest who answered explained that two pillows in the coffin would do the trick. The jaw muscles of cadavers over eighty, he said, were often slack, even in rigor mortis. "Place the pillows just above the loved one's nape, press your hand gently against the chin, hold it there for at least fifteen seconds, then let go." His voice sounded both soothing and scientific; he recited the formula like a funerary incantation.

"Thank, you, Your Eminence." She hung up.

Yoko got an old girl-scout compass from the garden shed. The matriarch's head was slightly off course, and she and her sister carefully pointed the coffin due north. The men brought in an ancient folding screen with a drab duck motif. Yoko had not looked at this heirloom from Japan for many years: its pond was muddy and smudged, its evergreen woods faded, and the classical characters running down the side of the screen, for the most part illegible, were splotched with age. "The dew-drops of life, something something, the waterless plant embraces something, the wind has stopped," she read, touched for a moment by the ancient words. The colours, the poetry, and the flaking brown varnish of the screen would act as a perfect backdrop for the coffin.

"We will do *sakasa byobu*," she ordered.

The men bowed to the dead matriarch and turned the screen upside down, the ducks and trees pointing down toward the tatami mat. They placed the screen to the left of the coffin, and wheeled in a cocktail trolley to its right. The bottles were quickly removed and a white sheet draped over it. On it Yoko set up a mini-altar with incense stands, an ornate Edo-period incense box, a small bell, and two large

candles that she jammed into matching Fabergé candlesticks. She placed the *ihai* tablet containing the dead woman's name and picture in the exact center of the trolley, and put a glass of water and a bowl of cold rice next to it. She pushed a pair of wooden chopsticks into its center and adjusted them so that they pointed straight up. Then she lit the candles and the incense, and put a ritualistic star anise plant behind the old woman's name tablet.

At dusk the first guests began to arrive. Yoko's husband stood waiting by the door dressed in a black morning coat. He greeted everyone, and with deep bows accepted the envelopes they offered. They were tied shut with rich dark silk ribbons, curled and looped into extravagant bows. Each envelope contained money that traditionally helped grieving families through their period of deep mourning.

Yoko had changed into a black kimono with a small white crest on each lapel. Because of the heat she could have worn a white silk *habutae* as an undershirt—the strips of light material at the neckline would have been a tasteful backdrop for the opulent black silk of the kimono. But after much deliberation she and her sister decided on black, slipping into sable-coloured *rinzu* blouses.

They knelt on pillows, next to all their cousins. Large wreaths of white flowers stood in rows on wooden stands on either side of the coffin. The placards on the stands bore the names of the aunt's friends and business associates: Akira Towels, Iwai Bath Oils, Waikoloa Soaps, Asano Massage Accessories and Toys, Kiahuna Waterbeds.

Yoko's head hung in deep bereavement as she acknowledged the guests' condolences with bows and gentle smiles. Her handbag lay within easy reach, and in it she carried a bottle of Valium for emergencies.

The first prominent personality to arrive was Mrs. Morishita from the consulate. She was escorted by a very young man whom Yoko imagined must be her son. Behind them, to Yoko's amazement, were Senator and Mrs. Yamanka, followed by the president of Haruyama Exports.

Other illustrious guests arrived: Judge Mori, and Nakayama Hiroshi, the anchorman from the Japanese cable channel, and even Mr. Ito, who had been Japan's ambassador to Korea but who had retired to a life of golf in Hilo. Yoko bowed deeper and deeper as she received their condolences. She looked over at her dead aunt, who was lying quietly among the flowers, her mouth and eyes now tightly shut. The candles and the thin sticks of incense burned on the cocktail trolley. With her head high on the pillows Aunt Mariko looked young and happy, and her white makeup and unyielding crimson lips made her look strangely

executive.

"She *was* well-connected," Yoko thought. Her aunt had roped in all these people with large donations. Yoko envisioned the fortune she was about to inherit. The hotels by the port were a gold mine, renting out rooms by the hour. The massage parlors were even more profitable.

Aunt Mariko's hands were clasped together, propped up with clumps of crinkled paper hidden beneath the leaves and blossoms. Her cold fingers clenched a gold dagger whose blade pointed down at her feet, ready to stab at the evil demons that snatch at cadavers. Alongside the dead woman's legs and arms lay the objects to which she had been most attached during her life: an old scroll, some books, and, to the guests' amazement, an original Picasso watercolor whose glass and metal frame had been removed: in the extreme heat of cremation they would melt, and contaminate the ashes.

Yoko felt a dim wave of unhappiness. "The Picasso in the coffin was a mistake," she thought. A large exhibit was opening next month at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. "*Maria La Vasca With Pineapple*, from the collection of Ms. Yoko I. Suzuki, Hawaii." Yoko noticed a group of men in dark tailored suits. They were standing in a taut row by the door. Despite the dim light they wore black glasses. Some of them had their ring fingers severed at the top joint. They were mobsters.

More of them arrived.

She wondered what her aunt's connection to these men had been. Had she paid them for protection? Or what was almost more frightening—had they paid her? She looked through the drifts of incense at Aunt Mariko, who lay cold and beautiful among the flowers.

"Could she have been a mob boss, or even a Godfatheress?" Yoko felt a wave of laughter well up inside her, and she quickly picked up her handbag. Pretending to look for a handkerchief, she opened the Valium bottle, but only one pill rolled out. She blinked, trying to recall how many pills she had slipped into the hot water of her aunt's evening tea.

Carolyn Polizzotto

Allan Daniels and the Ghost House*

Well, it was a job. The company had *always* been here. I never thought it'd close, this place!

I came for three weeks, to be a relief forklift driver. Twenty-one and a half, I'd have been. I wasn't worried about work! My Dad used to work here too, and he told me they needed someone for three weeks: 'Why don't you get down there?' Then they needed someone in packing. (They were sixty-pound packs.) Then there was a job came up on shift. I started off in the Char End. It was the shit job, the mucky job, cleaning up and that.

Mum didn't like it! Two people in the house on shifts. One of us would be at work and the other one would be sleeping.

The Char End, they said it was going to be closed five years ago, but it's still damned well going. It will be one of the last departments to close, I reckon. When I first started in the Char End, it was a bit of hard yakka. We had three fires going, and six cisterns, with thirty-five tons of char. You had to drag one out a day—it might even be two—they were oil fires then, and it was filthy stuff. People would have their cars in the car park, and if the mixture wasn't right, there would be these bloody big blobs of oil would come down and land on the cars.

You had to make up the lime for the Melt House as well. There was no safety thing then, we used to breathe in lime all the time. Oh, it was all hard yakka, then!

* Allan Daniels was interviewed by Carolyn Polizzotto on his last day at the CSR sugar refinery at Mosman Park, which closed down on 5 September 1997.

We lived here thirty-five, thirty-eight years. Dad had a War Service house in Mossie Park. He got that about 1951. He used to ride his pushbike to work. There was only a gravel track and the railway. When people started complaining about the trucks at night, we thought that was a bit much. After all, it was the company's road: they built it!

My Dad was here for forty-two years. They were hundred-and-forty-pound bags in those days. All man-handled. (Now they're grizzling at fifty-pound bags!) They came in by train to the store. The coal—the boilers were fed with coal—the coal had to be fed. My Dad worked twelve-, sixteen-hour shifts. Mum'd say, 'Do you want to take his lunch down?' and I'd jump at it. Mum'd wrap Dad's lunch up in a teatowel to keep it warm and I'd ride it down on my bike, see the old blokes.

They'd say, 'Ah, she'll be right!' There was an old tunnel they used. It was the mystique of the place: all these little tunnels everywhere.

Once the pan dropped and the boiling sugar splashed on Dad. It was at 180°, eight or ten ton of it. There were no cold water safety showers in those days. He got third degree burns. We had to hand wash him and feed him at home. He had huge blisters like melons under his arms, filled with water. He was on morphine for six to eight weeks. We thought we'd lost Dad. Safety was out the window in those days, it was just get the production through.

It was where my Dad worked. I used to ride my bike over: it was good! The coal: you'd shovel it in, put it up in an elevator, into hoppers, tip it in. There were 180-odd people working here then.

People would be lining up here for casual work when the ships came in. There were people lining up here, people who could take your place. They'd hang their bikes up on hooks in the bike sheds and walk in. You did what you were told, because if you didn't, the boss'd say, 'There's plenty waiting outside to take your place!' And there were.

There was the mystique in coming over and seeing the old blokes. They all had time for you. They were built like brick dunnies, or they were little nuggety blokes, and they *worked*. There was no standing around like nowadays. There were no crib rooms then.

I would have become a supervisor, but there was no position available. I used to relieve people —three weeks here, six weeks there—but the times were too far apart, I'd have to learn everything over again, so finally I said I wouldn't keep doing it. You had to run the whole refinery. And I *could* run it. I only did second year high school, and I only got halfway through *that*, and here's me running a multi-million-dollar refinery! 'Start at the bottom', Dad said.

Finding another job's going to be hard. It's the thought of starting again. I've come in to help with the shutdown. I would have missed it afterwards, I think, if I hadn't been here for the last week. My résumé: my daughter's helping me with that.

It's not the money. It's just that I can't see the idea of not being able to get up and go to work. I was planning to work till I was fifty-five, and then take early retirement. Now look what's happened! I've only ever taken two weeks' holiday, because otherwise I get bored. One week to go away with the family and then one week fixing up the house. That used to do me!

I used to like the shift work. It'd give me the free time I wanted. It was good: the day shift from seven to three, then three to eleven, then eleven to seven am. I only need five hours' sleep a day; five hours was all I needed. I used to do a few people's lawns, make a bit of extra money that way. Go down the beach for a swim. I liked it being different, not being a nine-to-five job. I loved the versatility on the different shifts. In them days it was quite common to do sixteen-, eighteen-hour shifts. Up to five years ago, sixteen-hour shifts.

If you wanted to work, the work was there. You'd spend all the weekend recovering. I'd say it was a good job, in the sense the money was there, though it's hard on your home life. That's what I missed with my Dad, I didn't see him. My Dad sure put in some hours. I was determined I wouldn't do that with my kids. In some ways it was good: I could take them to school, to pre-school, help out there. The teachers said, 'There's not too many Dads who do that!' I wanted to spend quality time with them.

When my Dad retired, they made him a little set of stairs, because he hated the stairs in this place. I always thought I'd retire, but we got told to go.

I was one of the last ones to get the gold watch for twenty years. I don't wear a watch. See? I never wear a watch. So I got one for my wife instead. The company gave me an open cheque and off I went and bought one. It was a good watch, too: about four hundred dollars, it cost! Up in the dining room here, there was a ceremony, I had to say a few words. I said I wanted to thank my wife because, especially in the early years of our marriage, she found it very hard, the shift work. She had no experience of it, you see. Her Dad was a carpenter, so he was home at night.

I did the supervision training. We learned about industrial accidents and about team leadership. For some of us, it was going straight over our heads! We got a form at the end, where we had to say how we had found the course, and I said that. I said, 'But I can run the refinery, all right!' Still, it taught you a few things, it helped you out now and then.

The company paid for the training. And we did the quality training. Going for another job, that might help.

Five or ten years ago, we had to put it down on paper, every step in the process we did. To put it down on paper: that was hard! The paperwork was unreal! Some of the things you only learned by experience, by *colour*. It's something you can't teach people. It just comes to you by experience. But it had some good points. If you had to do a job after not doing it for three years, if you had to go through the *process*, it was good to have it written down.

One time I stuffed up in the refinery. (I was a bit outspoken then.) I was waiting for a truck to come. The lab would give us the liquid sugar orders for the day, but they wouldn't give us enough time. So I told them to shove it. (You're working in forty-, fifty-degree heat.) The chemist told me, 'You go back to the beginning, or you're out of here.' I bit my tongue and went back to the Char End. It was that or out the gate.

The Melt House. Dad used to say, 'If you get it right there, it'll be right all through.' It's the first stage of the process, where the sugar comes through the raw store. You wash it, put it through a gas and lime mixture. You have to get it just right. The precipitant becomes like a mud slurry.

If you got it all right, that was all right; if not, you could stuff the whole place up in twelve hours, because that was the start of the processing. And if you were working there, you had the power. 'I'll fix you, you bugger!' You could give someone further along a hell of a time, they'd be shovelling mud their whole shift.

I always thought I'd see it out, but it's not to be. With a food product, I thought I'd be set for life.

They used to call it 'the ghost house', people who'd be out on the river. Because we had our own steam-driven generator, running off the boilers. So the lights'd be out everywhere when there was a blackout, all across the river, but all our lights'd be on. So it was called the ghost house. You could never see anyone from the river. It looked as if no one was here.

When I first started, there was my Dad and three of his brothers. One was a fitter and two worked on the process side of it. So I had my uncle was head rigger, and a cousin on the fugals, one in the retail packing, and then there was me. I think there was four or five. They used to say, 'Oh, one of the Daniels!' And my other uncle was in the Char End. One in the fitters, two cousins ... We used to organise family dinners when we were here at work. I'm the last one here now.

Blokes used to go down and fish—catch crabs—down at the pumping station. Then there were the tanks they used to swim in. They're twelve foot high and thirty feet across: you could really have a swim in them! But it was banned because they stirred up the algae at the bottom, and it could get into the screens. It would block the screens, and not enough water would go into the boilers, and they could have overheated and cracked all the piping. Big bucks!

It's been good! Not too many of them know all the processes like I do. It's a bit of a sad thing. That's when I suppose it'll hit me, next week. After twenty-seven years of work.

There's plenty of casual, part-time work around. I don't want to do full-time any more. Shift work mucks your life around too much. Often there'd be no time off for Christmas. We closed on Christmas Day and Boxing Day, but to shut down for Christmas, sometimes it'd be three or four am before you did. Summer is the busy time.

And it was always us and them, the shift workers versus the day. They'd have a booze-up and a spit roast all right, but they'd have it in the day. Well, we thought that was wrong. Then they changed it—made it at a time we could go—but two shifts would have had to come back from home: ten blokes. It was always the inconvenience for the shift workers.

We were a different breed of people altogether. We felt we were doing something unique. Just a certain breed of person could do it. If you could do it, you loved it. (It's changed in the last ten years. RDO's, this girlie sort of stuff. Ten-hour breaks, penalty rates, all this wussie stuff.) Shift workers, we thought we were different. We'd get together and have a barbecue at each other's places, all your own shift, five blokes. Even my old supervisor, we call him, he comes. Every quarter, about that, we get together.

Safety aspects is the biggest contrast; and the automation of it all. They had eight or nine blokes on each shift. Now there's only four, and the production's *trebled*. Down-time's less.

After seeing my Dad, with the old belt drive not protected, the belts all just flapping around. An accident never really happened, that I know of, but it could have! They were twenty-five feet long and more than a foot wide. But I used to think it was fascinating, I used to love it. Watching the train come in, you'd hear it from home, ride your bike up, racing the train. 'I'm going up to watch the trains.'

The trains brought raw sugar and coal. I'd watch. Sometimes the watchman used to let me in. He shouldn't have, but he knew me, and he did. I'd watch them shunt the carriages. It was all hundred-and-forty-pound bags, stacked as high as the ceiling. I used to go and climb up the bags and swing on the sling like Tarzan. I wasn't supposed to.

Like everyone says, 'Those were the good old days, then.' The tunnel was dark in the night. Lights on, little lights, strung all the way along. Every noise used to amplify itself.

I've seen some changes! We used to come in on Australia Day and sit up on top of the Pan Floor and watch the fireworks from there. You can see right up to Perth.

In the winters we'd usually shut down Friday morning; we did a five-day week. We had to sew cloths for the frames, we'd do the maintenance ourselves. 'Sewing circles', we called ourselves. We used to have to paint the floors. You'd get a bloke's hat, or his boots, you'd put them in the middle of the room, and paint around them. He'd have to wait till it dried to go home!

When the contract painters came in to paint the exterior, we'd put sugar in the paint. So it'd peel off! And when they were laying concrete, we'd put sugar in the concrete. It wouldn't set! We had two-gallon buckets of water, we'd pour them over people. To get rid of some of the boredom, the tension.

We used to always say, 'She'll be right, it'll never happen! Then if something did go wrong, we'd say, 'Too late! It's happened!'

drawings "on gold silk, [...] with lovely linear shapes and cupolas shaped like breasts, built on a human scale, their delicate detail reflected in lakes and pools" (114).

Halligan's stories are crafted microcosms imbued with a gossamer light; they are like splinters which captivate the reader for their alluring spark and provide him/her with a hint of immortality, that, as the writer advocates, can be preserved by means of both photography and storytelling. "We are avid consumers of our own history, we long to know where we have come from and what we have been, but history won't keep us, and besides we need to make some of our own to pass on to our descendants" (86), suggests Halligan. Therein lies the gift of the writer, as well as that of the photographer, like the one who in the 1890s took a picture of men unloading the Queen Victoria's marble statuary whose eyes still "gaze upon us" (121).

After finishing *Out of the Picture*, I look once again at its seductive cover which reproduces "Archibald Fountain, Hyde Park, Sydney", a gelatin silver photograph by Harold Cazneaux which dates back to the early 1930s. Theseus is just about to slay the Minotaur, a deed carved in stone which before the turtle's eyes—and ours—will remain eternally deferred. Daedalus's maze is all around us and Ariadne must be somewhere in the urban labyrinth waiting for her hero to accomplish his task, and still confiding in an elopement with happy ending. And here we are with our own thread that we should start unwinding, as Halligan's "keatsian turtle" (49) has been doing already, paraphrasing and parodying the Greek tale which "would have us believe" (50), spinning different versions of a solemn act engraved on stone and solidly constructed while gushing water.

Mark Raphael Baker's biography, *The Fiftieth Gate*, adds one more precious tessera to the mosaic of Holocaust literature. A second-generation survivor, Baker unearths memories and accounts which for long laid hidden in the ground of his parents' birthplaces, now radically changed or even erased from the atlas by the atrocities of history; he gradually brings to surface untold stories of loss, internment and war which silently haunted the lives of his parents, who had the luck or the courage—in Baker's father and mother's versions respectively—to live through the horror of the genocide perpetrated at the hands of the Nazis. As an historian, Baker accomplishes a meticulous and thorough research of

the facts of the Holocaust: he provides sources, dates, statistics, names of places and people—those of both victims and persecutors—which produce graphic evidence of the reality of Hitler's *Endlösung* against any plausibility of revisionism. Finally, as the biographer of his own parents, Baker recuperates their memories and concomitantly contributes historical material to foster their curiosity and augment their knowledge about their families and countries of origin, in his attempt to create a shared history, one which he endeavours to impart to his own children as both an inheritance to cherish and a legacy to pass on to future generations. By writing this book, Baker keeps alive the notion enhanced by his cultural and religious community for which memory is something grievous, yet necessary, which cannot be escaped. As he reminds us: "Jews remember with stones. Rocks and pebbles placed on the gravestone; impenetrable, mysterious, eternal. / And Jews remember with words; with the Word which is studied by the living, in the name of the dead, daily, in a yearly cycle, which once ended begins again" (114).

Baker's approaches and pre-occupations are reflected by a multi-layered narrative in which records and historical documents are subtly interlaced with his parents' private memories, tales from Jewish sages, poems, memoirs of other survivors and Baker's own recollections of his childhood, along with his impressions and fictional accounts in the present tense through which he suggestively recreates the experience and conveys the pain and humiliation his paternal grandparents went through when they were deported to the concentration camps of Buchenwald and Treblinka. The effect is that of a vibrant texture which resonates with distinct voices; in it Baker conflates the precision and sharpness of historical narrative with the poignant style of a writer who depicts memorable portrayals and renders with vivid tones the complexity of memories, relationships and inner conflicts.

As Baker follows his various itineraries throughout archives and libraries, memories of the Holocaust are disseminated on grounds as diverse as those of Melbourne, Surfers Paradise, Jerusalem and Wierzbnik. These are places where Baker never hesitates to pick up and ponder on current facts such as neo-Nazis rallies, Rabin's assassination and the abominations of Bosnian civil war, instances which dismally show how history keeps ignoring the deterrent implied in previous crimes against

humanity. Hence Baker's preoccupation to rigorously reconstruct and record the exactitude of his parents' memories, and to visit those places which may clear away the blur with which time has obfuscated Yossl and Genia's reminiscences of the Shoah. Notwithstanding the persistent reluctance of his parents to be interviewed and to go back to Poland and Ukraine, Baker perseveres in his attempt to provide the missing bits in order to restore their fragmentary recollections, and confronts his parents' anger and frustration when memories exacerbate their inner lacerations. His relationship with his mother emerges as being more conflictual than that with his father: Genia is the only survivor of Bolszowce, she is "its gravedigger" (140), the one who cannot relate to anyone else's memories, and who shares Primo Levi's constant obsession with telling stories which will not be believed. Her son, as historian, has this awareness which transpires in her conversations with him. As Baker questions in a stirring passage: "Does history remember more than memory? Why am I calling her? Won't she recognise the shameful truth, that I doubted her, that I never believed her, that I only recognise suffering in numbers and lists and not in the laments and pleas of a human being, of a mother, screaming for acknowledgment?" (139). Yet, in spite of this intermittent mutual scepticism, Baker maintains his task of "searching for *her* history to vindicate *her* stories" (177).

Baker engages in a journey which is both his own and his parents'; with them he goes through gates which are both real and imaginary and which most of the time stand for excruciating thresholds and pathways. However, this is the unavoidable passage which eventually leads to the fiftieth gate which, as mentioned in the *Zohar* —a text of Jewish mysticism that Baker quotes among his sources— epitomises the highest knowledge of God. This is also Baker's ultimate implicit invitation to undertake this journey: "...it always begins in blackness, until the first light illuminates a hidden fragment of memory..." (316), he writes in his laconic closing chapter.

For readers who are not familiar with the literature of the Holocaust, *The Fiftieth Gate* provides both a detailed historical frame and a lucid account of the experience in Nazi concentration camps. For those who already have some knowledge of facts and memories of the Shoah, Baker's original orchestration of different perspectives and narrative modes offers an outstanding dramatic

portrayal of his parents and conveys the uniqueness of each survivor's life and recollections which history must acknowledge.

Roberta Buffi

Brigid Lowry, *Guitar Highway Rose,* Allen & Unwin, 1997, 205 pages, $14.95.

Brigid Lowry's second book for the young adult market comes with a cover picture of an angelic girl in Doc Martens hitch-hiking on a back-lit desert highway. It could be a still from one of the crop of current Australian road-movies. This is a book that stops in front of you, swings open its cover, and says: wanna lift?

Inside is the story of Rosie Moon: how she admires Asher, a worldly new arrival at school, fresh from Byron Bay; how Rosie and Asher get over their shyness with each other and take off on an illicit adventure; how they come to grief; how they return to families that have been changed by their absence.

We learn from a school assignment that Rosie is fifteen years old:

> *My star sign is Aries on the cusp with Pisces, which is why I am a creative warrior woman from Mars who loves to swim. I live in a house in Swanbourne with my parents, Robert and Lily, my brother Harry, and a cat named Beethoven. My best friend is Pippa and she has blue hair. She comes from New Zealand and is part Maori. Her parents, Vera and Joseph, are totally cool. She is allowed a nose ring, well, it's a little red glass stud actually.*

The style is hip without being patronising. Lists and other shorthand devices keep the pace moving and a viewpoint which glides like a steadi-cam from scene to scene ensures that we won't end up stranded in some teenager's bedroom late at night with nowhere else to go.

While both characters are presented in stream of consciousness sound-bites, Asher is denied the benefit of punctuation and upper case:

> what oh god mum in her fuzzy dressing gown with her hair all sticking up what get up love it's seven o'clock that worried voice oh shit first day of new school have to be there at eight thirty wish i could just sleep all day roll over in the warmth and drift off again i was dreaming something i was climbing rocks climbing way up high and a hawk on my shoulder yeah yeah mum.

Lowry chops up the text in a way that

allows her full authorial omnipotence without losing the intimacy which powers her characterisations. In particular, I liked the loving portrait of Asher, inspired (according to the dedication) by the author's son Sam. In the space of a page are no less than five sections:

> **What Asher wore to school/ Wednesday; What the home-room teacher said**; (the reader is invited to 'write this bit yourself. Invoke your imagination. Use the words disappointed, scruffy and disgraceful'). **What the home-room teacher did; What Asher felt**; ('supreme satisfaction'); **Rosie and Asher/Wednesday.**

These devices work well, in that they bestow on the book an immediacy and paciness that uses the print medium to full advantage. The reader is playfully invited to participate, to come along for the ride and Lowry facilitates this by having marked out the journey in advance. Some sections are signposted with visual icons such as envelopes, a shoe, stars, a camera, a telephone, a light bulb. Some are all the more painful for their extreme brevity: '**What Asher wishes he could forget** (the day his parents finally called it quits)'.

One surprise inclusion is four excerpts from *Living with teenagers*, a publication produced by Family and Children's Services in Perth. The extracts work at an ironic level in view of the struggles of the fictional parents, but also provide a wise voice and some anchor points for the speeding, hot-headed text.

Young adult books by John Marsden and others have been criticised recently for their emphasis on violence and misery. Lowry's book is generally optimistic and believes in romantic love. Without revealing the ending, it could be said that the resolution of the story is at best statistically unlikely, at worst schmaltzy.

The emphasis on style, particular brand-names and pop icons like Jim Morrison, all fit my fantasy about where young people are at in middle-class, consumerist Australia. Some younger readers may feel left out of Lowry's world, the way they are left out of most things, yet I suspect that most would be persuaded by the rebellious tone of the protagonists and the fact that the authority figures invariably come off second best.

Guitar Highway Rose manages to be unsentimental, although it's hard to miss the whiff of patchouli from time to time and a trace of yearning for another way of life. Here's a portrait of the earth mother who helps Rosie and Asher live out their all-to-brief escape

by taking them in to the bosom of her mobile family:

> Once upon a time her name was Patricia Louise Stanford, but not any more. Now her name is Star. Her name is Star and her hair is the colour of moon-beams rippled with streaks of day-glo blue, and on her bare brown ankles she wears a chain of tiny silver bells that make music when she walks. She isn't walking now though. She is sitting in the front seat of a blue Volkswagen kombi, feeling very spaced out and ragged.

I once read a book called *The Serial*, in preparation for a trip to San Francisco. It was a soapie send-up of the mores and customs of 1970's Marin County and it was thick with brand-names and lifestyle references. It was funny and brittle.

Brigid Lowry's book has the lists, the lifestyle references and the teen-magazine format, yet it is far from brittle. Beneath the flashy surface you'll find a romantic romp with lashings of folk wisdom, as bold as Brautigan and almost as cool as the Doors. Highly recommended for middle-aged teenagers as well as young people.

Bruce Russell

Delia Falconer, *The Service of Clouds.* Sydney: Picador, 1997, $16.95, 316pp.

A woman born with historical eyes. A man who gives himself up to the madness of photography. Clouds that are inhaled, threatening lungs with collapse and filling hearts with movement and colour to the point that they too must burst, almost. Clouds that are arrested in the aperture of Harry Kitching's Ensine Carbine camera. Clouds that are caught in the throat, caught on the glass plates of photographic negatives, and made in a make-shift dark room by this woman and this man whose fingers graze, but never entwine.

These are the kinds of clouds that are formed from the stories, desires and losses which have evaporated from dreams, skin and the Blue Mountain landscape and drift softly, beautifully, through Falconer's narrative, her first novel. It is a story told by Eureka Jones, one which recollects, forgets, fabricates. Set in the then village of Katoomba, the narrative traces the years between 1907 and 1926, traces the bodies which moved through this time that met, loved and left, but which are imprinted in memory and image, and the space outside these frames.

allows her full authorial omnipotence without losing the intimacy which powers her characterisations. In particular, I liked the loving portrait of Asher, inspired (according to the dedication) by the author's son Sam. In the space of a page are no less than five sections:

> **What Asher wore to school/ Wednesday; What the home-room teacher said**; (the reader is invited to 'write this bit yourself. Invoke your imagination. Use the words disappointed, scruffy and disgraceful'). **What the home-room teacher did; What Asher felt**; ('supreme satisfaction'); **Rosie and Asher/Wednesday.**

These devices work well, in that they bestow on the book an immediacy and paciness that uses the print medium to full advantage. The reader is playfully invited to participate, to come along for the ride and Lowry facilitates this by having marked out the journey in advance. Some sections are signposted with visual icons such as envelopes, a shoe, stars, a camera, a telephone, a light bulb. Some are all the more painful for their extreme brevity: '**What Asher wishes he could forget** (the day his parents finally called it quits)'.

One surprise inclusion is four excerpts from *Living with teenagers*, a publication produced by Family and Children's Services in Perth. The extracts work at an ironic level in view of the struggles of the fictional parents, but also provide a wise voice and some anchor points for the speeding, hot-headed text.

Young adult books by John Marsden and others have been criticised recently for their emphasis on violence and misery. Lowry's book is generally optimistic and believes in romantic love. Without revealing the ending, it could be said that the resolution of the story is at best statistically unlikely, at worst schmaltzy.

The emphasis on style, particular brand-names and pop icons like Jim Morrison, all fit my fantasy about where young people are at in middle-class, consumerist Australia. Some younger readers may feel left out of Lowry's world, the way they are left out of most things, yet I suspect that most would be persuaded by the rebellious tone of the protagonists and the fact that the authority figures invariably come off second best.

Guitar Highway Rose manages to be unsentimental, although it's hard to miss the whiff of patchouli from time to time and a trace of yearning for another way of life. Here's a portrait of the earth mother who helps Rosie and Asher live out their all-to-brief escape

by taking them in to the bosom of her mobile family:

> Once upon a time her name was Patricia Louise Stanford, but not any more. Now her name is Star. Her name is Star and her hair is the colour of moon-beams rippled with streaks of day-glo blue, and on her bare brown ankles she wears a chain of tiny silver bells that make music when she walks. She isn't walking now though. She is sitting in the front seat of a blue Volkswagen kombi, feeling very spaced out and ragged.

I once read a book called *The Serial*, in preparation for a trip to San Francisco. It was a soapie send-up of the mores and customs of 1970's Marin County and it was thick with brand-names and lifestyle references. It was funny and brittle.

Brigid Lowry's book has the lists, the lifestyle references and the teen-magazine format, yet it is far from brittle. Beneath the flashy surface you'll find a romantic romp with lashings of folk wisdom, as bold as Brautigan and almost as cool as the Doors. Highly recommended for middle-aged teenagers as well as young people.

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Harry Kitchings is a photographer inflicted with an illness for shaping images that his uncle and grandfather suffered also; he swoops through the sky on flying-foxes and hangs suspended in woven baskets from the sides of the mountains as he searches for a shade of God in the clouds. Eureka Jones is a young woman, the assistant to a pharmacist who is fascinated by the physical damage that can be done to a body and concocts pills and elixirs for corporeal and psychic ailments: "*In pharmaceutical terms they were all quite ordinary. Opium sometimes, a syrup, an alcohol content of around thirty percent. But that was not the point, you see. It was the names which acted like digitalis on the heart.*" These potions cannot cure his own losses however, nor the tubercular lesions on the lungs of consumptive patients who are prescribed open air treatments which see clouds and mist replace words in the mouth.

Eureka Jones suffers and recovers, not from consumption, but from a love for Harry Kitchings which consumes. This love is silver, precious; it is seen in the beautiful photographic viewbooks made by Harry, yet it is formed also in gelatine on negative plates which may be peeled off with a brave fingernail, Eureka later realises. This love is filtered through the lens; it holds multiple perspectives, histories and sadnesses, and its image is not always recognised or known. It is an act of faith that parallels Harry's search for the cloudy semblance of God.

Harry is not alone in conceiving of the Blue Mountains as salvational. Falconer's text is populated by characters whose skins, desires and gardens are soaked by the air and the clouds: for the women of the Fresh Air League, the good, clean air is considered to be the restorative antidote for the sickly and slovenly children of the polluted city they seeks to sponsor, if only those few who are literate enough to write letters in appeal for assistance. However, it also this air which expels the strangely comforting spirits of babies from the house of Eureka's aunts, leaving the youngest aunt to will her sister to breathe in the dark draft their siblings' ghosts leave behind.

Indeed, the characters in this novel are haunted, shadowed by impulses of death and desire which coalesce in the cascading waterfalls of a consumptive's chest, an image that arrests both beauty and despair simultaneously, a striking and successful quality of ambivalence which infuses Falconer's text. The establishment of a sanatorium some train stops from Katoomba to care for

these invalids has Eureka leave Mr. Medlicott's pharmacy to become a nurse. It is here, where the patients are gripped, at times, by an outbreak of '*spes phthsica*' in which the longing for travel, love and living overwhelms the possibility of death, that she places an ear to the breast plate of a man who reads the dreams of other people in his own night sleep and hitches her skirt to the waist: "*I think, at last, that we may have performed that Great Act, as men define it. Sometimes it is difficult to remember.*"

The aftermaths of these plague have their devastations and disappointments. They require recovery and reconstruction, and this process for Eureka coincides with the unexpected return of Harry Kitchings to Katoomba following his disappearance some years previously. Yet what Harry sees only confirms Eureka's suspicions; the colours of the mountains are hushed, the mauve tinted clouds have paled, and the streams have disappeared. Harry blames the constant click and flash of Kodak cameras, yet ironically, it is his generosity that has led, at least in part, to this trade in tourism; the photographs and viewbooks which he made and gave away, rather than sold for profit, have generated this interest, and have resulted in the commodification of both his work and much of the district by the local government and postcard vendors alike.

The novel ends with a journey undertaken by Eureka, a move away from the mountains. However, this ending is not conclusive. Like the photographic collages Eureka experiments with while on ship, and the movement of the narrative which washes clouds and stories over the reader left breathless by the prose, it is 'fragmented and suggestive', poised and expectant, in graceful service of both the image and the word.

Tanya Dalzeill

Fay Zwicky, *The Gatekeeper's Wife*, Brandi & Schlesinger, 1997, 71 p.

Fay Zwicky's trajectory as a poet is both clear and subtle: she adopted various personae and other distancing mechanisms in her early poems then grew into an increasingly personal voice. Because personal poetry, as practised by most English-language poets today, gravitates toward the domestically dreary, Zwicky has risked becoming yet another of many poets who showcase the minutiae of their lives in flaccid lines and slack language. Fortunately, Zwicky never has abandoned her dedication to art (literature, music, painting), wit, and

the poet's relationship to the world. Her allusions in her poems always have evinced an artistic and philosophical knowledge and historical awareness exceptional in an international cultural climate that trumpets the values of ignorance. Although erudite, Zwicky is no stuffy academic; she is willing to grapple with difficult yet essential issues of art and morality and to be direct while doing so. Neither a solipsist nor an aesthete, Zwicky is often iconoclastic and fond of plain speech; formal sleight-of-hand or linguistic pyrotechnics have never been part of her poetic arsenal.

Zwicky has continued this direct approach in her fourth individual collection of poetry, *The Gatekeeper's Wife*, which embodies her belief that poetry should "incorporate a moral act of reticence, of not invading people, of not clamouring for attention" (*Meanjin* interview). Indeed, the subdued tone of some of these poems almost seems an effort to avoid attention. Because the act of reticence is, for Zwicky, a moral one, she is pursuing a difficult path, one constructed simultaneously from understatement and authority, modesty and attempts at real change. Her poems give silence its due—not silence as a refusal to speak, but silence as a presence in poems in the process of speaking. These reflective silences recall those in Wallace Stevens's poetry; and like Stevens's 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', she is dissatisfied with "things as they are" and seeks through poetry a means of communicating an alternative. This ambition marks Zwicky as an iconoclastic moralist, and the poems in *The Gatekeeper's Wife* further develop a moralism that usually evades didacticism and pedantry.

Another part of Zwicky's moralism depends upon her honesty (most poets want to be honest, but few are sufficiently sensitive to pursue reticence as well, and consequently peddle propaganda dressed up as poetry). The acts of remembrance that occupy Zwicky in these poems carry with them an obligation to seek the truth in her experiences; for a poet, this also necessitates a language rich enough to differentiate the work from the anecdote or the journal entry. This is where Zwicky's poems can disappoint; her attention to craft notwithstanding, few of her poems revitalize language. Despite her statement in her journals (excerpted in *Island*) that "Each 'I' is different, an impersonation, a dramatisation of diverse *personae*," the dramatic monologues that allowed her to escape the poet's persona in her earlier poems mostly have disappeared. *The Gatekeeper's Wife* largely gives the

impression of a poet—a single person/personality/persona/voice—sifting through various experiences and trying to render those experiences in sufficiently compelling language. This type of poetry—where language is not allowed to shape, define, and reveal the experience, but instead is welded onto it—seldom holds up to careful re-readings.

Zwicky's poems, in general, begin and end strongly, but too often falter in the middle, struggling (and sometimes failing) to sustain a narrative or lyric thread. Therefore, some of these poems ('Portrait,' 'Learning,' 'American Safety Valve,' 'Groundswell for Ginsberg') seem too long. The book's title poem, which is also its opening poem, is a sequence consisting of twenty parts varying from three to fifteen lines each, and it represents most of the strengths and weaknesses of the poems that follow. The poem begins with a summary of and explanation for the Jewish yahrzeit ceremony: "When a man died / My ancestors lit a candle. / It guaranteed eternal memory." Although this objective tone might serve as an antidote to melodrama when the poem becomes more personal, it immediately diminishes the poem linguistically, rhythmically, and emotionally. But the poem later demonstrates Zwicky at her most searching, serving up such impeccable lines as "Like an old familiar tree / I'm still here, your branches / Tangled in mine," "The steps of these poems / Are very small, your footprints / In my mind," and "Not a character / But a destiny / Without a character / To endure it".

Other notable poems in *The Gatekeeper's Wife* include 'Triple Exposure & Epilogue'—three poems based on works of art (by Gerhard Marcks, Arthur Boyd, and Louis Kahan) followed by 'Wiping the Canvas,' which is the best of the four, combining a clear focus and perceptive ear with emotional complexity:

> Half asleep, we catch creation's
> rustle
> hum and bang, afraid to answer
> to our likeness. A daily fear,
> mind and breath out of gear in
> buzzing air.
> We gasp before the process of
> our own creation.

The Indonesia poems ('Peminangan,' 'Perdjodohan,' 'Kera Kera,' 'Akibat') near the end of the book are less self-absorbed and therefore more absorbing than the China poems from *Ask Me* (1990). And the four 'Conference Hi-Jinks' poems show Zwicky at her most satirical. Her sardonic wit can acquire

a serious edge (as in 'A Summation'), but also can be just cleverly amusing, as in her Chaucer-esque take on an academic conference:

> New formes for changing cultures,
> wymmens plaintes,
> Canon formations, languages
> restraintes.
> All solved by Goddes grace and
> wynes grape,
> The prykke of conscience gave us
> no escape.
> ('A Canterbury Tale')

Such satire also emerges in other poems in which Zwicky examines the role of the poet in society, pitting Laureate Hughes (Crow) against the academy (God) or implicating poets "seriously reading their sestinas" while "the underworld's rumbling upward." Her refusal to be satisfied with the status quo or with moral blindness transcends mere complaint and occasionally provides her with exceptional poems.

Because *The Gatekeeper's Wife* contains only twenty-seven poems (the longest poem extends to five pages), the weaker poems have nowhere to hide. Thus, the fumbling account of a teacher's life in 'Learning,' the easy social statement of 'Cafe' Sitters,' the overly earnest 'Groundswell for Ginsberg,' and some other uneven poems detract from the volume's successes: the fascinating monologue 'Letter from Claudia in the Midi,' which creates the sense of a failed yet defiant life; the socially critical 'Shelley Plain,' which transports the poet into the present day, where his "androgynous creativity / Boosts him high with feminists" and he wouldn't be able to afford the "black tie affair" given at "[h]is Oxford college"; and the emotionally and intellectually resonant 'What Fills.' Although only a handful of poems achieve a synthesis of intellectual complexity, linguistic resourcefulness and innovation, and the ever-important act of remembrance, most of these poems contain at least a few memorable lines and stanzas. Zwicky is particularly rewarding when she brings strict attention to her description, using lush and evocative language that illuminates and enhances the quotidian:

> It grew dark fast. Black clouds
> blossomed high
> over the Prahu rimmed by sunset's
> sizzling
> orange fuse. I saw those running
> bursts, can
> see them now alive in no particular
> order
> alive in no special way alive
> remembering how you used to say
> it was getting to be time

to drink up and come home.
('Kera Kera')

Zwicky's seriousness of purpose and moral vision mark her as a poet worth coming to terms with. However her reluctance to forge a poetic language that consistently moves beyond her subject matter makes her a perennially promising poet, yet one whose achievements often fall short of her promise.

Brian Henry

Thea Astley, *Collected Short Stories*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1997, 342 pp.
Thea Astley, *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*, Ringwood: Penquin, 1997, $16.95, 296 pp.

Thea Astley's *Collected Short Stories* confers two major benefits. Firstly, it brings together a number of her stories which have not previously been collected and have been accessible only in journals with limited availability; and secondly, it allows an overview of Astley's writing which spans the greater part of her career, beginning with 'Cubby' from the late 1950s and progressing up to the late 1980s. Over this period Astley has honed her prose style to the point where it is amongst the most precise, sportive and compelling in Australian fiction of any period. What this collection also emphasises is the remarkable consistency of theme and tone with which Astley has imbued her fiction.

In the early part of her career it may have been possible to mistake Astley's reliance on domestic themes and a confined range of locales as being evidence of a limited if particular talent. Without disregarding these early themes, however, she has by the gradual accretion of detail and resonance revealed a deep engagement with some of the most profound questions regarding the place of the self in the post-colonial world. Her characters are frequently engaged in a struggle to establish a secure identity as they react to the challenges of dealing with the vestiges of the empire: including a comparatively recent colonial past, the still alien and daunting landscape, the remnant elements of the imperial 'home' and its values, and the unresolved relationship with the Aboriginals. The result is keynotes of isolation and separation, featuring characters who are never entirely comfortable with their landscapes or the other people who populate them, and who engage in a series of hesitant and invariably failed gestures intended

to establish a sense of either self or community.

In the short story these themes can only be tackled in a comparatively fragmentary way, but Astley undertakes the task with the meticulous attention to detail and structure and the flair for observation of social manners which are the hallmarks of her writing. Her use of the shorter form creates fictions that are never less than accomplished and frequently brilliant. In her stories she consistently achieves an intensity of character and drama which surpasses that realised by her novels. In doing so she presents new insights into the ongoing struggle of her characters to create their desired sense of self without forgoing the need to belong to some larger and shared experience. A number of the most successful stories in this collection ('One of the Islands', 'A Northern Belle', 'Ladies Only Need Apply', 'Getting There') turn on the question of the victim, of the individual who is prepared to cross the Rubicon into some form of submission in order to establish the much needed connections which might yet provide them with a sense of community. Astley's telling of these stories reminds us not only that exercising autonomy and independence of judgement may result in a subjugation to the will of others, but also that issues of reponsibility and culpability in such situations are not only complex but perhaps irrelevant.

It should be noted that this collection does not represent Astley's complete short fiction. Stories have been omitted from the two collections *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* and *It's Raining in Mango*. Indeed, the wisdom of including any pieces from the latter is questionable. In structure and execution *It's Raining in Mango* is more a novel than a collection of stories, and this is apparent when reading the seven 'stories' drawn from that source for inclusion in this collection. Several of them lack the integral dynamic and cohesion expected of a self-contained story and which are so evident elsewhere in this collection. Even a piece as comparatively complete in itself as the excellent 'Getting There' suffers by being denied the presence of its companion study of desire, the chapter from *It's Raining in Mango* titled 'The Kiss, the Fade-out, the Credits'.

Other selections from *It's Raining in Mango* include references to deleted sections of the novel which are nonsensical to the reader of this collection. For example the reference in the story 'Singles' to the 'year the brothel floated out to sea' will only serve to perplex the reader not familiar

with Nadine Laffey's fate as an employee in a whore-house which suffered that dreadful fate as a result of one of the many storms which punctuate Astley's fiction. However, if material from *It's Raining in Mango* had to be included in this collection it is a pity that particular incident was not selected. It is a high point of Astley's masterful interplay of character and circumstance and an excellent example of her finely tuned sense of the bizarre. It also makes a marvellous counterpoint to that other notable river journey in Australian fiction of the late 1980s, Oscar Hopkins' triumphant voyage upstream piloting a glass church in Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda*.

Given, therefore, that this collection is obviously a 'selected' edition of Astley's stories, it would have been useful to provide the name of the editor responsible for compiling the selection, and perhaps also to include an introduction which might serve at least to establish the principles on which the selection was made.

The most recent evidence of Astley's concern with the vestiges of Australia's colonial past is contained in her novel *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*. The novel returns to the central theme of the dislocation and ill-treatment of Aboriginals which has surfaced in a number of Astley's previous novels—most tellingly in *A Kindness Cup*—and which is also very much in evidence in the *Collected Stories*. In doing so she also voices other themes which are common to her fiction. These include the sense of the land and landscape as a corrupted Eden (Doebin Island, the setting for much of the novel, is described as "enchantingly beautiful and as spiritually loathsome as ever"), and the mysterious and subtle ways in which the past and present interact to refract their own reality, which in turn imposes itself upon the many characters who inhabit the novel.

The novel commences on Doebin Island, which is revealed to be a dumping ground for unwanted mainland Aboriginals. The early sections relate three views of an incident in which the island's Superintendent takes the lives of his two children before being shot and killed by one of the Aboriginal inhabitants. It is a tragedy which those directly or indirectly involved hurry to put behind them, but the novel traces the irresistible impact of the incident as it unravels in their lives over several decades. The fallout from the incident proves to be subtle but devastating, eventually influencing in unexpected ways the lives of all those who were touched by it. And although these lives continue to intersect, the

characters remain strangers to themselves and to the land which they played a small part in depopulating of its original inhabitants. Each of them senses in some way the blighted nature of their existence. How, one asks, "could everything be so beautiful and so ugly, so simple and so complicated?". Invariably they become increasingly isolated and victims of their own disconnected and solipsistic gaze.

In a stunning conclusion the central incident is revealed to have political as well as personal ramifications. More than twenty years after the initial tragedy the Aboriginal population of Doebin Island provokes a failed rebellion against their controllers. "There were", the reader is reminded, "patterns to follow". Having been removed to the island with their families as undesirables, the leaders of the failed revolt are repatriated finally to the mainland as prisoners. In the meantime they have shown a capacity to adapt to their environment in a way which has eluded the white population. Doebin island has become their home as it never will to the transient population of white public servants and church men to whom it is has been an unwanted place in which to do an unsavoury job. The Aboriginals are therefore subjected to a second attempt at deracination, a second attempt to disrupt that sense of belonging and community which eludes their gaolers.

Once more Astley has written powerfully about the forces of alienation which damage attempts by the settler population to feel at home in what she describes as "this dangerously new country". At a time when arguments about race and belonging are engulfing the Australian polity, *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow* is a timely warning about the dangers unleashed when we lose respect for each other's places and items of reverence, of the end-games we invite when we succumb to solipsistic impulses, and of the fate which awaits both the occupier and the occupied if we choose to indulge our neo-colonial fantasies.

Paul Genoni

CONTRIBUTORS

BARBARA BRANDT's selection of poetry *The Snow Queen takes Lunch in the Station Cafe* was published by FACP in *Shorelines* in March 1995. **BEV BRAUNE**'s poems have appeared in numerous journals in Australia and overseas. Her poetry collections are *Dream Diary* (Savacou 1982) and *Camouflage* (Bloodaxe 1997). **DAVID BUCHANAN** is a playright, musician/composer as well as a poet. He won the Swan Gold 1992 Outstanding Playwright Award for his second play *Looking Off the Southern Edge*. **ROBERTA BUFFI** is a PhD student with the Department of English, UWA. **PETER CONSTANTINE** has written six books on languages and cultures of the Far East. His pieces have appeared in *The New Yorker, Harper's Magazine, Fiction, New American Writing*, and *Harvard Magazine*, among others. He lives in New York. **MTC CRONIN**'s first poetry collection *Zoetrope* (Five Islands Press) came out in 1995. Her second collection *Everything Holy*, is forthcoming this year in the USA and Canada through Berrima Books. **TANYA DALZIELL** is a PhD student in the English Department, UWA. **BRUCE DAWE** is one of Australia's best known poets. At present he is teaching U3A classes and enjoying it.... **JOY DETTMAN** has published in NZ and Australia. 'Two Gifts for Annie' is an altered excerpt from a novel, *Mallawindy*, which will be published in June by Pan Macmillan. **BRENTON DOECKE** teaches at Monash University, Victoria. **RUSSELL FORSTER** is 41, married with two small children. He works as a school teacher and writes out of Moonee Ponds, Victoria. **SARAH FRENCH** will be emerging writer in residence at Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre in August '98, and she will co-edit the Young Writers issue of *Westerly*. **PAUL GENONI** teaches Library Studies at Curtin University and has just completed his PhD at UWA. **JEFF GUESS** teaches **SUE GILLETT** currently holds the Frank Moorehouse Perpetual Trophy for Ballroom Dancing. **BRIAN HENRY** is in Melbourne on a Fulbright grant and is an Associate of the Australian Centre at the University of Melbourne. He edits *Verse* and international poetry magazine. **MARY ANN HUGHES** teaches at the Institute of Languages, University of N.S.W. She has recently published an article on Keri Hulme in *SPAN*, and has an article entitled 'Editing Aboriginal Texts' coming out in *Southerly* later this year. **CORAL HULL** is a full time writer and animal rights activist. She is founder of *Animal Watch Australia* and has just completed editing *The Book of Modern Australian Animal Poems*. **WENDY JAMES** is a Sydney writer. She has had short stories published in

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