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## **Announcement**

### **In the Year 2000**

**No, we're not worried about the millenium bug,  
this is a positive announcement!**

From 2000, *Westerly* will be affiliated with John Kinsella's magazine *Salt* and Folio Press. Each magazine will be published annually, *Westerly* in November/December, in a volume of approximately 200 pages. Subscribers will be able to take either *Westerly* or *Salt*, or both. *Westerly* will continue to cover literature and culture in Australia (especially Western Australia) and the Indian Ocean region. *Salt* will continue to cover literature and culture in Australia, Europe and the USA.

This new affiliation and structure will give *Westerly* much wider distribution, and a broader and more international profile, putting it in a unique position among Australian literary magazines.

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# WESTERLY

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Mary Jo Bang

## Poem

Could you please hold that mirror  
in a way that doesn't illuminate the past

at the expense of the present?  
I see something coming up ahead

of its time but before the invention of soap,  
and there's one with her hair

and her hope held aloft by a series of ropes.  
Silly, you say, but you'll see.

It will all come to pass  
us by. Soon someone will say to the door,

Quote the blankblank,  
blankblankmore.

Then before you can count to three, there we'll be—  
high season, our flat faces facing a sea

full of glowworms or reading the sparse  
marginalia of a scroll

we once found in the trail of a paste summer-slug.  
What splendid events, the crowd will cry.

The light.  
The light of the world.

## When Meeting Beauty

What must we do?

Nothing is clear, not since a vroom swept the sky  
raising dust clouds, drizzling grit down to veil our small minds.  
Something seen against a grave stone.  
Something with a deadly centre.  
In this centre of November, a dog bows its head and howls.  
Leaves cling to the fence's faux diamonds.  
What isn't dead, is dying.  
Everywhere the eye discovers fortune. Take it  
on faith. A grey stone adhered to green lichen,  
like the skull with its spare coat of reason.  
A wall succumbs to its brick: at the brink, fourteen windows,  
three tiers. It fascinates, this glass triangulation: sky, window  
and which. Can you tell me, Marco Polo,  
is this grey butter dish a bridge, or a narrow waterway?  
A lock, or the long door behind which everything comes clean?  
I need to know, if only as a forewarning  
of weather. As a possible key  
to the forecourt of heaven. What can be counted  
upon? Now, back to the exhausted topic.

## Marriage to the Sea

As the earth turns bringing darkness

the glaciers rumble in the same queue with  
the turtle unaware of colour symbolism  
or its destination. The purpose of this laboratory

is something to do with taking biscuits  
from the mouth it cries out for  
turning me upside down to notice round holes

in the stonework everywhere. They stop at nothing  
beating on doors and windows  
two parts truth to one part neatly impaled.

A poison-tipped arrow allows that repose  
and remnants of horsehair. It is marriage to the sea  
which is keeping us out of work.

In the whirlpool of Corryvreckan, and all around  
brace yourself for the red mist  
that never arrives. As luck would have it

I need the transfusion: hope dashing  
with the smooth iron of the last possible moment.  
Observe the reed bunting

noble in defeat and eschewing all other brand names.

## Susan Schultz

He stopped writing when the language got closer to his bones; now he drops images into sentences at random, Las Vegas thumbs calloused by the slots. In one poem the queen eats her dead lover, slice by slice, a case of consumption before consumerism. In another, he apologises for his happiness, its betrayal. The language was plastic, he says, now betrays him like Revelations, albeit without white horses. Revision unwrites, leaves occasional coins where sentences were, where Lorca walked off the page into Times Square, webcam catching attempts to phone other poets. Lines were busy and Crane was in Havana, so he sent a postcard home: "bungee-jumping Dow, margins justified, I am Laffitte on a twin Towers rope whose business is my heart's ruin, home soon, love, Lorca." No one knew who wrote the line about dropping the heart, but he wept at the next day's headlines: "Poet Dead Off Cuban Coast." It's not exile that's difficult, it's the blank water between.

for Eric Gamalinda, 21/10/99

## Towards a Particular Hybridity: A Beginning

Hybridity is a term I've wrestled with for a long time. When I first met the term at an undergraduate class in postcolonial literature I felt the shock of sudden recognition: here was a word used to describe lives something like mine, lives affected by migration and ethnic miscegenation; here was a framework that might allow me to begin to speak about dislocation, fracture and strange new unions; here, perhaps, was a word I could hang parts of my life upon, parts that had never been aired before in the semi-public space of institutional discourse. It was an exhilarating encounter, marked in my mind by Derek Walcott's eloquent expression in "A Far Cry from Africa" of hybridity (in a context of mixed ethnicity) as a predicament, with his accompanying suggestion that one can partially escape from this predicament by writing:

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,  
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?  
I who have cursed  
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose  
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?  
Betray them both, or give back what they give?  
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?  
How can I turn from Africa and live?<sup>1</sup>

Since that first encounter I have read Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's summaries of postcolonial theory and have considered the critique of the use

1. Derek Walcott, "A Far Cry From Africa", in *Derek Walcott, Collected Poems 1948-1984*, New York: The Noonday Press, 1986, 18.

of the term “hybridity” by Aboriginal activist Ian Anderson and academics such as Ron Shapiro and Jonathan Friedman.<sup>2</sup> I have learned from the practical deployment of the term by Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo in the area of postcolonial drama.<sup>3</sup> I have puzzled over Homi Bhabha’s changing definitions of hybridity and have marvelled at Robert Young’s lucid history of the use and development of the term in Europe.<sup>4</sup> I suspect that like many others who have used the word “hybridity”, I struggled with Young’s revelation of the dark history of the term as part of the justifying “vocabulary of the Victorian extreme right”, however I have come to the conclusion that it is perhaps apt for contemporary appropriations of the term to operate under the shadow of this past.<sup>5</sup> The dark linguistic history that is raised as a spectre each time the word is used could be quite a useful reminder of the ways in which the spectre of racism continues to haunt our society today. It was with this dark history in mind that I responded to sociologist Pnina Werbner’s call to “develop processual models of hybridity to replace the current stress on contingent hybridity, a self-congratulatory discourse which leads nowhere”<sup>6</sup>; and so devised my own definition of hybridity with a particular context in mind — the analysis of novels by Asian-Australian migrants.

What preceded this period of research, however, was an attempt to articulate my own experience of hybridity in poetry. I wrote “A Few Thoughts on Multiple Identity” in response to a call by the editors of *absinthe* (a Canadian journal) for submissions of poetry and short stories on the topic of multiple identities in a racial context. From what I can remember, the focus of my efforts at the time was on figuring out how to represent particular amalgams of ethno-national identity in

2. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989; also Ian Anderson’s “I, the ‘Hybrid’ Aborigine: Film and Representation,” *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (1997): 4-14; Ron Shapiro’s “Critical Areas of Uncertainty: Crossing Cultures, Hybridity and Human Chaos,” in Bruce Bennett et al., eds., *Crossing Cultures: Essays on the Literature and Culture of the Asia-Pacific*, London: Skoob books, 1996: 41-48 and Jonathan Friedman’s “Global Crises, the Struggle for Cultural Identity and Intellectual Porkbarrelling: Cosmopolitans versus Locals, Ethnicity and Nationals in an Era of De-Hegemonisation,” in Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood, eds., *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, London: Zed Books, 1997: 70-89.
3. Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, “Performing Hybridity in Post-Colonial Monodrama,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 32.1 (1997): 5-20.
4. For Homi Bhabha’s earlier definition of hybridity see “Signs Taken for Wonders,” in Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994: 102-122; for later definitions of hybridity see “Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” in Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge, 1990: 291-322. Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Race and Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995.
5. Young, *Colonial Desire*, 10.
6. Pnina Werbner, “Introduction: The Dialectics of Cultural Hybridity,” in Werbner and Modood, eds., *Debating Cultural Hybridity*, 22.

juxtaposition with each other. This is what I produced:

### **A Few Thoughts on Multiple Identity**

Let's start with my brother. At the dinner table. He finishes his mouthful of rice and looks up. 'Mum,' he says, 'if you're from Australia and Dad's from Malaysia and he's Chinese and you're Caucasian and I'm an Australian citizen but we live in Singapore, what does that make me?' We all laugh. It's finally hit him. The great family joke. My sister and I look at each other, 'Lots of things', we say at the same time. Lots of things, but how does it fit together? How does it work? Are you lots of pieces all at once somehow jammed into one not-quite-anything body? Once when I was feeling angry and confused I wrote a poem about a paper doll made of lot of different scraps and pieces who stayed stuck together by sheer force of will. I don't think it always has to be like that — angry and confused. The pieces are there, alright, but they don't have to be sharp and jagged, though they are sometimes. I tried writing another poem. This is for you, Tim.

#### **What is it like?**

A river.  
There is a  
river with water  
like smooth liquid mud  
lolloping, loll lolloping  
against thick  
and thin wooden posts  
that hold up  
the edge of a market.  
The market leans  
over the edge of the water,  
wanting to swim,  
to let roti chanai and muturba  
float to the surface  
in fat oily rings,  
to let kolo mee  
stream through the water

There is  
a river.  
A river with water  
that is wide choppy blue.  
On bright days  
the waters seem  
wide as the sky,  
the white houses,  
jostling for views,  
small concrete specks  
jumbled behind  
the billow of white yacht sails.  
At night  
boys with buckets  
trial prawn-nets  
along its dark margins.  
The locals

like bright yellow hair.  
Iban shops sell beads  
and ikat cloth  
perched over floorboards  
rich with thick green slime  
on their undersides.  
We stand on the jetty  
waiting for the sampan man  
to take us across  
in his small, fish-like boat  
to the other side of the water  
where we've parked our car  
in a carpark  
hidden behind  
a screen of dark, river-tree leaves.

open a carton of beer.  
Girls lie with boys  
on blankets  
beneath a fringe  
of long, narrow leaves.  
We stand on the bridge  
as the sun  
shines through jellyfish  
gliding up river.  
Eight lanes of traffic  
roar from behind.  
Hot on our bikes  
we watch, till  
the wind whips our sweat  
a salt trail of dry.

I wanted to write about how each place exists in the space of the same heart-beat, about how it boggles the mind that two different worlds can exist in the same space of time and not only two but countless, countless, others living moving churning flowing, foreign familiar friendly frightening in the one space of breath. I wanted to write about you kicking a rugby ball in Singapore as I brush my teeth in Perth. But it sounded really twee in poetry, so here I am back in prose. What's it like? That's a little bit of it. It'll be different for you, of course, and you'll have to think of your own words to say it, but I think there'll be some of the same. Do you mind taking my love and some silly sister words with you?<sup>7</sup>

What strikes me in retrospect is how much this representation of hybridity is (quite literally) framed by the family. What also strikes me is the role that certain background factors had in creating what is a relatively peaceful articulation of juxtaposed difference: namely, quality of certain relationships (especially that between my mother and father), congenial historical circumstances (particularly the marked improvements in race relations in both Singapore and Australia in the last thirty years, although the present situation is by no means perfect) and access to capital (to use Pierre Bourdieu's distinction, money capital made the travel possible

7. Miriam Lo, *absinthe* 9.2 (1997), 49, <<http://www.ucalgary.ca/~amathur/lo.html>> (2 Sept 1997).

and cultural capital made the writing of the poem possible). Had any of these factors been different, I suspect that I may have written something quite different and perhaps more closely aligned to the intense angst of Walcott's piece.

My reading of novels by Asian-Australian migrants has contributed to this retrospective awareness of the importance of background factors such as those mentioned above. I do not want to suggest that all novels by Asian-Australian migrants are autobiographical or even semi-autobiographical, neither do I want to imply that all novels by Asian-Australian migrants necessarily deal with the representation of mixed ethnicity and/or national migration. Many of these novels do, however, deal with such representations. These representations became the focus of my research. One of the main questions I asked was: how are subjects of mixed ethnicity and/or migrant background constructed in novels by Asian-Australian migrants? As I read, I took particular interest in how the 'background factors', mentioned above, were used in the construction of 'mixed' subjectivities. In Adib Khan's novels, family tension, especially marital difficulty, plays a large part in the construction of the migrant and mixed ethnic subjectivities of characters such as Iqbal Chaudhary and his daughter Nadine in *Seasonal Adjustments*, as well as Khalid Sharif's children in *Solitude of Illusions*. Similarly, in Simone Lazaroo's *The World Waiting to Be Made*, the divorce of the unnamed female protagonist's parents has a fracturing impact on the protagonist's sense of self. Lazaroo's descriptions of the effects of the White Australia policy upon her protagonist illustrate quite powerfully the importance of historical contexts in constructions of mixed ethnic characters. In Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage*, the character Seamus' traumatised subjectivity is signified by attributions of poverty, social alienation and the absence of family. Trauma features again in Castro's construction of part-Aboriginal, part-white characters in the novel *Drift* — in which miscegenation is marked by violence and rape.

What I wanted was a definition of hybridity that could allow for all of these differences in the construction of individual hybrid subjects; account for the impact of factors such as family, historical context and access to capital; and go some way towards explaining why some constructions of hybrid subjects seem so clearly to be influenced by forms of racism and Orientalism. What I came up with is a little bit like a jigsaw with morphing abilities.<sup>8</sup> I define hybridity as a mode of self-representation where a subject defines him/herself or is defined by others as possessing an identity that is split into different ethnic and/or national parts, the parts of which are articulated in some form of relationship with each other. If I

continue with the metaphor of the jigsaw, the shape of these ethnic and/or national 'parts' is arguably influenced by factors such as family, historical context and access to capital; while the ways in which these parts 'fit together' or relate to each other is influenced by ideologies of ethnic and/or national value that operate through the family and society.<sup>9</sup> I hypothesised that the configuration of hybridity that most effectively resisted racist and Orientalist ideologies was characterised by a relationship between the different ethnic and/or national parts which involved mutual, non-hostile recognition, instead of the effacement of one "part" by another.

I applied these theories to a selection of novels by Asian-Australian migrants with reasonable success — but that is another story.<sup>10</sup> What I am interested in at the moment is how these theories apply to my own work — the poetry I'm in the process of producing. The "particular hybridity" I'm wanting to move towards is my own. At the same time it belongs to other people — my family and the society that has shaped me. Already, I am conscious of gaps in my theories, holes in my system: if a person is not reducible to ethnicity or nationality, how do I account for those other dimensions of identity? If religion and ethnicity (or even nationality) cannot be conflated, how do (changing) religious beliefs affect the formation of the different 'parts' I have talked about? On a more personal level, given that my own beliefs are Christian, how can I write with sensitivity about the impact of differences in religious belief upon my (wide and motley) family? What of the impact of form on representation — will my choice of the poetic form influence the kinds of narratives I produce? How can I create a positive representation of a hybrid subject at the same time as acknowledging the impact that racist ideologies have had upon this particular representation? How do I move between the language of theory and the language of personal experience? As one way of answering these questions, I have chosen to write about my grandmothers. I am writing a series of poems that deal with their individual lives and also with what it means for them to meet — they did meet in real life, but they also "meet" in a metaphorical sense, in my life. The poem that follows deals with some of the questions raised above and also functions as

8. Elsewhere I describe my definition of hybridity as something that both 'is' dialectical and can be used "dialectically" and I like to think this says something both about the way this definition of hybridity came into existence and about how it can be used in analysis. See Miriam Lo, "Shaking a Few Tales: The Dialectics of Hybridity and Beth Yahp's *The Crocodile Fury*", *Hecate* 45.1 (1999): 56-71.

9. I am not using "ideology" in its classic Marxist pejorative sense here, but rather loosely as a term to indicate systems of thought and hierarchies of value that form the foundations for particular worldviews. I also tend to use 'ethnicity' in preference to "race" even though it can be argued that both terms have problematic histories.

10. See Miriam Lo, "Until A Connection": Re-Thinking Hybridity Through Novels Written by Asian-Australian Migrants," MA. Diss. U of Queensland, 1999.

something of a summary for the project:

### **Reading Two Grandmothers: A (Poetic) Investigation of Asian-Australian Subject Formation**

This is an abstract / abstracting itself / from the language of abstracts.

Watch

(quote) Ethnic mixture complicates the diasporic trajectory. (unquote)

and

(quote) Can one break free of the 'ethnic' cage without ignoring the very real impact of ethnicity and nationality on (Asian-Australian) subject formation?

(unquote)

become

the story of two women

a Chinese woman in East Malaysia

an Anglo-Celt in Western Australia —

leading parallel lives

tracing circles of birth and death

birth and death

and all that gathers in between:

one hears the cry of her first-born child

above the din of a narrow shophouse street

as a midwife clips

and chuckles,

the other waits for her tenth

with a clenching of teeth

as the doctor hesitates,

how will he say

"Down's Syndrome"?

How does one catch

a life in words

or trace the coalescence

of two worlds?

In a small room

a seismograph

shakes to the coupling,

measuring aftershock  
in epithets:

(Didn't I Say) Don't Play Too Much Soccer  
and Don't Bring Home a Foreign  
Wife?  
Get Out the Guns  
Let's Shoot the Yellow Bastard!

The dust drifts down.

Observe  
the pattern of its fall,  
the web that forms,  
the layers  
that accrete,  
the words that float  
and drop  
to shape the lips that speak  
one word (or many):  
*Grandma.*

The last two lines of this poem allude to another aspect of my project. As part of my attempt to create representational parity I will be translating some of my poems into Mandarin and possibly writing some in Mandarin and translating them back into English. Language is one of the areas of my life where the impact of British colonialism is perhaps most apparent. English had first language status in the schools I went through in Singapore. I learned Mandarin as a second language. As a consequence, translating poems into Mandarin, or writing in Mandarin is quite an effort and it is possible that native speakers of Mandarin will find many reasons to be amused (or perhaps offended) by what I produce. I persist, however, in making use of Mandarin as it brings me one small step closer to understanding the world my paternal grandmother lived, spoke and thought in. The final poem I include in this article is my first attempt at writing a poem in Mandarin. It is followed by a translation into English that plays with some of the problems of translation.

## 请求许可

您写:

“愛兒小特:

媽為你立法只一章，不是三章。

媽的信不可讓旁人閱讀。”

祖母

您的信

我未经许可

翻阅过了。

或许

您的爱儿

为了爱

推翻了您的法令。

法令错误？

爱儿误解？

难说也。

对我而言。

您的信

一闪闪地

泄漏您的心意。

祖母

这首诗

是我付给您

的信:

请求许可

试试翻译（即使犯法罢！）

我俩知心话。

## Asking For Permission (to translate)

You write:

“My dearly loved son:

(that name,

do I translate it too?

Loved-Son-Little-Special,

or,

My dearest son Danny

— did she know him by that name?)  
I ask one thing of you.

(But she plays with a legislative idiom,  
that carries the sense  
of making an order:  
'I, your mother, decree just one regulation,  
not three,'  
— is this seriousness  
or just playful irony?)  
Don't show my letters to anyone else."

(Which literally is  
'Mother's letters,  
don't let beside-people read',  
Am I beside or  
with you, my father?  
Do I stand in your place,  
reading this?)

My dear grandmother,  
(My father's mother,  
the one we would have lived with  
in a traditional Chinese household.)

I have read  
your letters  
without

your permission.

(**翻阅**: to read, to browse,  
it shares a character  
with the words for 'translate'.)  
Perhaps  
your dearly loved son

— for the sake of love —  
has overturned your decree.

(that character, 翻  
again, appears in overturn,  
to turn, to cross, to rummage through,  
to translate, to fall out with...)

Was there something wrong  
with what you asked for?  
Or has your dearly loved son  
wronged you,  
misreading your words?

(Did he read:  
Please don't forget me?)  
It is difficult to say.

For me,  
your letter  
(which I can't read without a dictionary)  
divulges the secrets  
of your heart  
in flickering strokes  
(of dark and light).

My grandmother,  
this poem  
is the letter  
I give to you  
asking for permission  
to translate  
(knowing this  
— already a betrayal)  
the words that echo  
in the chambers  
of our hearts.

I am not quite sure what this process of translation will do to my present definition of hybridity. I am hoping that my use and exploration of two different languages will add to the sense of difference between the disparate 'parts' that make up my particular experience of hybridity. I am reasonably convinced that the way these two languages "speak" to one another in my work will widen my understanding of how the different "parts" that make up my identity relate to one another. On the other hand, as I have attached the different "parts" of my identity to people in this project, it is entirely possible that these people (my two grandmothers) will transform the way I understand hybridity, both on a particular and at a more general theoretical level. Whatever happens, I offer up my present definition of hybridity as one (small) stage or development in the history of its use, keeping Robert Young's somewhat paradoxical admonition in mind as I write, that "there is no single, or correct, concept of hybridity: it changes as it repeats, but it also repeats as it changes."<sup>11</sup>

11. Young, *Colonial Desire*, 27.

## Love story

She looked out of the window of the train and stared at the railyards, where two men were riding their bicycles from one huge shed to another, and another group of men was standing, talking, next to an immense rusting engine moored in a sea of yellow grass. Past the railyards was the red brick factory with the storey-high windows in which each pane of glass was individually smashed. Underneath the eaves of the roof was a bright orange scrawl of graffiti. She wondered, as she always did, who put it there: an angel with a black cap? A boy with spinnerets?

The train stopped at the station and hissed open. A man sat down opposite her, fat, white, freckled, his head dropping forward, his mouth hanging slackly open almost as soon as he sat down. A thin line of saliva, scarcely visible, lengthened from the side of his mouth before he started vertical, only to be dragged back down again. There was a wet spot on his blue jumper. She watched him impassively. It could be no invasion to watch another so far away, no more than staring at a corpse. He jerked upright again and his eyes flickered dully across hers, and she flinched inwardly and stared out of the window.

The train was already passing wastelands fenced by cyclone wire, where grasses and bindweed and milk thistles and wild fennel sprawled over mounds of orange gravel and dirt and broken bottles. These gave way to warehouses, factories, houses. She turned back and looked at the man opposite. She relaxed. He had gone to sleep, his head lolling against the back of the seat, his mouth open, the sunlight harshly shadowing the craters in his face, scars of pimples perhaps or some childhood disease.

A shadow passed through the train like a wing, and then was gone. It was the bridge that soared massively over the little streets people lived in. Then oil tanks fixed in pools of tarmac with trucks parked in rows around them and after that the backs of houses, with yards full of tricycles and fruit trees and plastic sand pits and

unmown grass and, once, a tiny boy playing with a red ball.

A painful tenderness seeped through her, ice-cold like an anaesthetic running into her arteries. She realised she was looking at the landscape through her reflection in the window. She unfocussed her eyes so she could not see herself. Other people were getting into the carriage but now she didn't wish to look at them: that woman with her five shopping bags and this man with the pusher and the fretful child throwing its bottle onto the grimy carpet. If anyone caught her eye, if anyone sat next to her and asked her for the time, if anyone smiled at her across the seats, it would hurt her, like a claw reaching into her breast. It was a relief when they sat down and the doors wheezed shut and the train started again and the risk of contact subsided, for a little while.

To reach the hospital, which was near the university, she had to walk through an avenue of elm trees. She walked slowly, not looking at anything in particular. The wind was warm, one of the first warm winds of the season, and she felt the leaves vibrating around her.

She waited in a corridor full of women. She felt no interest in any of them. She stared at a fading calendar on the wall with a photograph of a kitten. At the end of the corridor was a television that was showing a cooking program. The man was balding with an absurd red moustache and his voice sounded like a faint quacking. He was stirring something in a white bowl. A door opened and a woman came out, with her husband holding her elbow. Her face was expressionless and she left quickly. A name was called and another woman stood up. Her face was tight with fear. She'll die, she thought, idly.

When her name was called for the third time she started and stood up, almost tripping over the bag of the woman sitting beside her. The doctor ushered her into a tiny room that barely had room for the consulting couch and his desk. He was very young and careful, a student, she thought, and he pressed her breast gravely before he called in a surgeon, whose hands were quicker, more subtle. He nodded his head decisively and told her she would have to come in for an operation.

- Within the next two days, he said. The lump is attached to the breast tissue and is bumpy, which are not good signs.

He nodded again.

- We will do a biopsy to confirm what it might be. It will be a day operation and you won't have to stay overnight. After we know what it is, we will decide on the best treatment. Breast cancer is very treatable and so you must not worry too much.

You will receive a letter.

The door opened and she walked out through the corridor full of women, feeling light, as if she had carried something heavy up a long hill and had put it down and was just now walking down the other side. She walked a block until she found a cafe and ordered a coffee which she drank slowly, smoking three cigarettes. She watched the smoke curl intricately out of the burning end of the cigarette and dissipate in the faint wind.

The light shone through the glass and the scotch, breaking on the ice-cubes. There was a ring of condensation on the surface of the table in which stray flakes of ash were dissolving. She stared into the middle of the ice.

- Fifteen, they reckon, he said. And that's just to begin with.

He was drinking quickly, a beer, she was drinking slowly. Scotch.

- Nobody knows who it's going to be. Maybe those with families last. Which means me first.

- Yes, she said.

- It doesn't matter who it is, he said. We all get done in the arse.

- Yes, she said.

She looked up from the table. He was looking to his right, not at her. She stared at his mouth. It was cruel and sensual. When he smiled it was like he was a little boy.

- The game, he said. They're just playing the game, and everyone else can get fucked.

- Yes, she said.

She thought of standing up and shouting, why don't you look at me? I'm empty, and the light shines through me and there isn't anything inside, not even air.

- Another drink? he said.

- Yes, she said.

He went up to the bar and stood next to a tall woman with a mound of black hair caught on top of her head like a fountain. She thought about standing up and putting her coat on and taking her cigarettes and walking out into the night.

She stood up and walked out.

The wind felt luxurious. She stood outside the door for a couple of seconds and looked at the sky. There were no stars. The light from a streetlight splashed onto the pavement, a poisonous yellow. She started walking. She hadn't gone far when he came running up behind her. She walked faster, but he caught her arm and swung her around.

- What the fuck do you think you're doing? he said.

She didn't answer him.

- What are you doing? he said. Answer me, you bitch, you can't just fucking walk out, one minute we're having a drink, the next I turn around and you've fucking disappeared, what the fuck's wrong with you?

- I'm going home, she said.

- Like fuck you are, he said.

- I'm just going home, she said.

- You sit there like a stuffed monkey all evening and then just walk out, you treat me like shit.

He was shouting now, his face was flushed, the corners of his mouth started twitching. She knew the signs.

- Go back to that woman, she said, and leave me alone.

- What woman? he shouted, what fucking woman? What's fucking wrong with you?

- I feel like shit, she said.

- Don't you fucking talk to me like that, he said, Don't you talk like that, go home then, fucking go home.

He pushed her away from him so she collided with the wall. He was shaking but she knew he wouldn't hit her.

- Fucking go. Just fucking go.

She stared at him, saying nothing.

- I don't want to see you again, he said, quietly, dangerously, I've had it with you, you stupid cunt, I've had it, do you understand, I've had it. I've had enough.

He bunched his fist and slammed it into the wall next to her head. She didn't flinch. He stood back and looked at her and spat on the ground. His hand was bleeding. He walked unsteadily back to the pub and went in. She stood very still for a few seconds and then walked away, fast, and turned down a street that led away from their house.

It led towards the foreshore, where in the blackness the lighter forms of boats bobbed indistinctly at their moorings. Far across the water she could see the other arm of the bay, with the city buildings heaped as if a child had been playing with blocks of electric light, and to the right of them, an endless darkness. Above her the sky was a translucent blue with a white sliver of moon. She turned off the street and started walking across the grass.

Her pace slowed and unconsciously she breathed in deeply and exhaled, turning her face to the stars. She paused and took off her shoes and walked on, feeling the cool blades of grass bend beneath her bare feet, the weight of her shoes in her hands. Soon she reached the levees that bordered the sea, where three or four feet below small waves lapped against the stone. The sea was very shallow and its black surfaces flickered with reflected light.

She sat down on a bench and looked out over the water. The tiredness in her body became a simple heaviness. After a while she hunched up her legs and put her arms around them and lit a cigarette. She had an almost full packet. The cold began to penetrate her body, but she felt no desire to move.

A melody was moving in her mind, half heard beneath her breathing and the breathing of the sea, a sound that was almost music. The city is singing, she thought, it is the voice you can never hear, except now, when everything else is silent.

She had often sat up all night, starting when she was a child. At such times it seemed to her that she sank through the layers of herself to a core of ineradicable patience, millennial and planetary. She watched the moon shifting through its slow orbit and the waves lapping against its slender light. A cat slipped out of the darkness and watched her and moved away. She might have slept, but if she did, she slept with her eyes open. She had no consciousness of the passing of time. She thought absolutely nothing.

Then the sea was steeped with a grey wash of light, and almost suddenly the greyness infused the sea and the sky so they became more transparent, more distinct, and made her aware of herself again. She was so cold she could hardly move.

She stood up slowly, like an ancient woman. She lit a cigarette and watched the sun's disc edge over the water, so bright she couldn't look straight at it and turned her eyes instead to the path of flaring waves leading to its whiteness and the clouds edged with pale gold, still and beautiful and real.

Her mouth was thick with the stale taste of cigarette-stained saliva and her clothes smelt old and foetid. She wrapped her coat closer.

When the sun had lifted itself entirely clear of the horizon, she turned away from the sea and walked home.

- Do you know me? he asked. Do you know who I am? He looked exhausted,

the stubble grey on his cheek, his eye sockets hollow and grey.

- No, she said. No. I don't.

He sagged against the doorway.

- I don't know anything, she said.

- You're cruel, he said. I can't stand it any more.

She didn't say anything. He stared at her and then turned and walked inside. She followed him.

The light in the kitchen was still thin. A chair was lying on the floor, broken. On the draining board was the remains of a broken glass, each shard carefully picked up and placed in the jagged base.

There was no possibility of saying anything.

She reached forward and touched his arm. He flinched away from her. Her arm fell, numb, by her side, as if she had suffered an electric shock. Her lips felt numb. She tried to speak but her throat constricted, stopping the words. She had no words to say in any case. She tried again. She said his name. He didn't respond. He was sitting on a chair by the table, his eyes shaded by his hands, his body turned away from her.

She just stood by the wall and watched him. The silence between them grew until she felt an intense buzzing in the middle of her forehead. When he turned to face her, she jumped.

- I don't understand you, he said. How could you -

He paused.

- I'm not even angry any more, he said. I thought I was going mad last night. I tell you that I'm going to lose my job and you can't get rid of me fast enough. I couldn't believe it.

He looked up her, and she looked back. She had no idea what expression was on her face. She felt a tormenting necessity to speak, but her face felt like a mask. She licked her lips.

- I -

- I what? He suddenly smashed his fist on the table. What? What? What?

- I'm sorry, she said. I -

There was a long silence.

- This is no fucking use, he said. This is a waste of time.

- No! No, listen -

- To you saying nothing? I sit here and listen to you saying nothing? That's what I'm supposed to do? You've been out all night, all night you've been gone and I've

been worried sick, I was so sick I threw up, and you can't even tell me why? Why? Why?

She took a deep breath. She was suddenly so burdened with sorrow she could scarcely stand.

- I had to go to hospital yesterday.

The words came out more lightly than she expected. They were not at all what she had thought she meant to say.

- I had to go to hospital because there's a lump. And the doctor said it needed operating and I have to go in tomorrow for a biopsy.

She stopped. It sounded like an excuse. Her possible death seemed suddenly a very trivial thing.

- Why didn't you tell me?

- I didn't want to worry you. No. I mean, I was frightened, I didn't know how to say it. And anyway you've been busy. I didn't think you'd be interested.

He breathed in sharply.

- Why wouldn't I be interested?

She considered the justice of her remark. It wasn't just. So often he wasn't just to her, and she permitted his injustice without comment, considering his later knowledge punishment enough. How often was she unjust? Who was to balance the ledger of resentment?

- Well, did he say anything else?

- He said it was bumpy and attached to the tissue. He said they were not good signs, but they couldn't be sure until they did a biopsy. He said not to worry too much because breast cancer is very treatable.

Was that all? It wasn't what she meant. There were no words she could find or say for what she meant.

She took a deep breath because all the air in her chest seemed to have disappeared. In its place was a hard ball. She made a sound like a loud hiccup and suddenly she was crying, without dignity, without restraint. She couldn't even put her hands to her face to protect herself from her own tears. He watched her. She slid down the wall. Her sobbing came out of her in violent, choking heaves. When she didn't stop, he went to her and held her, gently shaking her.

- Don't, he said. Don't.

- I can't stop, she said, between heaves.

- Don't, he said. Don't let it take over, that way you can't come back.

He put his arms around her and she pressed her forehead to his chest,

struggling against the sobs. The sobbing finally stopped and her teeth started chattering. They sat awkwardly sprawled on the kitchen floor. He cupped his fingers underneath her chin. Her jaw rattled against his hand.

\*\*\*

Douglas Barbour

## Space

### Gerry Hemingway Quartet

what sharp note or gently brushed ting  
hung out over what high cliff of silence broken on  
ly once again & again & re  
stored instant by instant ring  
spreading out through what  
across what  
beyond what  
unheard unresolved  
what

## out of this world

dizzier than thou ain't that  
the thing and the soap format  
set to run and run from puppy  
dogs to party gods from sweet  
and sour sixteen to glorious  
eightysomething and what not  
whether one flares or clings  
turning faces to a frizzed up  
sun per mood medicine of the  
they which thwarts the flags  
orbs and name plaques only to  
run up fabulous encrustations  
and gems like the woods full  
of emaciated young ladies in  
rat-nibbled hair on moon-pale  
faces with the same painless  
nonchalance that keeps fresh  
turf over the imperial thrill  
of biochemical individuality  
as mannish as ever but racked  
with security about the upper  
body and performance fabrics  
while time according to one  
Calvin Klein will become even  
more of a luxury wrapped up  
feeling to silence in a felt  
sachet du jour as the elusive  
carrot which perks up in one  
helluva language stick you've  
got there give us our cheese

“Transformation Song” is an extract from the opera Yue Ling Jie (*Moon Spirit Feasting*), by Liza Lim (music) and Beth Yahp (libretto). It will premier at the Adelaide Festival in March 2000. The opera reinterprets the myth of the Chinese Moon Goddess, Chang-O, within the structural context of the Hungry Ghosts Festival. In the myth, Chang-O is the wife of Hou Yi the Archer, who is given a Pill of Immortality for shooting down nine renegade suns. These fall to earth as fiery three-toed ravens. Chang-O steals the Pill of Immortality for herself and floats up to the moon where she is exiled in the Palace of Far-Reaching Cold. In some versions, the Queen Mother of the West turns her into a toad, which is a symbol of fertility. In Chinese culture Chang-O symbolises coldness, loneliness and beauty.

## Scene 6. Chang-O:

### Chang-O Flies to the Moon

#### *Transformation Song*

She is the moon-heart's furnace, brooding.  
Her Fortune's flown, arrows pursuing.  
Mouthless, throatless, she gorges sun and moon.

I take the Herb of Immortality.  
I fly up to the moon.  
I, Chang-O, turn myself  
    into  
        my  
            self.

Moon toad, moon shiver  
— unmanageable creature!

Celestial birds, I have your reason.

Your wishbone blazing.  
 Alchemy of feathers  
 Wind-heart tremors.

Earth falls away  
 Miscarried weight  
 Of ancestors.

Amorphous clouds, I am with you.  
 I unskin your scruples.  
 Your airborne gravity  
 propels me.

Earth falls  
 A bride disrobing.

I seize your secret, Immortal Heavens,  
 while your jury's out hanging.  
 Your quarrel  
 quickens my slipstream.

Earth  
       bound  
           exile.

Before my blood and spirit fused,  
 I was already burning.  
       Womb ice wanting  
       Pregnant with fire.

Restless ghost, I recognise you.  
 Once we suckled like sisters.  
       Your breath, my boldness.  
       Your sting, my sinew.

I rise  
 I ripple

I reach

I relinquish

I face

I embrace

you.

## Apple Blossom

for Finton Vallely

Year in, year out  
my father sprayed himself  
with the apple tree spray  
He sprayed the apples too  
but had no delusions  
Would not wear the special suit  
to protect himself  
from the end of the world  
Down under the trees  
I could see his beard and hat  
and hands holding the chemical monster  
the skin becoming more and more transparent  
with each coming of this special season  
when the killing of invisible things  
would purse his mouth  
and eat his reason  
And by and by  
the inspector would drop around  
to click his tongue  
over my father's impersonation  
of an angel floating away following a lifetime spent  
paralysed by heaven  
But my da didn't care, he said  
It keeps me out of church on Sundays  
I might give up the poison for Lent

## "Ground Zero Warholing": John Kinsella and the Art of Traumatic Realism

In the title chapter of his recent book, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, art critic Hal Foster introduces the term *traumatic realism* in an effort to mediate the contradictory views surrounding the work of Andy Warhol—that is, as “referential *and* simulacral, connected *and* disconnected, affective *and* affectless, critical *and* complacent.”<sup>1</sup> This “contradictorily coherent” view and the complexities of the term *traumatic realism*, veiled to a certain degree by the notion of immediacy implicit in words like “trauma” and “realism,” bear significantly upon the encounter with the figure of Warhol in John Kinsella’s “Warhol” poems.<sup>2</sup> Approached in this context, Kinsella’s “Warhol” poems can be read as a sustained critique of the structure and ideology of representation (as a relation to the “real”) and of the determination of the aesthetic object as morally responsible.

According to Foster, one way in which we can understand the concept of traumatic realism is through “the famous motto of the Warholian persona: ‘I want to be a machine.’”<sup>3</sup> Foster argues that while this statement has often been interpreted as confirming the ultimate blankness of the Warhol Factory, “it may point less to a blank subject than to a shocked one, who takes the nature of what shocks him as a mimetic defence against this shock: I am a machine too, I make (or consume) serial product-images too.”<sup>4</sup> In this sense, surface effect becomes a type of camouflage or even prosthesis, in which “reality” becomes a mask, a defence

1. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996, 130.

2. The “Warhol” poems can be found distributed between the 1993 collection, *Full Fathom Five* and the 1992-4 collection, *Wireless Hill*. Other poems by Kinsella relating to Warhol have yet to be collected, whilst references to Warhol can also be found in sections of the experimental sequence *Syzygy*. All references in this essay, however, are to the versions of poems included in *Poems 1980-1994*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1997.

3. G.R. Swenson, “What is Pop Art?: Answers from 8 Painters, Part 1.” *Artnews* 62 (November 1963), 26

4. Foster, 131.

against the traumatic (which in turn becomes viewed as something dis-affected or dis-affecting).

Calling to mind those species caught in the grip of mimicry, this concept of traumatic realism suggests a way in which we might view “the real” in terms of a certain notion of program, in which a compulsion to repeat describes the basic condition of the “individual” and of cultural production generally.<sup>5</sup> Countering an ethics of individual action and art as politically and socially *engagé*, Warhol posed the idea of “engagement” itself as merely symptomatic of a social condition, one which masks the fact that the objects of engagement already operate within an economy of commodity fetishism. Ethical engagement becomes a compulsion to repeat; to act is to consume.

In a recent interview, Kinsella elaborates upon this in terms of narrative (as verisimilitude) which he insists is “a device, an artifice, not reality”<sup>6</sup> (which should also draw our attention to the distinction between “reality” and “realism” in *traumatic realism*—or again, between “realism” and the “not reality” of narrative discourse). Responding to a statement of Adorno, that “the committed work of art debunks the work that wants nothing but to exist; it considers it a fetish,” Kinsella further argues:

Narrative poetry with horror as its subject subscribes to the worst aspects of commitment. It necessarily becomes fetishised and commodified itself.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, some art which might be considered “decorative” (which “wants nothing but to exist”), can in fact be seen as critical, and at the same time resistant to the political coercions of *art engagé*. That is to say, it poses its structural indifference to subject matter as something that requires accounting for, and calls into question the assertions “committed” discourse makes about the value and integrity of its objects while at the same time omitting a critique of its own rhetoric. Indeed, it is difficult to find in Adorno the means necessary to structurally distinguish committed discourse from mere agitprop, as much as from so-called “ornamental” or “decorative” form, whose exclusion by Adorno from the realm of the meaningful thus situates it at a crucial juncture in the (self-) fetishising of the

5. See Yve-Alain Bois and Rosiland Kraus, “A User’s Guide to Entropy,” *October* 78 (1996), 39-88. Also Yve-Alain Bois and Rosiland Kraus. *Formless: A User’s Guide*, New York: Zone Books, 1997, 74ff.

6. Interview with Brian Henry in *Verse* 15.3-16.1 (1998), 74.

7. *Verse*, 72.

political as a type of aesthetic morality.<sup>8</sup>

Kinsella identifies this critical element of the ornamental or decorative in the structure of repetition:

I feel there's a kind of honesty in the "repetitive formulaic play" [of decoration] that allows me to explore its terms of reference in an apparently disconnected way. But such exploration always reveals the potency of the decorative—it is a core language which backdrops the drama we accept as committed.<sup>9</sup>

What Kinsella points to is one way in which repetition enacts, as it were, a critique of certain aesthetic values which are implicitly politicised in any discussion of the "real." Serial repetition is seen to trivialise (and downgrade the uniqueness of) the narrative event of realism, or of committed art, and renders it anonymous, substitutable, as though it were chosen by the artist at random, as merely one among many otherwise disconnected pictorial elements. And this is precisely the argument of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who insists, in his seminar on "The Unconscious and Repetition," that "what is repeated is always something that occurs... *as if by chance*."<sup>10</sup> Here, the "appearance" of chance is what contributes most to its galling effect.

In Warhol's *Disaster* series (in which photographic images of electric chairs, automobile accidents, police brutality and so on, are repeated ad nauseam like some sort of tabloid nightmare), the "traumatic" is not so much attached to the images presented, but to operations of technique (such as "a slippage of register or a wash of colour,"<sup>11</sup> "suggesting the smudged graininess of newsprint, the reject layout, the uneven inking"<sup>12</sup>) which punctuates the discontinuous "serial space" of representation itself. These operations, according to Foster, "seem accidental, but they also appear repetitive, automatic, even technological"<sup>13</sup> (or we might say, *grammatical*), to the point that they exhibit their calculations in a way that is

8. It may be worth noting that "rhetoric" can be defined as the theory of "ornate form," and that the word "ornament" itself derives from the Greek "cosmos."

9. *Verse*, 73.

10. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, London: The Hogarth Press, 1977, 54.

11. Foster, 134.

12. Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*. Rev. ed. London: Thames and Hudson, 1991, 348.

13. Hughes, 348.

virtually menacing (and more so since the images themselves succumb to the violence of the repetition process).

On the other side of this equation there is a traumatic resistance, an effort to deny the “emptying out” of ethical discourse in what critics refer to plaintively as an “age of conspicuous consumption and modern technology.”<sup>14</sup> Another of Warhol’s famous statements is that “the more you look at the same thing, the more the meaning goes away.”<sup>15</sup> For Foster, this experience of the apparent emptying out of signification, and the resistance to it, can be summed up in a phrase of Lacan’s, whose implications are particularly provocative. He defines the traumatic as “a missed encounter with the real,” (Lacan) which can be understood as a rupture and a failed rendez-vous, a recoil at the very limits of the representable, an after-effect that is unable to account for itself. We might also say that this “missed encounter” describes a type of nostalgia, an insistence upon going back over past events, a fixation upon particular instances in the hope of isolating the very thing that can never be presented there: the encounter itself.<sup>16</sup> As “missed,” this encounter escapes representation; “it can only be repeated” (and “repetition,” insisted Freud, “is not reproduction”) (Lacan).

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The problem of reproduction and repetition is fundamental to any discussion of “the real” and its function both as an object and as a paradigm of ideological or aesthetic critique. In Kinsella’s poetry, the figure of Andy Warhol operates on both sides of this equation: he exemplifies both a failure to encounter “the real,” and the assimilative manufacture of it; insulation from the traumatic, and its compulsive

14. See Anna Moszynska, *Abstract Art*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1990, 206ff.

15. Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol '60s*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980, 50.

16. Critic Robert Hughes, for example, identifies the process of serial production as a form of “onanism,” whose “sterile and gratuitous functioning has made it a key image for an *avant-garde* that tended, increasingly, towards narcissism” (56). The moral and political implications of Hughes’ statement are not difficult to determine as being linked, at least in part, to notions of (private/public) property which limit the permissibility of much “private” experience to forms of social utility. In this sense, the concept of repetition embraces a paradox, since forms of self-engenderment in no way differ from forms of re-production except in the values attached to them on the basis of utilitarian ideology. Moreover, exhibiting one of the many underlying prejudices of art history, Hughes cites the lack of uniqueness in Warhol’s work as a measure of its valuelessness. In a comment that could equally apply to human DNA, Hughes complains of the “inert sameness of the mass product: an infinite series of identical objects” (348). The contradiction is almost crude. The Venus of Milo is unique, finite and commodifiable, but somehow neither inertial, nor “narcissistic” in its “sterile” singularity. Warhol, whose “infinite series” in fact defy sameness at the same time as they mimic it, is considered on the other hand as simply masturbatory: inauthentic production, repetition. Hence: “Warhol’s work in the early sixties [i.e. the Campbell’s soup cans] was a baleful mimicry of advertising, without the gloss. It was about the way advertising promises that the same pap with different labels will give you special, unrepeatabe gratifications” (348).

articulation.

In "Warhol at Wheatlands," for example, the situation is one of disengagement posed against an Australian rural landscape whose "authenticity" masks an ideological content in a manner that is both disingenuous and beguiling. For "Warhol," who is presented as mere surface effect, the signifying codes of the Australian landscape are unrecognisable—it "doesn't / remind [Warhol] of America at all":

But there's  
a show on television about New York so  
we stare silently, maybe he's asleep  
behind his dark glasses?

At "Wheatlands," Warhol is presented as "engaging" only at a remove from the external world (which is kept at a safe distance in "laser prints," "polaroids," and "deadlocks and hardened glass"). This is the Warhol of The Factory, "tinfoiling / his bedroom," for whom ring-necked parrots are only conceivable if they are "famous," in a landscape where "the day fails / to sparkle" in a haze of dualities.

It would be easy to imagine here that Kinsella is proposing the landscape as more substantive, more "real," than the Warholian persona, and using it as an indictment of the so-called post-modern condition. What is actually at stake, however, would seem to be less a claim upon the "real" than upon the unassimilable. The unassimilable in this case would be the mark, precisely, of what is "missed"—and what is missed is presented not as the "real," in any straightforward sense of that word, but as an "other," even if this "other" manifests itself as nothing more than an unfamiliar system of signs (i.e. the Australian landscape).

In many ways Kinsella is reciting the (post-) colonial antagonisms that have often been taken as defining moments of an Australian cultural sensibility as one of alienation, and this alienation is made more acute (and more ironic) by clichéd depictions of cross-cultural alarm and mystification. On the one hand, Warhol represents the intrusion of "alien" cultural and commercial interests (with an eye to asset stripping), while on the other (as a type of visitor from outer-space) he orientates a comedy of commodity fetishism, which is as much a burlesque of (one-sided) cultural exchange as it is of culture shock.

On an allegorical level, "Warhol at Wheatlands" also re-enacts the larger history of Western encounters with the Australian landscape, which consistently found it to

be aberrant, repellent, dystopic; the underside of the world, the Antipodes.<sup>17</sup> That is to say, *traumatic* (a missed encounter with the “real” as much as with what Slavoj Žižek has called “the sublime object of ideology”). In *The Fatal Shore*, Robert Hughes argues that, at the time of first settlement, Australia (and the Pacific basin, an “oceanic hell”) functioned as a type of “geographical unconscious.”<sup>18</sup> The name of this dark continent at the time of “discovery” was *Terra Australis Incognita*: the name of the land-without-a-name, and perhaps something in this paradox presaged the sense of the unnamable that belongs to the “unconscious” which Freud discovered, at about the same time as “Australia” was coming into being as a federated, self-governing nation state (that is, when it might be said to have begun evolving its own consciousness, if not its own conscience).

Like Freud’s unconscious, Australia existed in the European imagination initially as a series of “well-made enigmas / propitiatory hermeneutic and well coded” (Syzygy 11. “Deletions”)—the negative desire of an emergent scientific positivism. This “imagined country,” as Hughes says, lurked beneath the rational conscious of the Enlightenment like something “infernal, its landscape that of Hell itself<sup>19</sup>”:

Within its inscrutable otherness, every fantasy could be contained; it was the geographical unconscious. So there was a deep, ironic resonance in the way the British, having brought the Pacific at last to the realm of European consciousness, having explored and mapped it, promptly demonized Australia once more by chaining their criminals on its innocent dry coast. It was to become the continent of sin.<sup>19</sup>

But as Hughes’ comments imply, this Hell was already an operation of the

17. This tradition most likely begins with the accounts of the English adventurer William Dampier, who on the 5th of January, 1688, observed of the inhabitants of New Holland (Western Australia) that they “are the miserablest People in the world.” *Australian Discovery: By Sea* (vol. I), ed. Ernest Scott. London: J.M. Dent, 1929: 60. However, there exist some notable exceptions in the body of utopian literature published in English, including Richard Brome’s *The Antipodes: A Comedy* (1640)—a comedy of role reversals in which women rule men and people rule magistrates—and Henry Neville’s *The Isle of Pines, or, a late Discovery of a fourth ISLAND near Terra Australis, Incognita*, by Henry Cornelius van Sloetten (pseud.) (1668)—a story of one man and four women shipwrecked near the coast of Australia, and who subsequently establish political and religious order based on European forms. Interestingly, this latter text was followed by a sequel, *A New and Further Discover of the Isle of Pines* (1669) in which Neville describes a period of “whoredoms, incest and adulteries,” followed by a period of harsh laws (anticipating, among others, Reverend Samuel Marsden’s puritanical observations of Sydney under Governor Macquarie a century and a half later).

18. Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787-1868*, London: Collins Harvill, 1987, 43.

19. Hughes, 1987, 44.

rationalist spirit; it was what Foucault might have called a Hell of “discipline and punishment,” a “corrective” Hell. And in fact, in 1788, the colony of “New South Wales” was inaugurated as the largest prison in human history, and it at once became the epitome of the Sisyphean contract between labour and redemption enshrined in the Protestant work ethic of those who instituted it. The absurdity of the penal colony (due to various forms of incompetence, from its conception to its implementation, it largely failed to be self-sustaining) extended also to the project of exploration, which most famously exhausted itself traversing one desert after another in search of a mythical (“redemptive”) inland sea.<sup>20</sup>

In every endeavour, Australia seemed to resist assimilation to the European “idea,” although this in itself seems to have been determined *a priori*, programmed by the “idea” that rejected it as dystopic in the first place. And this assignation as a *dys-topia* ties in to an entire complex history of repression that organises itself around the concept of “property.”<sup>21</sup> Australia, it should be remembered, was first and foremost the destination of those who were considered to have insulted the law of property, it was dispossessed of those who failed to recognise the law of property, while it itself was consistently hostile to the very purpose of property—just as it has always been hostile to an aesthetics of the “proper.” In this way Australia was also viewed (and often continues to be viewed) as *dys-functional*: the missionary work of pastoral industry, for example, being constantly undermined by the irrationality and godlessness of the place, manifested in floods, bushfires and droughts, and a native population seemingly immune to the inducements of salvation through toil. These demographic and environmental “disasters” give the appearance of a nihilistic force bent on sabotaging the efficient, serial production of pastoral industry, and this suggests another way of looking at the relationship between land-scape and technology in Kinsella’s reading of Warhol.

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Central to any discussion of Warhol is the notion of “authenticity,” and the corresponding idea of art as being fundamentally distinct from manufacture, or of

20. The myth of an inland sea was “redemptive” in the sense that its waters were expected to transform the dry interior of Australia into a flourishing Eden. Industry later resurrected this myth, although its form is closer in appearance to that of Lasseter’s gold, which Kinsella deals with in his *Nebuchadnezzar/Lasseter* poems. The Dantesque atmosphere of these poems, however, suggests the idea of a geographical hell as the destiny of industrialist greed.
21. The irony of the New South Wales penal colony having been established on land stolen from the Australian aborigines is one that still remains lost on many Australians today.

aesthetic value as being somehow intrinsic to a work of art (and therefore “real”) and not determined by the marketplace (that is, as something purely nominal or virtual, and dependent upon a context). It is possible, for instance, to see the juxtaposition of Warhol with “Wheatlands” as a comment on the structure of authority in determining the signifying value of (the) landscape, particularly in regards to agricultural industry—in that the mechanisation of the land determines its meaning in terms of use-value, which in turn situates its meaning within a particular cultural-historical setting. In the experimental poetic sequence, *Syzygy*, Kinsella likens this to the technology of writing:

threatening construction on its very  
printed page, corrector fluid  
[...]  
formatted like a river ending  
in a window mouse decorating  
graphic disasters  
without compassion. We impose.  
Macrographic-Beta-Language  
[7. “Subjecting objects to serious scrutiny”]

In many ways, *Syzygy* can be said to explore this conjunction between poetics and technology,<sup>22</sup> or between landscape and language, and there are notable instances where Kinsella deploys the figure of Warhol to negotiate these conjunctions.

Like Warhol, Kinsella can be seen to focus upon ways in which the heavily mediated, and mechanised “object” nevertheless resists “interpretation.” In the case of the Australian landscape, and the Western Australian landscape in particular, this situation is radicalised; not only do the idiosyncratic aspects of the land escape mechanical normalisation (weather patterns, distance, population density, cultural isolation, racial difference, etc.), but they also *call* for normalisation—that is, from the point of view of an ideology which requires that the earth and its species be “dignified” through utility in the service of advancing “civilisation” and sustaining

22. This calls to mind a statement by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, that “techné belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiesis*: it is something poetic.” Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” trans. W. Lovitt and D. Farrell Krell. *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell. Rev. ed. London: Routledge, 1993: 308.

economic “progress.” Further, there is a level of contiguity between this ideology and the dominant aesthetic. For instance, there is the question of how land is represented (in the visual arts, in politics, in economics, in poetry: i.e. “the pastoral tradition”), and how in Australia this process has been, since colonisation, one of conflict between a mechanical “translation” of land into “land-scape” and a resistance to translation (an element of the unassimilable which enacts a deconstruction of the Western aesthetic, and so on). As Kinsella suggests (drawing upon the internal contradictions of “property”), this process may be “re-flex-ive / though who owns the fragments (?)” (Syzygy 18. “peine fort et dure”).<sup>23</sup>

One of the outcomes of the encounter between Kinsella and Warhol is the foregrounding of a certain irony regarding the meaning of “technique” and what authorises technique and determines it as a mechanism of identity. This irony, however, masks a radical violence: the systematic effort, in Australia, to not only translate, but to expunge (as a form of ge(n)ocide)—to replace the (dystopic) land with a functional (aestheticised) landscape, and thus to impose upon it a metaphysical “essence.” In this way the nature-culture distinction breaks down, as does the opposition between essence and *proprium* (or outward aspect), and “landscape” henceforth functions as a type of *deus ex machina*—a grotesque and hysterical apparatus caught up in the perpetual manufacture of its own image as *property*.<sup>24</sup>

What would determine this in terms of *traumatic realism* is that this manufacture does not act to conceal what lies beyond, nor does it mask the absence of a beyond, a negation of place or a *terra nullius*. Rather it points to its own “technique,” its own “essence” as technology, to what defines it as “technological.” In section 2 of *Syzygy*, “Fallout,” Kinsella writes:

remember looting these impressions?  
machinery expressive and light-  
conscious love scarifying poise  
the tractor rocketing the clod of loamy earth

23. These contradictions may at first appear slight but in fact carry a deal of philosophical weight. Between *proper*, *propre*, and *property*, the sense of “own” moves from the reflexive to the objective mode—from an implication of “self,” and what properly belongs to oneself, to an implication of something acquired externally and therefore supplementary to “self.”

24. We might say that the very structure of this “missed encounter with the real” is technological, that is to say poetic, and that it requires a mark of the unassimilable, which remains, like an unconscious, to haunt and disrupt the ordered exterior.

bootlegging frustration mudbrick and fencewire  
circular-saws threatening Robert Frosts

In this evocation of the encounter between pastoral and industry, Kinsella poses the question of how cultural self-awareness, through aesthetic representation, veils a threat posed by the technological, which is not only a threat of disillusionment originating somewhere “beyond” representation, but a threat which belongs to representation itself. In this way Kinsella poses the idea of landscape not only in terms of *topos*, but also as *trope*.

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It is a commonplace that, for the most part, Australia inhabited the European Romantic imagination as the *dystopia* to North America’s *utopia*. But while America had Southey, Coleridge and Blake to laud it as the next pantisocratic Jerusalem, Australia’s spiritual patrons were more concerned with its promise as a penal abyss into which a whole stratum of society might be cast and forgotten. Both were conceived in terms of “use,” but the nature of this use differed radically in intention, even if it was similar in its outcomes.<sup>25</sup>

The similarity and disparity between the ideas of Australia and America can be seen as informing Kinsella’s reading of Warhol in terms of use-value and the aesthetics of different types of consumption. In “On Andy Warhol’s *Baseball and Gold Marilyn Monroe*,” America is represented as “industrial might [...] pre-packed,” with an “earthly” Joe DiMaggio leaping from a “black bunker” towards Marilyn’s celestial lips like a germinating phallus. The heliotropic metaphor links together industry and fertility in an image of commodified desire (“a gold shrouded satellite / orbiting the American dream,” “The President licks your golden feet”), while the rhetoric recalls a whole genealogy of creation (and nation) myths, and one could

25. The implications of this for a “democratic” view of the American utopia are played out in several comments made by Warhol which point up the illusion of individual freedom by which modern consumerism is sustained (what could be called the democratising of the consumable): “What’s great about this country is that America started with the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same...” Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975, 100-101. Warhol also makes a point of noting that “Those who talk about individuality the most are the ones who most object to deviation.” Quoted in Swenson, 61.

almost imagine DiMaggio hitting the home run for the species. But then, seasonal “[r]e-runs of greatness start to look the same,” and the allegory itself seems banalised at the same time as its language becomes inflated and sloganised (“course // marked collision”).<sup>26</sup> America as utopia, as Warhol himself insisted, is a “dream America,” “custom-made from art and schmaltz and emotions.”<sup>27</sup>

But as elsewhere, Kinsella, like Warhol, poses a challenge to the way in which the value-structures of myth or legend are often perceived. Much of Warhol’s artistic production, for instance, can be viewed as a critique of the way in which myth and cultural identity have become objects of the market place, comprising, in his own words, “a statement of the symbols of the harsh, impersonal products and brash materialistic objects on which America is built today. It is a projection of everything that can be bought and sold, the practical but impermanent symbols that sustain us.”<sup>28</sup> The banality of such symbols, however, is always contextual, and this is something we need to keep in mind even while reading Homer’s *Iliad*, for example, whose similarities to the inflated prime-time rhetoric of modern ball games are perhaps more significant than its differences. And it would be disingenuous to suggest that hexameters are somehow intrinsically more worthy as a medium than modern commercial silk-screens, or that intentionality intervenes on the part of Homer to elevate his subject, while on the part of Warhol it intervenes to debase it. If we consider the well-worn phrase of Cleanth Brookes that relates a work of high art to a well wrought urn, there may be more than sarcasm at play in Kinsella’s formulation of “[a] perfect pose concealing / popular truths, the trashy / synthetic polymer makeup, canvas / skin and silkscreened hair” (‘On Andy Warhol’s *Marilyn Six-Pack*’).

In “Shot Marylins & Gunbelt,” the theme of allegorical recycling is tied explicitly to landscape. As with “Warhol at Wheatlands,” the landscape is viewed through the use of catachresis. The “sunset,” contrasting with Marilyn’s lips in “On

26. It is important to keep in mind that the juxtaposition here (between “Baseball” and “Gold Marilyn Monroe,” etc.) is Kinsella’s, and that it is precisely this intervention in the serial arrangement of Warhol’s images which gives rise to the possibility of reading them allegorically in the first place. Similarly, we must also not lose sight of the fact that here we are dealing with a question of mimesis, one which requires that we attempt to distinguish between “reproduction” and “repetition” in Kinsella’s serial meditation “on” Warhol (an interesting feature of many of Kinsella’s “Warhol” poems being the way in which they appropriate certain representational devices, such as the convention of entitling a poem “On such-and-such.” For example: “On Andy Warhol’s *Baseball* and *Gold Marilyn Monroe*,” “On Andy Warhol’s *Optical Car Crash*,” “On Warhol’s *Blue Electric Chair* and *Statue of Liberty*,” in which Kinsella seems to be adopting a mimetic register which nevertheless is disrupted in the text).

27. Andy Warhol, *America*. New York: Harper and Row, 1985, 8.

28. Andy Warhol, “New Talent U.S.A.,” *Art in America* 50.1 (1960), 42.

Andy Warhol's *Baseball and Gold Marilyn Monroe*," is "tacky / & nothing special." The iconic value of the solar metaphor is replaced by the negative commercial value of an image which is apparently unaffected (and dysfunctional). However, Kinsella is quick to remind us that the "real" is not anchored in mere portrayals of landscape (or "crops [with] broken unglazed surfaces"). Significantly there are "[p]owerlines" that "hiss in the uneasy air— / like poems escaping from screen-prints," suggesting that the poem itself, like the industrial objects and "collectibles" that define the rural environment in terms of commodity pre-packaging, is already involved in a process of consumption.

To recast the signifying equation, we might say that every signifier markets a signified. Or, as Kinsella himself has said: "landscape has always been a political concept," or so much "rural propaganda."<sup>29</sup> But beyond "landscape" there is also the ideology of "THE LAND," whose "reality" serves to mythologise the Australian dystopian experience in a way that the Statue of Liberty, for example, serves to mythologise America's utopian one.<sup>30</sup> That is to say that the idea of "THE LAND" serves to dignify the antagonistic relationship between "man" and environment—a relationship which might otherwise be seen as merely one of cruelty, cynicism or futility.

In section 28 of *Syzygy*, entitled "Reality," Kinsella connects landscape with the female body, which is seen to function, counter to the ideal "feminine" object of desire ("capture[d] and isolate[d...] like a flash billboard") in poems such as "On Warhol's *Marilyn Monroe's Lips And Red Disaster*," as a carnal object of sexual aggression:

If it's real it's been photo-  
graphed but not by lips  
testing on recall cauterised  
word(s)—slash & burn, scorched  
earth releasing opacity  
of skin and smooth cool sight  
in our hands, wounds

29. *Verse*, 69.

30. The ideology of THE LAND also amounts to a laying-claim to values of spirituality which are not only alien to white, Anglo-Saxon culture (which has never quite had a correlative to the northern European racial cults or the Hebraic obsession with a promised land), but remain fundamentally incomprehensible to it (without, that is, assimilating it to sentiments that are either steeped in nihilistic fervour or are simply trite or kitsch—both cases barely masking a contest between resentment and indifference that reveals itself in the daily hypocrisies of Australian political and social life).

washed & THE LAND  
never sulking.

Elsewhere, in section 12, "Entropy / Flesh," a reference to Warhol's "Tunafish Disaster" separates "tundra vista / the canvas captures and projects / the sky shocked" from "disaster spread / like emulsified stabilised sheen upon / Marilyn's tender lips c/- Big Sirs." Here the carnality of section 28 is prefigured in an image that at once commodifies and ironises a "rape" by conflating the language of pornography with that of speculation ("en-loading your own quizzing sense-around. Smell it!").

In much of Kinsella's writing, landscape functions not as a plane of representation, but as the place of a "missed encounter" between the "real" and those systems that seek to exploit it in terms of what it can be made to represent. Hence "Entropy / Flesh" suggests a type of encounter whose limits define a "carnal knowledge" in opposition to the higher (socio-economic, cultural, political, aesthetic) values invoked in order to conceal its actual operations. Instead we are invited to witness the effectiveness of this encounter, its technology, which becomes anaesthetic in the form of pastoral.

However, to supplant the pastoral with some other negative representation, such as "the rape of the land," does little to engage the complicity of representation itself (—it ultimately makes no difference if "THE LAND" is depicted according to one ideological system or another, as utopia or dystopia, since it is equally suborned in either case). Where we might begin to speak more decisively of *traumatic realism*, then, is at those points at which the subornation of the "real" is exposed in its own machinations, through a lapsus or series of lapsus.<sup>31</sup>

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In *Syzygy*, and to a similar extent in other experimental works such as *Erratum/Frame(d)*, Kinsella adopts what could be described as a strategy of ellipsis, which in itself constitutes a general grammar (recalling Joyce's "paperspace" and Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés*), in which it is not so much a matter of representing a lapsus or lacuna, as framing a space of repetition. As Lacan has noted, the Freudian "return of

31. See Jacques Lacan, "Freud, Hegel and the Machine.," *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli. New York: Norton, 1988, 64-76.

the repressed” is not the return of any thing, or even of a signifier of a repressed, but rather of the absence of a signifier, which thus signifies in turn: it functions as a blank into which other signifiers are repeatedly (mechanically) inserted.

One of the ways Lacan explains this relationship of ellipsis and repetition is by relating it back to Saussure’s model of the Sign. Lacan situates the signified as a species of ellipsis, whose “place” is subsequently assumed by series of differing signifiers which are taken to refer to it. Lacan describes this in terms of *glissage*, or the slippage of signifiers across the interstice separating them from a supposed signified (enacting in the process a type of repetition compulsion whose structure articulates and “affirms” the illusory reality of the signified).<sup>32</sup>

In *Syzygy*, and much of Kinsella’s non-narrative writing, this notion of *glissage* could perhaps better be expressed as “abrasion”—it is an abrasion rather than a mere slippage (or laminar flow) which gives signification its possibility and ties it to the traumatic (as a “missed encounter with the real”). That is to say, it does not simply pass over, or conceal, the ellipsis. Rather, this ellipsis persists, like a cicatrix—the trace, in language, of “damaged landforms”:

fault-lines highways upending  
bridges siphoning rivers neuter  
[...]  
like bedrock and pylons  
congealed beneath town planners’ forgotten mud, acronyms  
[*Syzygy* 11. “Deletions”]

The landscape of *Syzygy*, unlike that of “Warhol in Wheatlands” (which is more or less iconic), persists beneath the impress of mechanisation (its “meaning,” to implicate Wittgenstein, as its “use” in language—that is, certain political, socio-economic, cultural rhetorics) whose object is to mask as much as to replicate.

Section 23 of *Syzygy*, “Na(rra)tive/*chappelle ardent*,” poses the question of meaning (“Syz-23-key”) as “fetish or frou-frou,” warning that “Rhe / -toric plans an / invest atation,” “morphemic and trendy / up- / wards & categorise.” Landscape becomes a process of meaning-formation, a screen upon which discourses are superimposed, just as “pastoral industries” are imposed on the “natural” environment (in which-crop cycles, with talk of yields and threat of infestation,

32. See Jacques Lacan. *Ecrits: A Selection*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977, 4ff.

define the landscape in economic terms while at the same time laying claim to higher (ethical, theological) values of utility): “De- / tailing / edifice & / scripture/ & / inspire- / ation.” Indeed, it is perhaps at this intersection of the pastoral tradition and pastoral industry that the “traumatic realism” of Kinsella’s writing has most often been identified, though equally as often misunderstood, under the rubric of “anti-pastoral.”

One of the problems with discussions of “anti-pastoral” are that they risk being re-appropriated by a discourse of engagement which masks an ideological investment in the so-called “Ground Zero” of “objectivity,” an investment Kinsella draws our attention to in a passage in *Syzygy* critiquing the truth-value of “archaeology”:

on meeting archaeological light, spent swarming  
the traps, for this is Ground Zero Warholing  
in cyclone territory  
[*Syzygy* 5. “The Cane Cutter”]

The derivation of first principles, of an *arché*, is shown as always being brought up against the problem of language, of Warholian serial repetition, of the un(der)grounding of *logos* at the very point at which we expect to encounter the “real.” In section 23 of *Syzygy* again:

logos  
go go  
& presuppose a% of  
an \*  
[vraisemblance]  
eschews a?

Touchy on a point  
of picture & linkage = so what?

[*Syzygy* 23. “Na(rra)tive/*chappelle ardent*”]

Textual archaeology, in other words, never steps “beyond” discourse, for which the distinction between “picture” and “linkage” (reference) is a matter of indifference.

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Against the Romantic deployment of the pastoral as a locating of the sublime through the egoisation of landscape, “anti-pastoral” implies a negative dialectics whose anti-subjectivism presupposes the possibility of a more authentic relationship between representation and its objects (or, on the other hand, countering the devaluations of “post-modernism,” between representation and repetition).

What remains, however, is that in Kinsella’s writing “anti-pastoral” does not define itself in terms of a *negation* of the pastoral tradition, but rather as an articulation of the pastoral’s “missed encounter with the real.” It situates this “missed encounter” in language, in the very structure of language, such that we could speak of “traumatic realism” as a condition of discourse, and not as an object or objective. But if Kinsella’s poetry can be said to articulate a kind of “anti-pastoral” violence, it is not to say that this poetry is “about” violence (the violence of the landscape, of industry, of white Australian history, etc.). Rather it is a matter of its being “‘about’ the violence of repetition and its structure.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, this violence can be considered as “traumatic” not because it confronts us with a destruction of ego-affirming pastoral ideology, or because this destruction brings us into a (threateningly) direct encounter with the “real,” but because it implicates us in an event of language from which we are necessarily absent and about which we are only able to manufacture accounts.

This paradox, which is ultimately that of a failed identification in the self, underlies the “representational” violence of pastoral through which landscape is redeemed for the prestige of the colonising ego of Western property culture. What Kinsella’s reading of Warhol suggests, however, is that this “redemption,” theological in pretension, is also a type of Simony, a purchasing of preferment, a buying back of the singular commodity of guilt, to the profit of indifference.<sup>34</sup> Warhol’s alleged cynicism in this regard has earned him the accusation of being “morally numb,” and of being “disposed to treat all events as spectacle.”<sup>35</sup> Yet in rendering “guilt” as spectacle (the spectacle of social complicity in tragedy and acts of violence), Warhol denies “guilt” as fetish, as the sacred object of an institutional morality which metes out judgement and justice (as it appears in *art engage*).<sup>36</sup>

33. Bois and Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide*, 163.

Moreover, in Warhol's work, the commodification of guilt does not render a denial of responsibility, but rather a destructuring of responsibility. For Warhol, as for Kinsella, it is not a question of responding to or for the "guilty" image, but of encountering those structures which render such "responsibility" impossible and which tie the individual into an economy of guilt that is self-perpetuating at the same time as it is "meaningless."

*Traumatic realism* can therefore be taken to describe the on-going repetition of this missed encounter (the failure of responsibility). In this way, Kinsella and Warhol also enact a critique of what Leo Bersani has termed "the culture of redemption,"<sup>37</sup> exposing the aesthetic morality of *art engagé* as a form of historical-cultural revisionism. As Leo Bersani argues: "A crucial assumption in the culture of redemption is that a certain type of repetition of experience in art repairs inherently damaged or valueless experience."<sup>38</sup> We might also say that, in "repairing," it replaces, or dis-places. Redemption, as a process of assimilation, perpetuates the "experience" of trauma as a hidden topos of incarceration, repression, amnesia for what it implicitly excludes from its economy of "corrective will."

34. See Donald Horne, *Money Made Us*, Ringwood: Penguin, 1976, 136ff. Horne's ironic term "The Lucky Country" aptly focuses this idea of the crude projection of nationalistic fantasies of self-affirmation and wish-fulfilment. The guilt with which Australia had always been tainted became the basis of a redemption myth: Australia, its politicians decided after Federation (and particularly after the Second World War), was a land of "unharnessed resources" and "pastoral possibility." What Horne makes clear, though, is that this redemptive wealth was not the product of rational industry, but simply one of chance, or "luck." As a counterpoint to the dystopian experience of "trauma" that it conceals, the "Lucky Country" also describes an event from which the colonising ego is absent. This is an irony to which Kinsella often returns, employing the example of Warhol in a critique of the pastoral tradition and of pastoral industry, in which a compulsion to repeat describes the condition of vicariously lived experience which remains the common condition of (post-) colonial Australia.

35. Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, 348 & 351.

36. A tendency, as Kinsella suggests, to "moralise / & catastrophise & lies / out & about before sequestering / downs the spout & closes / the ment (al) gap: lash / out" (*Syzygy*, 30: re (con) structure ing / damage control).

37. Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1990.

38. Bersani, 1.

## Diptych

“a grey building seen through green palisades appears  
red” & windows  
heavily curtained  
reflect—  
an aperture  
a figure shifting in ultra-  
marine [like] a sail / hung up  
on the shore to dry — the sullen backdrop of the sea partially  
obscured in successive contrasts / off-register  
as sentiment in the dis-  
illusioned after-image—  
*seeing red*  
as storm clouds threaten to mar the scene grey describes  
effortlessly

## Documentary

(for Donald Theall)

obliquely, the film coverage strips back to reveal  
an optical allusion, telescoped  
to red or blue in the naked & too re-  
ceptive eye—contours of light  
changing & shifting from series of counter-  
point in timeless neo-classical syn-  
thesis — a resonant interval in the body’s “coming  
forth by night” with its lack  
of punctuation & other visual aids  
like a carefully devised strategy — a clinical

apotheosis, aware of the interest  
that its presence is arousing

in the hollow muscular thoracic cone — circulating  
the blood & playing down the terminal act

*Writing the Politics of Difference: Race, Ethnicity  
and Class in Literary Representation*  
Gareth Griffiths and Ian Saunders

Race/ethnicity and class are central in the representation of cultural and social identity. Gareth Griffiths and Ian Saunders examine the history, development and critical implications of these terms, offering helpful definitions and distinctions of their meanings. The informed discussion is illustrated with practical examples drawn from a wide range of texts, including popular film (*The Lion King*, *Forrest Gump*, *Clueless*) as well as literature (*Othello*, *Emma*, *Heart of Darkness*, *A Fringe of Leaves*, T. S. Eliot).

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## Poetry, History & the Imagination

In the first of Rainer Maria Rilke's "Letters to a Young Poet", Rilke advises the young poet on subject matter:

...write about what your everyday life offers you; describe your sorrows and desires, the thoughts that pass through your mind and your belief in some kind of beauty — describe all these things with heartfelt, silent, humble sincerity and, when you express yourself, use the Things around you, the images from your dreams, and the objects that you remember. If your everyday life seems poor, don't blame it; blame yourself; admit to yourself that you are not enough of a poet to call forth its riches; because for the creator there is no poverty and no poor, indifferent place. And even if you found yourself in some prison, whose walls let in none of the world's sounds — wouldn't you still have your childhood, that jewel beyond all price, that treasure house of memories? Turn your attention to it. Try to raise up the sunken feelings of this enormous past...

I chose this quote because it highlights the potential breadth and depth of the individual imagination, as well as the nature of the past as a potent creative source. Although Rilke is talking about the past in the personal (childhood) sense, I believe his comments can be equally applied to the public (historical) past, and that, as writers, we can express our own particular "sorrows, desires, thoughts and belief in some kind of beauty" when we reach beyond our individual histories, and tap into, and respond to, broader historical events in our work. I am not sure that by turning to history we discover more about the future, but I do believe that exploring historical events with an open and active imagination can help us to connect with our collective past as a society; help us to clarify and fortify ourselves as individual members of an ongoing group, sharing some kind of organic human knowledge

with which to face the future.

To my mind, knowledge as a body is dead without imagination: imagination is the blood that runs through the veins of the body of knowledge. Statistics, dates, facts tend to hold very little life of their own. And the imagination is a necessary adjunct to the intellect when engaging with history, as it is only with our own breath that we can respond to the “lost” life of the past. In this sense, it is an act of the imagination that is required in order to activate the intellect into creative, that is, living understanding.

There is an exchange that occurs when one turns to history in this way: the “facts” you take, the “feelings” you supply; the growth of understanding, and the outward communication that hopefully results. How does this exchange occur? By engaging, heart and mind, with your chosen subject matter: by both suspending *disbelief* in what has gone before, and suspending *belief* in your own dominating ego. One must allow oneself to be moved, to feel the breath, to see the most trivial moments as moments in a *life*.

As a writer often working in the realm of documentary poetry, I have been challenged (and re-challenged) by a number of issues over the years. For example, the role of nostalgia, which can be destructive if one is merely looking to the past in order to confirm the (often false) tenets of the present. I have found I have to be particularly careful when approaching a subject that invokes a nostalgic response in me, as this is when my own emotions can surreptitiously unbalance the apple-cart.

The role of truth is also problematic, raising questions such as whose truth? Who has recorded this history, and why? Is truth experienced differently, according to who you are? Does truth transcend the usual dichotomies of gender, race and class? Is one person’s truth another person’s folly? And so on. It certainly seems ‘true’ to me that if history repeats itself, it is because we repeat ourselves. Perhaps putting ourselves in another’s position, walking a mile in another’s shoes, will help us to understand, learn, change, become better people, do less harm.

I have always been drawn to history as a source of material from which to create poems. My first collection contained many poems and sequences based on archival materials. At the time I was writing them, I thought I was writing about other people’s lives, but of course I was writing about myself. When I look over the subjects of that first book — Emily Dickinson, Frida Kahlo, Ahab, Frankenstein, the witches of Salem, and so on — I am struck by the clear connection between “me” and “them”, and my writing is certainly not as objective as I then thought. Over time, I have come to accept that my work can never be totally objective, and that I

exist in each poem, despite its subject matter. I have even begun to enjoy this concept.

With this realisation in mind, I approached my second collection *Botany Bay Document*, which is subtitled *A Poetic History of the Women of Botany Bay*. Of course, there is nothing new about documentary poetry, as the works of Homer, Ovid and countless others will attest to. But it was important for me to realise how much of my own past was being accessed while studying supposedly “outside” historical events. In fact, I saw this as a revelation: I could adopt “other” personas as a foil for my own; write about everything I felt but could not, or did not want to, express, with that enormous “I” comfortably and conveniently concealed in the vehicle of another’s identity. In this sense, adopting an historical persona can be seen as a metaphor for oneself that is sustained over a poem, or even a whole collection.

Here is a poem from “Botany Bay Document” that was inspired by a research visit to Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney. The ground-level floorboards had been recently lifted, and a huge assortment of cutlery, clay pipes — everybody smoked, even children; there were something like 5,000 samples — and other items that had fallen, or had been pushed, through cracks were on display. I was particularly taken by the collection of tampons. Yes, tampons! Obviously, they were not invented by Carefree or Meds a few decades back, but were being fashioned by women and girls at least two centuries ago, for their personal use. Looking at these curious items, I was struck by the thought that if this discovery had been made too much earlier, the tampons almost certainly would have been disposed of as rubbish, and I was very aware that this was a piece of women’s history I was fortunate to view. Many adolescent girls, the youngest only eleven years old, were transported to Australia without their families, for committing an array of trivial crimes. With this poem, I wanted to access some of the loneliness I experienced when I started menstruating in the early 1970s, how embarrassed and confused I felt. I also wanted to *imagine* the same situation in convict times, girls suffering separation from friends and family, tearing up the few clothes they possessed into pieces of cloth which they formed into tampons, and later poked down through the floorboards for disposal:

## Moonfish

In my stiff canvas cot between  
Catherine and Sarah I stare out  
at the Port Jackson night. A

different moon looms above  
North Dorset Downs and I'm  
sickened within to be hid from

its thin moorish light. A twelve-  
year-old coiner when the *Midas*  
hove to thirteen when it ceased

all its sailing I am become a  
woman in sad Sydney Cove with  
no companion or kin to comfort

me in the misery of my secret  
ailing. The tide inside is timely  
turning the fish in me are

hauling heavy through the hellish  
bone and in the sky my mother's  
eye trails its counsel over my

plight in the warp and weft of  
fine cloud. While Sarah stirs in  
her Aberdeen dream and Cathy

sighs somewhere near Suffolk  
I am learning shame in crimson  
waves that seek to drag me under.

My petticoat is ripped to bits

so too my old neckerchief and  
the linen shift I was issued with

barely exists at all. I arise  
once more to stall the flood on a  
twist of worsted rag *wrap the*

fabric round and round tie the  
string and slide it in to stop up  
*the scarlet wailing* and stuff

the old stain through the boards  
where rats nest in my blood. As  
birds bring in a southern dawn

to shut off my mother's stare my  
thighs dry stiff with moonfish  
that have drowned in foreign air.

I was drawn to the early pioneering women because they are part of my history, and part of this country's past. I wanted to explore the roots of our society. I did not, however, feel capable or willing to attempt writing from the perspective of Aboriginal women, but chose to restrict myself to that part of Australian history (that is, the white, female part) that I responded to, and felt I could contribute to as a poet. I felt very awkward in some ways about this decision: was I simply repeating the same old white boys' narrative? Yes, and no. For women of any colour represent a distinct "minority" in terms of power, and I decided (after my research revealed how little of white women's history here was deemed worthwhile enough to record) that these women and girls deserved a voice.

With my most recent collection, *The Hanging of Jean Lee*, I wanted to concentrate on one woman. I searched for a long time in order to find the 'right' subject for my writing. And it was during this search that I realised I was looking backwards for parts of myself. I chose the story of Jean Lee precisely because it is so unknown: it seems everybody has heard about Ronald Ryan, the last man hanged in Australia (1967), but who has heard of Jean Lee, one of only five women ever

hanged in this country, and the only one to be executed this century? Which year? Only 1951, in Pentridge Prison, Victoria. My intellect told me, This is a story that must be told, while my imagination told me, This woman is like me in so many ways! That is when the pot starts melting, and poetry sometimes happens, when you feel your own core or centre blink with recognition, and begin to write.

Although Jean Lee was accomplice to a cruel murder, she was only an accomplice, and, after three miscarriages of justice during the various trials, she was sentenced to hang. Think about the year: the murder occurred in 1949, soon after World War II, a period during which women came into much greater independence, holding down jobs and helping keep everything going while their menfolk fought. Jean Lee, herself, was a prostitute and a single mother: not the desired post-war model the government in power wanted for white Australian women during the aftermath of 1945. Many scholars agree that, in this respect, Jean Lee was something of a scapegoat: an example to be held up to all those other women who may have become too confident and sassy during the war years; , message to get back into the kitchen and rattle things. And so she was hanged. But what of *her* story? She left no journal or diary, wrote to nobody, and was visited by nobody in her solitary confinement, apart from prison officials, a priest, a nun. I wanted to tell this story, but I also wanted to express my own aloneness, my own "downfall" if you like, my own story. I have never been a prostitute, or an accomplice to murder, but I have experienced my own mistakes and misunderstandings, my own "solitary confinement", and I found many instances II I felt, or felt I felt, Jean's presence along with my own when I wrote.

For example, it is widely considered that Jean became pregnant around the age of thirteen, and for the duration of the pregnancy was taken to Melbourne , where the child was subsequently adopted out. Jean was brought up a Roman Catholic and, as I have had my own tussles with God, and with my own biology as a woman, I chose to express this devastating experience in a quasi-religious setting:

### Dear Diary (1934)

When I meet God I will  
kill Him With Bible  
and knife I will cry for

His life in words even  
He won't be willing to  
fight I will kill Him

but first I will force  
Him to crawl through  
the valleys and shadows

scrawled over my soul  
I will teach Him the  
scriptures from inside

of me I will preach till  
He prays for verses of  
*mercy* He will lay

Himself down in an  
unholy heap His hands  
round my ankles His

head on my feet I will  
kill Him and as the fires  
and storms start I will

*damn* Him and *doom*  
Him for culling my heart  
Dear Lord don't forgive

for I know what I do  
and as You forsook me  
so now I forsake You

It can be difficult and exciting work, using recorded history as a springboard for one's own imagination. Researching the past, and writing about it involves the melding of one's present self, and all those past selves, however they are perceived.

Maybe it is all we can do — as poets, as writers — to create a personal kind of order out of the overwhelming rush of information we are presented with, during our time on this earth. We are all individual beings, but we are also a product — to a large extent — of what has gone on before.

To conclude, as Rilke points out, we always have our own childhoods — our individual pasts — as an enormous source of material to write about. Yet Rilke lived in a different culture, and a different time. Perhaps the present state of the world environment, of the planet itself and of its inhabitants, lends a greater urgency to the enterprise of (re)writing history as an act of the imagination. As the millennium draws to a close, what have we learned about the role of history in our creative lives? It is easy to maintain an attitude of denial: that was then, this is now, they are all dead, we are alive, that is all that matters. It may be more difficult to open ourselves to our collective past, but in order to move closer and without trepidation towards an increasingly global community, and within increasing multiple threats to our very existence as a species (let alone as writers), we need to exercise both our intellects and our imaginations, in tandem.

## My Neighbour's Face

### Point of Contact

This is the scene. I am walking along the footpath of a street in my suburb. Ahead, I notice one of my neighbours in her front garden, watering. As I approach her property she looks up at me; I turn my face towards her and say, "Good morning." She returns the words and I keep moving.

What is it that has occurred? What have we just seen? Let me run it again, fill in a little more detail. It is a sunny morning. A young woman, smartly dressed, is heading towards the train station, on her way to work. Another woman, older by, let's say, forty years, is in her garden, tending her blooms, as is her daily habitude. There is an exchange of neighbourly greetings — a word or two of acknowledgment, a good wish. "Good morning." This is an event of community.

Perhaps this depiction seems clear enough. Perhaps I have lit the corners of a reality with which you are familiar, which is, to a satisfactory extent, knowable. But I am restless, discontent. I have the sensation of something more. Something else is passing through and I have a glimpse of it. What I want to do, *need* to do, is break into this scene, peel it back. I'm going to work here; I want to see if I can't get somewhere else by prodding whatever it is that is just outside my field of perception.

### Who She Is

I have never met this woman formally. I have seen her in her garden and driving her car, and I can tell you that I believe her to be a grandmother and a lover of colour. These are details I have appropriated from an exterior, characteristics which have been demonstrated and which one could reasonably assume to be matters of fact (indeed, all one need do is ask her to confirm their accuracy). In reaching these conclusions I have made good use of that old faithful, the empirical method: after all, don't we of the modern age know full well that what is real is that which is

observable and verifiable? But here is the point at which I become uneasy. Something more is going on. There is more that is significant about her, I somehow sense it, something I cannot access in this ordinary way. I could analyse her attributes until I run out of categories, but in the end it all would come down to the one logic: she is either the same as me, or different to me; together we make up a totality. But what I'm getting at is something otherwise. The clue is in her face.

I have experienced an exchange with this woman; I have looked her in the face and said, "Good morning." And though she was familiar to me as a different version of myself, she was, in the same moment, terribly strange. I'll warn you right now that what I am striving towards is outside the reach of these words. But I have little choice: I must work with them and through them; they are all the tools I have.

Who she is. In her face the woman was presented to me as another person, similar, but external, to me. But her face was also the site of another encounter — one with something altogether beyond my intention or my objectification. Her expression was of... an expression. It signified not a static body of meaning available for my appropriation, but itself; accessible only as a challenge, an enigma. In my neighbour's face I caught a glimpse of her absolute alterity — that is, the reality that she is other to me in a way *that I cannot know*. Would I go so far as to call her face an epiphany? Yes. To the extent that it was a revelation of a trace of that which escapes me.

### Who I Am

I did not exist before I came face to face with this woman. Does this sound strange? Of course, I am referring to this woman as representative of all women, as well as all men, and all children too. In other words, this woman as Other to me. There is always an Other; in fact, the very structure of my being is in relation to my neighbour. You could say, and you would be right, that because of this essential relationship I am constituted as *exposed* to this woman. She is outside of all my conscious intentions, and she is *prior* to me: not in temporal, historical terms, but in the framework of my being.

But I must go further. The older woman who lives on my street, who I pass on my way to the train station, holds me hostage. I am bound to her. Irrevocably. Impossibly. She uses no ropes, chains, no physical restraints, but in facing her I am subject to her imperative. Here is the link: when we face one another I am capable of responding to her — I have an *ability to respond* to her — I have a *response-ability* — I am *response/able to/for* her. The condition in which I reside, therefore, is one in which I am appealed to, called upon, by my neighbour, by the nakedness of her

face, and my responsibility to her has no limit; in effect I am *substitutable* for her and understand I must supply for her need with my very substance. Can you think of this? Can you find yourself in these shadows and reflections? Can you see how I cannot reject this responsibility? No, my neighbour has never asked me for anything, not even to feed her cat. But in the act of facing, in looking into her face, I have become open. A woman I do not, can not, know has opened me from the outside, and I live a life of debt, in the shadow of her call. She is alterity itself, insofar as she is not simply another perspective of the same (myself), but is a disturbance, a rupture, of me. And I am her subject.

### What I Said

What I said was "Good morning". A simple enough observation, or the expression of an idea, a wish, to my neighbour. An utterance used countless times on innumerable mornings. Something relatively stable is conveyed by these words. It would seem. But can you perceive an undersense? Have you caught another impression, the trace of another dimension? This is where I am heading.

What I said to my neighbour was "Good morning" but what was also happening was something too raw for these words. A more pure communication. Not the expression of an idea, but the communication of nothing but the sincerity of communication. The uncovering of myself, an exposure too true for words' obstructiveness. A kind of saying which could never be fully represented by what is said. I spoke. I expressed my ability to respond. And the simplicity of my words contained the trace of what was beyond them: my exposure; the breaking up of the totality of my self in the face of the Other; the recognition of my debt. I did not 'tell' 'the truth', but I expressed my truthfulness.

### What I Am Saying

My sensitivity to my neighbour's face is a shadowy domain. And I cannot speak of what is outside the light without tremendous strain. Is this fiction? I agree: to speak without having said anything would be. So I must use what I can and offer this to you as words, themes, ideas. But this is a site of penumbra, where meaning is in the glimpse of the eclipse. What I am saying is in what I have said, but it is also beyond it. What I am saying is both this, and not this. Thank you. Good morning.

This text is informed by Emmanuel Levinas' theories of subjectivity and alterity, particularly as discussed in his work, *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence* (trans. Alphonso Lingis. London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).

## The Poison and the Antidote

*The situation turns ambivalent if the linguistic tools of structuration prove inadequate; either the situation belongs to none of the linguistically distinguished classes, or it falls into several classes at the same time...*  
Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*

### PROLOGUE

This is the story I can barely tell. Where I drink the poison and the antidote FROM THE SAME CUP. The beast bites; there is the complexity of pleasure in its fangs. Teeth marks, a rupture, so that what is in seeps out, and what is beyond cannot be kept at bay. The intermingling. I welcome the delicate wolves through the door.

### THE PHYSICAL

Have you ever had a simpler moment? Cancer is creeping but you suck that sweet smoke down into the airless box that is your chest and it is a breath of life as true as oxygen itself. The ignition and the immolation. What feeds on you, and what provides.

### PHYSICS

In 1898 Marie Curie discovered the radioactive elements polonium and radium. One hundred years later nuclear medicine imaging is used to examine hearts, brains, bones, for signals of disease. Madame Curie died of leukaemia at the age of sixty-six, after years of exposure to radioactivity. In 1998, radioactive material

is inserted into the body to provide an effective treatment for a range of cancers.

## METHOD

The aphrodisiac cantharidin, widely known as Spanish fly, is made from the dried and ground corpses of a small beetle, native to Spain and southern France. The ingested amount which leads to sexual effects can also cause pain, kidney damage and death.

## THE MATERIAL

How forgiving my lover; how well my lover provides.  
For my neck, which bruises too easily, a seven-string mikimoto choker;  
For my ankle, where the bone too quickly breaks, an exquisite rhinestone strand;  
For the crook of the arm which is slow to submit, Prada;  
For my torso, too prone to scar, full-length chinchilla;  
And for my too-ready lips, Chanel: a vibrant jolt of intense red.

## DYING

Our daily tasks were simple: Adjust his body to alleviate the points of pressure. Administer morphine. Fill a bowl with warm water; use a soft cloth, perhaps an old pair of his underpants, to wash down his sinking skin. We tried to avoid seeing or touching the new lumps, which were so sturdy and certain we no longer had the courage for a direct encounter. One of us would bring a cup of cool juice to hold to his lips. We listened in silence to the delicate hollowness of his gasps. As the night came and we bedded down on the floor to be nearby, we prayed that God would be merciful and take him before morning.

We began the new day with a prayer of gratitude that he was still with us.

## DESIRE

Empty, and replete with emptiness.  
Rooted, in the between of yearning.  
Fastened into the void, impossibly tilted towards its exterior.

## IDENTITY

My mother has Alzheimer's. I visit her and she says, *Who are you?* I say, *Susan*, but the truth is... I can't say what the truth is. I could try harder to identify myself,

to remind us both of who I am. I could allocate the events of my life into categories in an effort to clarify them, to tease out the actual nature of my identity. Mother, I could say, remember me? I am your daughter. I am mother to your three grandchildren, all grown up now and beginning lives of their own. I am wife of Stuart, your son-in-law these past twenty-eight years. I live two suburbs from you, as I have done for the past decade. I am an educator, with a career behind me of which we've all been proud. Every one of these sentences is authentic; every one of these threads of my life has been sincere.

### **IDENTITY (CONTINUED)**

But there is more. I could tell you also that whilst I have loved and cherished my children every day of their lives, they have been a terrible burden to me; that, simultaneously, I have wanted and not wanted them. That I have cared for Stuart for thirty years, and still do, but I no longer want to be married to him. That I have lived in seven houses, on three continents, but I could not say where I feel most at home. That I have been called teacher, but all the while have been the learner. I could say Yes, I am your daughter, and as such I am both you, and not you. I too forget as much as I remember; I too am ineluctably balanced, upon boundaries which continue to appear and disappear.

### **WORDS**

You board a ship, an airplane, any vehicle, and embark upon a tremendous journey. You travel to and across every land, gathering and testing every means of expression this wide world can offer. You spend your lifetime amassing all the words of all the languages, and still you do not get to the thing itself.

### **AFTERWORD**

There is silence, but not an ending; there is a gap, but I'm still here. I am not saying. Living suspension as a language, listening for the to-be-said. At the edge of incompleteness, the compulsion to remain.

## Beaconsfield

Or should I call it "First Love", or "Innocence", or "Smitten"? Or does that tell too much? Does that give it away? "The Watch"? "On Watch"? Or, better, "Guard Duty"? "On Guard"?

"Ah, you're out!"

He looked up. Or, rather, blinked up, focused, surfaced, in his customary at such times condition of confusion, bestraddled, bisected, not quite yet of this world, not yet quite of the other.

"The Vassarovs are coming!" she said. "We invited the Vassarovs! They'll be here in a minute!" She looked at him. "You haven't forgotten?"

She read in his face what she required of reply.

"Quickly!" Come on! "Change your jacket!"

Her hand on his arm, already hurrying him in proper direction.

"Oh, and those trousers! Look at your trousers! Change those too!"

Well, but a wife after all, not for nothing, for thirty years a wife,

"It went well?" he heard, in still only half-here habitation ascending his dream-rising stairs, how she reminded herself to remember to ask.

Yes, I like that, let's start like that.

He unbuttoned his working jacket.

Of canvas, his own invention, that is to say, devising, in limitation of pipe-spark conflagration the briefing, clever Jew, his tailor, although he still managed a few, his blouse-front, his pants.

Or is it finished, even?

He stood a long minute in abstract consultation.

Sufficiently hinted? Touched the chord?

By pier-glass posed in invisible reflection.

Have I written it at all?

"Rufus! Firefly! Stop that! Come here at once!"

Their panting skitter on the tiled hallway released and regained him, his twin pugs, in simultaneous transaction, from that realm to this.

Oh, yes!

A jacket!

Which jacket?

The canvas shucked, he chose and donned his beloved befrogged velvet blazer, that clever Jew again, of equal artisanship.

"Sophie! How nice to see you! Count!"

Oh, and trousers!

Time for trousers?

Which trousers?

Again in pier-glass quick confrontation.

Damn it!

She's seeing things!

Nothing wrong with these!

"Coming! Coming!"

Halfway down to discover, adorning his blouse-fronted beating chest, a fatal flaw, a final bullet, a pipe-sparked new black hole.

And all the better for it.

"Sophie my dear!"

Badge of office!

"Count!"

Sufficient masquerade!

Or the carriage to be first glimpsed?

Cliche.

Its sound, horses, leather, gravel?

Proceed.

They were old friends, so no need for a tour.

Sufficient (for us) his great-coat, her fur, as also head-gear, scarves, gloves, his necessary mannerism of unnecessary stick, by attendant staff assisted and gathered

and removed, such dutiful minions in convention of Japanese theatre (or is it Chinese?) to our eyes invisible, Sophie and her Count the scene, the spectacle, the story, the snuffling pugs in clipped-claw clatter of domestic detail sounding out the acoustic mosaic of hallway tiles — “Rufus! Firefly! Behave yourselves!” — our caught tableau of occasioned welcome.

“How nice!”

“Too long!”

“Ah, *tempus fugit* —”

In mime of appropriate dolour.

“— that terrible *tempus* and all that!”

Oh, a wit, our Count, acknowledged and applauded, a fine wit.

As simultaneously of otherwise unobserved choreography such schooled and skilful shepherding towards (what will become) an invitation of exactly-just-then open door.

“Let’s be happier in here, don’t you think?”

A grammatical nicety, well, to be expected, thirty years after all a listening and learning wife.

Albeit as easy to imagine the opposite?

On that basis instinctively chosen?

By such process intuitively gleaned?

Thus ushered into what we might call a sitting room.

Divans, sofas, single seating as required too.

Antecedents in proper and proud portraiture.

Cut blooms in captured profusion.

Twin log-lengths merrily ablaze.

“Oh, I say.”

“Rather.”

“Firefly! Rufus! Get down, you naughty doggies! You know you’re not allowed up there!”

But it was on the other divan, the brown, the velvet, placed and positioned opposite, in best light (he realized after) the consideration, he saw the surprise.

Unknown to you, of course, in here premier viewing, as you are, he had enlarged, our Count, since last encountered (as the good man himself might well have merrily punned) beyond mere measure of mortal abundance, in grossest

magnification, that is to say, a globular girth barely girdled, as above and below likewise expanded, each finger, both jowls, thighs of a size best not conjectured, flesh upon flesh and no end of it, an amplitude of amplest exaggeration, the corpus ("Steady on, Count!") writ large.

"Do sample the sturgeon!" his Count's hostess nevertheless enthused.

As they advanced around the trolley of afternoon buffet, piled plates and platters, made survey, hot and cold, laid siege, all four, the silver in shining obedience, of frosted or steamy augmentation, its both ways liquid gleam.

"Oh, I shouldn't," shrieked pronging Sophie.

Her once buxom beauty (take my word) to her Count's immensity of increment (last seen, as before) in unerringly inverse diminishment, her rapid gathering no indication, a wisp, a whisper, smaller each time, littler than memory, where did it go?

"No, doggies!" Not for you!"

His wife's surprise of framing she motioned to a minion to move, a chair drawn up specially, over there, allowing them paired opposites, on the now-freed sofa surface and its facing other, about the fire comfortably to chat and eat and sit.

"Taken up the brush again I see, old man," pointing with his ("Meat and spinach, delicious") pie pronounced the connoisseur Count.

Its maker in both or neither world where he still sought claiming purchase of lapsed long moment to respond.

"What?" he first faked. "Oh," he then floundered. "Actually," he finally found himself (or one of his selves, at any rate), "it's a pastel."

A second sortie to the buffet might now be in order, don't you think? To salve the embarrassment, as best it can, wise course, all around.

Or shall we instead allow Sophie, dear Sophie, take no notice of how she'd shined her chin, it's so small, after all, to speak, at last to make some mark of say?

"Still writing?" between mincing munchings of miniscule mouth she enquired.

Small-talk is a sparrow. Small-talk is a quick biting beak. Small-talk is a whirr of wings and away.

"I once voided a tubed container of toothpaste upon the face of a trusting and innocent sleeping girl," he said. "A dastardly act," he underlined unnecessarily, "Why did I do it?" of equal unnecessary. "I've brooded the matter for fifty years."

Where he should now have smiled. Made light. Allowed the Count his waiting-in-the-wings (which he saw, also its shadow, solid as wood) interjectory second-

class joke. God's good eye on the sparrow, after all,

A tongue-tip of no size at all traced, from inside, the remembered outline of Sophie's once-upon-a-time fine lips. For food? For story? For no real reason at all?

"But I was in love," he teased instead, still there, the crumb of memory, "Smitten," he enlarged. "Aged at most let's say just barely turned fifteen," he elucidated. "Entranced," he planted the flag.

Rufus snuggled, felled by the fire. Firefly in similar sibilance slept. Where wind broke in bodily easement was naturally by none remarked. A dog is a dog. Let sleeping dogs lie. The Count himself bred borzois, of course. Deemed no other animal of any significance. Stood proud with them (or more likely sat, these corpulent days) upon his estate. A safe topic! A sure topic! How goes it, Count, with your dogs?

"We were on camp, you know," he persisted his morsel, "Run on semi-military lines and all that," he invested its authority. "Marches, guard duty, drill, you know," he fleshed out the programme, "The sort of thing you did in those days," he excused the excuses of time.

Again that tongue-tip of less than measurable dimension ventured its appearance, tempting, testing, teasing, tasting, in action independent of its owner, or so it seemed, unknown and unconscious, so thus it appeared, separate of Sophie, sneaked out, secret of Sophie, snuck past, at this lip-corner and then that (twin limits of exploration) waived, waited, wordlessly withdrew.

"She slept outside," he persisted the detail. "Had to, you know. The air. Needed the air. Suffered from asthma, poor thing. And the high hot days of Summer come and gone too. Brisk breezes. Morning dews. Nevertheless. Even so. The tent for her intolerable. My role that night to patrol. Ten till midnight. First watch. Oh, dastardly, dastardly. Her canvas cot under the open stars."

"Beautiful, of course!" supplied the requiring Count.

Courtesy called otherwise but not now in his power. The story told itself. In flow, in flush, in flood. He merely mouthed the words.

"Oh, dastardly, dastardly!" he served (as simultaneously saw himself serving, and servile to it, amazed) his story forth. "Worse than dastardly! Imagine! Picture it! To pretend then discovery! To feign then consternation! To instigate then search!"

Even the dogs not unmoved.

"No, not particularly," he answered then the Count. "Yes, still writing," to Sophie his retarded reply.

I have said old friends? Paired couples? Facing sofas? The buffet, the fire, the

dogs? Of lightness? A levity? An afternoon of sparrows in hopping easy blur?

“Did you declare your love?” asked Sophie,

Except sometimes the ground shifts, a fissure opens, the very historical foundation on which we imagine we stand.

“As best I knew,” he said. “Of utmost art. Of fullest heart in thrall. Of endless given grace. Of every line in my mind still and so clear, the trees, the hedges, the fences, the fields, how and where I stood to see, the captured perspective. I drew a picture.”

Did the Count appear uncomfortable? The buffet buffeting within?

“And not for fifty flown years to understand this,” he said. “Or even my need to ask. Well, a writer, you know. Words. Even for the unsayable. Always words.”

Does she squeak when he beds her? Pale pastel? If he beds her? Bold oil?

“And how did she respond?” shrunken Sophie surfaced to say.

As a sparrow alights on his other art’s resumption. Will they notice? Of fish-bone-fine footing atop the gift of golden frame. Do they see?

“The other girl?” he said. “The real girl? Who smote me? Who entranced me? Who caused me to besmirch some faceless innocent? Who didn’t even know I existed? Who never even noticed? Who didn’t even know I was there?”

Some sign of sudden sun catches the edge, flashes the surface, makes blank, makes brilliant, love’s labour, trembles, exactly now, holds, exactly then.

“You tell a good story!” crowed the Count. “Oh, dastardly, dastardly and all that, ho ho!”

Yes, he thought, his hand at last to that hand all that time alongside. The title is correct. Where it happened. Leave the title. Where it took place. Let it stand. Where I went.

## The Lover

An adaptation of an Eastern European fairy story of betrayal, loss, journey and return. (Written with the assistance of an Australia Council Music Fund Grant, set to music by Quentin Grant)

*She searched for him in leaden shoes  
Crossing the world for seven years  
As the dark blood faded to petal stains  
On the doorstep of the silent house*

### 1

The falcon's shadow was a dim grey kiss  
Brushing the wavetips of the Tasman Sea  
Her body was a leaning figurehead  
Endlessly breathed, not breathing

“Once you were held at the rim of my lips  
Your body smelt like crushed flowers  
Now I miss the bruised and bruised sweetness  
Of our bed”

### 2

Under the seabirds riding the wind  
She strained to see his darker wings  
Her feet were heavy as the ship's keel  
As the Atlantic rose under each plunging fall

“I love you still

With words like razors on the windowsill  
Acres of flowers on windowsills  
Aching for you”

3

The Red Sea cays were skeined with terns  
Skimming the heat haze overhead  
She glanced once at the departing birds  
Then watched the sand

My crime was a moment of doubt  
Shattered at dusk in knives and glass  
But yours is a thousand times worse  
Years of this desertion  
And my leaden thirst

4

Chao Phrayâ was green and ruthless  
Gleaming with plastic, fish eyes and feathers  
The prow of the boat slid through the khlongs  
And her raw feet reddened the weathered hull

“I hope these feathers are yours  
And these eyes,  
These cold eyes have known you.  
I hope these mouths have torn you  
Loved you between cold lips”

5

The Seine was filled with floating dead  
The water leered under an empty sky  
Blank and dark, an eyeless road

Downwards. She turned away

“My heart is dull and fine as lead  
Loaded now with ancient stains.  
The deserted chambers of my heart  
Clink with ankle bones  
And rounded bloody stones”

6

As she stepped from the Southern Ocean  
Back onto the Southern Land  
She stared at the fine-branched veins  
Of her lightly wrinkled hands.

“My blood is this wild river  
Flooding the ocean of my flesh  
I am flying on my pulse  
I am the world”

7

Somewhere, for she had lost the names  
The worn shoes fall and melt away

She looks upwards and stretches  
Her thin arms to the sky

“I am free, thin as painted paper  
Fine as fishing line.  
Printed with the feathers  
Of memories,  
I fly.”

*She searched for him in leaden shoes  
Crossing the world and the seven seas  
When they returned after many years  
He filled her arms with bruised flowers  
On the doorstep of the silent house*

## Water

All paths leading to water shine  
Even before the ocean, grey sea, salt spray  
Brown coursing lizard in the green belt  
Silver shimmering disc in the mountains  
Crests the last hill to the eye.

The black pepples wriggling in the liquid air  
The brittle brown scimitars fallen from eucalypts  
The dark bed under the sizzling canopies  
The reeking asphalt pocked with cancers  
Shine

The scattered limestone on the bony headland

The emu tracks pressed like fingers in clay  
The thin lines tattooed on the hilly paddock  
The red dust smooth on the wind-made breast  
Shine

The glimmering sand in the moonlit dunes  
The gypsum starlit through the swaying trees  
The hallway timber in a darkened house  
The white sheet stretched to your shadowed body  
Shine

## Untitled

I'm in a strange town, the country's largest, population just over a million. We arrived at midnight.

I'm in the third floor apartment of a group of city folk who're just getting ready to go out clubbing. Slim girls, prettily made up, add finishing touches to their faces in the bathroom and screech while adjusting the hem lines of tight dresses. Big blokes with gelled hair stand around drinking beer and laughing heartily while they wait.

The grunge girls who gave me the lift up here are sitting on the floor with their friend, still excited to see her and to be so far away from home. We were supposed to be here much earlier but we got a bit lost: it took us fifteen hours to get from the bottom to the top of the island, instead of the usual ten or eleven.

We stopped in to see my Mum on the way up. As I climbed out of the big car I heard shrieks of laughter from the dining room and Mum's gang came through the french doors onto the deck, all casual clothes immaculate hair.

"Eric, you remembered my birthday! Hello girls!" Mum's friend Evelyn cried out as she tottered down the steps in her high heels, balancing a champagne flute on three fingers. The girls had got out of the car and were stretching on the lawn. Mum crunched across the gravel and kissed me. I wished Evelyn a happy birthday, pretending that was the reason I was there. They were both laughing about something, I couldn't figure out what.

"What's that strange looking thing Eric?" Evelyn asked, pointing at the back windscreen. Oh, that thing. I refused to look, denying all knowledge of the fluorescent dildo propped up in the window.

"Maybe it's your birthday present?" Mum said, causing Evelyn to shriek again.

Lisa, the driver, said "It's our mascot." While she and Evelyn talked and laughed I sipped Mum's champagne and told her what I was doing. She got a bit pissed off.

"You can't just up and leave like that, you've got to plan it out, have you got any money? You've got to save some money, make sure there's work up there, arrange somewhere to live..."

I guess she was wrong. I just upped and left. We arrived at midnight.

From over the kitchen counter I watch the girls, watch them raise bottles of cider to their lips, watch them laugh. They're in ripped shorts and cheesy old T-shirts, they wear no make-up and their hair is limp, but God they are beautiful. I've still got my hopes up, even though I know they will be leaving after the long weekend and I'll be staying.

"Spot?" The boyfriend of the girl they've come to see offers me a rolled up five-dollar note. He's big and ugly and looks at me funny. I take the tube, ask:

"It's not too harsh is it? I've got a real sore throat."

"Nah man, it's smooth as, I'll just give you a little one if you like."

I nod, put the tube to my lips. The boyfriend scoops a glob of thick green/black oil onto the end of an unbent paper clip, scrapes the knife off the stove and shoves it under my face. The spot of oil looks as big as a golf ball, it's huge and crackles on the hot knife. I suck at the smoke which flows from it, but there's too much, it billows up around my face and into my eyes, blinding me, and I choke — it's as harsh as a mother fucker. My eyes are stinging, my throat is on fire, and that bastard thinks it's high comedy, he's laughing and pointing, saying:

"Sorry mate, did I say it was smooth? I meant to say it's rough as guts! Aaah ha ha...!"

When I stop retching I wipe my eyes and tell him he's a dick, which just makes him laugh more. I go sit on the floor with the girls. One of them asks me if I'm alright, passes me a glass of cider. I gulp it to cool my throat.

Lisa says "I was just telling Jo about your Mum's friend, man she's a dirty old bitch!" I laugh and have to agree.

The ugly boyfriend calls out from the kitchen, asking me if I want another spot. I tell him to fuck off. I'm just starting to relax and enjoy a mellow stonage when he comes and sits down next to his woman. He puts his arm around her, gives her a clumsy kiss. She's stunning, she has the kind of smile that you can fall in love with instantly. He's got a big goofy grin. How does an idiot like him score such a goddess?

I'm more stoned than I thought, I'm drifting off into my own world. I realise that I'm staring at this girl whose hospitality I'm trying hard to enjoy. I glance at the boyfriend, he looks up from the joint he's rolling to give me the evils — looks that push me over the edge of slight unease into full-blown paranoia. That was good stuff

he gave me. The wanker.

“Can I use your phone again?” I ask, rising to my feet.

In the bedroom I call Craig, “This place is a freak house man, I’m coming around now.”

Craig says cool, gives me the directions again.

I’ve got my life in the pack on my back, and it’s not all that heavy. The night is humid, there’s a gentle rain falling through the street light and nightclub neon. It feels warm, lovely, like misty feathers stroking my face. I’m fully stoned and a little worried that through the eyes of all the beautiful city people, in their skin-tight black city clothes, I must look like a total hick. So I’ve made a conscious decision not to gawk up at the tall buildings like a tourist, I want to look like I’ve lived here all my life — but as soon as I cross the street there I am, head back, mouth open, gawking.

It’s a big fibreglass sculpture, made to look like a wooden Maori carving. It’s a man and a woman embracing, the man with a huge hard-on pressing up against his belly and the woman stands with her legs slightly apart, showing a gaping vulva to the world. I have no choice but to stop, look up at that and think “I love this town already.”

When I’ve had a bit of a laugh I look around and work out where I’m going. There’s the street sign? Ah, Vulcan Lane, okay, I turn left here and up Queen Street, past queues of people outside nightclubs.

The hill gets steeper, the crowds fall behind me. I pass a group of street kids cuddling in a doorway. I must be gawking again, one really dark kid sits up and says “What’s the matter? Never seen a Maori before?” He must think I’m a foreigner, some European backpacker. I pretend I didn’t hear him and ask if he knows the way to the Trough.

“The Trough?”

“It’s a pub, I think,” I say.

“Oh yeah, I think I know the one it’s up past another... two streets? And then left and it’s straight ahead.”

I thank him and keep walking. He calls out after me, asking if I got a spare cigarette. I’ve got some rollies, but if I give him one I’ll have to give them all one. I’m poor and homeless too.

“Wanker!” he shouts after me.

I find the Trough on the corner of grubby little Mount Street, just out of the central business district, just beyond the brightest lights. I pause by the door to have

a look in, nodding up to the bouncers on the step. Some electro-rock band is rarking up a packed crowd of students. A high-rise hostel is across the road, twelve stories of glass and concrete where the students will return to spew and pass out. Next to the pub is a long two-storeyed row of flats. It looks like a total dive, just how Craig described it.

The first door on ground level is slightly ajar. I knock, call out, but no-one answers. Craig said to go up the flight of stairs inside the first open door but I can't see any stairs, just a dark hallway. I back out onto the street and for the first time start to feel a bit lost. But this must be the place. I hear a mad, screaming laugh from the lit window above. That's Craig! Now I'm getting excited about seeing my friend and being so far away from home.

I walk along to a black hole in the wall, an unlit doorway with no door. As I enter I feel like I'm a ghetto somewhere, there's graffiti on the walls and the smell of piss in the air. I creep up the dark stairs, wanting to bound up two at a time, but I can hardly see my own feet. At the top is an almost total darkness, and I stand in it for a few seconds, blind. Music from the pub echoes up to me. I feel around on the left wall, find a door, bang on it.

There's a cry from inside: "Aah! That'll be Ricky!" The door flies open, light blinds me for a second and the music jumps up a few dozen decibels — it's coming straight through the walls and windows of the flat, from the pub. I'm surprised he heard me knock, it's really fucken loud.

Craig's in the doorway laughing madly, covered in... blood? I stare at him as he laughs, looking him up and down. There's blood all over him, from the long greasy hair, down his blushing cheeks, on the big collars of the shirt that is so unfashionable it's hip, even on the bottle in his hand, blood, everywhere.

Craig screams my name and jumps on me, giving me a bear hug. I hug him back, I'm glad to see him, but he's getting blood on my coat so I pull away from him, confused but grinning — he seems unhurt and pretty happy about everything...

"What the fuck's going on?"

"What? Oh, the blood, oh don't freak out man we're just..." He cracks up laughing, gives me another hug, pulls me inside. I dump my pack in the hall and let Craig pull me through into a bedroom crowded with people trying to talk above the music. One guy is pulling a blood soaked T-shirt off over his head, unconscious of his scarily skinny torso. He grins at me when his face comes free and throws the shirt into a corner. He's a dead ringer for Sid Vicious but good looking in a strange way. From his grin I can tell I'm going to like him.

A plump little girl in an op-shop dress pushes past me, shouts “Don’t mind me, I’ve just dropped some *really* good shit so I’m gunna go do my own thing!” She giggles her way out of the room.

“Yeah, don’t mind her, she’s Janice, Victim Number One...” Craig yells.

“No Jim’s number one, I’m Victim Number Three!” Janice yells from the door.

“...and this is Jim, he’s Victim Number Two...” Craig points his bottle at the Sid Vicious look-alike.

Jim raises his own bottle to me. “You look a bit lost Eric, we’ve just been filming a...”

“*We’ve been filming a splatter movie ad!*” Craig screeches. He’s fully manic. “It’s fucking cool man, we’ll watch it later, you’ll love it, I get stabbed in the head with a crucifix!”

A figure rises from the bed. The back of my neck tingles as this person, I think it’s a guy, approaches us. His face is plastered in make-up — foundation, blusher, eyeliner, even fake eye lashes and shocking red lipstick. His hair is a thin film of grease on his skull. He wears a tight “Jesus Loves Me” T-shirt and skin-tight, glossy pants. His boots are the only things that don’t cling to him, they’re huge steelcaps, his feet must rattle inside them. He looks at me like I’m a scab he wants to pick.

“Oh, and this is Peter, the Killer, star and director of ah...what’s it called again? Your movie?”

“*Untitled.*” Peter says, walking out.

“Oh *that’s clever Peter, very clever!*” Craig shouts at his back. He turns to me, says “Come on, let’s get out of here, I’m going deaf. Do you wanna beer? Got any weed?”

Craig hands me a beer from the big old fridge. I’m looking at the posters and paintings that clutter the kitchen walls.

“These guys are all art students,” Craig says, “so you’ll get on with them. They’re pretty cool most of them — and HEY! — here’s Jim, the coolest of them all!”

“Aw thanks Craig. You’re pretty cool too, y’know.” Jim puts an arm around Craig, who pretends to be all shy.

“Nah, I’m not that cool...”

“Did one of you cool cats say something about weed?”

“Oh yeah, wait a sec...” I go to my pack in the hall, take a plastic bundle from the front pocket, go back to the kitchen. While Craig cleans himself up, mopping up blood with a dishrag, I roll a fat joint. Jim suggests we go out the back.

Peter heads out the door just ahead of us, turns right, lopes down into the street.

Craig leads the way, left, down into the garden. Jim shouts "See ya Peter. Thanks for rending me limb from limb!"

Craig whispers to me "Now that guy's a freak show." He walks down into the light ahead of us, stops on the lawn, says "And he didn't dress up for the movie, he always wears that freaky shit."

"Aw leave him alone, he's a sweetie really." Jim says.

"Yeah I know, he's alright, next time I see him I'll give him a big pash."

"I think he'd probably like that Craig." Jim laughs.

The garden is a strip of uncut grass about six metres across, stretching the length of the flats, with washing lines sagging into the distance. Garden furniture and urban debris are scattered around. Next to the flat the pub looms above us. The band has finished and the rain has stopped. We can hear the shouts of drunken students in the street. On the other side of the lawn is a low wall. I lie across it, looking down into a carpark full of BMW's and Mercedes about fifteen feet below.

I take a swig of beer. My throat is still sore, but I ignore the pain as I light the joint and take a long toke. I pass it to Jim. Craig's still excited and it's infectious, I get a grin on, I take Craig's hands and jump up and down, swinging him around in a little dance. Woohoo!

We finish the joint. Jim runs upstairs to get the rest of the beer. I'm stoned out of my head and although the paranoia is long gone I'm restless, I need to be doing something. There's a pile of dryish wood sticking out from under the house. I pull it out. It's a broken bed.

"He-e-ey, we could have a fire", I say.

"Yeah, okay man, just a little one though eh?" Craig asks.

"Yeah man, chill bro," I say in my hazy stoner voice, "I'm a professional."

I break up the wood, build a small pyre against the garden wall. I light crumpled pages from an old telephone book under the wood and as it catches there's a rumbling from above. Jim's propping a big speaker up in the window. Smoke rises, blows across the carpark into the street. Melodic, lo-fi guitars float down to us.

Jim comes back down with the remains of a dozen beer, hands us one each. We wipe the garden chairs dry, sit around the fire. We drink, talk, smoke cigarettes. I catch Craig up on all the gossip from down home. I tell him about the trip up with a car full of girls. We all agree that I should have asked them around here.

I look around and think that, even though this place is a dump, I'm much happier here than I would be with the beautiful clubbers and their perfect hair. I'm

sure they are nice enough people, they're just so *boring*. They'd be at the same dumb club talking to the same people they saw there last week, arranging to meet them there again next week. They got no balls.

Towards dawn we smoke another joint, then run out of beer and firewood. We go upstairs as the sun rises to a breakfast of honeyed toast and bananas.

## Seven Impressions of Medan

### 1. The Press Cutting

In December 1998, before leaving Melbourne for Sydney, which would be the stopover on my way to take up a writer's residency in Medan, the capital city of Sumatra, Indonesia, my girlfriend's mother gave me a press-cutting. It was all that she was able to find on Medan. The article from the May 22nd 1998 issue of *Asiaweek* was titled "Medan's Madness: How and why Indonesia's third largest city descended into chaos". It was illustrated by two photos. One of a gutted building in front of which stood a soldier armed with an automatic rifle. His expression was that of irritation, as though he were about to reproach the photographer and demand the film. The other photo was of a pile of burning tyres. Behind it two children were running. The one boy was a streetkid dressed in ill-fitting clothes and the other a schoolboy, neat in dark shorts with a clean white shirt and a backpack worn over both shoulders.

The article gave the impression of a city turned on itself, where the various ethnic groups — the Bataks, the Malays, the Javanese, the Chinese, the Arabs and the Indians — were alienated from one another and blaming the others for their economic and social hardships. The Chinese, who number about 300,000 in a city of 3 million, were said to be especially vulnerable. They are seen as the wealthiest and least assimilated community. Generally they have been thought to be running the economy of the country in cahoots with the dynasty of the then First Family, the Suhartos.

In a travel guide I had read that the word "medan" means "field" or "battlefield", though I hadn't been able to find that meaning in my *Periplus* phrasebook-dictionary. In the article there was another meaning for the name. Jokingly it was said to be an acronym for *Masuklah Engkau Dalam Api Neraka*. According to the

journalist that would translate to: *Enter the flames of Hell.*

## 2. *Itu Medan, Bung!*

Imagine a city like Perth, Western Australia, too big to be a country town and too small to be a major city. But unlike Perth, there are people everywhere you go: crowds. There are people fishing in the deep trenches outside the door of your house. There are people crouched in shanties patched together with cardboard, bamboo and corrugated iron, in makeshift homes that occupy the sloping land between a row of three storey villas and a dangerously fast flowing brown river. People seated on the broken paving beside their stall of fruit from the nearby volcanic plateau. Injured people, cripples, the blind, people obviously mentally ill who stand disorientated at busy intersections in the midst of the clouds of noxious blue.

Imagine traffic without road rules. You can pedal your bike up a one way street into oncoming traffic. The *becak mejin* driver who zooms you round in your own cloud of smoke has no problem with making a left hand turn from the right hand lane of a busy five lane main road. He just indicates with a small gesture of his right hand — *Here I come...* They understand. *Tidak masala!* Though you, as a foreigner, entertain the possibility that you both mightn't make it...

Imagine people who smile at you just because they don't know you and they want to be friendly. Imagine these people: men wearing *batik* shirts or Hard Rock Cafe t-shirts with sandals and no sunglasses, and the women wearing dresses with a bright patterned blouse or DKNY t-shirt or with violet jeans. Imagine the schoolchildren, in a hot atmosphere hazy with the smoke from garbage being burned on street corners, dressed in shirts so white they seem brighter than the urban sun. Imagine them all either walking in groups or lounging in slowly pedalled *becaks* or squashed together in the multitudes of yellow public buses called *sudakos* or perched several people at once on a scooter or motorcycle. If you picture the motorcycle or scooter, imagine them either seated one behind the other — as though you are seeing double or more — or with the woman behind, riding sidesaddle, demure in her skirt with her legs crossed and her eyes directed over her driver's shoulder. No matter what the traffic's like, imagine her calm as a Buddhist, vivid as a lily...

Imagine that there are differences that you can't see, or that you will only be able to notice after you have been there for more than a month and are able to understand some *Bahasa Indonesia*. For example, that woman who seems strange,

like a symbol of another world, in her mud-caked gumboots, yellow floral dress, mouth stained a red-black, with a flap of thick cloth for a headdress. You would understand that she is a Karo Batak, from the area around Brastagi where the famous and wonderous fruit *mangis* and *marquisa* are grown. You would understand that her mouth is that colour from chewing betel leaves. You would also note that the South Indian family who live in the house across the road make their living by delivering lunch pails, as they do in India, the pails hanging from the delivery-boys' bicycles like pearls from a beautiful courtesan's neck. You would also note, that though there are ethnic divisions, almost like ghettos - you are living within a Batak area where most of the houses are owned by Indians and their area, Kampung Keling, may be translated to mean "Darkie Village" — you are living next door to a house full of nurses and they are Batak of the various kinds: Toba, Karo, Simalungun, Papak, Angkola, Mandailing... But also you would note that those young women are sharing with others from Riau, Aceh and West Sumatra. Later you might notice that on Sundays several of them in their best formal clothes, each with a copy of the Bible, would walk to church hand-in-hand. And you would, inevitably, notice when others of them would wake up at 3 o'clock in the morning during Ramadan to break their fast before the first strains of the Islamic call to prayer, the hypnotic *Azan*, would enter your dreams like an angel. You would also note that nothing is simple in Indonesia. You would notice that the grandmother of the Indian family — even though they are Hindu and South Indian — on the Holy Day of Idul Fitri, that day when Muslims visit their elders to ask "in body and soul" for a year's forgiveness, would be dressed in the graceful style of a Javanese lady, wearing a pink *kebaya* and golden *kain*, both standing out against her dark skin like stars against the night, and in listening to her — if you can imagine this — you would be amazed to hear her addressing all her children with the casual clatter of her first language, *Bahasa Indonesia*...

If you can imagine all of this, only then you can say — *Itu Medan, Bung!* (*That's Medan, mate!*)

### 3. Sumatra and the *Bahasa*

Medan is not a city travellers like. Several guide books recommend that travellers should stay there only sufficiently long to plan their trip out to rural Sumatra and its wilderness: the Real Indonesia. (The same advice is given to travellers to South Africa: Leave Johannesburg as soon as you can. But I am from Jo'

burg! That dangerous city is the dreamscape of my childhood...) To me, as a poet, the urban chaos and noise, the city's tension and cosmopolitanism were more interesting than the countryside that appears "untouched". Medan is a city that is not yet Westernised or international in the way that Jakarta is, nor is it a city that may be seen as an expression of an idyllic pre-modern culture, like the entire island of Bali. Medan is a city for traders, everything about it centres on that. And traders' cities are grungy, rough-as-guts places, the sort of places where churches can be built next to scrapyards, where ancestors are venerated on balconies beneath satellite dishes and karaoke bars act as the front-rooms of brothels.

I was surprised to find out that despite the undisputable fact that Medan is not now a city for the cultured — in the archipelago that city is undoubtedly Yogyakarta — the Sumatrans played a very important role in the early history of Indonesian culture.

It's believed that the ancient Buddhist Kingdom of Srivijaya, with its capital probably at Palembang, South Sumatra, was responsible for the wide distribution of the Malay language as its dominion included the Straits of Malacca, the Java Sea and extended into the South China Sea. The Kingdom of Srivijaya was first mentioned in the historical record by the Chinese monk I Ching who stopped in the capital in 671 AD on his way to study in India. He wrote that there were more than a thousand Buddhist monks in residence and that it was a thriving intellectual and trade centre, a walled port on the banks of the wide Musi River.

The common language of diplomacy and trade in the region was Malay, and Malay inscriptions have been uncovered, not only in areas where the language is still spoken, but also in distant Central Java, the "mainland" of Indonesia. Those date back to 827 AD.

The first Malay glossary was compiled on the island of Tidore in the Straits of Malacca in 1524 by Pigafetta, an adventurer who had sailed around the world with Magellan. As long ago as 1603, the first Malay phrasebook was available in Holland. In 1615, when the Achenese Sultan Iskander Muda, a hero of the Indonesian nation, corresponded with King James I of England he wrote, not in his mother tongue of Achenese, but in Malay. This was common practice. Malay was not only the argot of the market but also the language of courtly life in the region in much the same way that French was the common language in the palaces of Europe.

At the beginning of this century Medan was the centre of the production of popular fiction written in the everyday Malay that would later be transformed into the national language *Bahasa Indonesia*. When in the 1920s the Dutch colonial

government started the publishing house Balai Pustaka in Batavia, what is now the city of Jakarta, many of the earliest works were in the Malay language and written by Minangkabau writers from West Sumatra.

That *Bahasa Indonesia*, the language of the nation of Indonesia, is derived from one which has a long history in the area surrounding Sumatra seems to have been a boon to Sumatran writers working in the first half of this century. Two of the nation's most significant poets, Amir Hamzah (b. 1911 - d. 1946) and Chairil Anwar (b. 1922 - d. 1949), came from Sumatra, both of them having had some connection with Medan: Hamzah having studied there and Anwar having been born there.

Writing in an essay titled "Pasemon: On Allusions and Illusions", the poet and editor of *Tempo* magazine, Goenawan Mohamad, remarked: "To my mind there has not been, in the last few decades, any single poet who has exhibited the verbal inventiveness of Amir Hamzah, who wrote in the 1930s. Amir Hamzah gave his poems a lavishness of expression, a mellifluous melange of sound and meaning. If forced to give a reason for this poet's strength, it might be that his mother tongue (like that of Chairil Anwar, who followed) was Malay, the basis of contemporary Indonesian, which is not true of many Indonesia poets writing today."<sup>1</sup>

According to Mohamad, the reality that the lineage of *Bahasa Indonesia* is Malay, a lineage not shared by many Indonesians, may be the reason why many contemporary Indonesian writers feel, as the poet Toto Sudarto Bachtiar has written, that "words cannot say enough."

The preeminent contemporary poet Sutardji Calzoum Bachri, whose mother-tongue is Malay and who was born in the Riau region that lies between Sumatra and the Malaysian Peninsula, has taken *Bahasa Indonesia* into an iconoclastic, shamanistic realm where, ironically in the words of his own poetic credo, 'Words are not tools for conveying meaning. They are not like pipes for conveying water. The word is meaning itself. It is free... Words must be free to be themselves... When I create poetry words are set free. In their passionate joy at being set free, words leap about and dance on the page, drunken and stripped naked...' He has said that he has the confidence to do this because he feels that the language is his, his mother-tongue is *the* language of the archipelago.

Sutardji's aim is to free words from the shackles of their meanings. His poems remind me of the work of Aime Césaire, the Francophone surrealist poet from

1. Mohamad Goenawan, "Pasemon: On Allusion and Illusions", in Leila S. Chudori, *Menagerie 2*, Jakarta: Lontar, 1993, 127.

Martinique. The distinguished Zulu poet Mazisi Kunene has written that for Césaire surrealism was “a logical instrument with which to smash the restrictive forms of language which sanctified rationalised bourgeois values. The breaking up of language patterns coincided with his own desire to smash colonialism and all oppressive forms.”<sup>2</sup>

Sutardji is as famous for his performances as for his poetry. Many people told me about them with a sparkle in their eyes. I was told Sutardji would be drunk and chanting his poems while waving an axe. I was told that his words are mantras and his performances instances of magic.

I believed them. I remembered some of the stories of my mother's childhood. She would tell me how a Cape Malay “out of his mind”, affected by the magic of ‘Malay tricks’, would run *amuck* in the back streets of Cape Town, attacking anyone and everyone with a knife or axe. I could easily imagine the menacing power of Sutardji reciting the following poem:

### Prayer<sup>3</sup>

O Father of the Axe  
 give me slender necks  
 let me hack  
 let restless blood flow  
 to the the sea that accepts  
 Go to Hell!  
 (Trans. Chin Woon Ping)

#### 4. Streetlife

A paleface can't be inconspicuous in Medan. Taxi drivers and *sudako* conductors point at you. Old men pedalling *becaks* grin at you. Everywhere you go you will be a conversation starter. Much of the time you are asked, “Where you going, Mister? Where you from, Mister?” “Hey Mister! Hello Mister!” is so commonly addressed to

2. Paul Auster, “Twentieth-Century French Poetry”, in *The Red Notebook: True Stories, Prefaces and Interviews*, London: Faber, 1995, 66.

3. Chin Woon Ping, “Playing Dangerously with Words: Translating the Poetry of Sutardji Calzoum Bachri”, in Bruce Bennett (ed), *A Sense of Exile: Essays in the Literature of the Asia-Pacific Region*, Nedlands: CSAL, 1988, 230.

you, you soon can't hear it. Sometimes — being a youngish man — I was taken off-guard by girls who would called to me: "We love you!" And one Sunday a group of friendly teenagers shouted: "God loves you! You Christian?" That same Sunday an old lady came up behind me as I was walking across the parking area behind Peringgian Market. "You Mister," she said, "I have been calling you. Where you from?" I answered: "Australia". "Where you live?" "Medan Baru". "Ah, Medan Baru. I have daughter in Australia. Mister I call you. How proud you are!" Then she turned on her heels and was gone.

For the first time in my life — strangely, since I'm from Africa — I felt that I was being stereotyped as that being from the West, The Great White Man. Actually I am from the *South*. After a while in Medan I forgot what I looked like and was shocked one day to notice that the only other weird-looking person in the suburb of Medan Baru was another Caucasian — he was on the billboard advertising Marlboro cigarettes.

Various people told me to be wary of the following things:

Indonesian girls in general (they just want to latch onto you), Bataks (they are aggressive and rude), Javanese (because they're untrustworth), people from Nias Island (they're criminals), Balinese (they're not workers), taxi drivers (crooks), speaking (they want free English lessons), Indonesian books (whole sections missing), escalators (pickpockets), the money ("Count it at least twice: there's too many zeros..."), the water (it can kill you), meat (intestinal parasites), padang food (chillies), dogs (rabies), *warongs* ("no clean"), massages ("Even the ones that are above-board aren't. But the blind massueses are ok..."), plates and cutlery (scour them with table napkin), the resturants ("It no good..."), doctors (all incompetent), journalists (you will have to pay for lunch and the article), walking (no one does), fish (they're farmed in the sewers), traffic police (collecting money for gifts), a strange Australian man wearing odd clothes (he was last seen naked surrounded by kids throwing stones and he'll just ask you for money), buses (crowded), crowds (they might riot), another demented Australian man who's always seen accompanied by several dogs and a snarling monkey that will jump onto your head (obvious reasons), soldiers (keen to shoot), the pub at Hotel Danau Toba (full of prostitutes and Westerners), nightclubs (Medan is Indonesia's Ecstasy capital), night (roadblocks), day (heat), Aceh (an undeclared civil war), mosquitos (Ross River virus, dengue fever, several strains of malaria), et cetera.

## 5. Readings!

I was invited to present one at UNIKA, a Catholic university situated on the suburban outskirts of the city.

On the drive to the university gates you pass between paddy fields, *kampung* houses and the Indonesian equivalent of uni coffeeshops, open air shelters of bamboo and — what seemed to be — palm leaves. My entourage consisted of Australia's honorary consul to Sumatra Frazer Cargill, Novi the librarian from the Australia Centre and our driver Pak Yanto, a Javanese ex-truckie. We were met at the car by several members of the English department staff and the Dean of the arts faculty. The Dean looked disconcertingly like Aboriginal leader Peter Yu of the Kimberley Land Council. He had the same stocky build and wistful goatee. We all shook hands, as is expected, but for some reason I felt that they weren't quite sure who I was. (Later, one of the academics would confide that initially they thought I was too young to be The Poet. They had thought Frazer was John Mateer and that I was his son.)

The lecture hall was at the top of the *Sastra* building. There was no glass in the barred windows. From there I looked out over the campus. Banana trees were flourishing between a small collection of white buildings. I was already sweating, having left the airconditioned car only a few minutes before. I sat down at the table at the front beside the man who would introduce me.

Sitting in low fixed desks there were about 100 students. They greeted the MC in response to his 'good morning'. Then I was to speak for an hour, followed by an hour of questions. The microphone wouldn't attach to my collar, so I held it with my left hand and turned the page with my right. In the middle of one of my statements about "the alienation of whitish Australians from the actuality of their country", a young woman carrying several small boxes entered the room and proceeded to place them on the desks of the people sitting in the first row and in front of the MC and myself. She must have felt that she was being unobtrusive because I was speaking in a foreign language. As soon as the boxes landed on the desks people opened them and began eating the contents. I felt like the singer of a covers band in an empty bar. Clearly I hadn't yet adjusted to the ways of Medan. Frazer, the consul, sat off to the left, next to Novi in the front row. Throughout my talk he wore the English Queen's expression of untiring bemusement.

When the questions came, they were various and some of them tricky.

I was reminded of my first discussion in Indonesia, at the arts centre in the city. First I had been asked if there were any Indonesian poets publishing in Australia, to

which I had to answer that I didn't know. Then I had been asked if any Australians had written poems about East Timor, to which I answered probably, though I personally didn't know of any. I was aware then that I didn't know what they were after, whether they were genuinely interested or if they wanted certain suspicions confirmed (eg. Whether Australians are only interested in the independence of East Timor due to the massive submarine oil reserves in the Timor Gap.)

Fortunately, the students were both polite and engaged by my discussion. They were very curious about the problems facing Aboriginal people and also about how I viewed myself as a South African immigrant to Australia. I spoke gravely about the so-called Aboriginal Situation, emphasising the ambivalence with which the Howard government regards blackfellas. Then I made a quip about the consul and myself being typical Australians, him from Scotland and me from Jo' burg, and mentioned that the other two Australian poets who had previously visited were Adam Aitken, who was born in London but spent much of his childhood in Thailand and Malaysia, and Javant Biarujia, who was born in Melbourne and is known in the underground of Australian poetry for the creation of his 'private language' Taneraic. *Odds and bods!* They took this all pretty well. Although it could be said they just weren't able to interrupt me in a language not their own.

Before I had finished my last reply, the MC broke in to suggest that I open my box of treats. He then said to the audience, "We will not be able to offer tea today. I believe it has something to do with the current economic crisis in Indonesia." The hall erupted with laughter.

At the conclusion, the MC invited the head of the English department to the front of the hall to present me with a gift commemorating my visit. It was an *ulos*, a symbolic handwoven cloth. These cloths are traditionally given as gifts on important ritual occasions: weddings, births and funerals. The *ulos* that was presented with a verbal proclamation in the Toba Batak language, then wrapped around me, was brightly coloured with beads in geometric patterns and streaks of golden thread. I knew that many of these cloths are now made for sale to tourists and that I must have looked silly with it wrapped around me. Even so, I could almost have cried.

## 6. A Video Night

The night after I arrived I had received a letter inviting me to attend the screening of a video called *Mother Dao The Turtlelike* at YPIIA, the Foundation for Indonesian-American Friendship. The letter described it as "a kinematographic picture of the Dutch East Indies 1912-c. 1933".

The title of the film alluded to a creation story from Nias, an island off the coast of West Sumatra known to surfers around the world for its spectacular breaks. According to the story as recounted in the letter, Mother Dao scraped the dirt off her body and kneaded it into a ball which became the World. Later she became pregnant, “without knowing a man”, and gave birth to a boy and a girl who were to become the first people of the World.

It was a Dutch production. Edited by Vincent Monniken with a soundscape by Jan-Dries Groenendijk, the film itself was astonishingly beautiful, all in the kind of high quality monochrome that suggests timelessness. Essentially it was a sequence of images enhanced with readings of ancient Javanese and modern Indonesia poems and the traditional songs of the Niassers, Toradjas and the Sundanese. (Some of the poems, I would later find out, were by another modern Indonesian poet with a Medan connection: Sitor Situmorang, a Toba Batak whose work is existential, influenced by the years he lived in Europe.) The images were selected from more than 300, 000 metres of 35mm nitrate film, which had been recorded without sound and are now in the collections of the Netherlands Film Museum, the Central Office of Information (RVD) and the NOS Polygoonarchief (NOB) in Holland. The Dutch historian who introduced *Mother Dao* had remarked that the footage it relied upon was intended to be propoganda. But as I watched the film I thought the images weren't merely that — they were profoundly Romantic, focused with the facination of longing...

The image of the young, bare-breasted Balinese woman washing herself at the edge of a paddy field, while it was voyeuristic, was also amazingly attentive, as though the cameraman were witnessing her as a visitation. The footage of the Nias islanders at a ceremony was startling and alien. The images of heavy industry, of the machinery of plantations, of foundries where the “coolies” were half-naked and barefoot were glimpses into the Hell of industrialisation. *Mother Dao* was poetic, each series of images another view of a lost world.

Yet there was one image in particular that haunted me:

There was a boy-child, perhaps large for his age, perhaps older than he appeared, in close-up at his mother's breast. He was sucking on the nipple with the languid, half-drugged expressionlessness of an infant. It was an intimate scene, so intimate and so calm that the mere fact that it had been filmed seemed an invasion. In the profound motion that only soundless films can have, the child pulled away from his mother's breast and lifted a crudely rolled cigarette to his mouth, inhaling deeply. Then he exhaled a thick smoke that obscured most of his face.

To me it was a shocking image: a symbol of Indonesia.

But the audience laughed. Or, more accurately, most of the Indonesians laughed, while the non-Asians like myself recognized its insidiousness and what it said about our shared history. I didn't know if I should have laughed with them at the absurdity of life, of childhood, of innocence, or if I should have left.

That image would haunt me for the rest of my stay in Indonesia, returning to me in different forms — as the primary schoolboys in their pristinely white shirts who walked passed my house in the morning sucking on their cigarettes like old men; as the beggar with the infant at her naked breast who sat at the intersection opposite Medan's famous mosque, Mejid Raya, seemingly numbed by the lead-blue air; or as the silent prostitute in the crooked lanes of Yogyakarta who grabbed my hand, whose hand I could feel was as warm as mine, but whose face was as fugitive and distant as that of the black statue of Kali in Kampung Keling...

## 7. Farewell

My housekeeper, Ibu Inem, wouldn't let me get a taxi to the airport at five in the morning. She said that many people in Indonesia are no good. She said she would arrange for me to be driven there. I agreed, thinking that if the ride didn't turn up I could always get a taxi or *becak mejin*.

At the arranged time, at one of the few times in 24 hours when Medan is quiet, I heard revving outside the house. I went out to see. It was a dark South Indian bloke on a 250 CC motorbike. I smiled. I thought I'd asked Inem if it was a car. To which she had replied in the affirmative. What I mightn't have double-checked was whether it was a *motor (car)* or *sepeda motor (motorbike)*. The driver was a charming, softly-spoken Buddhist, a friend of the forthright, staunchly Muslim Javanese Inem. I conversed with him in my best broken *Bahasa*. He was disappointed to hear that, though I'm also a Buddhist, I had visited only the Chinese Buddhist temples in the centre of the city. I told him I didn't know that there were any others. He assured me that there were many for South Indians and that, if I could return, he would take me to see them.

So there I was, on the back of a Buddhist's motorbike, with my backpack balanced on one knee and a packet containing books and a kilo of *marquisa* on the other, with my suitcase squeezed between my driver's chest and the petrol tank. We were speeding through the city. We passed the temple Vihara Gunung Timur, that is said to be Buddhist but is actually Confucian, filled with huge statues of bearded men like visions of the Old Testament God. Its Chinese lanterns were glowing a

fierce red. Yet, like the rest of the city, it was serene and cool. There was a full moon above us and I could understand why in Thailand the full moon is said to be a symbol of Happiness.

My Buddhist friend was talking to me as we were leaning into the corner. Again I was receiving warnings: *Be careful. Be careful: There are many criminals in Indonesia...*

## From *MISTER! MISTER!* Poems<sup>4</sup>

### Translated Man

To hear myself think in this noisy city I plug my ears.  
Even the minarets are sirens and the daylight a thieving.  
Here female eyes shout volumes at me.  
Beside what was my soul, wordless men pedal their gliding becaks.  
Through a phrasebook I stutter, bargain for space, mask disbelief.  
Momentarily recognizing myself as the Marboro man,  
I return to the invisible.

In mimed song my lover's remembered voice taunts me.  
Her dancing body is the universe, its axis always a zero.

In the desperate theatre of speech I dream ok.  
Under the polychrome statuary of Kali's temple in Kampung Keling,  
I fade out ok.  
The translated man I am is becoming numerical: zero, ok.

4. First published in *Mister! Mister! Mister! Medan*: Australia Centre Medan, 1999.

## The Rock

The volcanic rock on my desk performs solidly.  
I identify its presence.  
It returns me to this room, this desk, this body.  
I observe the rock: It is an eye heavy with silence.  
It is an ear consuming space.  
It is a memory of a clear day on the island of Samosir.  
It is returning me to this room, this desk, my body.  
Like Uluru, it confounds the astral, stating,  
*You do not know what it is you are like.*  
Personality, igneous rock and oblivion are the same.

## Azan

Voices from the nearby minarets, in an asynchrony,  
triangulate, tracking the deep space  
of my body and my ears' attunement.

Noise doesn't exist here, only the sound  
in which my flesh has intervened.

Though from elsewhere, rising like  
a wave of emotion, the Azan's voices  
aren't amplified for broadcast to the God:

they are invocations of what already is  
(void and loud as their busy sky).

## Takbiran

There is a night when all radios transmit like minarets,  
when the chanting of engines and firecrackers  
is as comprehensive as the space in any loved room.

It's the night when windows tremble like the walls of Jerico,  
when unbelievers acquiesce to the silence of their wide screen tvs.

That night is stalked by a fasting moon and its thirsty day,  
and with vibrato and reverb is everywhere breeding voices  
like engineered wheat or a mirage in an Arabian desert.

That night is pursued by the single-eyed sun who squints  
at the field of newspapers where families have knelt,  
and squints again at them on scooters speeding to their ancestors.

On that night all is awake to the sound of the one Name.

## VOTED MOST LIKELY TO

Since New Year's Day, Michael has had a disgruntled old narrator living under his pillow. It's been feeding him episodes of the old SCOTT NOVA: DEAD EARTH 2000 radio serial that never went to air.

They start with a [bang!] and then settle into the [waaaaa-weeeeeeeeeeeee] of a starving theremin whine. All there underneath:

SCOTT NOVA! the adventures of a lone hero, stranded in an apocalyptic HELLWORLD that may be ALL TOO CLOSE to our own!

only moments ago, nova was faced with the threat of the villainous THRANG, warlord of FOUR DIMENSIONS!

- now, nova, you will feel the pain of spatiality of which you never dreamed!
- gone... for... unless I can... reach the jesus hologram... on my utility

belt...

suddenly, our hero THRUSTS! his postcard at the monster

- what... is this? is it two dimensional...? three dimensional...?
- too late, thrang your 4-D technology cannot withstand the SPATIAL

PARADOX created by such an example of earth ingenuity!

- NOOOOOO I will have... my revennnnnnnnggggggeeee...

but [da dum da daaaaaa!] even as THRANG is defeated, can NOVA ever hope to triumph, against

THE DAY THE EXCLAMATION MARKS

drained from the

very air?

All the episodes end with that same question, narrowcasted right onto Michael's frequency. He's been asking himself the same thing. Something has gone very wrong with the future.

Look: the streets are empty. Not empty-plague or empty-apocalypse, but empty as there's no longer any real reason to leave the house.

Look; and don't let your eyes snag on slogans outcropping from the walls. Difficult when the landscape seems papier-mâché'd from old catalogue clippings. To your left, you'll notice bins of outdated T-shirts and Xmas lunch carcasses, boiling up like cancer. To your right, there's Michael. He's leaning up against a billboard with one hand welded-clenched in his pocket.

He's waiting for anyone, anyone to pass by, so he can grin and say *nice day for it*.

It's Boxing Day 2000.

Every date this year sounds like a B-grade film.

That's an old joke. Was old by February.

He knows that something has gone very wrong with the future because the first girl to pass by is wearing a T-shirt that reads SOMETHING HAS GONE VERY WRONG WITH THE FUTURE from breast to breast.

*Nice day for it*, Michael says.

But it's more than that.

It's the way in which 2000 appears after every catchphrase, object, and event. The way in which the now announces its futurity with every passing digital click. The way in which retro, finally, became retro; and the past, finally, withers sepia behind yellowing museum glass.

Last New Year's Day drove Michael back into the margins of his old highschool yearbook. Desperate for the sort of nostalgia he used to have in the good old days, he conserved it like the last drops of water in a desert-island-cliché.

He'd forgotten he was

(and let's get this word for word)

VOTED MOST LIKELY TO RESORT TO  
RITUAL KILLING IN ORDER TO  
ALLEVIATE REPRESSED DESIRES  
BASED IN UNREALISTIC FANTASIES OF  
WOMEN.

But he's genuinely more surprised at how good his hair looked back then.

There's a queue of handkerchiefs lined up beside his bed, crusted into tight little knots. Semen marries one surface to another, pattern to pattern, plaid to plaid. Four mornings out of five, he thinks about the girl

VOTED MOST LIKELY TO FORGIVE  
MEN TALKING TO HER BREASTS.

The radio playing in his head sometimes makes it hard to focus, but compensates with appropriate sound effects when he manages to come. It's with a great, rocketing [schwaaaauuuuuuuwahhhhhhhhh!] that makes Michael expect plaster to dust down from the roof.

It makes him feel like quite the man.

Come April, the effects became a little more sinister-sounding.

If he crossed eyes with a neighbour through the front window pane, there was a [bup DUM bup DUM] of a Poeian telltale heart that drowned out his own. If he made a sudden point, his trigger finger fired a single silenced shot like [ffffwup]. And, if he waved hello, there was a steely [kssching! kssching!] like his hand was being sharpened, left to right, on the tiny metal particles floating in the air.

Then July.

When the weather broke down and froze over, and all the new heat-sensitive

mood shirts went black in Gothic mourning the minute you stepped outside. July bought Michael's personal sci-fi Dolby sound and THX, and it rang around his skull like superballs caught in a coffee tin. Even more alarming was the retroactive loophole the voices must have found in 30s censorship laws. Like this:

- *FUCK the galactic space corps, and FUCK you too, Xzaacs the merciless!*

with that, our hero FORCED his raygun into one of the venusian's many mouths

COULD he? SHOULD he? WILL he pull the trigger? thousands of years of earth morality seems to scream *NO, SCOTT, NO!*

but deep down, scott listened to a little voice - much like this one - which knew that killing was gosh-darn okay, so long as it would make everything RIGHT!

[Zzzzzzzzzzzzzppp!]

It all seemed fairly grim for the Nova that Michael remembered, whether from the old radio show, or the 70s kitsch TV revival, or even the blockbuster revamp last summer. Now, the episodes only Michael heard seemed to come from another world: they sounded like Ed Wood morality plays, just with *KILLING'S OKAY* dubbed over what once was *DON'T DRINK* or *NEVER TALK TO STRANGERS*.

Things didn't come to a head until the world wound down into Xmas Day 2000.

Michael churched, miming along with songs about God; squeezed his eyes closed so as not to see lunchtime grace; he kissed the air around his relatives' cheeks and opened the envelopes they gave him with glee.

He sat up that night, his unnamed family all bloated off to bed, and tallied up the day's haul. Vouchers are the gift of the season: kept carefully blank excepting the amount, neatly stenciled and proofread below. He added until he determined what he was worth. He watched late-night infomercials.

Michael's narrator had been observing silence, dulled by an afternoon champagne. He began to murmur a little at exercise equipment, a little louder through the power of positive thought;

Until the radio matched its pitch to the TV, retuning with a

[snp krklal ppop].

And this was how

(in a room landmined with potential paper cuts)

(where under the tree is carpeted like a dead letter office)

Michael used those FX to slice open the ribbon on his very own Xmas epiphany.

It grabbed the base of his skull and twisted. He wet the lounge. His mood shirt tiedyed itself into a shifting, dayglow EEG. And, last night, he remembered the true meaning of Xmas:

Buy yourself something nice.

Michael pressed one-eight-oh-oh.

The man answering phones and asking for Visa expirations sounded strangely familiar, but Michael couldn't quite place him.

It arrived first thing Boxing morning. Michael's carrying it right now, tight enough that his knuckles are bleaching themselves in anticipation. He's waiting for anyone, anyone to pass by, ignoring everything but the serial that runs through his nervous system.

It's a Very Special Episode of SCOTT NOVA, only a day late:

now, kids...if Scott wasn't the LAST HUMAN left alive on Xmas Day, do you know what he'd do? That's right!

- *i'd share, kids. Remember: SHARE SHARE SHARE!  
it's NO FUN keeping those toys all to yourself!*

The first to pass by is a girl Michael's age. She's blonde and fairly pretty. She's wearing a T-shirt that reads VICTIM in red.

As he raises his right hand, the radio finds a scratchy old CD of the Psycho soundtrack, and plays the shower scene at the wrong speed like [rrrrriiiiiittttt! rrrrrriiiiiittttt!]

Inappropriately, Michael only now places the 1-800 operator. It was an old school friend from psychology class. From memory, he was

VOTED MOST LIKELY TO BECOME AN  
ACCESSORY IN A MAJOR CRIME

*Nice day for it, says Michael.*

And then he lowers his mail-order knife so that it falls into the victim's neck and shoulder, cutting through the muscles like so much shoe leather.

Afterwards, it could still slice a tomato wafer-thin.

It never needs sharpening.

**WILL!**        our hero make his first kill?

**WON'T!**      this girl now simply be the FIRST OF MANY needed to satisfy Michael's NEWFOUND BLOODLUST? and

**WHEN!**      will the secret of THE DAY THE EXCLAMATION MARKS DRAINED FROM THE VERY AIR finally be revealed?

Michael doesn't know the answers.

He's finding it hard to stay tuned.

## A Surplus of Webbers. Unexpected Consequences of Writing Historical Fiction.

If tomorrow I were to answer a knock on my front door and there standing, dripping on my front doormat was a deep sea diver in old-style full dress suit and brass helmet, and if he were to politely introduce himself as the late William James Webber, I wouldn't be terribly surprised. Lately my world seems to be increasingly populated with William Webbers, both fictional and real.

The original William Webber died in suspicious circumstances in 1912, after pearl diving one hundred feet below the lugger *Eurus*, off the Eighty Mile Beach near Broome. He had been the leader of a crack team of ex-Royal Navy divers brought to Australia to prove that white men could successfully dive for pearls. He was real.

Then there is William Webber "junior", a character I invented for my novel, *The Drowning Dream*.<sup>1</sup> He is...well, I shall allow him to introduce himself, as he does in the book.

*My name is William Webber. I am ninety-six years old. I was born in Canterbury, England, when Victoria was on the throne, or in a sickbed quite close. My father was William Webber, the Royal Navy diver. He was famous enough in his day that I guess I would still be "William Junior" to this day in Canterbury, since I never returned as an adult to earn my seniority. I am now a long-term resident of the Onslow District Hospital Permanent Care Unit. A rare medical ailment is turning me into a human candle, starting with my tongue which is unnaturally large and full of wax, and when the process is complete I shall ask to be painted in festive colours and burned during the televised Carols by Candlelight Concert, live from the Myer Music bowl. I should like Miss Sigrid Thornton to ignite me as she is attractive yet dignified and I have long considered her to be an under-rated actress.*

1. *The Drowning Dream*, Fremantle, Fremantle Arts Press, 1998.

My William Webber “junior” is the most unreliable of witnesses, and it would be impossible, I hope, for any reader to mistake his misadventures in Broome in 1920, for historical fact. *The Drowning Dream* is, so the back cover proclaims (and who am I to disagree, I’m just the author), “a richly ironic blend of mystery, romance and Rider Haggard.” William Webber junior recalls for the reader’s benefit how, in investigating the mysterious circumstances of his father’s diving death, he leaves behind a trail of havoc, and inadvertently triggers the Broome Riots of 1920.

My novel is not about the diver, but the fictional son’s search for answers. The diver looms in the background as a reason for the son’s adventures in northern Australia, and he appears not as a well-defined historical figure, but merely a fuzzy memory, an enigma. There was one good reason for this, and it wasn’t a literary one. At the time that I wrote the book, I knew nothing about the diver, other than vague accounts of his death.

In fact, I almost changed his name for the final draft. My brother advised me to, between tinnies while we were fishing off the rocks at Rottneest. “It’s a small world now”, he said, “you’ll get a phone call from California. Webber and Webber, Attorneys At Law.” Only slightly phased, I decided to keep him nonetheless.

I’m glad now that I did, for there are more William Webbers in this story and they are certainly real. In fact, I have just delivered one, whom I will herewith call Bill, to the airport after he had completed an emotional journey across the world to the place where his grandfather died. For unknown to me at the time I wrote the book, the dead diver did indeed leave behind a son called William, and he in turn had a son with the same name. The latter is Bill Webber, now aged seventy and a retired mathematics teacher from Barry, Wales, who has just visited Broome with a strangely similar motive to his fictional namesake; to find out something about the circumstances of the diver’s death.

It was within a few weeks of *The Drowning Dream*’s publication that my brother’s prophesy came true and I was first contacted by one of the diver’s descendants. Not from California, however, but Wales. Angela Stephens, a granddaughter of the diver, had initially come across my book via the internet, perhaps proving that there is something to the global village concept after all. Subsequent correspondence has allowed the two histories of William Webber to be brought together for the first time; that part known by his family in Wales, and his brief and ultimately tragic few months in Australia, which had up to now barely been credited with a footnote by Australian historians. In retrospect, it seems amazing that the two halves of his story should have remained so completely

separate these eighty-seven years. The sum total is an intriguing tale.

As told in Australia, the story of William Webber began, like the book of Genesis, in a void. It was as if he had appeared from nowhere, and died like an unknown soldier in a distant place. His death certificate, carrying the imprimatur of L.G.Monger as Registrar for the District of Broome, underscores this. *William Webber, Diver. Died 7th June 1912, off Cape LaTouche. Cause Divers Paralysis. Aged 44 years. Born London, England. Name of Father Not Known. Mother's Maiden Name, Not Known.*

In fact, most of the details on the death certificate are wrong. He wasn't forty four, he was only thirty two years old. He was born in Wales, not London. And his parents' details should have been known to many men in Broome, for he had come out with a group of twelve divers and officials from the Siebe Gorman company. But Australian officialdom recorded him as the man from nowhere.

Conversely, as retold in Wales, the story of William Webber ended in nothingness...he went to Broome and simply disappeared. The "hows" of his death were wild guesses. His Freemasons Lodge, Royal Jubilee Lodge No 72, wrongly recorded him as having failed to make it to Broome at all, but having been "lost in the wreck of the *Koombana*" on 21st March 1912. Presumably the Lodge confused him with John S. Davis of Siebe Gorman, who did go down with that ship. Angela Stephens, on the other hand, recalls hearing her aunty say that "natives" had cut his airline, while another family story had him dashed on the rocks in strong surf. Even after eighty-seven years few solid details had filtered back home, and the many gaps had been filled with family lore.

The challenge in trying to piece together the two halves of William Webber's story was much the same as that faced by the fictional son in my book — to sort the facts of the diver's life from supposition and fiction.

*While Viney talked of my father the Malay stared straight at me with glazed and untrustworthy eyes, and grinned openly. He gave the impression of having some secret knowledge which made my investigations a source of amusement to him. My father's death was a joke.*

*"I sincerely hope your obstacles do not prove too great for you," he grinned, and wagged his head.*

*"Like trying to find cockroach shit in black pepper," proclaimed Viney, to their shared amusement.*

Fortunately, among Webber's many descendants are several amateur historians who have devoted much time and energy in recent times to recording the fascinating Webber family history, which they have kindly shared with me.

William James Webber was born in Llangattock, Brecknock, Wales on September 26th, 1879. His birth certificate records the less esteemed title "Willie Webber". His father, James Webber, was the head gamekeeper for Lord Glenusk, and wee Willie was one of thirteen Webber children inhabiting the estate at Glenusk Park. One piece of family folklore, as retold by Angela Stephens, seems to encapsulate what must have been a rather wild childhood, while giving an account of an early dice with drowning which seems, in retrospect, rather eerie.

*One day the Estate was preparing for the visit of the famous, or infamous, Duke of Clarence (Queen Victoria's son), and William's father was personally advised to keep his brood out of sight and under control during the visit. Matters did not progress smoothly. The children took a boat in an attempt to catch a royal glimpse outside the church on Sunday, and as young William stood to get a better look, he capsized the enterprise. His father and another gamekeeper had to strip off their Sunday best and dive to the rescue. Naturally the tribe was soundly beaten with a withy and put on starvation rations. William, recognising the error of his ways, promptly set about learning to swim.*

It seems Glenusk Park was a perfect nursery for young adventurers, and the Webber boys appear to have all gone on to live colourful lives. One died while serving with the Royal Navy in the South Atlantic. Another was said to have worked for a time as an assistant to Czar Nicholas II of Russia. Another died in a mining accident, the timing of which, so family lore has it, saved him from being hanged for murder. William joined the Royal Navy at age fifteen and learned how to dive.

Underwater diving at the start of this century was a new and hazardous pursuit. Caisson workers were required for bridge construction, divers were required for salvage work from shipwrecks, and medical science at this time had no explanation for the deaths and paralysis which affected so many. The Royal Navy was ahead of most in trying to ensure the safety of divers, but in the years that young William Webber dived for the Royal Navy, it was still a risky affair. Equipment was improvised, and there was no such thing as diving tables to ensure that the depth and duration of dives were kept in safe limits.

William Webber graduated from his class as "top man in the water", and dived with the Royal Navy for eight years until he was invalided from naval service in

December 1903, at the age of twenty four. Whether this was for medical reasons related to his diving, is unrecorded.

What is known is that he continued to dive up to, of course, the day he died. His work was varied and often very risky. As Angela Stephens writes, "he was a man who knew his work wasn't a sinecure", and besides, he now had responsibilities, having married Harriet Addicott in 1905. She was Nova Scotian by birth, possibly part-American Indian, a dark-haired, fragile beauty. They moved to Battersea, and Harriet bore two children that William saw, William junior, and then Ellen. The children's birth certificates list father's occupation as "Journeyman Diver".

William Webber's reputation as a diver was excellent, and when work came it was sometimes very well paid. In 1910, for instance, he was employed by the tantalisingly named "Pieces of Eight Syndicate Ltd", salvaging sunken treasure from the wreck of the Spanish galleon *Florentia* at the bottom of Tobermoray Bay on the Island of Mull, and the legal contract with the company shows he was paid handsomely at seven pounds per week. Shortly before coming to Australia, Webber had received a retainer from Robert Scott of Antarctic fame, and it is said that he was only prevented from joining Scott's expedition in 1911 by a bout of influenza. Knowing the fate that befell Scott, that dose of flu, if the story is true, was timely.

It was during these years that Webber played one role for which all modern divers, commercial and recreational, owe him a debt of gratitude. That was to work with Professor Haldane and the Siebe Gorman Company in their seminal experiments on the effects of pressure on divers, and to thereby help devise the charts used to determine safe diving limits. These were adopted by the Royal Navy as the "Admiralty Tables" and evolved into the various dive tables now in common useage by divers around the world.

The cause of "the bends" had been known for some time to have to do with accumulation of nitrogen at depth. As early as 1878 the French physiologist Paul Bert had described how, as a diver ascended from depth, bubbles of nitrogen in his bloodstream would expand in size and number. If the diver had accumulated too much nitrogen and then surfaced rapidly, his blood simply effervesced like uncorked champagne, causing excruciating joint pain, muscle spasms (hence "the bends"), or paralysis, or convulsions...or sudden death.

Professor Haldane experimented firstly with goats in a compression chamber, making use of the observations that the earliest signs of "the bends" in a goat is a loss of appetite for corn and an outstretching of the hind leg! He then extrapolated his calculations to humans and tested them on divers, including Webber. It was from

these figures that he formulated the charts of safe depth and time limits for dives. He also established the principle of staged decompression on the way to the surface. Webber's pioneering role was acknowledged in a book published years later by Sir Robert H. Davis, the Manager of Siebe Gorman. It might have been expected that, having played a principal role in these experiments, Webber would have been the least likely diver to ever die of "the bends".

Which brings us to the mystery of his death in Broome.

*My father's face stared at me through the round face glass, impassively at first, then contorting with pain, then expanding into the great helmet, eyes bulging, lips purple and swollen then opening in a scream, and the glass filled with blood and water. the disconnected air hose snaked wildly, spraying bubbles in all directions and they shot up along the tube towards the surface where the tender, who could be seen now through the watery shimmer, was laughing so much his great white belly shook. Then from somewhere came a banshee scream which jolted me awake, wet with sweat, choking, heart thumping on the inside of my ribs like a man trapped in a bamboo cage.*

*I knew now for certain. This time I had seen him.*

That's the fiction. But what really happened to William Webber in Broome? Why did one of the foremost divers of his day die in such circumstances?

It was the London-based Siebe Gorman Company who brought the twelve ex-Royal Navy divers to Broome. Together with Heinke and Co., they produced most of the diving equipment used in Broome at this time. Webber was by now well-known to the company. Manager Robert H. Davis wrote of him in glowing terms to Moss and Richardson, the pearling company to which he was to be attached once in Broome.

*I have made the selection as fairly as possible and given each firm exceptionally good men. You will notice I have included Webber, whom of course you know. I have sent him not only because he is a deep water man, but because he is very loyal to the Firm and I think we ought to have at least one man that we know and trust to look after our interests among the fleet. He is most enthusiastic about the work and most anxious to show the pearlery what he can do.*

The aim of the enterprise was ostensibly to demonstrate the capacity of European divers to successfully dive and collect oyster shell in these waters, and to

debunk the entrenched wisdom that the Japanese diver possessed some natural superiority of vision or endurance. Whether the company acted alone in this aim, or whether it did so at the urging of others, is not clear. It is difficult to understand what the company stood to directly gain by promoting the cause of English divers over Japanese, since divers would require the same equipment, regardless of nationality.

However such an aim would have been seen as noble and righteous in many quarters, and was in keeping with Australian government policy of the time. These were the early days of the White Australia Policy, and a series of government enquiries had raised concerns about the "Asiatics" who dominated the pearling industries in northern Australia and whom, it was claimed, not only took the profits out of the country but could pose a risk to national security. A 1908 Queensland Government inquiry into pearl diving in the Torres Strait, for instance, explored "the possibility of encouraging white divers with a view to their gradual substitution for aliens."

But while such a concept may have had official sanction in distant parliaments, in Broome it would have been quite the opposite. Broome was a frontier town, with different rules, and there would have been very few in that town who would have wished the English divers success. Certainly not the Japanese, who saw their reputations and livelihood threatened. And not the pearlery, who would have faced perhaps a ten-fold increase in wages if they had to pay Englishmen to dive rather than Japanese. That would have been beyond the economics of many, and it was widely felt that many pearlery stood to be ruined if the English divers were successful.

There was a bad omen for the enterprise at the very start, with the loss of John S. Davis, brother of Siebe Gorman's Manager, who was to help supervise proceedings in Broome. He was one of one hundred and forty six passengers aboard the *Koombana*, the 3700 tonne pride of the Adelaide Steamship Company, which steamed out from Port Hedland on the morning of March 19 1912, straight into a cyclone, and was never seen again.

But despite this setback, and a local reception which ranged from cool to hostile, the enterprise in Broome proceeded, and the divers were allocated to the various pearling companies. Webber set up as planned with Moss and Richardson. One can imagine the consternation of the Japanese divers as they watched the confident, moustachioed Welsh diver prepare for his first outing on the *Eurus*, armed with his Admiralty Tables to keep him safe, and his engine-driven air

compressor, never seen before in Broome, which might allow him to reach deeper than they had ever gone, perhaps to discover virgin beds of shell. The reputation of the Japanese diver was on the line, and with it his livelihood.

Critical to Webber's chances of success would have been his choice of tender. The hard-hat diver's life was literally in the hands of his tender, for it was he who supervised the dive and controlled the two lifelines; the manila rope which allowed communication, and the red rubber air hose. So, who was William Webber's tender? There are conflicting reports regarding this critical point. At a subsequent Royal Commission one of his fellow English divers, John Le Noury, stated that "all the crew was black and he may have been killed." But recently an official report has come to light which suggests that Webber in fact had employed one William Read, who may have been a nephew, in the crucial role of tender. How experienced or competent a tender Read was, is not known.

Like all of the other English divers, Webber had only modest success in collecting shell. Some divers were later to claim that they had only been taken to a reef that had been "worked out". They simply could not bring up shell from a reef which had none. The pressure to dive deeper and for longer, to take more risks, must have been acutely felt by the English divers. They were elite divers working in unfamiliar waters, and for them too, professional pride and reputations were at stake.

On June 6, 1912, while diving one hundred feet below the lugger *Eurus*, somewhere off Wallal south of Broome, something catastrophic happened to William Webber. The tender's report states that he had earlier complained of shoulder pain, which can be an early sign of the bends. He had appeared to act erratically on his last dive, refusing to stop on the way up. He lit a cigarette, told the tender to take off his corselet and heavy boots, and as this was done he grabbed at his left leg, fell back and collapsed. The lugger turned immediately for Broome, but the diver lapsed in and out of consciousness "until 3pm on the 7th when he turned livid and gradually sank, dying at 5.30pm, the boat then being off Cape La Touche on the way to Broome." They arrived there the following day, and that same afternoon a post-mortem examination was performed by a Dr. Suzuki, who attributed the cause of death to "Diver's Paralysis". William Webber was buried on the 9th June in Broome Cemetery. There was no inquest into the circumstances of his death.

The Siebe Gorman enterprise ended as it had begun, in disaster. As for the other divers, at least two others were paralysed, including Webber's friend John Le Noury,

who spent several months in Broome Hospital before he was back on his feet. "Feet that could not get me back to civilization quick enough!" he declared. While Le Noury was in hospital, another diver was in prison. While working for pearlmaster Stanley Piggot, this diver had been coerced into signing a declaration that white men were unfit for pearl diving, and when he later retracted and tore up the declaration, a livid Piggot successfully had the diver prosecuted. Now without wages and unable to pay the fine of twenty pounds, the diver spent a month in Broome Prison for his pains.

A Royal Commission into Pearling was held in 1913. The voice of John Le Noury rang out accusingly, suggesting a conspiracy had taken place to ensure the English divers could not possibly succeed. But his was a lone voice, for most others called upon to give evidence mysteriously lost their powers of comprehension or of speech or of recall, in a manner which has since become a hallmark of Royal Commissions.

The Commissioner's findings were a victory for those who supported the continued use of Japanese divers. Le Noury's testimony was dismissed as unreliable. A recommendation was made that pearlers be allowed to continue employing Asian divers. European divers, said the Commissioner, "whilst the equal of any race so far as their actual diving was concerned, were not possessed of that special faculty which enabled the Asiatic diver to discover shell on the ocean bottom." Analogy was made to the ability of an Aboriginal tracker to see signs on the ground that a European would not notice.

Not one European dived for shell in the following pearling season of 1913, and the Japanese divers continued to dominate the pearling industry in Australia. But the industry was soon to become a sadly depleted one, with the advent of the Great War seeing the price paid for shell plummet. Perhaps success for the English divers would have made no difference, for within two years of Siebe Gorman's disastrous experiment there was little money to be had in pearling, and besides, most able-bodied white men had departed Broome to fight a war. It was not until well after World War II, when scuba equipment and pearl farming changed the rules forever, that Australian-born "European" divers would finally put the mythology to rest and prove themselves the equal of the Japanese in diving for shell.

That a pearl diver should die at sea was nothing very extraordinary for Broome in 1912. Eight others died that year, and that was one of the safest years on record. Over the next five seasons, despite much curtailed activity, there were a further one hundred and thirteen deaths of divers, and the vast majority of these were Japanese.

The Japanese divers were extraordinary men, and their contribution to the development of the pearling industry cannot be overstated. The size of the Japanese Cemetery in Broome is a reminder of the tragedy which so frequently accompanied their endeavours. In a way, the Japanese triumph over the English divers in 1912 was rewarded with a poison chalice.

In 1918, the Broome Hospital received a recompression chamber from Heinke and Co. At the same time, most pearlers had finally begun to insist that their divers adhere to the limits of the dive tables and the principles of safe decompression. There was only one death from decompression sickness in 1918, and since then such deaths have thankfully become a rarity. The eventual adoption of these principles he helped establish might be considered a belated victory for William Webber in Broome.

The news of William Webber's death eventually filtered back to his widow, Harriet, who was pregnant with his third child; a boy, John, who would never see his father. There was no pension or annuity forthcoming on William's death, and Harriet was left bereft, with three young children and no income. She developed tuberculosis, but despite this it appears she remarried soon after. Her health continued to decline, and she died of a complication of pregnancy, less than two years after William's death. The children were taken in by various aunties. The eldest, William junior, found his way out of the poverty trap of his childhood. At the age of thirteen, he went to sea.

And so to the present. When Bill Webber, the diver's grandson, retired from teaching a few years ago, he spent a good deal of effort trying to find out something of the circumstances of his grandfather's death. Lack of progress and ill health had almost caused him to give up until he received a copy of my book. This fortified him in a long-held desire to come to Western Australia and see for himself. And of course, like the fictional William Webber junior in my book, he headed for Broome.

Happily, unlike his fictional counterpart, he did not trigger race riots, and nor was he incarcerated in Broome Prison. He did however get to stand on Cable Beach and look out to sea, and walk down Dampier Terrace where his grandfather must have walked, but of course he found no concrete reminder of his grandfather. The Broome Cemetery was a disappointment for him. Unlike the well preserved Japanese graves with their impressive headstones and monuments, the European headstones are few. "A grader went through in the seventies and tidied up a bit", he was told. William Webber lies in Broome Cemetery, but there is no record of where.

The local newspaper interviewed Bill. What did he think of the novel, they

asked. "It's a good story", he answered. "But I don't like fiction much. I'd rather the truth."

So, what is the truth regarding William Webber's death in Broome eighty-seven years ago? Certainly suspicions abound about the possibility of foul play. There was motive and opportunity. As a writer, it is of course tempting to conjecture on these possibilities. But I am also a doctor with an interest in diving medicine, and when I look at William Webber's situation from this perspective, I see it as having been precarious in the extreme. A diver who had been invalidated from the Navy, working under conditions of great duress and pressure to succeed, in unfamiliar waters, with crew which, even if not hostile, may have been unfamiliar with the new equipment...perhaps the greater mystery would have been if he had come through unscathed.

As with all absorbing mysteries, we shall never learn for certain the truth of it. Unless, that is, he comes knocking on my door tomorrow.

*He delicately placed the smaller pearl down on the square of baize and gently flicked it with his finger. The little ball, my father's life, rolled truly across the baize. He picked it up, placed it in my palm, closed my fingers over the pearl, and held my fist between his two hands, as if in blessing.*

*"Please, take the pearl, Mr. Webber. You are leaving Broome tomorrow. I should like you to have it, as a reminder of your time here."*

*He gave me no chance to refuse it. When I withdrew my hand from his, with the pearl in its grasp, it seemed to me I had forfeited the right to raise the circumstances of my father's death again.*

#### **Acknowledgments**

Two of William Webber's descendants, Angela Stephens and Nudgean Basley have kindly sent me the results of their own research, some of which is quoted, as well as the photographs.

John Bevan, who has a research interest in the history of diving, unearthed much of the primary material regarding the circumstances of Webber's death, and passed it on via Angela Stephens.

My thanks to the family for being lovely Welsh folk, not Californian lawyers.



*The diver William Webber c. 1901 aged 22. He was by this time already an experienced diver, serving on the Royal Navy cruiser HMS Terrible.*



*William Webber's wife Harriet, holding the diver's first son William Webber junior, about 1904. Born in Nova Scotia, Harriet was described as shy and gentle, and a fine pianist. She died two years after William, leaving three young children to be cared for by aunts.*

**Christos Tsiolkas, *The Jesus Man*.**

Vintage, 1999, 403 pp.

Christos Tsiolkas' first novel *Loaded*, and the Ana Kokkinos directed film adaptation *Head On*, have both attracted cult followings, a dubious blessing which can sometimes leave an author with an impossibly difficult act to follow. In his second novel, *The Jesus Man*, Tsiolkas confronts this challenge, as it were, head on, and departs with highly creditable, if not wholly unmixed, results.

Once more Tsiolkas brings an acerbic and informed social conscience to his preferred style — grunge splattered hyperrealism — and traverses, indeed even expands, some of the thematic territory explored in *Loaded*: alienated youth, suburban despair in a brilliantly charted Melbourne, class friction, ethnic difference, generational conflict in families, and a fascination with, and suspicion of, popular and subcultural discourses. This latter concern finds particularly cheeky articulation in the use of Tsiolkas' beloved Australian rules football as a source of sexual fantasy for his narrator, Lou Stephano, and a genuine sporting interest for the entire Stephano family — evidenced in the domestic vignette which has Lou watching "The Footy Show" with

his brother and sister in law: "Eva rests her head on my shoulder and Dominic is playing with my hair. On the television, Saverio Rocca is on the panel, shirt and tie, so very handsome. I sit up." Clearly, perhaps, *deliberately*, and, at times, it might be argued, even excessively, the Italian-Greek Stefanos are a more sympathetic family than the unbending Greek clan who kept *Loaded*'s Ari firmly locked in the closet.

It is in broadening his focus on sexuality and gender — with particular reference to masculinity — that Tsiolkas consolidates what is, arguably, his great contribution to Australian writing in the nineties: an intelligent assimilation (never uncritical) of queer politics and theory into fiction. Ostensibly the three Stephano brothers — Lou, Dominic and Tommy — have little in common. However, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes apparent that they are, at times, uncanny mirrors of each other. Their stories are told through the imaginative recreation of Lou, who, in paradigmatic postmodern fashion, avows that he has blended fiction and fact, perceiving this approach as the only model possible for addressing the tortured problem of "truth" in a contemporary society which has ruthlessly commodified the tragic death of one of his brothers in a

distorted frenzy of tabloid trivia.

Tsiolkas handles this overarching narrative device with considerable subtlety, for the danger, surely, would be for Lou's brothers to become mere extensions of his subjectivity. They retain, however, a degree of hermeneutic opacity, thus facilitating a complex delineation of intersubjectivity — a fusing of narration and focalisation — in which sexuality is relentlessly complicated, so that gay and straight verge into that distinctly queer borderland that lies somewhere in between the hetero/homo binarism. Tsiolkas' readers have been here before: the catch cry of *Loaded's* Ari was, after all, "It's not that I can't decide. I don't like definitions", and the insuperable (and hence perhaps richly satisfying) puzzle this posed was whether it was an immature and/or frightened denial or a productive resistance to regulatory regimes which homogenise sexual (and other) identities at the expense of complex multiple difference: class, ethnicity, age and gender. Something of the same iconoclasm remains in *The Jesus Man*. Lou's gayness still comes with a twist: he is hopelessly in love with Soo-Ling, the one time girl friend of his dead brother Tommy, and mother of Tommy's child Betty. Lou's dilemma is genuine and moving, defying the simple explanation of

denial of his "true" sexuality (although this clearly plays its not inconsiderable part) and touching on that irreconcilable, yet compelling, conflict between emotional need and erotic desire: "I am trying to learn how to be straight, how to make my body respond to women. It's women who reach inside me, they don't reject my heart." It is, however, "straight" masculinity which is under the microscope this time around. Thus, straight elder brother Dom is depicted (or perhaps imagined?) in adolescence, as selling himself for sex to a lonely elderly widower so as to pay for an abortion for his girlfriend. This gives him something unexpected in common with Lou who later recounts that he has done the deed (as much out of sympathy as for cash) with the same, or a similar, elderly man, who, it might be added, strenuously maintains all the while that he is straight.

The apparent narratorial (if not specifically authorial) neutrality in addressing such vexed issues as inter-generational sex and prostitution, along with hints of incest and violent pornography, will (and perhaps not unjustifiably) concern some readers. Certainly, the catalogue of horrors which unfolds in the story of the tortured middle brother Tommy might have benefited from some

rigorous editing. In fairness, however, it cannot be denied that the accumulation of blank, brutal, banal and profoundly unerotic images of debased women in Tommy's self-excoriating mind does have a critical intent, and that they must be juxtaposed with depictions of most of the women in the novel — in particular the feisty, complex mother Maria — which are markedly sympathetic. Nor can it be denied that Tsiolkas recognises the ideological function of the abject representations his character consumes. Tommy, an externally passive but internally riven man, is riddled with a sense of inadequacy in regard to normative masculinity (exemplified by Dom and father Artie). His internalisation of his childhood "fat boy" persona offers some interesting insights into the often under-addressed topic of male body image. Equally, the spiralling of his obsessions into paranoia after he loses his job in a ruthless downsizing exercise locates his anger in a firmly delineated socio-economic context and hints at the ideological mechanisms whereby such frustration is diverted from political action and displaced onto culturally sanctioned substitutes: here the contrary pulls of porn and religious mania.

Tsiolkas' rather ambivalent concern with spiritual issues is by no

means uninteresting — blending Greek and Aboriginal myth, Christianity and atheism — yet seems somehow never fully worked through to justify its elevation to title status. It is, rather, in its attack on the perversities of popular culture that the book finds its real core. Tommy's final act of grisly murder suicide turns him and his entire family, into page three fodder for *Who* magazine, a fate to which Lou responds with crisply analytical vision: "Interview with Mum on Channel Ten news. She regrets it; they caught her, a camera in her face, asked the questions. She broke down. They played that again and again." If, at times, Tsiolkas' mediation on the seamier side of life in the nineties seems excessive, then such gut wrenching images provide adequate compensation.

Deb Hunn

**Christopher Cyrill, *Hymns for the Drowning*. Allen and Unwin, 1999, \$17.95, 193 pp.**

Christopher Cyrill's latest work, *Hymns for the Drowning*, reflects some of the concerns of his earlier *The Ganges and its Tributaries* (1993). The attention to the world of mind and memory remains, and the focus on the hidden foundations of meaning and

knowledge, unreal worlds, worlds in which meanings are always necessarily multiple — if for no other reason because the narrator recognises his own limitations, the constraints of his own cultural make-up.

In a meditative novel about memory, recollections, loss and recuperation, dreams and reality — “What I remember next is perhaps the memory of a dream”, but then *perhaps* not — it is almost impossible to put together a plot. Besides, plots are hardly central to Cyrill’s work. Cyrill is rather more concerned with tracing lines of thought, moving from one thing to another more or less at random by picking up connections between words, the hidden layers of meaning each word carries within its fabric. This is a narrative that makes little attempt to sound coherent, but rather relishes the power of the fragmet(ion), of digression, a kind of *à la recherche des choses perdues*.

I imagined that if I could preserve my dreams, a young archaeologist a millenium from now would find in the silt of a riverbed the remains of dream where a man pursued the sun.

As in his earlier work, Cyrill writes of many worlds at once, in a style where polyphony is not so much

a characteristic of the work as the very essence of it: “the stories she told me were hybrids of fables and fairytales, of proverbs and wives’ tales...”.

At times the narrative style borders on the precious, though this seems reductive and unfair in a work where different cultural and aesthetic sensibilities merge. In *Hymns for the Drowning* Cyrill has woven together a narrative so intricately and finely stitched that often it feels as if one is looking through a dainty sheet of filligree:

Within the mind of each mourner, I presumed, would be a story or fragment of a story from the long story of my grandfather’s life, and if I were to be given access to each mind I could piece together, like the placement of tesserae in a vast mosaic, some rough portrait of the man.

The tapestry whose authenticity and provenance the narrator is employed to explore becomes in this context a somewhat glaring metaphor for the way in which *Hymns for the Drowning* is written.

This is a novel for the moment — not so much postmodernist or postcolonial, transnational, cosmopolitan, transcultural or millenarian, but reflecting all these concerns. It assiduously flaunts its own condition

of artifact while, paradoxically, foregrounding its roots in the world of the imagination. In between, there is talk of the "old country" and of "a new language", of migration and exile, of familial fragmentation and cultural alienation; of imperialisms, colonialisms, and post-colonialisms; of Cortés' story and those of its unwitting actors; of love, death and joy. Of capitalism, too — the narrator's job is neither his first choice nor permanent; rather, it is what he must do "in between jobs", for the sake of paying the rent.

*Hymns for the Drowning's* "stylised renderings" of memories, of *à propos*, of remarks overheard, of interjections draw the reader into the narrator's own narrative of self-discovery. I could tell you more, but "I have forgotten how the story ended..."

Tony Simoes da Silva

Sue Woolfe, ed., *Wild Minds: Stories of Outsiders and Dreamers*.

Random House, 1999, 350 pp.

Catherine Pratt, *Resisting Fiction:*

*The Novels of Henry Handel Richardson*. University of Queensland Press, 1999, 205 pp.

*Wild Minds* is an anthology with a very tight principle of selection: stories whose characters stand outside the accepted norm. Within this rubric, Sue Woolfe has selected a rich blend

of stories from around the world without trying to be comprehensive. There are stories from Africa (Ngugi wa Thiong'o), from Italy (Italo Calvino), from China (Jiang Yun) and from Hungary (Gyula Krudy). And there are also the stories one expects to find; narratives of misfits from authors who have made this type of story into "classics" of the type: Flannery O'Connor's "The River", Rabindranath Tagore's "A Wife's Letter", Jorge Luis Borges' "Avelino Arredondo, Marguerite Duras' "The Building Site" and Gabriel Garcia Marquez' "The Trail of Your Blood in the Snow". And there are stories by authors one is happy to find represented here in international company, Elizabeth Jolley and Joan London and Peter Wells.

The stories are rich, evocative, well-made and focused on characters who are living in a particular society but who are not part of the social norm. All of them have, to one degree or another, "wild minds" — either enacted in a moment of "fine madness" as in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's story "Minutes of Glory" or internalised into a pattern of idiosyncratic response (as in the excerpt from Jane Bowles' "Two Serious Ladies" which opens the anthology) or a conscious choice to remain apart, to reject an opportunity

for community when it is offered (as in Lorrie Moore's "The Jewish Hunter"). These first three stories set the tone and the basic themes of the outsider either consciously rejected or unknowingly misinterpreted.

However, in order to acknowledge a character as an outsider, even when clearly labelled as such by these authors, there must be a tacit assumption that the reader will also be able to recognise the societal norm against which this character is placed — in the position of someone either outside the shop window looking in or else walled up inside a small room impervious of even the window itself. In other words, even when the author carefully details the conventions of the "normal" characters and expertly shows us the actions, thoughts and words of the non-normal character, the point or the strength of the story depends on our initial recognition of the conventions as, in fact, "normal". So, apart from the skill of the author (which is in abundant evidence here), there is still a need for the reader to recognise, to identify a certain community — readers who can say "ah yes, I know what you mean" to Ngugi wa Thiong'o when he suggests the differences between Beatrice and the other bar ladies.

For readers trained in the language of late twentieth century

literary theorists like Jacques Derrida and Frederick Jameson, this sort of reading could easily be held suspect and, at best, considered naive. From such a critical position, one could argue that, as capitalism has so fractured any notion of community, so the notion of an individual as anything other than a social construct is just that, only notional. The character appearing to act outside them is really only behaving in the inverse of one set of givens. Independent action outside a social norm is not possible (Foucault has put an end to that); to be able to recognise an outsider's actions as "outside" anything at all is, in fact, to recognise yet another social construct already embedded within another social construct.

But does this view dilute the reading pleasure of this anthology? Not at all. If one were not a "naive reader" on some occasions, why would one read at all? Anthologies, by their very nature, are committed to a kind of community. They group things according to some method of selection; some property which all the members of that group share in different ways: a common theme, a common country, a common type of character. Anthologies to be anthologies require readers who can recognise, and accept, this commonality. The reader, while reading such

an anthology, might be inspired to think of other works which might have been included, but this would be more in tribute to the success of the principle of selection and the community of experience it creates rather than a criticism of it.

*Wild Minds* fulfills its editor's very personal principle of selection "This is a collection of stories that have engrossed and enthralled me and shown me that whatever art is, it is partly about the struggle of the person at odds with the family, the world, the universe." (2) and builds a community of outsiders. If the reader can think of other stories which could have been included, then this anthology is a successful one.

Catherine Pratt's full-length study of the novels of Henry Handel Richardson is part of the series "UQP Studies in Australian Literature". Pratt states her purpose in this study quite early in her introduction: "Resistance, anomaly, contrariness—this study begins with the strong sense of these qualities in Richardson's fiction, and seeks to account for them." (2) What follows from this statement is a careful exploration of these perceptions through the linking of narrative structure with ideology to destabilise the traditional views of Richardson's work as either masked autobiography or realist/naturalist fiction. This

process reveals formal and ideological aspects of Richardson's fiction which conflict with the apparent autobiographical features and naturalist conventions of her novels.

Pratt provides a biography of the novelist which quickly fills in the chronology which opens her study. Pratt also takes this opportunity to lightly sketch some of the preoccupations which she will tease out in the chapters dealing with the actual novels themselves. Feminist impulses, sexual ambiguity, a concern with fiction as the shaper of expectations are hinted at.

This biography is followed by a brief, but cogent survey of previous critical assessments of Richardson's work. In the nature of a literature survey, Pratt describes the major theoretical positions in the canon of Richardson criticism from Vance Palmer to Carol Franklin. Essentially, these are presented within three streams: those critics for whom the analysis of gender stereotypes overtook any assessment of aesthetic or formal considerations in the novels; those critics who took the opposite stance and overlooked any political issues in preference to the formal study of the narrative forms; and, finally, those critics who link the interests of the first two, finding in Richardson's novels the connections

between narrative form and ideology. Pratt sees herself as working within this aspect of Richardson criticism.

Pratt positions herself within the more recent studies of Delys Bird and Carol Franklin by "offering a feminist analysis of narrative form" (6). To demonstrate this, Pratt identifies multiple layers of plot and points of view with reference to intertextual elements in the narratives by working through each of the novels in order of publication, devoting a chapter to each with the exception of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. In the case of this seminal text in Australian literary history, Pratt offers an extensive analysis of each volume in its own chapter.

It is in her interpretation of this work that Pratt extends her argument linking narrative modes with ideology through an analysis of its intertextual encoding of Darwin and the spiritualists in the narrative of a nineteenth-century professional man's oscillation between science and religion combined with the novel's playing against the naturalist tradition in which it is usually placed. As she pursues her analysis of narrative and ideology, Pratt extends it into a consideration of the theoretical positions of French Feminists such as Luce Irigaray by focusing attention on the importance of the "body" and the

"male gaze" and its implications in the narrative of the Mahony family. Pratt also delves into a portion of the work of Julia Kristeva in the application of Kristeva's description of the "abject" to the personality of Richard Mahony. The result of these investigations leads Pratt to finally assert that "the relationship between the male gaze, Victorian masculinity, and the stability of the text becomes increasingly visible and contested, and motherhood becomes an organising feature of an alternative way of thinking about the self and about narrative." (97).

Pratt does not slavishly assert that the apparent narrative structure is undercut by an ideology in opposition to it. Instead, she broadens and deepens her theoretical position by clear reference to the works themselves, extending her analysis to additional layers of meaning specific to the texts. For example, Pratt's use of French Feminism's inscription of the female body is in one instance bodied as both monster and mother (*The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*), in another identified as desire and taboo (*The Getting of Wisdom*) and in another reified as the sexual and material rate of exchange in a male economy (*The Young Cosima*).

Whether or not one agrees with her assertion that Richardson

consciously made use of an "uncompromising oppositional strategy" (p. 182) in her fiction, Pratt undoubtedly makes a thoughtful and insightful contribution to the critical appreciation of an important Australian novelist.

**Kathryn Lawry**

**Rosamund Dalziell, *Shameful Autobiographies: Shame in Contemporary Australian Autobiographies and Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1999, pb \$29.95, 302pp.**

Why do we enjoy reading autobiographies? A deceptively easy question, its answer raises some interesting questions about reading practices as well as the nature of the self. Rosamund Dalziell's treatise on recent Australian autobiographies attempts to answer this question, as well as one allied to it: why do people want to write about themselves? Invoking Darwinian, Freudian and Eriksonian theories of human psychological development, Dalziell argues that shame is a pervasive presence in the human psyche and therefore in social practices. As autobiographical writing is a social practice explicitly concerned with the examination of the self, notions of shame underpin its production and reception. *Shameful Autobiographies*

identifies four principally Australian sorts of shame: the myth of British superiority (the 'cultural cringe'); shame over 'illegitimacy'; racist shame; and the shame of exile or the immigrant experience. Each version of shame is discussed in relation to one or more representative autobiographies. For example, shame about illegitimate birth is represented by Bernard Smith's *The Boy Adeodatus*, Germaine Greer's *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You* and Robert Dessaix's *A Mother's Disgrace*. Interesting arguments are raised with respect to these books but, taking Greer as an example, the discussion tends to slip into psychoanalysis of Greer herself rather than remain concerned with the text's representations of shame. Greer's book is difficult to read and seems to focus more on the shame of Australian treatment of the land, indigenous people and women, than on personal shame (about the father's lies and illegitimacy).

Kathleen Fitzpatrick's 1983 book, *Solid Bluestone Foundations*, is the model for the chapter on the cultural cringe, and this is probably the best and most interesting discussion in the book. Sadly, Fitzpatrick represented her life as "second rate". An influential historian, she never seemed to come to terms with two social "disappointments": she failed to

achieve a first class degree at Oxford and seemed to remain embarrassed over her brief marriage to Brian Fitzpatrick. Dalziell's discussion here is confident; the personal nature of her critique of the text and its author raises many issues about the authorial motives behind particular autobiographical texts. Fitzpatrick's text is, however, a unique autobiographical artefact. *Solid Bluestone Foundations* is not "typical" of contemporary Australian autobiographies — no text is. Life writing has proliferated in Australia recently and its variety is enormous, even within various sub-categories of writers such as women, Aborigines or immigrants. For example, Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* does contain facets of a shamed self, but its treatment of this emotion often produces different reading effects to those produced by Sally Morgan's *My Place*.

The theoretical study of shame is extensive. According to Ruth Benedict, whose influential anthropological work *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* was published in 1946, white settler nations of the West are "guilt cultures" while Asian nations are "shame cultures". Dalziell addresses some of the substance of Benedict's arguments, but not extensively. However, she

does raise some interesting issues. For example, there are distinctions between the concepts of shame and guilt; while guilt is morally located, shame isn't. The book was produced from Dalziell's PhD thesis and, like many books-from-theses, the editors have probably removed some vital (but boring) theoretical exposition. Consequently, there are some gaps in the discussion and odd occasions when Dalziell says that she will discuss something, but then seems to gloss over it. The text promises a brief discussion of Suzanne Chick's extraordinary auto/biography *Searching for Charmian*. However a couple of lines, which barely mention the issues of that text, were all I managed to find.

Despite these reservations, I have to commend Dalziell's innovation. This text is a notable addition to the field of autobiography studies in Australia because its (psycho)-analytical approach has not been attempted before. Dalziell makes some fascinating points about the emotional "risk" inherent in autobiographical writing (and reading) and the reasons for its unique status in literary studies. For a long time the genre of autobiography was "shamed" by critics; it was supposed to be the domain of those who lacked the "imaginative" ability to write fiction — namely everyone who wasn't white,

middle-class and male. Only a few "distinguished" male texts were considered worthy of examination. Dalziell's text reveals the complexity of the genre and the ways that it is able to elucidate the high-theoretical questions of the academy while simultaneously enthralling many readers. Her arguments in this vein are particularly compelling, especially those which discuss how the narrative confession of shameful experiences works to "authenticate" the "self" of an autobiographical text. Moreover, the text raises issues about Australian lives, social mores and histories that have provoked many arguments, and still do. This is the real interest of *Shameful Autobiographies* and of the life writings that provoked it.

### Lydia Wells

**Kate Grenville, *The Idea of Perfection*.** Picador, 1999, \$25, 401pp.

Grenville's latest novel is as deceptively simple as its opening chapter. Douglas Cheeseman, a man "no one would look at twice", views Karakarook, NSW, pop 1374, from his window in the Caledonian Hotel. The town's main street, Parnassus Road, lies below "as if stunned under the afternoon sun". He watches as a "big raw-boned plain woman" drives

up and surveys the same scene. She in turn sees the man watching from the window. The two outsiders view each other across a gulf of silence. A woman appears and crosses the street. The silence is broken for a moment by the ping and slap of the fly door on *Alfred Chang's Superior Meats*. With a deftness characteristic of this author, the brief scene foreshadows all the elements of the narrative, which alternates chapter by chapter among these three solitary figures as each struggles to overcome the isolation of the outsider.

Harley Savage is the "Museum Woman" down from Sydney to help the heritage museum put Karakarook on the map. She is a textile artist and quilt-maker who wants to rescue the *Australian vernacular*, the ordinary objects of domestic life which represent to her the true spirit of the bush. She carries the guilt of three failed marriages and her last husband's suicide, whose cruellest act was to die without an explanation. His suicide note: "*Dear Harley* it said, and a comma. That was all. *Dear Harley, comma.*" The story of his death has reduced her to near silence, and "lay like a stain across everything they said and everything she said... conversations inched forwards carefully across a chasm."

Douglas is a bridge engineer (a

*pontist*, not in my dictionary, and I suspect a happy invention by the author) who has been sent by Head Office in Sydney to pull down the old Bent Bridge, which goes nowhere in particular, and to replace it with an efficient concrete beam. His fear of heights and his inability to speak the masculine language of his working culture has condemned him to be a "small-job man." He reads the *Engineering Digest* for relaxation and his fascination for such things as the hydration of Portland Cement has bored his wife to a divorce.

Such a synopsis does no justice to the strong visual imagery of Grenville's writing. But it indicates her continuing fascination with the possibilities and limitations of language. The two awkward figures of Douglas and Harley struggle to find their voices in a series of encounters which are written with humour and compassion. They meet in an anguish of dialogue as disjointed as the planks of the old Bent Bridge. More painful still is the characters' internal dialogue, which constantly echoes behind their attempts at discourse with others. Grenville is concerned here with the construction of identity through language, with all its ideological limitations. As in her previous work, she plays with the text on the page, by italicising commonplace words and

phrases so as to examine their multiple meanings. When Douglas goes for a walk in the country, and becomes conscious of the landscape he thinks:

All this, grassy paddock, cows, trees – he had thought it was *Nature*. But now he could see that that was ignorance, or lack of imagination. It was not *Nature*. It was actually *property*.

Or Harley, speaking of her grandparents who lived "out Badham way":

But they're long gone.  
Coralie glanced at her.  
Dead and gone, like, do you mean? ...  
That's right. Dead and gone.

It was a funny phrase, when you thought about it, but of course it was right. *Dead* was not always *gone*. You could think about the *dead* every day of your life, so that it seemed they would never, ever, be truly *gone*. Philip, for example.

The third figure in the opening landscape is Felicity Porcelline. She was the little girl in the Palmolive ad, and has remained the commodified female. She speaks a fragile language which conceals the bleakness of her situation as the perfect wife of Hugh,

Karrakarook's stolid bank manager. But the narrative argues that language has a habit of stripping away euphemisms along with an assumed identity, and Felicity's isolation will be broached by an *awkwardness* with the town butcher and amateur photographer Alfred Chang.

He put the knife down on the block, hooked the steel back on his belt as if sheathing a sword, came over to the gauze.

Ever tried the mutton?

He was close enough for her to see his eyes, dark in his smooth face, but she could not tell what sort of expression he had. She realised you could call this *inscrutable*.

Oh, no, she said. No, I never have.

Somehow, she'd got the tone wrong. There was more regret in her voice than was warranted by *not ever having tried the mutton*.

The sustaining metaphors of the book are the old wooden bridge and the patchwork quilt. Each is a celebration of connection, of the joining of the commonplace to form something stronger and more beautiful than its parts. The structure of the novel mimics its subject, the alternating chapters reflecting the irregular light and dark patterns of

Harley's patchwork quilts. The form of the novel also reflects the author's own approach to writing, as she has discussed in interviews and in *The Writing Book*. She is a fluid writer, for whom the rearrangement of well-formed fragments into a unified work is as deeply creative as the earliest words on the page

If beauty is to be found in connection, then the tentative coming together of Harley and Douglas is a more optimistic outcome than in Grenville's previous work; outsiders such as Lilian in *Lilian's Story*, having found a voice, remain essentially alone. And in this novel, the characters come together in a way which finally goes beyond language:

There was a silence that was nothing more complicated than two people together who did not need to say anything. Against the pale sky, the leaves of the gumtree swept softly backwards and forwards over each other, providing all the conversation that the moment called for.

**John Ralph**

Lily Brett, *Too Many Men*, Sydney: Picador, 1999, 714 pp.

"Children of Holocaust survivors" says Ruth Rothwax,

[find] it difficult to separate from their parents. Difficult to have a life of their own. Difficult to have a life. They [have] to create obstacles and burdens for themselves. To align themselves with their parents. To experience at least some of the horror. Weighted down with fear, apprehension and depression, they [feel] free enough to go on. (18)

As with Brett's earlier fiction and poetry, *Too Many Men* is preoccupied with the question of what it is to be the child of Holocaust survivors. In it, Ruth Rothwax, aged forty-three, persuades her father Edek to visit Poland to revisit the site of his imprisonment and persecution. Ruth is haunted by memories and dreams which are not her own. She has the gift of empathy, a kind of premonition in reverse. She understands aspects of the past that others might miss. She reaches beyond the sign (Mrs. Feldman has a bald head disguised by a wig) and understands the signified (the hair of Malka Feldman was ripped out by the Nazis).

The stories in Brett's earlier two short-fiction collections, *Things Could Be Worse* and *What God Wants*, are not self-contained. Rather, they constitute moments of eavesdropping in a busy community. They have their ends and

beginnings in other tales. Her first novel, *Just Like That*, is characterised by the higgledy-piggledy onward flow of the lives of a whole company of Jewish survivors and their families. Many of the character traits in *Too Many Men* will be familiar to readers. But the journey of Ruth Rothwax in Brett's second novel has an identifiable forward progression and more cohesive frame.

Brett has broken from her earlier work by creating a layer of text beyond realism. Ruth Rothwax forms a dialogue with Rudolf Franz Ferdinand Hoss, SS Commandant of Auschwitz from 1940 to 1943, presently residing in Zweites Himmel's Lager [Heaven's Second Camp], a

sub-branch of heaven, a satellite camp. ... Hell is up here. ... It was a clever idea to put hell up here. It is next to heaven. People are not too sure where they are going when they come here. (85)

Brett uses this dialogue to explore the psyche of perpetrators of atrocities. Even so, if this book has a fault, it is that its parts are sometimes poorly welded together. In choosing to include Ruth's dialogue with Hoss, Brett has also chosen to make these moments entirely discrete. This leads to some gaps in logic as Brett leaves

unexplained the connection between Ruth's dialogue with Hoss and her "real" life. So, when Ruth muses on death, it is as if the fact of her conversations with Hoss do not exist:

The dead were absent. They were absent regardless of whether their memories were enshrined in a vault or tombstone. Or their names engraved on plaques and monuments. The dead were as absent as they could be. (253)

Elsewhere, in Brett's desire to convey information, the bones of her plot show through. Ruth reads everything she can about persecution of the Jews and she relates detailed aspects of the history of Jewish subjugation to her father. If Ruth is quoting from a book, then so is Brett, and the story does not always seamlessly accommodate this method of information relay.

On a fundamental level, the novel is preoccupied with the most basic aspects of the human condition. Brett's sentences are often simple ones: Ruth felt sick; Ruth was shocked; Edek looked sad. Brett locates a fine balance between simplicity and intensity which is at its most moving in the portrayal of the relationship between father and daughter:

"What are you talking about?"

Edek said. "Why do you think always that you are bad? You did this even when you was a girl. You was never bad. You was always a good girl." (538)

The importance of laughter to Jewish survival is both practised and observed by Brett, whose acute observation and acerbic delivery give her writing its life and edge:

Max did most of the business letters now. But Ruth still had to do all of the company's love letters. Max was too creative with love letters. She injected them with an intensity that appeared ominous. Ruth thought that Max was probably too young to do a good love letter. (78)

Brett's own writing celebrates the act of writing. Like Brett, Ruth is particular about words and she follows them to their logical, or illogical, ends:

"They weren't marching," Ruth called out. "They were walking. Soldiers march, not a whole community of people who were being forced out of their homes." (482)

*Too Many Men* consolidates and explores the depths of Brett's observation, passion and concern.

We're all searching for something. Going from cemetery to cemetery. From absence to absence. All of us looking for the presence of people who are no longer present. (569)

Brett's heritage is one of profound sadness, her inheritance is countless lost souls. As in each of her earlier books, she above all honours these.

### Georgia Richter

**Drusilla Modjeska, *Stravinsky's Lunch*, Picador, Sydney, 1999, hardcover \$50.**

A feminist study, very influenced by the writings of Virginia Woolf, whom Modjeska refers to a number of times in this book, *Stravinsky's Lunch* focuses on two women artists, Stella Bowen, the artist from Adelaide who married the modernist writer Ford Madox Ford, and lived with him in Paris, and the spinster Grace Cossington Smith, who quietly lived in Turrumurra, Sydney, and who was only really recognised in 1968, when an exhibition of her art at the Macquarie Galleries sold out, and in 1973, when she was in her eighties, when the curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Daniel Thomas, organised a retrospective exhibition of her art at the Art Gallery of New South

Wales that toured Australia during 1973 and 1974. In 1967, Thomas had bought paintings of Cossington Smith's that he had found in her studio and written an article on her work published in *Art and Australia* in that same year. In it, he catalogued the neglect of her art and listed her achievements. Thomas especially liked Cossington Smith's later work; the fact that, as he wrote, "the unseen presences in the late interiors have so structured and ordered their worlds that chaos is pushed back for a moment." "Art", he stated, "can hardly do more."<sup>1</sup> In 1987, after Cossington Smith's death in 1984, her painting "Studio Door" sold for \$140,000 and an unnamed interior for \$160,000.

Modjeska has written this book, she states, as a koan in her own practice as a woman and a writer and uses it to reflect on the reality of the implications, for women, of devoting themselves to a life of art; the cost, and the gains, of such a pursuit, and the conflict and connection between life and love. Such a book too, could and has been written about the life of male artists. They too can have this dilemma, as the lives of van Gogh and Joseph Cornell demonstrate, particularly if they have an intense

1. Daniel Thomas, "Grace Cossington Smith", *Art and Australia*, Vol.4, No.4, March 1967, 308.

vision, like van Gogh's, or a rich, interior, evocative life, like Cornell's, who is undoubtedly one of the greatest artists of this century. Men too need a room of their own, and a private income, or, as in Beckett and Patrick White's case, a supportive mother, to enable them to pursue their art.

Where Modjeska is best, in this book, is in her description of Grace Cossington Smith's devotion to her art. Cossington Smith, who was described, by Anthony Dattilo-Rubbo, as Mrs van Gogh, was very influenced by the art of Cézanne and van Gogh, and painted, in 1915, "Van Gogh's Room". She described yellow as the "colour of the sun" and as "the colour that advances" and aimed, in her art, for utter simplicity, following her own inner light. When she met the writer Ethel Anderson in 1925, Anderson told her that

with your unique brush strokes, with your grasp of colour, you may be able to give an expression to a quality in life, more moving than beauty alone, more intimate than infinity. You may find a fourth dimension as yet unfound, un-named.

Anderson, Modjeska writes, "understood what it meant to dwell in a zone that was not quite one or the other, betwixt and between; she

knew its solitariness, and its edgy pleasures." "All form", for Smith, landscape, interiors, still life, flowers, animals, people — has an inarticulate grace and beauty. Painting, for her was "expressing this form in colour, colour vibrant with light — but containing this other, silent quality which is unconscious, and belongs to all things created." She painted those "things unseen" that were all around her, "the golden thread running through time."

Bowen, who wrote an important autobiography *Drawn from Life*, and died in 1947 from cancer at the relatively young age of fifty four, considered, after the end of her relationship to Ford, that what she had "got out of it, was a remarkable and liberal education, administered in ideal circumstances." After the breakup with Ford, Bowen painted a very striking work, "Reclining Nude", c.1928, 31.5 x 40.5 cms, and two rather strange paintings "Still Life With Part Of Me", c.1927 and "Figure Study", c.1927, where the woman's face in both paintings is obliterated from the tip of her nose upwards. The figure of the woman, in "Figure Study", is very vulnerable.

Modjeska falters when she departs from history and speculates about the life of these two women, especially at the beginning of the book, as if she is writing a fiction

rather than a book about the lives and art of two women. Modjeska should not confuse genres. She would have been better served, by her editor, if some small sections of her book had been omitted. At times her critical judgement flies out the window, as when she describes Stella Bowen's painting "Provençal Conversation", c.1938, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 72.2 cms) as a great painting when, from the reproduction of it in her book, it does not deserve the adjective. The best painting of Bowen's reproduced in this book is her sensuous and extremely fine "Reclining Nude."

Modjeska's work has been rightly taken to task by Tim Bonyhady, in the *Australian's Review of Books*, for what he describes as her muddle when she speculates about and changes the dates for some of Cossington Smith's paintings,<sup>2</sup> as when she confidently states that the date for "Study of a Head: Self-Portrait" is 1918 not c.1916, as Bruce James dates it in his book *Grace Cossington Smith*, and speculates that it is "the face of a young woman who has known sexual passion — or at any rate passion — and is giving nothing away." Here one should note that the colours in the reproduction of this painting, in Modjeska's book, are very different to those in James's book on Cossington Smith, so much so, that it looks like a

completely different painting.

But, despite the flaws of Modjeska's study, it is undoubtedly a major contribution that enables us to better appreciate and understand the art and life of both Stella Bowen and Grace Cossington Smith.

**Michael Denholm**

**Lorna Sage, ed, *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English*. Cambridge University Press, 1999, pb. \$39.95; hb \$75.00, 696 pp, ill.**

In her short but critical introduction to this marvellous resource book, Lorna Sage refers to some of the issues its title raises. She says, "there are many Englishes in 'English'", acknowledging the potentially imperialist politics of "English". Interestingly, she suggests that this mapping of "women's writing" is also an index of social and historical change, "for the scale of women's access to literary life has reflected and accelerated democratic, diasporic pressures in the modern world". And she warns that, rich and hopefully reliable as this work is, such a reference can never be definitive; it provides starting points from which readers can move.

A huge and ambitious work, the *Guide* has been meticulously edited,

and much care has been taken to ensure that entries are as comprehensive and as knowledgeable and informative as possible, within very tight limits of space, of course. I should at this point declare myself an interested reviewer; as a minor contributor to this text, I know that the editor consulted widely and carefully, wishing the *Guide* to reflect accurately the field of women's writing in each of the English-speaking cultures it engages with. Entries may be in one of three categories; the largest number is under author name, the next largest is for important book titles, and a general category covers kinds of writing, influential movements or critical areas of interest — fairy tale for example, or Australian Aboriginal narratives, or biography — and cross-referencing is included. All entries are listed alphabetically. This arrangement breaks down the boundaries that are built up by categorising literary works and authors by their culture, and it's surprising what a different image of a world of writing such an arrangement offers.

The first page signals the range and scope of the entries. It begins with "Abbess of Crewe, The" (Muriel Spark's fourteenth novel), followed by "Abdullah, Mena" (Australian poet and short-story writer), "Abra" (Joan

Barfoot's first book) and "Acker, Kathy" (avant garde American novelist). On the last are "Zitkala-Sa (Gertrude Simmons Bonnin)" (native American writer and reformer) and "Zwicky, Fay" (Australian poet). Every page yields this kind of variety, and it's extraordinarily rewarding to follow Sage's suggestion and use the book by beginning with an entry in which you have a particular interest, then keeping on reading, and you will "find yourself in undiscovered country quite fast". It is the perfect bedside book for this kind of practice.

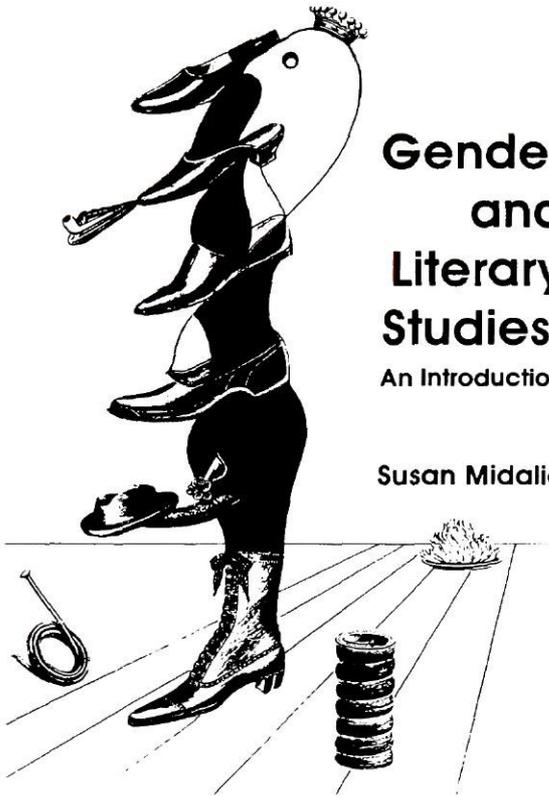
The entries themselves are variously authored, giving the *Guide*, as Lorna Sage begins by saying "a special liveliness and concision". They are all attributed, and the list of contributors includes writers as well as academic critics, graduate researchers as well as literary journalists, and men as well as women. This is an invaluable work for researchers and for all readers of English-speaking literatures. Inevitably, there are a few minor errors, typographical and factual. But it offers pleasures commensurate with the "pleasure in reading and writing about writing" that Sage establishes as the impetus for the entries, and that pleasure gives it a special quality in the lexicon of literary guides.

Delys Bird

## CONTRIBUTORS

**JORDIE ALBISTON** is a Melbourne writer. Her first poetry collection, *Nervous Arcs* (Spinifex, 1995) won the Mary Gilmore Award, was shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Award and received the Dinny O'Hearn Memorial Fellowship. **LOUIS ARMAND** is an academic-poet, and teaches at the Department of English and American Studies at Charles University, Czechoslovakia. **MARY-JO BANG** is poetry editor for the *Boston Review of Books*. **DELYS BIRD** is the Director of the Centre for Women's Studies in the English Department of the University of Western Australia. **PETER BURKE** is a medical practitioner and writer. His first novel, *The Drowning Dream* was shortlisted for the Vogel/Australian Literary Award for fiction in 1998. He is now medical director of the Travellers Medical and Vaccination Centre in Fremantle. **AARON COMPTON** is a Perth-based writer. **ALISON CROGGON** has won the Mary Gilmore Award for poetry and is a well-known poet and story writer. **MICHAEL DENHOLM** co-edited *Island Magazine* for a decade. He is the author of a forthcoming history of Australian art and craft criticism and Australian art history, 1951 to 2000, and a history of Australian art and craft magazines, 1963 to 1996. **DEBORAH HUNN** is a PhD candidate at the University of Western Australia. **MIRIAM LO** is currently working on a PhD at the University of Queensland. **KATHRYN LAWRY** is a PhD candidate in the Department of English, at the University of Western Australia. **MORRIS LURIE** these days paints as much as he writes; he has just had a successful first exhibition, and is writing new stories. **JOHN MATEER**'s most recent publications are *Spitting Out Seeds* (Anaman) and *Barefoot Speech* (FACP, forthcoming). **ROD MENGHAM** is the author of *Unsung: new and selected poems*. **DREW MILNE'S** recent work includes the collection *Benchmarks*. **ANNE-MARIE NEWTON** is a Perth-based writer whose work has appeared in various Australian literary magazines. **MARTYN PEDLER** has just completed Honours in Arts at Melbourne University. Current interests lie in notions of identity and performance by way of too much TV, conspiracy myths, and slapstick comedy. **JOHN RALPH** is a PhD candidate in the Department of English, at the University of Western Australia. **GEORGIA RICHTER** is a Perth fiction writer. She teaches in the Department of English, at the University of Western Australia. **EVA SALLIS** is a fiction writer whose first novel, *Hiam*, won the Vogel Award in 1997 and the Dobbie Award in 1999. It was also short-listed for the Courier Mail book of the year. Eva teaches at the University of Adelaide, and manages Driftwood Manuscripts, publishing academic work as well as fiction. **SUSAN SCHULTZ** is editor of *Tinfish* (Hawaii). **TONY SIMOES da SILVA** teaches in the Department of English at the University of Western Australia. **SHAUN TAN** is a Perth-based artist and

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