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eds. Delys Bird & Dennis Haskell

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# EDITORIAL

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The three short essays published here were first given as papers at a colloquium held at the National Library of Australia on 24–25 October 2008. The colloquium, convened by Paul Eggert, was held in honour of Bruce Bennett; it was an Australian version of the German *festschrift*, a yarn rather than a book, to mark Bruce Bennett's retirement from the Chair of English at the University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy. The theme, reflecting Bruce's interests, was "Home and Away: Writing about Place".

Bruce Bennett continues to have a distinguished career in the promotion and study of Australian literature. A long time staff member of the University of Western Australia, he was an editor of *Westerly* for many years and remains an Editorial Consultant. These essays provide a small selection from those presented at the colloquium, and are published here as a tribute and thanks to Bruce Bennett for all his work on behalf of Australian literature.

Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell, Co-editors

## EXPATRIATION, LOCATION AND CREATIVITY

David Lodge once asked me in perplexity, or maybe even in exasperation, “So what are you? Are you an Australian writer or an English writer?”

I suppose I wanted to be both. Or maybe neither. Transcending mere nationality. A citizen of the world. A writer. That was my youthful ideal. Nationalism as far as I could see had caused an awful lot of suffering. A slogan beneath which politicians and arms-manufacturers could send young men out to die for them. Women, too, these days. Internationalism seemed a good thing. Globalisation has taken the gloss off that a bit lately, though it’s not what I had in mind.

So when Nicholas Pounder, a fellow expatriate, set up a web-site for me recently, he recommended <Michael-Wilding.com>. You don’t want au or uk, he said. Not really a question. He does a lot of his business in the USA, and Americans are suspicious of foreign places and any suffix to the dot com. So if you want to be international on the world-wide web, you present yourself as an American. Up until recently that was the idea, anyway.

Well, my grandfather was born in America, after his father had jumped ship, running away from the English Midlands. The Wildings were a family of runaways and escapees, as their surname readily implies. “Ten ruddy Wildings saw I in the wood”, Dryden wrote. Great-grandfather had run away from home after his mother had got the village schoolmaster to beat him. This was after he had left school, so he was particularly indignant. He met a girl in America (from the next village in England) and they married. But after he’d seen American troops shooting down striking Carnegie ironworkers, he decided this wasn’t quite the land of the free, and returned to England. Then his son, my grandfather, came to Australia in 1908. Didn’t stay, of course; a restless family.

Apart from Imram Khan, the most famous pupil of the ancient grammar school I attended, RGS Worcester, established in 1292, is Adam Lindsay Gordon. Adam Lindsay Gordon, National Poet of Australia, a plaque on



the old school hall declares. He was there only briefly, having already been summarily removed from two other schools. Relationships with his father, “the Governor” as he calls him in this letter I’m about to quote, were fraught. It dates from 1853, and shows a mastery of idiom worthy of P. G. Wodehouse.<sup>1</sup>

I was breakfasting with the Governor when a row began in a curious way rather. I’ll relate it.

“You don’t seem in a mood for breakfast this morning,” says he, when I refused some eggs and ham.

“Not much,” says I, “you ought to have seen me a week or so ago, eating cochin china eggs.”

“Was that when you stopped a week in the country?” says he.

I stared at him a bit and said yes.

“You’d got a good-looking lady to make tea perhaps,” says he in his sarcastic manner.

I was a bit surprised, but keeping cool assured him, as he was so inquisitive, that he was right or thereabouts.

“Ah,” said he in the same tone, “I suppose that was the farmer’s daughter your uncle says you’ve been hanging after.”

This pulled me up and I felt myself getting a little warm, partly with surprise and partly with annoyance, however, I made answer in this form.

“I don’t know,” says I, “what gammon my uncle may have swallowed, but at all events she’s better than your precious son-in-law that is to be. I think,” I said, “you’ve studied my sister’s interests nicely by letting her have her way.”

“Well,” said he, with his usual coolness, “I suppose I’m to thank you for a daughter-in-law soon of another stamp.”

“Never you fear, Governor,” says I, speaking loud as I do when I get angry, “you may make your mind at rest on that score, for a damned good reason why, even supposing I wanted her, she wouldn’t have me, tho’ I am the Honble. Capt. Gordon’s son, so,” says I, “write and thank her for it. You ought to be much obliged to her, if I’m not!”

And I walked out and shut the door.

It put the old boy in such a rage that next opportunity he set to to abuse me about a bill which came in for me, and gave him an excuse, and we had an awful row – worse luck to it.<sup>2</sup>

The final straw seems to have been Gordon’s liberating a horse impounded for debt in order to ride it in a steeplechase,<sup>3</sup> at which his father finally lost what little patience remained.

“I’ve had some talk with the Governor, and seriously he means packing me off in a month if he can, but I’m not quite sure I mean going... I suppose he thinks I can’t be kept quiet here, and he’s about right. It will be the best thing I’ve no doubt, and I don’t dislike the idea. I long to begin the world afresh as it were... The Governor has got an offer of an appointment as officer in (what should you think?) the Mounted Police in Australia, devilish good pay, a horse, three suits of regimentals yearly and lots of grub, for me, of course, I don’t mean for himself, and he wants me to take it. I think I shall, in fact it’s no use mincing the matter, I know I *must*, but I must do something before I start to make my friends remember me, rob somebody or something equally notorious.”<sup>4</sup>

My own departure was less dramatic. My tutor at Oxford, Wallace Robson, said there was a lectureship going at Sydney, why didn’t I take it, better than being a junior bottle-washer at Sheffield.<sup>5</sup>

“Quite extraordinary,” said Elsie Duncan-Jones, a colleague at Birmingham University where I ended up after returning from Sydney. “He tells everyone you were the best pupil he had ever had and sends you off to Australia and then forgets all about you and leaves you there.”

Yes, well, Wallace did have a reputation for absent-mindedness.

But back in the English Midlands, after having spent three years in Australia, I couldn’t settle. Much like my grandfather, who soon went off to Canada after returning to England from Queensland.

So back I went again. Or came. Not quite sure whether it’s a matter of coming or going, now.

The writers I admired were most of them expatriates. Lawrence Durrell, Christopher Isherwood, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence. It seemed the way to go. The future looked bleak in England. Three years at Oxford had made it clear to me that if you came from the working class, you were never going to be accepted by the ruling elite. And the ruling elite ran the cultural show. Oh, you might find yourself a niche, as long as your politics were conformist, as long as you basically accepted the order of things and said so. But you’d always be a sort of upper-servant. Well, my mother’s family had been upper-servants. Or a licensed fool. And my licence looked like getting endorsed.

Once again it was Elsie Duncan-Jones who made the point: “I do wish you would write your campus farce, Michael, instead of living it all the time.”<sup>6</sup>

And then there was the other possibility, that expatriation had always been preordained. Not so long ago, I was looking through some old diaries I kept as a teenager. I discovered them when I was clearing up my parents’

house after they had died, and I thought, ah, I might be able to use something here for a novel. I couldn't. Use anything. It was all teenage despair, even less interesting than the mature aged despair I had ready access to. But on one page there was a doodle of a map of Australia. This was when I was fifteen. And beneath the map was a note. "I seem to have drawn a map of Australia. Why is that? Does that mean I am going there or something?"

In my fiction I have never explicitly addressed the issues of expatriation. No doubt subterranean themes can be detected. And in writing critical essays about Lawrence and Conrad and James and Marcus Clarke and William Lane and Jack Lindsay and Christina Stead, no doubt at some level I was drawn to the expatriate. But strategically it seemed to me a bad idea to get into the business of comparisons. You can lose a lot of friends for a joke, as was said of Oscar Wilde. H. M. Hyndman tells an anecdote of "the brother of Bernal Osborne, who held some British appointment in the metropolis of Victoria. Asked how he liked Melbourne he replied, with the drawl that was habitual to him, 'Immensely. But don't you think it is a little far from town?'"<sup>7</sup>

But being a Midlander, I never had much acquaintance with town, anyway.

Dame Leonie Kramer, launching a book of mine not so long ago, compared me to Byron, which I thought was jolly nice of her. "Shaking the dust of England from his feet," she elucidated. Well, it was rather like that. As Gordon<sup>8</sup> wrote in "An Exile's Farewell,"

I shed no tears at quitting home,  
Nor will I shed them now!

So, that's expatriation. Next, locality. Gordon deals with that succinctly in his poem "Doubtful Dreams," which fellow expatriate Marcus Clarke published in the *Colonial Monthly*, 140 years ago in December 1868.

I have changed the soil and the season,  
But whether skies freeze or flame,  
The soil they flame on or freeze on  
Is changed in little save name.

As for creativity, it has always seemed to me you just sit down and do it. Write. Wherever you are, about whatever you know, whenever you can. Where you've been, where you are. Like Clarke and Gordon, at times I've turned back to writing about England, at other times I've written about Australia. No regrets.

No escape, either. The Friends of Adam Lindsay Gordon contacted the old boys' association of my school last year. The president, Flying Officer Packman, Retd., dobbed me in. The Friends wanted somebody to address them, and as I'd been secretary of the Adam Lindsay Gordon society at school, what could I do but accept? A bit of local loyalty, a bit of piety. A chap who shot himself the day his last book of poems was published because he couldn't afford to pay the printer has my sympathy.

But we won't get onto the topic of publishing in Australia. I'll let Gordon have the last words, from "The Sick Stockrider":

I've had my share of pastime, and I've done my share of toil,  
 And life is short – the longest life a span;  
 I care not now to tarry for the corn or for the oil.  
 Or for the wine that maketh glad the heart of man.  
 For good undone and gifts misspent and resolutions vain,  
 'Tis somewhat late to trouble. This I know –  
 I should live the same life over, if I had to live again;  
 And chances are I go where most men go.

## NOTES

- 1 Bertie Wooster's name is taken from Worcester, of course, with which it rhymes. Wodehouse's fondness for Worcestershire is documented in Robert McCrum's *Wodehouse: a Life* (Penguin, London, 2005) 12, 18, 20, 93, 174, 176, 204. Last time I was in the Faithful City, the Star Hotel had a Jeeves bar.
- 2 Letter to Charley Walker, in Edith Humphris and Douglas Sladen, *Adam Lindsay Gordon and his Friends in England and Australia*, Constable & Co., London, 1912, 392–3.
- 3 I tried to establish the facts of this episode in "Adam Lindsay Gordon in England: The Legend of the Steeplechase," *Southerly*, XXV (1965) 99–107. But a report of the race in the local paper of the time records that the riders and horses were all entered either anonymously or under false names.
- 4 *Adam Lindsay Gordon*, 404.
- 5 The full story is told in "Among Leavisites," *Southerly*, 59, iii–iv, (Spring and Summer 1999), 67.
- 6 "Reality beyond imagining," *Griffith Review*, 11 (2006), 65–73.
- 7 H. M. Hyndman, *The Record of an Adventurous Life*, Macmillan, New York, 1911, 91.
- 8 Gordon's poems are quoted from Douglas Sladen, *Adam Lindsay Gordon: The Life and best Poems of the Poet of Australia* [the Westminster Abbey Memorial Volume], Hutchinson & Co., London, 1934.



## HOME OR AWAY? THE TROPE OF PLACE IN AUSTRALIAN LITERARY CRITICISM AND LITERARY HISTORY

In this paper I want to suggest that the trope of place has been used in Australian literary criticism either to connect particular writers and their work with the idea of a national project and a national canon, or to exclude them from it. Consider, for example, Joseph Furphy's injunction to the young Miles Franklin on the eve of her departure for the United States: "stay among the eucalypts, Miles, and earn the adoration of your countrymen by translating the hosannas and elegies of the bush into vernacular phrase."<sup>1</sup> More broadly, as advocates for Australian literature, the cultural-nationalist critics of the 1920s and 1930s, including Vance and Nettie Palmer, Miles Franklin and P. R. Stephensen, often opposed the idea of a national literature to what they called "Bohemian," "expatriate-minded" and "cosmopolitan" writers – the terms were interchangeable and uniformly pejorative – writers who worked and lived abroad, and absorbed international trends such as literary modernism. This was a spatial representation of the literary that assumed an agonistic relation between what Pascale Casanova calls national literatures and world literature.<sup>2</sup> In particular, I will focus on two classics of the cultural-nationalist period, Nettie Palmer's *Modern Australian Literature 1900–1923* (1924) and Miles Franklin's *Laughter Not for a Cage* (1956). In these two pioneering attempts at literary history and canon formation, all-pervasive images of place and landscape play an important role as metaphor and synecdoche, connecting Australian writers and Australian literature with ideas about Australian cultural identity, Australian nationalism and the idea of the nation.

### *Nettie Palmer*

In 1901, Australia became a nation and the first Federal parliament sat in Melbourne's Exhibition Buildings. Looking back on that great national

occasion, Nettie Palmer connected the rise of distinctive national cultures with the rise of national literatures: “Perhaps the chief possession of Australian writers in the year 1901 was this consciousness of nationhood. ... What [Australia] was to mean ... lay in the hands of her writers, above all, to discover.”<sup>3</sup> Palmer was the most important cultural-nationalist critic of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>4</sup> Though fluent in French and German, and widely read in European and American literatures, she and her husband Vance energetically promoted the idea of a distinctively national Australian literary culture. Believing that many Australians were either indifferent to art and ideas or else subservient to overseas cultures – the old high culture of Europe and the new mass consumer culture of the United States – Nettie believed that “the future of an Australian literature depends on ourselves as critics and readers and enthusiasts.”<sup>5</sup> She was committed to bringing into being through her literary journalism a vibrant national literature, albeit within a framework informed by her own profound knowledge of world literature.

Palmer wrote a remarkable body of reviews and essays that are now little known because they were published in newspapers and periodicals – there were rarely more lasting outlets for publication.<sup>6</sup> Believing that a literary tradition is made rather than given, her idea of a national literature was in part material and institutional, in part idealistic and organic. In “Our Own Books. Do We Evoke Them?,” she describes the national literature as both a nascent industry and “a living culture,” a community of writers and readers. Her view of the relation between national literatures and international literary space is more complex than Franklin’s. A national literature must not be allowed to become provincial in the negative sense – it must be in vital contact with the standards set by other national literatures – but at the same time its health depends on its internal well-being and integrity. It must attain a sufficient material infrastructure and scale of operations, a sufficient density, to survive on its own terms, and this requires dedication, even a deliberate “narrowness,” on the part of its advocates. Hers was a *strategic* provincialism:

Any of us who support the development of Australian literature as a necessary and healthy part of life are said to be narrow. People see us knocking the one nail on the head, and suppose we are not interested in other nails. Personally, I knock that nail because I know, as an Australian, that only an Australian is likely to do it. All my life I have cared passionately for overseas literature, but they are not depending for their existence on what casual Australians may write about them.<sup>7</sup>

These were the main arguments of Palmer's pioneering book, *Modern Australian Literature 1900–1923* (1924). Without a systematic critical, historical and bibliographical apparatus, there was no other record of Australian literature than “the scattered books themselves;” there was as yet no Australian tradition, for “in our literary history ... promising movements tend to run into the sand;” and “the facilities for ordinary publishing hardly exist,” leaving Australian literature vulnerable to imported culture.<sup>8</sup>

In her reviews, Palmer ranges widely in her references to Australian, European and American literature, creating an impression that the national literature exists in the same time and space as international writing, and that it can and should be judged from that broad perspective. The effect is generous, inclusive and dialectical: it is, in a word, cosmopolitan. To create this effect, Nettie often begins her reviews with a comment that places her Australian readers “naturally,” as it were, in an international context, as in her essay on “Marcel Proust,” written for the *Bulletin* in 1928: “It is good ... news that the publication of Marcel Proust has now been completed ... by the appearance of the last volume in French. The English translator, C. K. Scott Moncrieff, is following steadily.”<sup>9</sup> Her aim is to establish the broadest context in which Australian books can be considered and, when appropriate, valued highly in that company. Here, for example, she recalls reading Proust on the veranda of her home near Caloundra in South East Queensland:

The place is Southern Queensland on the well-watered coast. ... The Queensland houses seem – what do the French call it? – *a joure* – lace-like, full of trellises and louvres and screens, breaking the walls. I was sitting, then, on the veranda, which is like a living-room whose fourth wall goes only three feet up. Reading Marcel Proust, with perhaps more eagerness than if I had been in his Paris. ... Suddenly I noticed that a hatter had come up the steps, and was looking into the veranda.<sup>10</sup>

The point of the anecdote is to illustrate how the word “hatter,” as used by Tom Collins in *Such is Life*, can evoke an entire culture for an Australian reader in the way idioms in Proust are so familiar and evocative to French readers. In this seemingly effortless way, she locates herself as both a cosmopolitan *and* a provincial reader: she reads both Furphy and Proust from a local perspective, but also in dialogue, as a lover of what she calls “overseas literature.” Her provincialism is real and heart-felt, but strategic in the sense that she locates it deliberately in relation to her profound knowledge of world literature. She locates Furphy's distinctiveness not in

isolation, but precisely in relation to Proust's Frenchness; she locates herself as a reader of both national and international literatures: as cosmopolitan but also, strategically and deliberately, provincial. For Palmer, the act of reading takes place on the veranda of her home in Southern Queensland, but it "knows" the wider world. Her aside in French – "the Queensland houses seem – what do the French call it? – *a joure*" – perfectly captures this sense of being both home and away.

### *Miles Franklin*

The work of establishing a cultural-nationalist canon begun by Nettie Palmer in the 1920s was taken up at mid-century by Miles Franklin in a series of lectures for the Commonwealth Literary Fund, published after her death in 1954 as *Laughter Not for a Cage* (1956). Her outline of Australian literary history in the first half of the twentieth century summed up the cultural-nationalist project while also reducing it to its most polemical form. There had been a great flowering of Australian fiction in the 1890s, culminating in the works of Lawson, Furphy and Franklin herself, followed by a period of relative quiet and then a dramatic re-birth of the Australian novel in the late 1920s – this was the "break through" heralded by K. S. Prichard's *Working Bullocks* in 1926 and confirmed by *Coonardoo* in 1928–9. Franklin attributes the hiatus of the 1910s and early 1920s to the rise of a cosmopolitan and expatriate sensibility, represented by Henry Handel Richardson, above the determined provincialism she admired in Furphy.

Franklin distinguishes between writers who are rooted in their native soil, who write from "authentic" Australian experience, and "expatriate-minded" writers who have lost touch with their native culture and fallen victim to international fashions. This is illustrated by a comparison of near-contemporaries Joseph Furphy and Henry James. Both were born into new English-speaking communities; both experienced the difficulties of cultural transplantation. James responded by cultivating "cosmopolitanism," Furphy by grounding himself more deeply in his native culture: "One was a man who ran away, and one a man who stood his ground; ... James forsook his native country, Furphy never set foot in another." Without mentioning her own sojourns in the United States and Great Britain – or her sexuality – Franklin condemns James as "a foot-free bachelor of means" who "coddle[d] his sensitivity ... in drawing rooms and exclusive clubs, ... or in cosmopolitan Bohemian haunts." James doomed himself to a "double exile." He betrays no commitment to "the ... [American] experiment in national building," but "turned his back on this mighty new departure" and remains "haunted by his desertion." He became "a literary master"



but also “a man astray.” Furphy, by contrast, neither sought nor gained recognition overseas. “Rooted to his native soil,” he is “in every sense antipodean,” “a founding father of the Australian novel.”<sup>11</sup>

This contrast between James and Furphy is the benchmark for Franklin’s dismissive accounts of Richardson, Brian Penton and Christina Stead as writers who also “turned their backs” on their own culture while never quite becoming British, European or American. *Maurice Guest* only received good reviews because of Richardson’s “absorption of the Continental approach to her theme.” The Mahony trilogy was written at a time when “psychology, derived from hearsay and garbling of Freudian theories, was sprung like a blight on society,” and “the misfortunes of Richard Mahony caught this wave.”<sup>12</sup>

Franklin’s unbalanced assessments of Richardson and Stead, in particular, reflect her own refusal of the cultural authority of Paris, London and New York, and led her to adopt a *defensive* provincialism that expresses itself through metaphors of place and space, and of cultural regulation: “Then, too, like a very big toad into our backyard puddle plumped Christina Stead’s *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*.”<sup>13</sup> Her scorn for Stead reflects her own rejection of modernism, not only for its stylistic pretensions but also for its “unhealthy” themes. Stead’s characters “cerebrate in analysis of the proletarian upsurge, are introspective self-expositors touched with the brush of the coteries of the Latin Quarter, or Greenwich Village, or Bloomsbury.” She even criticises Penton’s *Landtakers* (1934), suggesting that in contrast to her own “Brent of Bin-Bin” novels he tainted the Australian pastoral saga by “aping” European trends, which seem belated in the hands of Australian writers:

Australian novelists have a time-lag in jargon and patter that sometimes heighten and more often becloud thought among the quidnuncs of Bohemian cliques in the big capitals abroad. ... but the use of jargon merely to be in smart-alec vogue gives them the air of wearing a *chapeau* which is not *le dernier cri* from Paris. <sup>14</sup>

In a back-handed compliment, Franklin acknowledges that Richardson and Stead were “rewarded by approval as being modern.” Finally, too, her diatribe against cosmopolitanism was a response to what she saw as an emerging academic deference to Europe. “The Australian,” she believed, “needs to dismiss from consciousness the bugbear of any necessity to be “universal” or to strain after “world standard” with which misguided academics have saddled him.”<sup>15</sup>

To sum up, Nettie Palmer adopts what I have called a *strategic* provincialism: as an advocate for Australian literature, she identifies herself as a reader with a local sense of place – as provincial – but also as one whose judgements are formed dialectically in relation to world literature: as cosmopolitan. Franklin's provincialism, on the other hand, is *defensive*, and she uses the relation between literature and place polemically to exclude “cosmopolitan” or expatriate writers. Thinking about Australian writers as belonging not just to the nation but also to an expanded field in which national literatures come into being in relation to world literary space provides a way of understanding different kinds of career without denegrating the “expatriate” writer. As *Laughter Not for a Cage* demonstrates, this has not been a neutral concept in literary history but is an artefact of the period's own cultural nationalism. For Franklin, we might say, it is a choice of either home *or* away. For Palmer, on the other hand, one's affiliations can – indeed should – be with both home *and* away.

## NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Drusilla Modjeska, *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925–1945* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1981), p. 39.
- 2 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* [1999, transl. 2004] (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- 3 Nettie Palmer, *Modern Australian Literature 1900 to 1923* (Melbourne: Lothian, 1924), p. 5.
- 4 See Deborah Jordan, *Nettie Palmer: Search for an Aesthetic* (Melbourne: History Department, University of Melbourne, 1999).
- 5 Nettie Palmer, “Our Own Books: Do We Evoke Them?,” *Brisbane Courier*, 11 August 1928.
- 6 See Vivian Smith, ed., *Nettie Palmer: Her Private Journal Fourteen Years, Poems, Reviews and Literary Essays* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1988).
- 7 *Brisbane Courier*, 11 August 1928.
- 8 Nettie Palmer, *Modern Australian Literature*, pp. 55–59.
- 9 Nettie Palmer, “Marcel Proust,” (Sydney) *Bulletin*, 1 August 1928.
- 10 Nettie Palmer, “The Hatter. From an Australian Diary,” (London) *Times*, 31 July 1928.
- 11 Miles Franklin, *Laughter Not for a Cage* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1956), pp. 125–7.
- 12 Franklin, pp. 147–8.
- 13 Franklin, p. 172.
- 14 Franklin, p. 179.
- 15 Franklin, p. 225.

## BUILDING THE HEART OR TROUBLING THE MIND?

This is not so much an essay as a kind of rumination on two different ways in which place (especially the natural landscape) seems to have mattered to Australian poets once they had recovered from the initial shock of “otherness” or “awayness” and entered the phase of claiming possession. It is therefore probably recklessly speculative (a privilege of retirement that I hope Bruce Bennett will also enjoy) and also remarkably free of scholarly references, thanks to the fact that I had to “seek a theme” while myself away in exotic places like Tonga and Argentina, where library resources on Australian literature are not to hand.

These two ways might be summed up as “Emblem of National Identity” versus “Country that Built My Heart.” The latter phrase is of course from Judith Wright’s “Train Journey” and that poem forms, for my discussion, an exemplary pair with Alec Hope’s “Australia.” In the following passages, the difference is not so much in physical perception, considerable as that may be, as in the attitudinal stance that colours and determines the evaluation of what is “seen:”

Glassed with cold sleep and dazzled by the moon,  
out of the confused hammering dark of the train  
I looked and saw under the moon’s cold sheet  
your delicate dry breasts, country that built my heart;

and the small trees on their uncoloured slope  
like poetry moved, articulate and sharp  
and purposeful under the great dry flight of air; ...

I woke and saw the small dark trees that burn  
suddenly into flowers more lovely than the white moon.

Wright: “Train Journey,” from *The Gateway* (1953)

A nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey  
In the field uniform of modern wars,  
Darkens her hills, those endless outstretched paws  
Of Sphinx demolished or stone lion worn away.

They call her a young country, but they lie:  
She is the last of lands, the emptiest,  
A woman beyond her change of life, a breast  
Still tender but within the womb is dry...

Yet there are some like me turn gladly home  
From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find  
The Arabian desert of the human mind,  
Hoping, if still from the desert prophets come,

Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare  
Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes  
The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes  
Which is called civilization over there.

A. D. Hope: "Australia," from *The Wandering Islands* (1955)

The assumption that the poet's task included defining an identity for Australia as place/nation was something of a commonplace until the 1950s, and continues into the present, if less insistently and at times in a revisionist mode that actively resists earlier identifications. A glance at the "Index of Titles" in the *Macmillan Anthology of Australian Literature* (a national identity anthology prepared for an international audience in 1990) shows a substantial number of poems called "Australia," including one of the five published under that title by Mary Gilmore, between 1917 and 1932. Hope's poem, quoted above, is very much an idea of the identity of Australia, with an abstractness also found in O'Dowd's sonnet of the same title. But its oppositional structure – its reversal of the home and away terms to make Europe – "over there" – the place of "awayness" links it (although I'm not sure Hope would be pleased by the comparison) to the strategy of Dorothea Mackellar's much-quoted "Australia" (first published in 1908 as "Core of my Heart"). Very few of us remember that her poem starts with a stanza that acknowledges cool green England as the conventional home of poetry before swinging defiantly into "I love a **sunburnt** country" – people, however, infrequently read that line with the right emphasis.



Actually Mackellar is something of an obstacle to my premise that it's male poets who are more likely to be interested in poems where landscape is correlated to national identity, whereas women poets are more likely to write about their affective connection to particular places. But – quite apart from literary quality – there's a striking difference between the two poems. Hope's terms are very general: drab trees and tedious cities are not the competitors against Europe: in a pre-emption of Patrick White's *Voss*, it's the desert that matters (and it's a very biblical desert). Unconstrained by naturalism, Hope feels no obligation to bring, for instance, the specifics of regional variation in vegetation into his poem (no hint of rainforests there): MacKellar does feel the need, and is consequently driven into amplification of detailed references which only prove that, in poetry at least, more is often less. Perhaps MacKellar's was one of the poems that convinced Judith Wright that the attempt to "do" Australia as a whole had brought poetry to a dead end, and that it was time for it to be rooted in regional specificity.

I don't want to push the gender divide: Robert Adamson's Hawkesbury poems immediately come to mind as complicating it, as do poems by Les Murray or Robert Gray, but nonetheless I intend to devote myself on this occasion to considering the importance of particular place (or places) as the imaginary home and the foundation of creativity for three women poets: Mary Gilmore, Judith Wright and Gwen Harwood, as well as considering how the historical context of the experience of place can intersect with, and sometimes disrupt, a writer's psychic trajectory.

None of these poets were to get what Yeats wished for his daughter, to be "rooted in one dear perpetual place" ("A Prayer for my Daughter"), and each deals with the loss of the original space and place of childhood differently, while knowing that there is no literal way back into that time. Wright's wish, in "Two Dreamtimes" (from *Alive*, 1973), to "go back to that far time" must yield to the reality that "we are grown to a changed world;" Harwood must discover in the ironically-titled "Return of the Native" that, however vivid the memory, "You cannot come as a child to your father's house." (*The Lion's Bride*, 1981).

There is a considerable risk that a strong sense of a lost place and time can produce little more than nostalgic denial of the present: the elegiac strain, too, is ever at risk of sentimentality. Harwood's defence against this is in part the sharpness of her intelligence and the precision of her language, but also the aesthetic she builds around memory and its role in bringing lost places and persons back into the light of the present,

although it will only be able to do this if the poem has a power beyond that of mere reminiscence: so it is “Sing, memory, sing” that she commands at the beginning of “An Impromptu for Ann Jennings.” Whether light (and its absence) would have been so dominant in Harwood’s symbolic repertoire if she had not experienced the physical shock of losing Brisbane’s brilliance to the more subdued tones of Tasmania one really cannot say. What we can glimpse in the concluding line of “1945” (“With the world that was the case already fading”) is a context for the adaptability that enabled her to grow into having an equal if different attachment to Tasmania’s landscapes. “1945” reminds us that there are different geographical as well as historical fields. And in one sense, Harwood’s poetry seems almost impervious to Australia’s socio-political history. A shadow of what was done to Tasmania’s Aborigines brushes the surface of “Oyster Cove,” but it certainly doesn’t send her back to scrutinise (at least in her poetry) whether Queensland was similarly tainted. It is the history of ideas, of Wittgenstein and Ayres and Heidegger, that comes into play in Harwood’s writing.

Gilmore and Wright are another story altogether. Apart from both being activists in social movements, both found that their sense of past rural Australia became inextricably affected by the history of the dispossession of the first people of the land, and by the knowledge of the ecological consequences of a settlement within which they were implicated by ties of ancestry. In one sense, Gilmore weathered the consequent storm better than Wright, if only because her passions were more diffused and her tolerance of inconsistency very much higher – to the very end she could praise the “pioneers” (and use the term without irony) with one breath, and decry their slaughter of Aborigines or their destruction of habitat with another. Once Wright had moved from the *The Generations of Men* (1959) to *The Cry for the Dead* (1981) such hawing was largely impossible: if a “marginal sort of grace” is conceded to the Wright clan in “For a Pastoral Family” (*Phantom Dwelling*, 1988), it is no answer to the awakened sense of complicity that drives the questions of the final line of the sequence: “Keep out? Stay clean? Who can?”

One could say that a sense of history gave Gilmore a voice, but – in the end – silenced Wright. When Wright pays tribute to Gilmore in “To Mary Gilmore” (*Alive*, 1973), it is not so much the overlapping of their Aboriginal and ecological interests that is central, as Wright’s admiration for Gilmore’s refusal to give up in the face of discouragement, her persistence in keeping “the ink running” rather than yielding to the temptation to “sit and grieve.”

I find it incontrovertible that Gilmore's return in 1921 to Goulburn and the Riverina area of her childhood, with its consequent re-contact with stories of the settlement era, gave her poetry (as well as the two much more profitable prose books of reminiscences in 1934 and 1935) a focus and force she would never otherwise have achieved. The poems of *The Wild Swan* (1930) are among her very best and since space is limited, I've privileged the ecological over the Aboriginal – although the two are often intertwined – in choosing to exemplify their power by quoting the concluding stanza of "The Wild Swans." The first three stanzas celebrate a remembered natural plenitude embodied in the migratory swans, only to conclude:

Never again as of old shall we know the flight  
Of the swans in their going; like petals they fell,  
They are gone, they are dead; they have passed in the blight  
Of our being! Never again will the day, or the night,  
Hear, as they fly, the sound of their trumpeting bell  
On the air till it dies like the lapse of a swell!  
Never again shall the moonlight gleam on the wing!  
Like a blast of the desert we came, and we slew;  
We burned the reeds where the nestlings lingered, till Spring,  
That sang in the bird, came in like a dull dead thing!  
Now only the dreamer dreams of the hosts we knew,  
That trembling died in the flame of our passing through.

As I just said, Gilmore's passions were more diffuse than those of Wright and one thing that marks her out from both Wright and Harwood is that she really enjoyed urban living in her flat at King's Cross (and a completely different essay could be written about the affirmation of the city as the place of Australia's history – think of Furnley Maurice's "The Towers of Melbourne," Chris Wallace-Crabbe's suburbia, Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (no wonder Miles Franklin hated it!). I'd like to draw attention to Gilmore's late poem "The Flower Stall" (*Fourteen Men*, 1954). This expresses her delighted reaction to the sight of a Kings Cross flower-stall where bees are swarming around the brilliantly-coloured flowers that they have followed "from Wahroonga down." I cite it not because it's her best city poem, but because it illustrates not only her at homeness in the city but also, in the concluding stanza, something of Gilmore's apparently incurable optimism about life, a quality that attracted her to the vitalism that informs much of her poetry in the 1920s:

Now, though it sat in each cut stem,  
I could not think that, there,  
Death was triumphant over all  
That sweet and scented air,  
Where life exploded, colour mad,  
With pollened hope to spare!

Wright, on the other hand, notoriously distrusted the city (think of “The Typists in the Phoenix Building”), and while she was able, like Harwood, to adapt her love for one form of natural environment to another, to transfer appreciation from the New England tableland to Queensland’s rain forests to Canberra’s high country, she became increasingly outraged by what she saw as environmental violation. I cannot think of a poem by either Gilmore or Harwood that exudes the unmitigated rage of Wright’s “Australia 1970” (from *Shadow*, 1970):

Die, wild country, like the eaglehawk,  
dangerous till the last breath’s gone,  
clawing and striking. Die  
cursing your captor through a raging eye.

Die like the tigersnake  
that hisses such pure hatred from its pain  
as fills the killer’s dreams  
with fear like suicide’s invading stain. . . .

I praise the scouring drought, the flying dust  
the drying creek, the furious animal,  
that they oppose us still;  
that we are ruined by the thing we kill.

It’s a poem that has always divided critics, with only a minority initially defending it. I have tried, not very successfully I fear, to convince disaffected students that it must be read (and responded to) in a different way from a more artistically-draped ‘protest’ poem such as the earlier “Nigger’s Leap, New England,” more as they might read the hammer-blow rhetoric of Blake’s “London.” They say crossly “But ‘London’ is **better**” and I refrain from asking whether it isn’t just a bit more comfortable, because distant in time and place.

Curiously, “Australia 1970” seems to me to be related to Hope’s “Australia” in the generality and the emblematic nature of the imagery, and in the value it places on wilderness/desert against city. But it speaks out of a different historical context as well as a different personal history. Provided properly and used properly, knowledge of something about both place and time will not smother the poem, but help us understand it.

There is one other aspect in the work of these three poets that interests me, and that’s the way they exemplify the twentieth century’s interest in language and changing attitudes to the relationship between word and world. Gilmore retains a kind of evolutionary confidence in language as the supremely human achievement, worried perhaps about her own capacity to make it work, but untroubled by postmodern doubts about its representational reliability, its slippery, even disconnected, relationship with the world of objects. Harwood, who established herself for much of her career as a mistress of playful, sometimes strenuous, language games, and who sometimes wrote as if music was the only divine language, surprised her readers in the late *Pastorals* with a kind of dismissal of human speech in favour of “the pure, authentic speech/ that earth alone can teach.” “Threshold,” from which these lines come, is, however, a complex poem: is it simply accepting an irreconcilable difference between that “pure authentic speech” and human “words and thoughts” that are “ground like pebbles in the stream of time” or is it in fact trying to demonstrate that the former is the speech that Harwood has now learned/ is learning?

In either case it seems a light-filled, somehow hopeful, poem compared to Wright’s “Summer.” For much of her career Wright held valiantly to an ideal of the expressive powers of language to unify poet and place. If the shadow of history intervened in poems like “At Cooloolah,” it was not a failure of language that was the issue. But in the late (and final) poems of *Phantom Dwelling* she abandons the possibility, registering language as the cause of an unbridgeable distance between the human and the natural world. In a landscape wounded psychically by the shed blood of its first people and physically by the past activities of miners, she reflects that she will “never know” the natural “inhabitants” she briefly evokes before concluding:

In a burned-out summer, I try to see without words  
as they do. But I live under a web of language.

As do we all, writers and their historians together.

# SUSAN HAWTHORNE

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## MARUTS: STORM DEMONS

*In India storms are caused by the Maruts, demons who run wild alongside the god, Indra.*

Afterwards, like new lovers telling stories  
we talk of all the storms we've ever  
witnessed, all the storms

that have touched our lives. Stories making  
sense of our new state of existence  
in the post cyclone world.

I tell you about the dust storms of  
my childhood, the afternoon when  
the sky died, went dark, red with dust.

We run to every window, bolt shut,  
pull down the blinds, tie in a  
figure-of-eight, our mother calling

out each place, *Is this checked?*  
*What of that?* The doors closed,  
with dust-jamming snakes.

A cold wind runs over the roof,  
blasting us, and later we roam the house,  
drawing stick figures in the dust.

You trump me. Tell me of the  
sandstorm in Tunisia, getting caught  
out in it, not listening closely enough

to the locals' warnings. Ant-watching  
you miss all the signs until it's  
almost too late. Diving into

the car, you plug every gap, every millimetre,  
but still the sand comes in. You say,  
*It's the roar of the wind that is the same.*

I remember the snowstorm on  
Mt Kosciusko. It is nearly summer and  
we leave the resort after lunch,

dressed only in shorts and T-shirts, walk,  
compassless, we follow the snowpoles  
losing our place on the map, not really

knowing our course. By sheer luck, late  
afternoon we stumble on Seaman's Shack  
a stone hut above the treeline. As dark

falls I go in search of firewood. One  
fallen pole is all there is. We cook,  
eat half-warmed food and pull the

sleeping bags over our heads. Midnight  
the roar comes, the wind blizzarding  
the walls. We lie with our bodies

curling the stovelegs, our ears filled with  
the resounding echo of storm demons.  
With each storm story, another

ricochets through our brains, our  
startled synapses in overload. The  
flood of '74, the fires, the snowstorms

in your home country. You say,  
it's like being in a washing machine,  
tumbled, thrown, strewn like driftwood.

## NIGHT OF THE BIG WIND

No stone lasts so long  
that it completely runs out of prayers  
though whether the prayers find welcome  
is another matter entire.  
It is a testament to ignorance  
how history can forget  
the seed potatoes full of blood  
or the knocking of a bunch of bones  
at the wind's first breath.  
Other mysteries besides.  
The dawn stillness of the air,  
the impenetrable cloud.  
On Inishmore the clink of stones is favourite  
conversation as, assembled into houses,  
they face the horizon's bleak grey.  
Whitewash peels as soon as it is slapped.  
Not a hill disrupts the view,  
but a stoic, imprisoned donkey  
fed on kelp and legends left by drowning.  
What bereaved mother  
would not walk away from that stormy ebb tide  
with its prospect of fish,  
a warm, amniotic whiskey at the end of it.  
Strange beginning to a day like any other.  
Rooks flying high and rooks flying low  
both foretelling trouble ahead.  
More is revealed by wind than just myth.  
Meanwhile a son sits on a barrel and repairs his nets



fortified with the knowledge of a watcher at the cliff top.  
The tarred skins ready for another sea voyage.  
The island never so large  
as when it is a speck at the curagh's stern  
glimpsed from the heights of waves.  
At Gortnagapul cairns stand for the moment,  
black as seals, backs to the rising wind  
testing the brunt of it  
like monks with pagan hearts  
casting empty prayers against the weather.  
Miles of dry-stone maze still stretch to the island's  
edge, coiling in patterns like oubliettes for cows.  
There is nowhere for so much rock to go but up.  
Up the desolate slope to Dun Aonghasa  
where two thousand years of emptiness  
fill the void. The ancient ramparts ended  
only by the air that drops from the breach.  
At the precipice the question  
of this empty auditorium,  
the rostrum's forgotten purpose  
with its swirling proscenium of sky.  
Below, the day's fresh toiling waves,  
the vertical honeycomb of fall.  
On the night of the Big Wind  
not a thatched roof remained in all the land,  
indoors became out, all was brought to light.  
The holed walls shrilly whistled,  
blown stones tumbled to ground and tasted of salt.  
Windmills caught fire they turned so fast.  
Herring fell six miles inland, sheep  
flew out to sea, not a pipe was dry.  
Heaven's closing gates shrieked.  
Plucked slate became the only language,  
the mute boats of never to return.  
What bereaved mother would not believe  
in the future of one stone balancing perfectly on another?  
Once to barter  
twice to build  
later to bury  
declare to all the world – *keep out*.

But on this howling day of Judgment,  
the future usurped,  
if she were to leap after him in her red shawl  
what is left of sacrifice?  
A moment for the tide.  
Food for fish and paperwork aghast,  
for the never-ending threnody of the wind.  
After the storm, beyond the sea,  
by the crumbled walls of mainland churches,  
uprooted by gale-flung trees  
some several knocking skeletons  
dangling in the air as from a gibbet.  
Who were they, waiting for the dawn?  
Unearthed like anonymous stones,  
no less tangible than a mother's grief  
or this sundered monument  
of potatoes rotting at the laneside.

# CAROLINE CADDY

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## GREAT SOUTHERN

Driving between Lake Grace and Lake King  
the land takes on the light or darkness of its sky  
so quickly so easily  
marginal country  
parts of it had to be named “lake” so the rest could be  
ploughed and harvested.  
Out here in the tail-wind  
like a faint leftover tilting of the earth  
that blows the thin film of water all one way  
and calls it full  
then blows it back  
I am blown on a millimetre wave of life  
between towns inches deep.  
I’ve met blokes out here  
who will attempt anything and it’s nothing  
fix a gate with a piece of wire kill a beast for the table  
build a boat.  
They are the ones who guide the juddering harvesters  
through blistering days dusty nights  
till everything they reach for  
a glass of beer a dinner plate  
is stippled with wheat.  
They are the ones who turn to speak in a roadhouse  
and bring those paddocks  
right up to the counter  
and after harvest the hot winds push south  
to Hopetoun on the coast to fish and visit grandfathers

retired on three thousand acre  
"hobby farms".  
They are the ones who when I say what I do don't flinch  
but turn the idea over  
like an oil sheened tool  
and the handing back and forth between us of the warmed metal  
is a thesaurus  
so that I feel I'm being given a kind of permission  
to be out here in my car blown between  
Lake Grace Lake King Lake Varley Lake Cam  
on the long reflective straights  
where life is so thinly spread  
and words must work.

## DALLOWAY & HANNAH'S WOMB

I lift the hood of the aquarium and sprinkle the pellets in. The slow swimmers and the quick sift through the grasses and floating plants. There's a baby drifting in Hannah and it's making her sad. She's sitting in the shell chair, all eyes and long dark hair. Her false left eye made of blue glass sees nothing, but her right, a blue lake, sees everything. Both are overlooked by Siberian pine eyelashes.

"Something stinks," Hannah grumbles.

More pellets, their odor nauseates my best friend and she covers her nose while I sprinkle them in. I place my finger on the tank, just as a white spotted fish with threadlike fins swims by. Since the pregnancy I'm trying to become a tropical fish expert. Touching the glass is a no-no, but she doesn't notice.

"That's a pearl gourami. You're pointing to Pamela. She's peaceful and shy," Hannah says, reaching for her empty glass on the coffee table. Hannah's beginning to show, her green dressing gown with gold trim bunches around the tummy. "The male Pushkin turns bright red in mating season. Would you fill this up? There's more protein shake in the kitchen."

"I know. I'm learning all their names," I say, wishing I could live here too.

"Why bother," Hannah grumbles, "you'll just have to forget them. They belong to the baby people. You should worry a little more about your appearance. Aren't you cold? White legs, blue cut-offs, red hooded sweatshirt. I can't believe you let everyone on the street see you in those bummy clothes. You could be pretty, you know."

I shrug. "We have different standards and I'm feeling patriotic today." She's a visionary seamstress, concocting her own wardrobe and those of her friends, yet opening a business (Hannah's Gladrags) takes capital. That's the long and short of it so she'd had to rent out her womb or become a

gestation surrogate. At twenty she's a Russian beauty with swan skin and cheekbones, a Manhattanite since age ten when she and her mother moved into the same building where I lived, age eight. Inseparable ever since. Hannah lied, claiming to be twenty-one, her birth certificate lettered in Cyrillic. You think they will write Moscow? Besides she was born Zhanna, which became Hannah.

The kitchen gives off a fruity odor. Raspberries and blueberries mingle on the cutting board in little pools of purple blood. A banana in halves. A basket of nectarines and apples. Lovely edibles. And a row of vitamins. The international surrogate agency paid for the kitchen and everything in it.

"Here you go," I say, handing her more protein shake. Then I take off my glasses and clean their lenses on my sweatshirt. They're non-prescription, the ugliest pair available and I value that. I used to be short but then I sprouted into long legs and reddish-brown hair, which I braid to keep out of the way. I prefer dour in any reproduction of my face. I don't smile.

Hannah takes the glass into her puffy hand. The only ring still fitting on her swollen fingers is a silver band on her thumb, my gift. "Take those misfit spectacles off," she snaps at me. "I'm sick of them." She sniffs the smoothie. "It smells funny. They're insisting I eat meat. Protein, protein, that's all I hear. I can't sleep. Do you see my dark circles?"

"No, you don't have dark circles." I let out a sigh. "What about the cottage cheese and protein powder?" Hannah's been a vegetarian since sixth grade. "Is meat in the contract?" Half the money down, half the money upon delivery. A miscarriage cancels the final payment. Assisted reproductive technology made it all possible. Ovulation. Egg retrieval. Masturbation. Sperm collection.

She slurps from the glass, a blue moustache forms on her upper lip. Her face scrunches, "What did you do to it? Spit in it? It smells like a sponge. I've been thinking I need to eat meat. I feel teeth growing in my stomach. The baby is definitely an alien in there."

I like the idea of stomach teeth. And that she feels no bond with the baby seems unquestionably for the best. "How's Osip?" I ask, pointing at the celestial goldfish. Osip's eyes are rolled to the top of his blunt head and forever staring up.

"He's a little sad," she blurts out.

"Why?"

"The lamp broke. His moon and stars. But he's lucky because it's cleaner in the aquariums than out here. Do you see the black grit on the windows? All that car exhaust coming in and what I breathe the alien breathes too."

She rubs at her cheek – white and smooth – yet frothy like the first bubbles of her banana creams. “I don’t feel like sewing or designing frocks. That’s not like me. What if the baby is stealing my talents from me? Do you think that’s possible?”

Hannah, so organized and always groomed beyond perfect, does seem to be letting go. She’s been messier the more months deeper into this thing she goes. I went along, thinking it a fine idea, except for the stretch marks, and, of course, that’s why the client isn’t carrying it herself. But the money, Dalloway, money is elasticity. I run the hot water into the blender, unscrew the blades. Scouring her protein shake from the blender. There’s a bacterium in there. Who are the egg and sperm donors? A married couple, actor/actress, corporate biggies? A Russian couple, an oligarch and his wife. Infertile. Hannah’s got her Farm Sanctuary catalogues, shows me gestation cages, the sows are constantly impregnated and the piglets taken, fattened, sent to slaughter. How was his sperm prepared? Frozen, stripped of inactive cells and fluids? Quarantined, thawed? Kept alive along with the egg in a culture? All that yuck injected into Hannah.

I curl up on the floor near the stool where Hannah sets her feet imagining how it would be if I were a fish or a fish lice or a devil ray or a Sausage Maker, a Car Jockey, a Caribbean Sautee Person. The tanks bubble, little words. I take Hannah’s foot and give it a squeeze then I massage it. Back in the pre-pregnancy days she wore a silver ring on the middle toe of each foot, now rings don’t fit. “Keep squeezing. That’s helping my headache,” she says, leaning back into the black suede cushion. “Dalloway, I don’t know what I’d do without you.” A shiver passes through me and I press my thumb against her instep. Then I kiss her foot. “Dalloway, stop that,” she howls. “My feet are dirty and besides kisses tickle.” Her toes smell slightly of fish food. “I haven’t bathed or gotten dressed in two days. Like a beautiful table that isn’t so pretty when it’s cluttered,” Hannah bemoans, her eyes closed. I sneak another kiss. This one she doesn’t notice. “What’s wrong with me? I’m lucky to be getting fifty thousand dollars. In India women take four thousand and are happy.

“Pathetic,” I grunt. “I hate them.”

“They’re going to bankroll Hannah’s Gladrags. What will you do? I know your parents pay for you to live in their old apartment but what about actual money? They’re going to demand you go to college or cut you off.”

“At the end of next month the apartment lease is up and neither Mom nor Daddy is renewing. I’ll stay with you, Hannah. I’ll get a job. Let me take care of you.”

She twists a strand of dark hair around her finger, her glass eye staring at

me. “You can’t stay here unless you’re gestating. They mentioned another fertilized girl might be moving in to keep me company.”

My head goes hot. “I’m your company.”

“You are, Dalloway. My only true friend.”

“Best girls together.”

She smiles crookedly. “Yup.”

I love her smile. When they impregnated her with another woman’s fertilized egg Hannah wouldn’t let me travel with her to the screener at the clinic where it didn’t look like they did anything medical. After they transferred the embryo a two–day rest period followed. She had to keep her feet elevated. For a month afterwards I helped with her injections. Hannah didn’t have to fill out a two–page application giving the entire genetic history of her biological parents or declare that she’d already given birth. “Oh,” Hannah had said, “it’s ad hoc. A private surrogate agency for Russians émigrés. We Russians do nothing by the book.”

I used to believe in the book, but no more. I graduated high school at seventeen, but now I am firmly eighteen and refusing to go to college. My mother, a junior high teacher married to the world’s most disgusting man, Brad Boonshaft, a sales manager at LeiLei Fashions, has no authority to give advice. And my father, a former Treasury employee, now a transgender woman partnered with his electrolysis technician, also female, is blowing hot air into a wind tunnel. I don’t call my father by her girl name Kim or Mom 2, just Daddy. They’ve hired someone to fill out the application to NYU. You won’t have to leave your precious Hannah. What do you think you’ll do without a degree? Sous Chef for Cruise Line? Auction Appraiser? Oil Burner Technician? Chinese Cable TV Director? There’s nothing nothing. The better question might be what you can do with college, a four–year Bachelor’s degree, and then a Masters because without that you can’t do anything. 60,000 dollars in debt, the Student Loan Association police after you. No thank you. No thank you, very much.

Hannah’s cell phone rings. It’s one of them, I can tell. Her chin thrusts out and her lips pucker. I always disappear when one of the baby people comes so likely I’ll duck out to the Jukebox Café for an hour until she calls to tell me the coast is clear. The KGB, we like to tease, come at scheduled and unscheduled times. Her face flushes, “He’s almost here. Dalloway, go to the window and see. He’s got medium length hair and dresses formally like someone pretending to be a pre-revolutionary Russian aristocrat. A hat, look for a hat. Janko’s supposedly his name. I think he told me he’s Yugoslavian.”

“I didn’t think there was a Yugoslavia anymore. It’s Bosnia, Croatia



and Serbia, isn't it?" I ask, crawling to the sill and trying to see the street through the grimy window.

"Humph," Hannah snorts, "I wasn't in gifted and talented like you."

She likes to bring up the fact that I skipped a grade, etc. The last of the sun smears the cab roof stopping in front of Kankahan and a youngish man gets out wearing a black fedora over loose brown curls. Fall is in the air and his jacket seems to be soft tan calf. Some animal had to die so that he might slide his arms inside those sleeves. He turns off into the deli.

"Wrong one. This one disappears into the caverns of Kankahan."

"At first I was attracted to Janko. I believed in his Brit accent and then it slipped. I heard something infinitely coarser. He adores his De Plo silk mid-calf socks. Definitely yuck," Hannah laughs, "Look, there they go."

When I lift my face I gaze at the larger of the two tanks. Pamela, the pearl gourami with her iridescent spots and Pushkin who waits for her, swim to the top of the tank. He has turned bright red. And in the smaller tank, red metallic veil tails peer out with their red eyes, their forked tails swaying behind them like wedding trains. Movements of music in water. Feed us, those eyes say. Don't you hear us? I get up and cast a generous number of sectioned worms over the surface. In a fan dance they swim.

Then without warning a key slips into the lock here. "Hello, hello," a male calls out and in he flounces carrying a Kankahan sack. The man with brown hair waves. So this is how it works. For fifty thousand dollars they own the keys and locks. Not even a knock required. It is their apartment, their aquariums, their Pamela and Pushkin, their belly.

Grudgingly, he takes off the calf jacket, removes the fedora that could have flown here from a 1930s movie. His brown hair parts on the side over his small ears. I've read that a small eared man is usually a cheapskate. On the plus side he has full lips and large greyish blue eyes. He's of medium height and slender and better looking than most normal people. On the minus side his nose reminds me of a hawk's beak with prominent nostrils and he has no lips, only a slit between his chin and nose. A baby pimp. A good quality embryo transfer man.

His eyes go swimming about the room. He grimaces and his pointy teeth show. "You didn't bathe, Hannah. Whole apartment stinks." He flounces to the window and opens it. "You smell seventy years not twenty-one. What is that rag you have?"

"I call it a bathrobe."

"I call it gunny sack." He marches in and sets down the bag in the kitchen, the water goes on and I hear him washing his hands. "Let's take the temperature, Hannah, and then review your food diary." He's got the

thermometer, the same as they use at the Beth Israel walk-in clinic. A few seconds and they snatch it from under your tongue.

Hannah pipes up: “Janko, this is Dalloway. My friend.”

He ignores the introduction and instructs Hannah to open wide. He starts to pontificate. “You’re pale anaemic. You’re not feeding baby enough protein. All changes start today.”

I bristle, resenting the way he’s talking to her. How could Hannah have mistaken that accent for a Brit’s? I stand in the kitchen entryway watching him count the milks and cottage cheeses, replenishing the protein powder and the fruit concentrates, the healthiest preparations on the planet.

“Are you same age as Hannah?” he asks.

“Absolutely,” I answer.

“You look younger.”

“That’s because you’re so old.”

“You’re crazy. As soon as I walked in I knew.” He aims his greyish stare my way. “You look crazy like pre-Raphaelite girl painted by Dante Gabriel.”

“Not really,” I say, thinking of my stringy hair. However, I’m slightly impressed. Pre-Raphaelite isn’t a common word, although girl singular is incorrect. Girls, Dante Gabriel Rossetti painted lots of them. They were called stunners, all petal skin stretched over thin flowing bodies with small breasts. Lizzie Siddall, tall, red-haired, and anorexic i.e. the first supermodel, an 1865 artists’ model who Rossetti married.

Janko’s lifting one meat or fish entrée from the bag after another. A bag of dismemberment and decapitation. “You’re not nice, I think. Not like our Hannah.”

“Is that so?” I say, giving him the middle finger when I push up on my glasses. “You’re the one toting around a sack of death. Disfigurement and pain.”

“You’re the one filling Hannah’s head with garage.”

“You mean garbage?”

“No, I mean shit. I was born in Niš near the Niš Fortress. We have superb education there.” He removes an herb-basted pre-broiled chicken from its Thanksgiving container and sets it on the counter. From the bag he lifts out treasures: raw chicken breasts, turkey thighs, halibut, tuna steaks, shrimp. Does this mean no more filling the blender with soymilk and a purple powder and bananas, a scoop of flax? His nose distracts me. The left nostril sneers. And he doesn’t lift his feet when he walks, as if he’s afraid of them leaving the ground for an instant. He busies himself in the kitchen. “Young woman, come here,” he commands.

“I don’t answer to young woman.”

“Miss.”

“I don’t answer to miss either.”

He strips the chicken of its holiday wrap, carves white meat and a drumstick onto a plate. The more I study it the more the cut up meats resemble not pale mushrooms but musky toadstools – greyish-purple suffering fungus. “Okay, you. Would you carry this?” he snaps, shoving the plate into my hands.

I back away, asking, “What is the magic word?” I refuse to be the bearer of bad tidings.

He pushes past me carrying the platter of corpse delight.

Hannah throws up her hands, fluttering like pale doves. “I can’t, I really can’t force anymore down me,” she protests. “I’ll throw up.”

“They find that unacceptable. Now eat,” he insists, sniffing. He reminds her that the Russian couples who have hired out their pregnancy are firm about pre-natal care of the highest condition and nutrition. Plus, he is not leaving until she eats protein.

“I feel like a wrecked veil tail trying to swim,” she says between hiccups.

He brightens, but the smirk stays. “Are they spawning there?” Turning his back he loses interest in Hannah, who is meekly cutting the chicken into smaller and smaller pieces, pausing to sniff and catch her breath, and to sniff again. Janko fusses over the tanks. “Look like we need cartridge filters and pellet food. Oh, here comes the little mister.” He bends over the tank with the skimmer. “Greetings, my Osip.”

Janko can’t be all awful if he dotes on the nicest fish in the aquarium. The celestial goldfish, his air bubble eyes forever wide. I’m already envisioning the Janko past. His father, a Serbian criminal, not upper crust by a long shot, but all the same dressing in white shirts with boned collars and fitted slacks. Father manages to pay for son to legally enter the United States, but getting here isn’t the great deal it once was, as opportunities are drying up except for the exceptionally bold. Perhaps that’s why too thick an ambergris scent clings to him. In a certain light, his skin appears like the blue gourami, a hazy, blue bordering on white. His father, I suspect is bluish too.

“Who’s feeding the fish? I am only allowed,” he snaps, his body stiffening. “What’s going on? Hannah, confess, did your friend toss in fistfuls of pellets? Does she know these are not cats but ecosystems? Ladies, join me beside tanks.” Hannah lets out an enormous sigh when getting to her feet. I roll my eyes. He instructs us about the miniature

fish culture. The male is usually smaller and skinnier than the female. “The glassfish is Anne. Yes, transparent with inside organs visible.” He pivots, rocking forward and back on his heels. He jingles the key ring. His hair hangs wispily around his face like the dorsal fins of the veil tails and now his grey eyes go blue – a chilling azure like the turquoise rocks in the bottom of the tanks. “Now a demonstration. The bleemies Catherine and Eugene are elongated. Big eyes, yes. Watch, how they know me. Hannah has witnessed before.” He cups his fingers in the water and before long one of the bleemies rests in his hand. An instant and the second bleemie chases the first out. “You see they love me. They are fighting for my affections.”

Would I have fallen into his trap the way the bleemies do or Hannah for that matter? Six months ago she was walking the five avenues from her receptionist job to home and passed Bryant Park. Models from the fashion show were sliding into limos or trying to hail cabs. They looked like hearses with big eyes. A young guy exited one of the tent pavilions and caught her attention. He was shining, taking the stone steps in one jump. She had to stop to let him go by, otherwise they would have collided. “Excuse me, miss,” he said in a voice mixed with some accent, “but your hair is in my mouth.” Her mistake was laughing. A mosquito stung his cheek. “I predict,” he said, slapping it, “malaria in this city. Dengue fever, also.” He seemed to be amused by the horror of it. Then they walked. The Prudential sign where Broadway split into two traffic streams seemed to have grown mightier. The Chock-Full-of-Nuts coffee cup released puffs of steam that rose like miraculously filthy night clouds. On the U.S. Army/Navy Recruiter Island, a diapered cowboy strummed a guitar. This was what the bald eagles died for. The Iroquois. This rot. 42nd Street heaved its arcades and theatres, its souvenirs and the eternal Lion King, and its people, people, people. Yet more people, more birthing, happened to be his stock in trade, along with egg retrieval and ultra-sound guided needles.

“Now go back to your plate, Hannah. Protein, no excuses.”

Hannah lets out another sigh and shuffles back to her chair. Her life takes place in the sunlit corner of the apartment, between the shell chair and coffee table. Her sewing machine she brought with her sits untouched, her laptop’s screensaver, a field of ten foot daffodils, stares at her. I know she’ll be happy again, she’ll sew madly bright costumes. I don’t dare leave her.

“Next week I bring company,” he announces, “another expectant mother.” Janko marches to the open window. The street breathes in a mixture of diesel fumes from the Hess gas station along with urine and

fruit. He yanks the window down, shutting it.

Another expectant mother. Those three words send a shudder through me. Hannah might grow close to a girl going through the same experience and become best pals with her. Another mother might separate Hannah and Dalloway, friends for life.

“Who opened window?” Janko asks, forgetting obviously that he was the one. “I don’t want the cold air circulating. You hurt the fish. You hurt Hannah.”

“Listen, you did it when you rolled in. First, you insulted Hannah by telling her she smelled seventy years old, and then you opened it,” I grouse. “I would never hurt Hannah. I’d cut off my hands before doing that.” And I mean that. Isn’t an alcoholic father who froze along with his dog on the streets of Moscow enough? And a mother who shampoos rich women’s heads and cleans their houses and cooks for them ceaselessly, a bit more than enough?

His feather of an eyebrow rises. “Not me who opened that window, you,” he accuses. “Hannah, your friend is unacceptable. A danger.”

Hannah struggles to raise her voice. It’s an even low voice with only a tiny bit of an accent. Like a thin gold chain on a white wrist. Really she’s unhappy here and sorry her body is incubating some Putin ass-kissing oligarch, KGB bribing, arms selling, gas sucking pipeline owning bastard and his wench’s eggs. Her blood feeding this alien being. Now she’s stuck and this Janko fruitcake is trying to banish her best friend from her side. “Stop berating her. I need Dalloway here so don’t make me do anything stupid.”

He throws his arms into the air. “Oh, God of Greater Serbia. She kill Osip. This girl overfed him. The prize fish. Bratislav not like this.”

The celestial goldfish with his bulging eyes lies on his side. A fist clenches in my stomach and I swallow a lump in my throat. Sweet Osip. Did I overfeed him? That’s not possible. Or was he mourning for his lamp? The sun and moon. Seconds ago he was alive and now he’s not. My eyes burn.

Janko scoops Osip into the skimmer net. “You chilled little one’s swim bladder. You killed most precious fish in these tanks. Hannah,” he practically shouts, “she can’t stay, unless she’s gestation too. Those are new rules.” Then he marches with the skimmer net into the bathroom and flushes.

“Did you flush Osip?” I ask, trembling, my knuckles going white. “How could you?”

“I gave him burial at sea.”

“A fecal sea.”

“Your head is full of garage.” Janko marches into the far corner of the apartment where a blue couch rests. “This is where we shift some furniture for other mother.”

No way. I shake my head and drop to my knees beside Hannah, whose lower lip trembles. Shreds of chicken stick to her chin and in an eyelash. How did it get up there? “They won’t be shifting furniture over for the other mother. I’ve made up my mind. I’ll follow you, Hannah. Two wombs are better than one,” I blurt out.

My friend for life wipes her chin. “My tongue tastes funny. Like it’s chicken too. Dalloway. What if some giant hen chewed on us?”

“Hens have beaks, not teeth.”

“Worse to be pecked. To feel the beak in your chest. In our eye.”

I let out a gigantic sigh. “Hannah, are you listening? You have to talk to Janko and vouch for me. I can be a gestation surrogate too. I had a 4.0 grade point average. You can tell them I’m of age.”

She pulls a crumb of chicken from her lashes. “You’re a virgin, Dalloway.”

“Remember Alberto? I’ve been with a boy once and that was enough. I can rent my womb. We can pool our money and become entrepreneurs.”

Hannah taps the coffee table with her sewing scissors. “Janko, we have to talk.”

After a thirty-minute long discussion Janko huddles in the bathroom with his cell phone. Hannah and I try to catch every word and luckily the apartment walls are thin. “She’s risky. Very risky indeed,” he ejaculates.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti painted his Lizzie brushing her hair. He wanted to see her hair down in cascading waves and a tortoise shell comb above each temple. Lizzie took an opium overdose and Rossetti buried his poems with her. A few years later he wanted them back and hired gravediggers to open the coffin. They reported that her hair had grown more lovely. Yes, the hat shop girl Lizzie became an artist’s model who once lay in the water while she was painted dead. Ophelia floating among the water weeds. After Janko gets off the phone he announces to the room that he told his superior about Hannah’s friend. Many barren couples retrieve eggs and store sperm and need a girl to gestate their baby. The wet nurse of the new century. There is an interest on the part of a wealthy art dealer. But first his boss Bratislav and his wife Eva would like to meet Dalloway tonight.

Forty-five minutes later I’m wearing a long dress of tarnished silver with a plunging back. It’s the hostess dress Hannah once took home to dry clean and then didn’t take back. A ring on my thumb, I draw markings

on each cheek with glitter like kissing gourami. I hate dressing up but Hannah is giddy with excitement. I have to look sophisticated. But why meet at the Marriott? Why not the Organic Grill for carrot juice? They're in town for the egg retrieval. I fold my glasses into my gym bag and sling it over my left shoulder.

"Dalloway," Hannah sighs, "you look beautiful. Call me, let me know everything."

Even in front of Kankahan there are beauties. A Ukrainian girl with lantern orbs for lips and breasts of shucked wheat. A Latina with large bovine eyes encircled with black pencil like dark equators, two spots blush on each cheek. I wave at Mrs. Kankahan, shrouded in grave-dirt black head scarf and outer garments, sitting astride a crate next to a stack of newspapers. Her five children surround her, fresh-faced and giggling, her oldest girl in jeans and teeshirt. The two little ones run after me until their mother shouts them back. My nose prickles with Sand & Sable. Dollar store scent.

Janko offers to hail a cab, however, he prefers to power walk wherever possible. Fine. We bypass the moneyless, a few actresses flit by in their dresses of champagne peaches. A stringy haired girl and a boy and a collie with a red bandana sit on the corner by the garbage can. PLEASE, their sign reads beside the collection kettle. Yesterday, a balding hippie begged from that corner, the collie with red bandana beside him. Different street beggars plant themselves there but the collie is the same. A snakeskin arm reaches from a sleeping bag made from Hefty garbage bags, the dark suited and pale skinned, the dark skinned and cocoon gowned.

A young guy in burgundy corduroy pants and bright white sneakers taps by with his cane. "I wasn't always blind. Please help me." His cane hits the mailbox and he pivots. "A blind good day to you. A blind good day."

"Vermin, you're not blind," Janko blurts out. "No more than I."

"Fool. I'm blind and I ain't trying to prove it to you. I'm not on your payroll."

Janko stops directly in front of the white sneakers.

"Move sucker." The white sneakers halt and the cane swings out.

Janko jumps back. "So how you know I was there?"

"I can hear you, fool."

"I don't believe that, no," Janko barks. "You are sighted person."

After we walk away the blind man shouts out. "Hey, sucker, where'd you get the beanie? That hat, man. Idiot thinks he's Humphrey Bogart."

"He sees my hat. Not blind man. Am I not right?" Janko crows. "I am not fooled. My country provides world one-third of all raspberries."

"I didn't know that," I say.

He smiles widely and shows his skin colored teeth. "Crazy girl thinks she knows everything. My country is very big in frozen foods."

"And ethnic cleansing."

"You are stupid," he grunts. "You USA know nothing. Do you know of Jasenovac Concentration Camp? No, I see you shake your head. Croats killed 50,000 Serbs there in WWII. Indeed, Serbs and Croats no friends."

Now he power walks in earnest, swinging his arms. My long legs keep me apace with him. We look idiotic. Well-dressed and terribly-dressed people are staring. One of them I recognize. A red-haired guy who shits himself then passes out on the sidewalk. His name is Orange. I've seen him holding the door open to Ninth Avenue ATM's. He's been exceptionally personable and smelly. "Friends, can any of you kindly souls spare quarters, dimes, nickels, anything?" I dig for a Susan B. Anthony dollar and drop it into the cup of his palm, careful not to touch his skin. "Sweetheart, you always take care of me. I know you always do."

"This is future USA," Janko declares at the spectacle of sleeping bags and pallets lining the streets. "Beautiful." The homeless are growing and spreading out in tent-like heaps. "I will go back to the Balkan Peninsula."

He speeds up and slows down. I think of Osip, the tiny bubbles of his perfect eyes down in the sewer system of this monster city. I am mourning him. My chest heaves. Like that other sadness I once felt when my father told me explicitly how he would transition from man to woman. We were splurging on dessert. "Do you know how it's done? Sex reassignment?" Daddy had asked. I told him coolly I'd read a few books. One about Christine Jorgensen. More cheesecake went into his mouth. "She was the first male to female," he said, pleased that I wasn't totally ignorant. "First you live as a woman for a year, then you begin hormones. A series of surgeries. I'd get my Adam's apple shaved. More cheesecake?" He held out his fork. I shook my head. "The bridge above my eyebrows goes. They grind it down and reduce it." I rolled my eyes. "Oh, boy. You'd really do that?" I asked. "You're the man who doesn't take anything stronger than aspirin." He laughed, showed me his trick, where you twist and snap a cloth napkin and make a bra out of it. "Then I'd have my eyes opened up. Women have larger eye orbits." I remark that I didn't know that, but he doesn't seem to be listening. "A face lift to give me a totally youthful look. Breast implants if the hormones don't make them full enough." He ordered another cheesecake. "Have as many desserts as you like. The key lime looks good." For a year after I wrapped my chest in packing tape and Ace bandages. I prayed for flatness.



Now I wonder if my father would approve of my decision to follow Hannah's example. I could add my fifty thousand to hers and we could truly become entrepreneurs. He surely wouldn't argue with that sum for nine months work. It's best to think of my father in a crowd. After he broke the original news to me and I took it calmly, he'd share or ask advice whenever Mom wasn't around. And it was all the sharing that started to bother me. He kept remembering this and that and all the recollection would spill out of him whenever he caught me alone. "I remember the first time I dressed up. I had on my mother's slip. I was thirteen." It was a brownie pie that time. He scooped up whipped cream and nibbled at it. "We lived in Marlborough. I showed you that nice stone house. Well, behind the garage there used to be a grist mill. One of those old stone mills with a waterwheel and I changed into a slip there. I was scared but I followed the creek way back into the woods and I kept walking in the water. Everything felt so soft, the slip and the water. Like hot fudge." Then he clapped his hands in a jumping jack and leapt to his feet. "I have a few lunges to do. I've got side laterals to work on and my rear deltoids. Work off the brownie." Daddy's antics always made me happy and I laughed. Months before Mom stopped talking to him. Divorce lay around the corner.

The Marriott. On the eighth floor we leave the escalator and get into the elevator, a glass bubble that travels on the outside of the hotel to the top. I put my face to the curved glass. Everything drops away. I want to walk out into air. We are far above Times Square. I feel the motion, tiny jerks as the hotel is tugged on its axis over the city's black towers filled with unblinking sequin eyes. We ascend to the rotating restaurant. I watch the waitresses in cobweb dresses and rhinestone shoes drift with their trays. A piano and player revolve along with the rest of us. A tall light-skinned black waitress with hair braided into cornrows swivels toward our table.

"What would you say my friend's skin is?" he asks her. "Calf leather? Custom bucket seats?"

The waitress looks surprised at his cloddish question. "She has fabulous skin."

"Would you like to eat it?" he snickers before ordering two strawberry daiquiris. "Drinks only. No dinner menu."

She laughs, "I'm going to need to see your friend's ID."

I open my bag and show her my ID. Not mine but one I found in a purse in the garbage can outside Hannah's building. It often happens that stolen purses are dumped with ID in them. I mailed everything back to the girl except her driver's licence. The bad photo showed a young looking

twenty-two year old brunette. I saw that I could pass for her. To older people, the young all appear the same age.

She turns on her high heels, leaving a hole of silence between Janko and me. When she brings the drinks, two goblets filled with red slush and topped with ripe strawberries and plastic swords, Janko doesn't pay with plastic, he folds a twenty and a ten onto her tiny tray and asks for change. "If you use credit card at a tavern, you will bleed white."

Is he stupid or smart? How would I sound if I were airlifted into Serbia? There's frost on my glass and I hold it to my cheek.

His eyes reflect the candlelight. His hawk nose hovers as he bites into a strawberry. "You have the Lizzie face. No question."

"How do you know about her?"

His grey gaze fastens on me like it did earlier by the fish tank. "I'm artist. I paint big colours, big canvas. In Serbia I'm doctor too. Here doctors from Baltic countries drive taxi or home health aide."

"So you got into the gestation business?"

"Absolutely."

The restaurant takes another sluggish jolt. A woman in a green spigot dress, really tall and classic, leans over the piano and requests a tune. I suck the drink through my straw. The daiquiri tastes like medicine. The slit in Janko's face is moving up and down. Yes, Serbs make art too. You've never heard of The White Angel, from the 1230s, Byzantine art. You, USA, think you know everything. He comes from the city of Constantine. At the next table, a tiny woman is bawling a huge man out, "I know you didn't have a dad and your mother was rough, but Christ you even wipe your hands on your pants like a jerk. Then you lost your 401k. No early retirement for us." The husband hisses at the woman. "Ssssh, we're in a public place."

Janko runs his finger through the frost on the outside of his drink, listening intently. "Sad," he says, smiling. "Now about crazy you." He spoons more ice crystals into his mouth, his tongue a glob of cherry pink. From his tongue some of the pink slush drops onto his calf jacket. "I am not sure you have correct personality for this. Are you reliable? What is your age? How do I know? References we need. Background check we need."

"I don't remember you doing any background check on Hannah," I say.

"Oh, yes, but since Hannah has fine background we have nothing to check."

I roll my eyes. If they'd done any checking, they'd found out her age. Or maybe they didn't care. The restaurant rotates toward a view of the city, black rocks and flickering torches. "Look, there's Chrysler Building.

Empire State Building!” he booms, excitedly. It’s the couple at the next table’s chance to stare. I thrust out my chin at the empty sky. The ghosts of the World Trade Center. Bodies somersaulting endlessly through the air. “There he is, Mr. Bratislav,” Janko announces in a shout. “He’ll make decision whether to use you.” If you were deaf and missed that, you’d be sure to notice him pointing to a tall man with silver hair moving through the crowded bar. Like the glint from a large spoon. The man’s hair brought to mind Hannah’s story of being fired. Is he the same silver man?

Hannah remembered the silver man (the sperm) who came to the office where she answered the telephone, the one who smelled slightly of orange blossoms. Yes, for almost six months she sat at the reception desk and tried to brush away the sun filtering in through a thick pane of glass. It tried to caress the back of her neck by placing a warm hand there. The phones kept ringing, first one then another and another, with callers requesting to be held or transferred and the sun’s hand grew heavier and hotter on her neck. All day packages came and went in the arms of elderly messenger men. Women with first names like Vinton and men called things like Chambers arrived for appointments. She smiled at the tall couple in expensive suits, their heads silvery and their elongated noses with tear drop nostrils and thought of gray foxes, the idea of them. She thought of Marina Tsvetaeva, her verses. *“Where does this tenderness come from? here on the ribs of the singer.”* A woman of genius who put a noose around her neck. All of bloody, poetry-devouring Russia in opposition to this. Yet she needed money to make some.

Hannah tells me everything so I can be her and she me. The silver man sat and crossed his legs and the woman got up and vanished into the glass conference room where the sun was. He stared at her, kept looking until her face went red. The man, more silver than white, lifted his right hand to his lips, kissing his knuckles, sniffing traces of his orange blossom cologne, and then he opened his fingers and flicked his tongue over his palm. The phone rang and her finger went down the sixty names. At the end of the day right before she keyed the phones into their overnight mode and locked the glass door to the conference room where the dusk muffled the long mahogany table, she was called into the managing partner’s corner office where she rarely went, only sending disembodied voices down that corridor. Now the partner, who constantly cleared his throat with “aaahhhh’s” afraid of losing the podium while he collected his thoughts, told her they were downsizing and voicemail would replace her. She strolled home. The ova of the female. The male need only be present.

The man with the shiny head is strolling ever closer. I hear him before

he sits and the slippery sound of his trousers making contact with the seat. The scent of orange blossoms sits too. No words of introduction.

Bratislav examines me. I smell orange blossoms. His silver hair cradles his head nicely and a few wrinkles but none around his eyes, as if he spent no time at all smiling. Reek of a hedge fund under the orange blossom. Michael Douglas plucked of hair and dipped in glitter. His fish scale eyes appraise my face. “Extraordinary. It’s as if Ophelia in the Morris painting has come to life.” He continues to stare, his eyes lingering on my face. The fingers with manicured nails do a tap dance on his chair arms. I detect the lightest clearest coat of fingernail polish.

I miss Osip. Shy Pamela and sweet Pushkin. My head feels like a red cloud.

Bratislav crosses his leg under the table, pointing his toe. “I didn’t want to waste my wife’s time if the girl was unacceptable. Let’s go to your place, Janko. It’s midway between us and Eva. We’ll talk there.” He blows on his fingers again. “You are serious about this, Dalloway? This is a nine month commitment but it’s more than that. You are incubating life. This requires a healthy body and mind. If you’ve had a tattoo in the last five months you’re ineligible. If you’ve ever had a sexually transmitted disease you’re ineligible. We look for stability and a relaxed manner. Do you think this is something you might be interested in?”

It feels like a Sunday, whatever day it is. Hannah and I are exercising – out for our walk on a quiet side street. A Latina wearing a stocking hat and two coats sorts through garbage cans, separating little mounds of egg shells from melon rinds, clumps of kitty litter from cartons of take-out fried rice. “See, I told you so,” She plucks from the garbage a still wrapped fortune cookie. “Good for you,” I laugh.

Hannah and I both have bellies, only she is in her ninth month and I’ve just started to show. Ahead, an old woman of not more than four feet four inches pushes a wire cart, two steps, a step, a pause. Bent over, her shoulders, neck and head are horizontal and view only her feet. When she comes to a stop at the corner she has to corkscrew her neck and head to see the Walk/Don’t Walk. She gives us the most beautiful smile. “I will design clothes for women like her,” Hannah bubbles. “There is no one I can’t attractively clothe. And maybe after this is over we should make a baby of our own.” I squeeze her hand, I agree. “Who will the father be?” she asks. “The sperm bank? How about Janko? He’s a doctor after all.” There’s a street fair going on, the homeless have unfurled blankets and pebbled them with paperbacks and soiled exercise videos. It can’t help being sunny.

## TO NO AVAIL

Mario Stefani : *Loneliness is not being alone; it's loving others to no avail.*

The glass pinning your note  
down on the kitchen table  
is a knife thrust through  
the paper-thin layer of my  
trust, the words like crackling  
static on a faulty line  
and all I decipher, or rather  
intuit is the horror story  
about finding somebody else.  
I search for signs that  
you were here, your smell  
tangled in the sheets, a hair  
wired to a bathroom towel,  
your handprint I imagine on  
a half-empty mug of tea  
all arranged in the shrine  
I've created in my mind where  
I pour libations and pray  
your new lover will vaporise  
and you'll rush back to me.  
The screen has gone blank,  
the phone is dead and something  
deep inside me rolls over and  
hides in an empty corner  
keening like a dog.

## IDOLS

To a child of five, the sun glints gold on the slopes  
and coins hang on trees. Some nights I'd watch the mask  
by the wall open its mouth, roll out its tongue  
in a column of fire, goggle eyes swirling.

How the child's eye quickens, pictures beget beasts  
and gods. Then the wonders passed. The puny gods  
she prayed to, Clara, her god of the turned-up nose  
and bulbous eyes, pot-bellied torso sprawled

in the closet dark. Still in my Catholic uniform,  
she took me out one day to a house in the fields  
where she said a woman could leach the pustule out  
under her tush; if I were nice, she said, she'd call

the rain down for me as well. Feet splayed, haunches  
shadowing the kerosene light where coffee brewed,  
the woman moved like a deity in her world of grain  
and thunder gods. Chatter didn't wax into spells,

so after a drink of melon sap, I tracked a goat  
to a grove of jackfruit trees. Not long they flung  
their banners up to breach the sky, beat the drums  
as they guzzled rain – jackfruits and cascades

breaking on the ground. The trees have turned  
to hags with bad backs, long-limbed straps  
lashing me down a shack half-sunk, a ghost ship  
buckling out of sight. Oh, how a child howls!

Fish balls on sticks consoled me on the way home.  
Clara's sweetened tamarinds warming on my tongue.  
I'd lie to mother for her, Clara of her fried smoke  
and soap-smelling hands, squatting beside my saints.

She'd do as much for me had she known  
how I forsook *Her* – she of the *Immaculate Heart*  
of my medallion; how from the wobbly pit of faith,  
I'd called out to the unholy names in the storm,

darkly gleaming thunder gods.

## THIS YEAR'S WORK IN FICTION 2008–2009

In her essay “The Conscience of Words”, Susan Sontag describes literature as “the house of nuance and contrariness against the voices of simplification.” In this view, literary form is a way of posing questions rather than providing answers to the complex business of living; it is a means of “help[ing] us understand that, whatever else is happening, something else is always going on.”<sup>1</sup> I have used Sontag’s model of literature to select and review the past year’s Australian fiction; for the works I have most admired are those whose ethical circumspection and emotional resonance have complicated and enriched my understanding of human experience. These are narratives which remind us that there are many different ways of seeing and being in the world; they offer what David Malouf, in his new novel *Ransom*, calls *this otherwise*.

It’s been a wonderful year for complex new works by established writers. Joan London’s second novel *The Good Parents* – highly intelligent and immensely readable, formally and linguistically assured – is one of my favourites. It uses a central trope from Australian colonial fiction, that of the lost or missing child, to explore the concept of the modern family as both a changing social institution and a complicated emotional experience. Its skilfully crafted plot charts the lives of three generations of families engaged with issues of ownership and independence, alienation and rebellion, estrangement and abiding love. With compassion and wry humour, London reveals the pain of loveless marriages, the compromises of middle age, the youthful longing for freedom, from the repressive rectitude of the 1950s to the hippie idealism of the 60s and 70s and through to the confidence and confusions of Generation Y. The novel’s use of shifting and multiple perspectives allows for the ebb and flow of characters’ memories and subtly suggests the continuing power of the past: as something to escape, to come to terms with and, finally, to honour. London is also very



good at depicting the different social milieux inhabited by the characters: the textures, rhythms and atmosphere of Perth, Melbourne and Western Australia's south-west are vividly imagined. Impressive in scope, *The Good Parents* is also beautifully suggestive in its use of detail to evoke interiority. Here, for example, is the middle-aged, married Jacob, yearning for his daughter's housemate – a woman, as the cliché has it, young enough to be his own daughter. In a vignette of less than 200 words, London conveys the pathos of the injured Jacob's longing, fretting that his "naked, swollen and purple foot ... exposed in rubber thongs" might "repel forever" the lovely Cecile. The comic-pathetic description – hyperbolic and vaguely sexual – suggests Jacob's return to the distress of an adolescent boy struggling with the fear of rejection. *The Good Parents* is also a philosophical exploration of the tension between free will and determinism, choice and chance, in the formation of identity and the shaping of a future. Some characters, for example, plan their lives carefully, while the lives of others are radically changed in a moment. A chance encounter on a rainy roadside propels the schoolgirl Toni into an elopement and a world of sexual glamour turned nightmare; Jacob is haunted by the knowledge that staying a few minutes longer at a party might have saved the life of a friend. Here as elsewhere in the novel, the sense of *what if, if only*, hovers uneasily on the edge of consciousness. And whether read for the various strands of its intriguing plot or for its psychological, social and philosophical concerns, *The Good Parents* also offers the pleasure of precise, incisive and rhythmically deft language. It's been seven years since the publication of London's first novel, *Gilgamesh*; *The Good Parents* – psychologically and morally astute and elegantly written – has been well worth the wait.

It's been even longer – ten years – since the publication of Murray Bail's last novel, *Eucalyptus*. His new work, *The Pages*, is more properly a novella, and centres on the tension between philosophy and psychoanalysis as interpretative models and the source of happiness. The clash is established at the outset, when a Sydney academic philosopher Erica Hazlehurst, accompanied by her psychoanalyst friend Sophie, attempts to appraise the work of the deceased amateur philosopher and recluse Wesley Antill, after pages of his writing are discovered on the family sheep station in western New South Wales. Several other oppositions underpin the characters' search for meaning: the contrast between Sydney and the bush, Australia and Europe, male and female, mind and body, language and silence, drives the plot and shapes Bail's conception of character. But *The Pages* never feels schematic or programmatic; on the contrary, it suggests that no schema yet constructed can adequately convey or explain the randomness,

the gloriously messy particularities, of life. Thus, while philosophy is privileged over what Bail regards as the narcissistic pseudo-science of psychoanalysis, its practice is also represented as a possible evasion of the challenges of human intimacy. The punningly named Wesley Antill is both an indefatigable seeker of truth and a pompous, self-absorbed bungler in his personal life. In the tradition of Sterne's eighteenth-century comic novel *Tristram Shandy*, seriousness and parody co-exist in *The Pages*. The resistance of Bail's novella to categorisation is formal as well as thematic and tonal: the novella is part romance (city academic meets taciturn farmer); part lyrical evocation of the bush – its spaces, its beauty, its solitude, the integrity of manual labour; a philosophical disquisition on the value of silence; a satire of intellectual pretentiousness and self-obsession; and a self-reflexive text about the nature and functions of narrative. And all this in a novella of less than 200 (small) pages. *The Pages* is the work of a skilled miniaturist, at once funny, melancholy and artistically satisfying. It is also a beautifully produced hardback: a lovely object to look at and to hold.

It's also been ten years since David Malouf's last novel *Conversations at Curlew Creek*; and like Bail's *The Pages*, Malouf's relatively brief and allegorical *Ransom* is structured on a series of oppositions: between the maternal and paternal, youth and age, earth and water, fixity and fluidity, the realm of myth and the world of the novel. Set in the mythical world of ancient Greece and narrating the story of two male adversaries – the legendary Greek warrior Achilles and the ageing Priam, king of Troy – *Ransom* is an anti-war novel, a critique of the destructive spiral of violence which Malouf sees as the inevitable, futile trajectory of war. And while the novel considers the role of the gods and fate in the behaviour of its characters, it is distinctively modern in its concern with masculine psychology – men's desire for power and immortality – as the origin of war. The note is succinctly sounded early in the novel, when Achilles, staring across the Gulf at the eternal recurrence of the waves, sees that "[i]n the long vista of time he might already be gone. It is time, not space, he is staring into." In opposition to the militaristic, vengeful Achilles is the figure of Priam, who represents the possibility of escape from war through the process of negotiation. Priam's journey to meet Achilles is impelled by a belief in an essential, common humanity through which the two adversaries might speak to each other "man to man", as a father and a son. The journey can also be read in metatextual terms, as a movement from the realm of myth – what Malouf represents as a world of hollow ceremony, hierarchies and a profound indifference to the other – to the humanising world of the novel, expressed in the tales told to the king by his peasant

mule-driver Idaeus. Listening to these stories of ordinary working-class life, increasingly enchanted by their sensorial and emotional intensity, Priam also comes to value the teller, Idaeus himself, as a particular and irreducible individual. *Ransom* is thus an unashamedly humanist narrative, affirming the possibility of transcending social categories through the transformation of individual consciousness and the affective power of realist literature. Malouf's consummate skills as a storyteller are evident in the novel's structure, which counterpoints the circularity of ancient Greek determinism with the linearity of a modern sense of choice and change; and, expressed in lyrical, often luminous prose, *Ransom* is a broodingly elegiac and deeply moving expression of masculine vulnerability and the healing power of forgiveness.

It's been even longer – some sixteen years – since the publication of a novel by another established writer, Helen Garner. Garner's much anticipated return to fiction, the novella *The Spare Room*, is characteristically and deliberately provocative. As a book about the difficulty of caring for a terminally ill woman, much has been made of its blatantly autobiographical nature. Is this indeed fiction? And what are the ethics of writing intimately about the suffering of real people? There has also been much praise for the book's honesty, as the narrator, Helen, confesses to feeling overwhelmed by a range of shameful responses as Nicola's carer. She feels impatient with the woman's demands, contemptuous of her patrician attitudes, frustrated by her refusal to face the truth of her condition and angry at her gullible faith in the medical charlatans keen to profit from her desperate search for a cure. And most courageously of all, perhaps, are Helen's admissions of self-pity, when caring for the dying surely calls for an effacement of the self, an ability to put one's own relatively trivial concerns into their proper perspective. But *The Spare Room* is more than a litany of a carer's complaints, however authentic. In its public exposure of quacks claiming to have alternative cures for cancer, the book is driven partly by Garner's zeal as an investigative journalist. It is also a story about the limits of empathy when confronted with the terrible, sorrowful opacity of the other – the friend who, once spirited, independent, generous and open, is unable to accept the imminence of her death and who wears what Garner calls “the horrible mask” of stoicism. For just as Helen's resentment and anger threaten to alienate the reader – where, we might ask, is the dying woman in all this? – Garner provides a moment of transcendence, in which Helen expresses for the first time what she really feels: “We can't find you anymore”, she tells her old friend. “We miss you. Where have you gone?” What follows is Nicola's willingness, however fleeting, to accept the reality of her condition and the gift of love:

Nicola rested her shoulder against mine. We looked each other in the eyes and away again, open and free. It was like being submerged to our chins in calm water. Our limbs were weightless, and so were our hearts. I looked at the clock. It was only half past eight.

The spare but resonant language creates for the reader reflective spaces about the nature of friendship, responsibility for others and the “trackless forest”, the “place of darkness”, into which the dying enter. *The Spare Room* – highly compressed, tonally varied and beautifully paced – works as both stringent social commentary and a thoughtful meditation on the “echoing spaces” of dying.

While readers have waited some time for new fiction by London, Bail, Malouf and Garner, Kate Grenville’s most recent novel, *The Lieutenant*, comes relatively hot on the historical heels of her highly successful and controversial *The Secret River*, published in 2005. Both novels are informed by what Grenville regards as the historical novelist’s obligation not simply to record or even to imagine the past, but to ethically examine it, in this case to judge the actions and ideology of white “settlers” in their first contact with Aborigines. While *The Secret River* is about a closing down of possibilities for communication and understanding, *The Lieutenant* is less pessimistic; refusing to erase the barbarism and destructive ignorance of white culture’s treatment of Aborigines, the novel also allows for the transformative possibilities of interracial contact. *The Lieutenant* is centred on the character of Daniel Rooke and the increasingly unbearable disjunction for him between the public marine – the man of duty and obedience to authority – and the private man, the lover of stars and language who discovers the ethics of relationship through his friendship with Aborigines, in particular the nine-year-old girl Tagaran. Grenville has avoided the historical controversy which beset *The Secret River* by insisting that her construction of Rooke is based entirely on historical documentation, thus pre-empting criticism that she has superimposed a modern ideological perspective onto past figures and events. One of the main strengths of *The Lieutenant* is its gradual development of the relationship between Rooke and Tagaran – the importance it conveys of the extra-linguistic, of touch, facial expressions, gesture, as the Aboriginal girl learns to trust the white man and he discovers his own capacity for reciprocity and understanding:

Everything in his life had come down to the sensation of her fingers against his. The person he was, the history he carried within himself, every joy and grief he had ever experienced, slipped away like an

irrelevant garment. He was nothing but skin, speaking to another skin, and between the skins there was no need to find any words.

There is an ethical poise to this epiphanic moment and in the novel as a whole. Such writing is never easy: it involves tireless re-drafting and polishing to create this kind of artless art. The linguistic and moral integrity of *The Lieutenant* is the mark one of our finest novelists.

The prolific Sonya Hartnett has produced another dazzling novel: *Butterfly* is another one of my picks for the year. Centred on Plum Coyle, a thirteen-going-on-fourteen year old sister and daughter, *Butterfly* conveys the savage self-abasement, piteous vulnerability and marvellous resilience of adolescents, as well as their inclination to cruelty. The scenes detailing the bitchiness of Plum's "friends" are anguishing reminders of the thoughtless humiliations and calculated malice of which teenaged girls are capable. And above all *Butterfly* is a novel about loneliness, not only Plum's but also that of her much older and sporadically affectionate brothers, Justin and Cydar, their parents Mums and Fa, and the next door neighbour Maureen, a mother with a largely absent husband. Glimpsing her own mother's loneliness, Plum knows that she

will never ask her ... what she thinks about when she's alone in the house and it's raining, those cold afternoons when [she] arrives home to find Elvis gazing up from record sleeves shuffled over the floor.

There is much to praise in Hartnett's latest novel: the use of vivid detail to create an emotionally charged world; the arresting figurative language (Cydar is "a hawk whistled down from the sky", while Plum's father is distanced from her by "an obscuring fog of softness"); a skilfully constructed plot which seems to meander like life itself while often threatening to erupt into calamity. *Butterfly* is also a fine study in character: Plum is a wonderfully layered construction; intense, peculiar, edgy and self-absorbed, she is a girl whose heart "fattens" with love when shown even a hint of affection and who learns about the adult world's capacity for exploitation, vindictiveness and betrayal. And there is a heartbreaking glimpse of a four-year-old child, Maureen's son David, a plaintive, unsuspecting instrument and victim of selfish adult passions. *Butterfly* is an exhilarating, sobering, utterly absorbing read, and a welcome addition to Hartnett's impressive body of fiction.

*The Slap* is Christos Tsiolkas's fourth novel. Published three years after the difficult, some would say impenetrable, *Dead Europe*, *The Slap*

is highly accessible. It's a hefty but engrossing read, structured on the reactions of eight different characters to the slapping of a three-year-old child by a family relative at a barbecue. Tsiolkas uses this wonderful conceit – the emotionally and morally loaded action of an adult slapping a defenceless (if highly obnoxious) child – to explore the changing social morés and conflicting value systems of those who witness the event. Set in Melbourne's multicultural northern suburbs, the novel's use of a range of perspectives is arguably an attempt to represent a cross-section of contemporary Australian society. Characters from different classes, races, ethnicities, religions, generations and sexualities attack one another and defend their positions in homes and on holidays, in pubs and bars, the work place and the courtroom, with arrogance, venom or self-righteous indignation, with the blow of a fist. What characterises this novel is the energy of the writing and its refusal to judge the characters: in allowing them to speak for themselves and in cleverly complicating our responses to most of them, Tsiolkas ensures that his text reads *as* much as we read the text. So how does one read a novel in which many of the characters are singularly repellent – racist, misogynistic, selfish, duplicitous, irresponsible, complacent, violent, superficial and sleazy? At one level, *The Slap* can be interpreted as a critique of the national myths of egalitarianism and the “fair go”, a descent into ruthless individualism and constant anxiety about wealth and social status. This is “aspirational voter” country and the effects are morally ugly. It is also a novel about narcissism, in which a shallow preoccupation with appearance and sexual performance suggests an inability or unwillingness to confront mortality. Its view of heterosexual relationships is dispiriting and cynical, its bleak vision of marriage expressed in the words of the old Greek patriarch Manolis: “Had [his wife] forgotten the long, poisonous years in between youth and age, the years of argument and spite and disillusion and despair?” At the same time, Tsiolkas gives us the unquenchable optimism of the adolescents Connie and Richie – wonderful portraits of excruciating self-consciousness, of loyalty and tenderness. *The Slap* is also a deliberate assault on bourgeois sensibilities and values, shown in the casual proliferation of expletives and obscenities; the relentless (and to my mind distorting) sexualising of experience; and by the fact that the few sympathetic characters exist outside the heteronormative confines of the nuclear family. As contentious and provocative as the slap itself, the novel will no doubt add to Tsiolkas's reputation as one of Australia's more confronting writers.

While reading new novels by established writers is a pleasure, it's an especial thrill to read quality work by debut novelists. The year's

outstanding works for me are Amanda Curtin's *The Sinkings* and Jacinta Halloran's *Dissection* – very different in mode and scope but both intelligent, skilfully crafted and beautifully written. *The Sinkings* counterpoints and gradually interweaves a contemporary and historical narrative, as Willa, a free-lance editor, researches the life of a nineteenth-century convict, Little Jock, shipped to Australia for a series of petty crimes. The narratives are connected by, among other things, the fact that Willa's daughter and Little Jock are intersexed; and Curtin uses this link to examine changing attitudes to sexual ambiguity and to explore more general and important questions about human rights and dignity, victimisation and courage. The historical section of the narrative, set in northern Island, Glasgow and Portsmouth, is both meticulously researched and sensorially, at times viscerally, immediate; and Curtin is excellent at using a nineteenth-century prose style without ever falling into empty pastiche or arch mimicry. Nor does she sentimentalise or demonise the poor; her depiction of life in the slums shows its hardships and brutalities but also its capacity for resilience and its sense of community. Life in Western Australia is also wonderfully realised: Curtin's sense of place is vivid and unerring. Little Jock makes a decent life for himself in the new country, but we are also shown the cost of always having to pretend to be what he is not and to forego the emotional intimacy he craves. The novel's contemporary narrative also deals with loneliness and victimisation: Willa is a mother shattered by grief and loss, while her intersexed daughter Imogen suffers under the "well intentioned" but violating medical attempts to normalise her anatomy and identity. But here too we witness the courageous struggle to remake lives in the face of overwhelming trauma. *The Sinkings* is ultimately a plea to move beyond destructively rigid gender binaries in particular and to embrace ambivalence, ambiguity and difference in general. This ambitious, thoughtful and very moving work by a prize-winning short story writer is a stunning achievement for any novelist, let alone a first-timer.

Jacinta Halloran's highly impressive debut novel *Dissection*, as its title suggests, is also concerned with the practice of medicine. Its narrative focuses on the experiences of a female GP, Anna McBride, who is facing a medical negligence suit because of her delayed diagnosis of a rare form of cancer and, as a partial consequence, the breakdown of her marriage. While Curtin's *The Sinkings* parallels past and present societies, *Dissection* is starkly contemporary in its use of form, located as it is in the isolated consciousness of the central character struggling to deal with the disintegration of her professional and personal life. A GP herself, Halloran is excellent at conveying the burden placed on doctors by public

expectations for perfection, and she examines with moral intelligence and urgency the professional ethics of responsibility and care. She also offers a psychologically astute examination of consciousness itself, as Anna “dissects” her conscience as a doctor, wife and mother. The use of a third person limited point of view is highly effective in creating a sense of Anna’s self-scrutinising, tortuous isolation, as this once rational and conscientious woman is gradually corroded by self-lacerating guilt and self-doubt. She even begins to reconstruct her virtues as inadequacies or failings: she fears that her calmness may be coldness, her capacity to reason an inability to feel. If “hell”, as Sartre famously described it, is “other people”, then Anna’s hell is surely herself: almost inhumanly stoic, demanding impossible standards for herself, she cuts herself off from the possibility of support or consolation. While this kind of material might sound rather grim, *Dissection* is ultimately an affirming story; Halloran never allows her character to become maudlin or self-pitying, and Anna’s fundamental goodness, fully realised rather than simply asserted, is expressed in her commitment to her vocation and in the value of enduring maternal love. There is a kind of grace to Halloran’s doctor and mother in this humane, thought-provoking and thoroughly readable debut novel.

Other first novels have been welcome new voices in the Australian fiction scene. I admired enormously Sonia Orchard’s *The Virtuoso*. Orchard is the writer of a memoir, *Something More Wonderful* (2003), and *The Virtuoso*, loosely based on the life of the gifted Australian pianist Noël Mewton-Wood, has the tone and texture of a memoir: a first person retrospective account by one of Mewton-Wood’s lovers, as he looks back with longing, regret and despair at his past passions and failures. Melancholy pervades this intelligent novel about romantic obsession and its relation to musical creativity, the anguish of jealousy, the emptiness of casual sexual encounters and the decadence of artistic circles in post-war England, particularly the homosexual sub-culture. I especially liked the minor but very haunting figure of the narrator’s father, with his nurturing love of music and his unspoken sadness. *The Virtuoso* is also a gift for anyone interested in music: its informed and lovingly attentive descriptions of works of classical music will return you with renewed passion to some great compositions for piano.

Sofie Laguna, a writer of young adult and children’s fiction, has created a chilling first novel for adults about the intellectually impaired child of reclusive religious extremists. *One Foot Wrong*, told from the perspective of the child through to late adolescence, details the damaging effects of psychological and sexual abuse, but the overall effect is less harrowing



than might be expected (although be prepared for the horrific climax.) The novel is rescued from unmitigated bleakness by endowing the child Hester with a creative imagination through which she constructs a world of kind, interventionist objects, including a door handle, broom and axe, to help her survive, and by showing her capacity for empathy and enduring friendship. Claire Thomas's *Fugitive Blue* is another fine first novel about the search by a young art conservator to find the origins of a fifteenth-century panel painting. In narratives about different historical periods, from Renaissance Venice through to post-war Australia, Thomas suggests parallel stories about love and loss, female creativity and unrealised desire. Polished and poignant, expressed with incisiveness and resonance, *Fugitive Blue* doesn't miss a beat.

There have been other excellent works of fiction published in the last year that I want to commend. Amanda Lohrey's novella, *Vertigo*, which charts the move of a "tree change/sea change" couple from the dilapidated gloom of a Sydney apartment to the natural beauties of the country, is one of my favourites. In this exquisitely lyrical narrative, Lohrey's evocation of place is masterly: the flora, fauna and atmosphere of the bush are inventively described and used subtly to suggest changes in the relationship between husband and wife. (I might add that the extended description of a ravaging bushfire, apart from being eerily prescient, is the best on the subject I've ever read, and alone is worth the price of the book!) The minor characters are drawn economically and persuasively, showing Lohrey's skills as a short story writer; and the use of symbolic details – birds, water, ash, books, an item of clothing – is always striking without being heavy-handed. A novella about our relationship to the physical environment and to each other, a story about stoicism, friendship and love, it's one of the best things Lohrey has written. And like *The Pages*, its production is superb: the cover design, the quality paper and the inclusion of beautiful images by Lorraine Biggs add to the pleasure of this memorable new work.

Sophie Cunningham's second novel, *Bird*, is the story of a daughter's search to understand the mother who abandoned her. Based very loosely on the life of Zina Rachevsky, a co-founder in the early 1970s of a Buddhist monastery in Nepal, *Bird* takes us through the life of Anna Davidoff, a wartime refugee in America, a '50s movie starlet and a '60s party girl, covering the Beat era, AIDS, hallucinogenic drugs, the siege of Leningrad and ending with a kind of peace in the monastery. Cunningham creates an impressive range of voices in the narration of a daughter's journey, from snappy one-liners to deeply affecting accounts of the siege. The deferment of Anna's own voice is highly effective in constructing her as

an ambivalent figure, a woman who changes from political engagement to political quietism and who is both narcissistic and selfless, desperate and joyful. *Bird* is an intriguing and well-written novel, a convincing portrait of an individual and an insightful depiction of different cultures and historical periods.

Tracy Ryan's third novel, *Sweet*, is her best yet. It charts the struggle of three women to find meaning and affirmation in a religious fundamentalist community in 1980s rural Western Australia. The novel is pervaded by a suffocating sense of the moral claustrophobia of that community – its small-mindedness, its sense of certainty, its oppressive good intentions. But *Sweet* is no simple or shrill anti-religious diatribe. The church leader, the Reverend William King, is a fascinating study in moral ambivalence, a man who is both genuinely compassionate and psychologically manipulative, benevolent and vaguely sinister. The three women whose lives he dominates are all drawn with compassion and a shrewd understanding of feminine susceptibility to the influence of a powerful man. I particularly enjoyed the character of Kylie, a young working-class mother whose inarticulate fumbling after faith is neither patronised nor sentimentalised. Uneducated, self-doubting and anxious to placate, Kylie is a touching portrayal of the emotional vulnerability lying at the heart of this intelligent and affecting novel.

On the short fiction scene, there have been several anthologies offering some of the best from established and emerging writers, including Delia Falconer's selection in *The Best Australian Short Stories*, Barry Oakley's in *Families* and Aviva Tuffield's in *New Australian Stories*. Writing effective and memorable short stories is an aesthetically exacting business, and *New Australian Stories* in particular offers wonderful examples from thirty-five exponents. Among its many pleasures are Cate Kennedy's "Flexion", a poignant narrative about marital estrangement and the healing possibilities of touch (Kennedy, as always, is superb at evoking "the unsaid"); Mark O'Flynn's laugh-out-loud monologue "Iago", in which Shakespeare's villain offers a diabolically clever, self-indicting justification of his duplicity; and Brenda Walker's moving and wonderfully suggestive "That Vain Word No", a beautifully crafted story about maternal love and loneliness.

The outstanding single-author collection is Nam Le's much lauded *The Boat*. What links these stylistically and tonally diverse stories set in a range of locations is a concern with history – political, familial, cultural – as burden, guilt and responsibility; and what distinguishes them is Le's gift for evoking the pathos or tragedy of individual selves fractured and buffeted by forces beyond their control. For me the finest

story in the collection is the last one: “The Boat” should be mandatory reading for xenophobes fearful of or hostile to asylum seekers. In this era of increasing anxiety about boat people “swamping” our shores, Le’s heartbreaking story is a timely plea to understand the traumatic histories and the desperation of such people. His stories are also distinguished by their length: at 8,000 to 10,000 words, they are considerably longer than most Australian readers are accustomed to and depend on duration for their effects. While the contemporary short story typically tends to use a spatial rather than temporal aesthetic and represents experience in terms of suggestive glimpses or moments, Le’s stories rely for their ethical and emotional power on the development of characters and experiences over time. “The Boat”, for example, works because the hazardous journey of the Vietnamese boat people is represented as hideously protracted: “Time”, we are told, “has distended every moment on the boat.” The journey, in which 200 people are crammed into a boat intended for 15, lasts for two weeks, but what we experience is its seeming endlessness, the ghastly daily replication of disease, dehydration, festering skin, acute malnutrition, delirium and death. The story works, too, because its quiet insistence on the preciousness of individual lives – its humanising of an enormous and growing social problem – depends on gradually developing the relationship between the young girl at the centre of the story and the little boy for whom she cares:

In the middle of the night, Mai woke to find Truong half draped over her stomach. His weight on her so light as to be almost imperceptible, as though his body were already nothing more than bones and air. “Everything will be fine,” she whispered into the darkness, her thoughts still interlaced with dream, scattered remotely across space and the grey sea.

Le has used the scope of these relatively long short stories to create thoughtful, subtly crafted and highly affecting tales about displacement, memory, identity and desire, in which personal experience is used to explore wider and often urgent social dilemmas.

Reviewing the year in Australian fiction has suggested a number of possible trends: the continuing viability of the historical novel; the popularity of the present tense, first person narrative; a preoccupation with loneliness and religiosity; the resurgence of the novella (although, it must be said, restricted to those by high-profile writers offering what publishers would regard as value-for-money). But above all I have been

impressed by and grateful for the moral intelligence, social awareness and stylistic poise of new and established writers alike. To return to Susan Sontag, the year's fiction has provided compelling answers to her question: What should a writer do? "Love language, agonise over sentences. And pay attention to the world."<sup>2</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Susan Sontag, "The Conscience of Words", in *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches*, Paolo Dilonardo and Anne Jump (eds) (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007), 151.
- 2 Sontag, "At the Same Time: The Novelist and Moral Reasoning", 210.

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\*London, Joan. *The Good Parents*. Sydney: Random House, 2008.

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## ON THIS LAST MORNING

1

On this last morning, she made breakfast  
Gliding easily between the bench and the stove  
With a grace befitting a ballet dancer  
While I smoked a cigarette and drank Kenyan coffee  
As she sat to eat her breakfast  
She flaunted her nakedness beneath her silk dressing gown  
That she had rescued from the local opportunity shop  
She's trying so hard to create an impression on this last morning  
But all she revives is a memory I hold from months ago  
Making love with her on the beach at Mallacoota  
Before the sun grew too high in the sky  
This was my memory, taken with my eye's camera,  
Distant now, like a dream I had months ago

On this last morning, she wants me to take another picture  
A picture of what I can no longer have but I'm focusing instead  
On how bad the coffee tastes  
Then the telephone rings, insistent like the plague,  
She runs for it and grasps the handpiece carefully  
Ensuring that she doesn't ruin her carefully manicured fingers  
When she speaks, her tone is slightly shrill, almost forced –  
Perhaps it's her latest beau –  
Wanting to make me feel hurt and rejected  
Even her laughing is fragmented and  
I have trouble hearing myself think  
On this last morning, my thoughts are with her

Far more deeply than she or I realise,  
Me not anticipating that maybe I really loved her  
Loved her more than I had known before  
I made another coffee, black this time,  
Briefly intoxicated with my brilliant theory,  
While she showered, singing softly to herself  
Then my mate stopped by to have a cry  
About his latest lost love and I empathised  
Misled him into thinking that I was happy and free now  
He left, better in the knowledge that I was no better,  
Probably far worse than he, having lost a gem of such beauty  
A brief intermission, then our final words,  
Barbed like fish hooks into soft skin  
Our mouths moving far too fast for our brains  
Everything on the surface and nothing of substance  
I'm thinking that we are so much better than this,  
Just not better together, but it's these final sentences  
That will write our memory of this last morning  
In the end, she simply picked up the last of her bags,  
Slammed the front door, and the photograph I took was of the sun  
Glistening on her newly shaven leg as she got into the taxi

2

On this last afternoon, six months later,  
Not a word has passed between us  
I am resolutely hidden from public view most of the time  
Occasional excursions to the one pub she hated  
My social outlet  
Today, though, I'm feeling good and walking down Main Street  
The world is in balance for a moment and I feel myself  
Coming back slowly from my submerged state  
Ah, ying and yang,  
My balance is soon shattered by the vision of her  
Not twenty feet away, arm entwined in another man's-  
I want to hide, want to dissolve straight into the ground  
But I have no time and she is upon me  
Kissing me extravagantly upon the lips and  
Pulling herself close into me  
Her eyes are electric and her body writhes  
Underneath her winter coat and she breezes

Through me as though that last morning never happened  
Was not even a memory she could regain under hypnosis  
Forgotten like a friend  
You used to play cricket with at primary school  
Hundreds of years ago  
But no sooner does she appear than she departs again  
Leaving me shaking on the footpath  
Like a zombie in need of a fix

3

On this last evening, a further twelve months have passed  
It's Saturday night, the vaudeville of football season upon us  
I'm in the middle of it all  
Drinking my brain into submission and happy to do it  
People around me think I'm pissed but  
I'm sober, stone cold sober,  
And there she is at the bar ordering a drink  
Is it really her, I ask myself,  
The same electric eyes, though the face is slimmer somehow,  
No greeting this time, barely a cursory glance in acknowledgement  
My grog-found balance is rocked again and I can't speak  
I get another shout and return it to my mates  
Then keep walking straight out of the pub  
As I hit the street, the cold air  
Straightens me like a crow bar  
She's there again and I'm in her arms  
And she says that I can have her, well, have her for fifty bucks  
And I want to, but I can't touch her and she goes  
I fall into the gutter and vomit my guts out, spewing out every  
Single molecule that ever knew who I once was

4

On this last morning, the air is heavy with rain and disbelief  
The casket is mercifully closed and I can't think of her dead  
Let alone look at the lifeless form of the woman  
I held naked in my arms  
Some inadequate words and blessings and she is gone for good

On this last morning, we can finally stand the truth,  
My love and I,



That I loved her, needed the life in her eyes and  
The warmth in her body, far more than she loved or needed me,  
Though she loved me in her own way  
No one else is present  
I walk home alone in the rain  
Five long, wet miles with no hat or raincoat

5

On this last morning, she makes breakfast and I eat with her  
We laugh together and make plans, talk about friends and family  
Eat until we are both satisfied with food and  
Now long to hold each other  
She falls into my arms and I carry her away to our bed  
Where we spend the day under the covers and get up late  
To drink wine and talk all night until every light in our street  
Fades into blackness

## NATIVE JASMINE FOR JENNIFER

The white star-flowered *jasminum suavisissimum*  
which tries to tendril  
through my kitchen door

has a scent like lily of the valley ...

Two months before you died, you detected this,  
angling toward the surf of flowers by your sick-bed's  
giddy peninsula.

Tides of visitors threatened to swamp you –  
but you were afloat on perfume, on fleur de lys and my photos  
from Paris: gifts from a foreign place  
you had tickets to only in dreams now.

“Is that lily of the valley?”  
briefly you hoped,  
bending to native jasmine,  
sniffing from it a whiff  
of the life you'd always wanted.

While the wardrobe mirror held  
giraffe necks of your garden's spotted gums,  
you morphed above the star-snuff

into a girl, just out of school in Mary Quant dresses,  
owl-eyed with mascara, the only dust ahead of you  
lifting benevolent as blusher from the library books  
in the Queen Victoria Building's bowels.

It was so cool, back in 1966,  
to inhale,  
to dabble in gold  
holding the Benson & Hedges pack,  
your fingernails, as you flicked away ash, pink pearls.

Perhaps the luxury of long life was not in your genes,  
perhaps you were right to ring your throat  
in smoke, lunch on Bodega, dress in black for a decade

and then, divorced, go white.  
In your forties, flashes of happiness  
coloured your life –

a blue budgerigar circled your walls  
as we ate your white meals, your new house  
had ruby-fruited tamarillos by the drive  
and windows which held a cobalt-  
blue lake. Too late. Like the lily of the valley  
coming up to flower from dark earth under snow,  
your perfect time was brief.

After the eulogies, after the racked back  
of your partner in the front pew and Joe Cocker croaking  
*I get by with a little help from my friends*

we comfort ourselves with this:  
fierce froths of flowers  
whitening the grave's slicked pit.

*Jasminum suavisissimum,*  
that tough native creeper, stars the dark skies  
of your memory now. I hold the fallen constellations,  
sniff them –

remember you    leaning towards  
your lilies of the valé ...  
Our shared lake shushes its tidal grief.

# MIRIAM WEI WEI LO

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## MARGARET RIVER

The organic camembert from the market is so real I can't eat it. It smells like the stuff we had in Singapore in the 80s. Imported from France. I used to pretend that I liked it. I wanted to be different.

Like the man who comes walking towards me, all chemical dreadlocks and piercings, ethno-patterned tunic flaring out with each booted stride, trying so hard to be different that laughter comes coughing out into my cheeks as I push past with the pram; as if I were laughing at myself, trying so hard to be like Jesus.

Trying so hard that I fish out a smile at Coles when the check-out chick dangles my scruffy cloth bags between two fingers. *Look at these*, she mouths, rolling her eyes to her teenaged friend. No reply when I ask about her day. *Look at these*. I go to the car, unpack the shopping and kids, sit down in the front seat and cry. It's no use pretending. I want to strike back.

You're so real I can't eat you, Jesus. Even if I put you in the bin your words smell up the house: *Love your enemy. Do good to those who hate you*. Do you have to hang about, reminding me of my pretence? Asking me questions that I cannot answer, like: *What does it mean to be different?*

## EDDIE BURRUP – A DAUGHTER’S VIEW

For the past twelve years, the subject of Eddie Burrup has been a looming presence (rather like a phantom elephant) that everyone – when I’m around, at any rate – has neatly side-stepped. It’s most refreshing to see the subject out in the open at last. Admittedly, the phenomenon addressed by Louise Morrison in “The Art of Eddie Burrup” is complex and would account, in part, for a reluctance to explore its diverse facets.

In all the hullabaloo that followed Elizabeth Durack’s revelation (in *Art Monthly Australia*, March 1997) that she had created an Aboriginal persona and was producing work in his name – it seems to me that most observers became lost in the woods; few stood back sufficiently to look a little more closely at the trees. Had they done so, they might have conceded that, first and foremost, the invention of Eddie Burrup is an ingenious work of art – one that combines paint, pen and performance. Some observers, rather than focusing on what the artist had the effrontery to do and concocting wacky theories about it, might have looked at the quality of the work itself and considered what it was communicating. Still others might have detected an experiment, a device – in the centuries-old tradition of pseudonyms – to obtain objective assessment of work and ideas.

Be all that as it may, the spin in *Art Monthly*’s sensational media release about Elizabeth Durack reincarnated as an Aboriginal male, producing and exhibiting paintings by him, set the tone for what followed, and ensured that whatever had happened, it must be denounced. With few exceptions, arts media and academic commentators dubbed Elizabeth Durack a “colonialist” (as if this explained everything) and sanctimoniously proceeded to impute base motives to her assumption of a black male alter ego. To their credit, the general public saw a witty side to it all. Studious analysis of *The Art of Eddie Burrup* – “whatever can Elizabeth have been thinking of ...?” must await another day. All there is space for now is a few general comments and a brief response to some points Louise Morrison raises.

The remarkable thing about *The Art of Eddie Burrup* is that, whichever way one looks at it, there's no denying the work is powerfully redolent of Aboriginality. How this came about is a long story and a crucial one. Sufficient now to say that at the end of a long working life, Elizabeth took the calculated risk of producing work in the name of Eddie Burrup. And she entered paintings by him in two dedicated Aboriginal-only exhibitions in order to have the work noticed on its merits, for its own intrinsic worth. In this goal she succeeded. As the work of Eddie Burrup, it moved people to tears; it was applauded and hailed as that of a genius. The irony is that, for the very same work, Elizabeth Durack was vilified, ridiculed and defamed ...

From the outset Elizabeth Durack's artistic motivation had been shaped and influenced by art, and by experiences far removed from the well-documented sources of inspiration in leading metropolitan centres. It was the land and people of East Kimberley – a remote region of northern Australia – where Elizabeth found fiat and stimulus to develop the style and singular vision that places her work in a category of its own.<sup>1</sup>

In the last decade of Elizabeth's life, when her beloved sister, Mary, was dying, and when she was deeply concerned by the turn of political events occurring on Australia's "rim," she was producing a series of paintings she was calling "morphological" works. They had evolved from earlier work, notably the big series *The Rim, the rim of our brittle and disintegrating world*, yet were different, a breakthrough from what had gone before. When she first showed me the morphological works (it was a day or so after Christmas, 1994), they had no titles, they were not signed and, familiar as I was with her work, they bowled me over. I said: "These are 'Aboriginal' works ... how are you doing them? Why are you doing them? You can't show them. They won't be looked at, never accepted, as works by Elizabeth Durack ... under another name, perhaps – any other name – particularly an Aboriginal name, they'd be highly acclaimed, but you'd never come at that." Elizabeth agreed – a nom de brush was not on the cards – and no more was said.

A day later we were walking along the edge of the Swan River when, out of the blue, Elizabeth said: "You know, Perpetua, I might consider signing those morphological works under another name." From that precise moment Eddie Burrup appeared, fully formed (as it were), before us. The subsequent development of this character and of his art proved extraordinarily liberating. Paintings poured out. Transporting herself imaginatively as a contemporary male with a long past, Elizabeth transferred onto paper and canvas a lifetime of association, shared experiences, adventures, memories, songs and anecdotes heard in the twilight years

of lost worlds. As Louise Morrison has acutely observed: “Perhaps Burrup can be understood as a conduit for Durack’s vast reservoir of knowledge and experiences with Aboriginal people and culture.” In similar vein Maureen Smith has said: “The story of Eddie Burrup and *The Art of Eddie Burrup* is a resource. Much of what it contains is no longer retrievable. With it, elliptical time, as obtained in the *Ngarangani*, (the Dreaming) is reasserted and who can say that a new paradigm for reconciliation has not been defined?”<sup>2</sup>

Fast rewind now, to 1953. In that year Elizabeth Durack produced a series of ten paintings that were extraordinary for their empathic recreation of aspects of Aboriginal life and culture. The series, *The Cord to Altcheringa*, had stemmed from personal experience of ceremonies, from familiarity with Stone Age masterpieces on rock faces in northern Australia, and from lessons learnt from Jubul, a bark painter from Arnhem Land. Elizabeth went on to produce three more comparable series: *Chant for Kurdaitcha* (1954), *Love Magic* (1954) and *The Legend of the Black Swan* (1956). All were inspired by Aboriginal ritual and legends, a fact clearly acknowledged at the time.

*The Cord to Altcheringa* was purchased in 1953 for the University of Western Australia through the Tom Collins Bequest. In the same year, Vice-Chancellor Stanley Prescott asked Elizabeth for a description of the series. Her reply to the Vice-Chancellor must be somewhere in the university archives but to date has not been located. In the meantime, here are extracts from a draft dated January 1954, located among her papers:

“The more I endeavour to write a ‘description’ of the paintings ... the more impossible it becomes ... I could proceed at tedious length on the fact that visually the works stem from what I know of our Aboriginal sacred life and ceremony; that the paintings hang around this ceremony ... however, without wishing to indulge in fantasy I can frankly say I am not quite sure where this particular crop of work came from. I know that while I worked on it I was in a peculiar state of being possessed – this particular expression called for this particular treatment. ‘Why,’ said one of our local art savants, ‘why, with all the benefits of the twentieth-century palette and Mr Windsor and Newton at your disposal should you have chosen to make mud pies of mud ochres and charcoal?’ To which I could only lamely answer, ‘I don’t know.’ ... the fact is whatever I have captured of the tenuous Cord to Altcheringa could not be translated ... through the multi-coloured array of pigments developed over centuries of research but only by a reversion to the first available medium, and by

a re-orientation to the primary arrangements of composition and formal construction ....”

*The Cord to Alitcheringa* hung in Winthrop Hall for thirty years and was seen by thousands of students and visitors. By the early 1990s, or perhaps it was the late 1980s, the pictures were taken down for reasons unclear. They are housed now in the splendid storage facilities of UWA’s Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery.

The art critic and writer Patricia Anderson has said: “A painter – like a novelist who writes, or a composer who composes – is someone who wakes up in the morning and paints. Everything revolves around this imperative. Even when there are lapses, delinquencies, disruptions, fallow times – even a crisis of confidence – the imperative remains. The creator alone understands the lonely journey and its hoped-for outcome.”<sup>3</sup>

It’s a comment that resonates strongly for me as that is what Mother used to do. She used to get up in the morning and paint (or write) and often was still at it late at night. Of course she had lapses, disruptions, crises of confidence but for over sixty years she was a person driven by the imperative of developing and honouring her God-given gift, of seeking to capture, to recreate, an essence of thought and vision – whether it be of a wildflower, a wayward child, bush roads or old and sacred ceremonies.

Over the “lonely journey” of her long working life, Elizabeth Durack produced a great deal of work, some of which came almost too easily, some of which she struggled with, much of which simply poured out. In the end the daemon, Eddie Burrup, possessed her.

## NOTES

- 1 The work as a whole falls loosely into two streams: either *Out of Sight* (alternatively ‘The Harvest of the Eye’) or *Out of Mind* (alternatively ‘The Mill of the Imagination’). It was the latter stream of thinking and work that most preoccupied Elizabeth, that influential out-of-tune critics dismissed and to which *The Art of Eddie Burrup* belongs.
- 2 *The Art of Eddie Burrup*. Exhibition brochure, Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London, July 2000. Scott Print, Perth, May 2000.
- 3 Patricia Anderson, review of Bernard Smith’s *The Formalesque: A Guide to Modern Art and its History*, *Quadrant* 52, 2008, 7–8.





Elizabeth Durack, *Flood on the Yule River* from the series *The Art of Eddie Burrup*, 1996, mixed media on canvas, 200 x 100 cm

## THE ART OF EDDIE BURRUP

Eleven years ago, the true identity of Eddie Burrup, an (apparently) indigenous artist from the North-West of Western Australia was quietly revealed in an article in *Art Monthly Australia* by Robert Smith.<sup>1</sup> Burrup's works had been included in the 1996 *Native Titled Now* exhibition and in the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in Darwin that same year, accompanied by extensive artist's notes written in Kriol and photos of his country. However, in March 1997, Elizabeth Durack, an eighty-one year old, white, female, third generation Australian from a West Australian pastoralist family, who was already well known as an artist and a writer, contacted Smith and asked that he make it publicly known that she was the true author of the Burrup works. Within a week of Smith's article, Durack was being heavily criticised in the national and international media and labelled as either the architect of the greatest artistic hoax in Australia since the Ern Malley affair or perpetrator of a fraud of the same ilk as author Helen Darville-Demidenko.

Hoaxer or fraudster, it was Durack's incursion into indigenous cultural territory that attracted the most vitriolic criticism. Djon Mundine, who was the Curator of Aboriginal Art for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney at the time, stated that Durack's behaviour was "a fucking obscenity"<sup>2</sup> and Wayne Bergmann from the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre described it as "the ultimate act of colonisation."<sup>3</sup> I'd like to closely examine Durack's actions and the accusations levelled at her in relation to the historical, social, political and cultural context in which the works were produced.

Well before the Eddie Burrup scandal became the talk of the town, Durack was a household name in Western Australia. Elizabeth, and her author sister Dame Mary Durack, were members of a well known pioneer/pastoralist family here. Their grandfather "Patsy" Durack established and

ran (later with the help of their father) “Argyle” and “Ivanhoe” stations in the East Kimberley. Although she was sent to Perth for schooling, Durack spent most of her twenties and thirties on the stations, even running “Ivanhoe” for some time in the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Durack was well known locally as an artist. She held a staggering eleven solo shows between 1946 and 1950 and was one of only three women artists chosen to participate in the now significant 1961 exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery in London that cemented the reputations of Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale, Albert Tucker, Fred Williams and Brett Whiteley amongst others.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, critical opinion of Durack’s art practice prior to the Burrup scandal varied widely. Some argue Durack has been overlooked. For example, Christine Sharkey suggests that Durack pre-dates Guy Grey-Smith and Robert Juniper in her interest in depicting the dry, outback interior.<sup>6</sup> She also states that Durack’s watercolour paintings of rural or Aboriginal labourers from the 1950s and 1960s rival Harald Vike’s works. Janda Gooding agrees that Durack’s depictions of Aboriginal people were progressive for their time, stating that “few other artists were creating such powerful portraits of Aboriginal women in the 1940s.”<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, David Bromfield, noted Western Australian academic and art critic, was not particularly impressed. He felt that she “was not a great artist. Nor was she particularly innovative in the wider context” and stated that her painting “came uncomfortably close to a range of familiar styles, from utilitarian potboiler realism and outback social surrealism to a figurative version of Jackson Pollock.”<sup>8</sup>

It is easy to assume, especially from the vantage point of 2009, that a pastoralist’s relationship with Aboriginal people must have been patronising at best and exploitative at worst. But Durack’s relationship with the Aboriginal people she lived alongside was quite different. It is well known that her family were unusual in their protective attitudes to the Aboriginal workers on their properties. Whilst it is also easy to retrospectively describe that attitude as paternalistic, at the time it was understood and valued by these people. Smith learned from independent sources that those who worked for the Duracks made their connections to the family known, when on other stations, because of the protection it afforded them.

Many commentators described Durack’s use of the Eddie Burrup alter ego as a hoax. Debra Jopson and Kelly Burke compared it to the well-known Ern Malley affair of the 1940s. But as Smith explained, “a hoax is when you attempt to spoof people”<sup>9</sup> and many others, in the absence of an explanation by Durack, countered that the long history of respect and understanding for Aboriginal people by her family made it unlikely

that her intention was to hoax.<sup>10</sup> Alternatively Durack's actions could perhaps be understood as yet another example of outright plagiarism; the sort of appropriation that has resulted in Aboriginal images and designs appearing on everything from the one dollar note to souvenir tea towels.<sup>11</sup> Historically, white Australian artists have also appropriated such designs. For example, Margaret Preston once claimed that Aboriginal designs made splendid decorations, but she later modified her statements as she became aware of the deeper spiritual content of such motifs.<sup>12</sup>

However, the Burrup designs were not copied from another artist. As Robert Smith explained to Jane Freeman and Duncan Graham, "Elizabeth has not plagiarised anyone or taken anyone's motif or taken anything from any living person. It is all her own creation."<sup>13</sup> Durack herself was taken aback by the accusation of plagiarism; "The implication seem(s) to be that I sat down and copied Aboriginal dot painting or something like that. It was never like that – never."<sup>14</sup>

Durack did utilise Aboriginal designs in the 1950s but she fully acknowledged the sources of her imagery. In the foreword to *Australian Legendary Tales 1953*, a book of Aboriginal myths illustrated by Durack, she clearly states that the imagery she included in her compositions was taken from carved nuts, bark paintings, rock faces and other sources and belongs to Aboriginal people. Moreover, she explains how she was taught by one of her Aboriginal friends "to understand black man's [sic] pictorial art."<sup>15</sup> Her description of the traditions of bark painting and, importantly, the cultural significance of painting in relation to secret/sacred cultural life are sensitive and respectful.

To Durack, Eddie Burrup is a fully fledged artistic persona. She explained: "If I think things through, I would say that Eddie Burrup is a synthesis of several Aboriginal men I have known ...[but he is] a character in his own right with a life and career of his own."<sup>16</sup> As Smith explained, Durack "always talks of him as a third person, because, to her, he is a real person because he is a compound of people she has known."<sup>17</sup> Three senior Nyoongar Aboriginals seemed to understand. After meeting Durack, they released a statement that said "We the Metropolitan Nyoongar Circle of Elders accept that Mrs Elizabeth Durack is the Human Body, that her alter ego possesses spiritually to work his art ... so essentially her art is a spiritual form of expression of a present living spirit of an Aboriginal person."<sup>18</sup>

But it was exactly this suggestion of an Aboriginal alter ego that angered Djon Mundine. He said "It's like Kerry Packer pretending he's Mahatma Ghandi."<sup>19</sup> He went on, "saying that because your family has lived on the land for years you feel about it as deeply as Aboriginal people and can

pick up the culture is just absurd.” Durack’s supposed appropriation of a culture is at the heart of the most convincing criticisms of the Burrup works. Kaye Mundine, who was head of the National Indigenous Arts Advocacy Organisation, put it simply, saying “it’s cultural theft.”<sup>20</sup>

This was not the first time that Durack had produced work containing Aboriginal cultural material. In fact, she was once commissioned to do so. In 1953, Durack was asked by the Western Australian Government Tourist Bureau to produce a mural sequence of works; a ten-panel painting called *Love Magic*. The Art Gallery of Western Australia noted that whilst “to the uninitiated, these pictures appear as strongly-patterned semi-abstract works with aboriginal [sic] motifs, they are fully authentic expressions of aboriginal [sic] lore.”<sup>21</sup> But Durack’s use of this material, once perfectly acceptable, even desirable, in the 1950s when people here began to be genuinely interested in Aboriginal culture, started to attract criticism in the 1990s with the socio-political changes witnessed in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1995, the Art Gallery of Western Australia held a retrospective exhibition of Durack’s work which came near to being cancelled only days before it opened. An assistant Curator at the gallery, Tjalaminu Mia, suspected some of the works contained secret/sacred men’s business and alerted the Curator of Aboriginal Art, Michael O’Ferrall. The subject matter was reportedly confirmed by Aboriginal people who viewed the works and were deeply offended.<sup>22</sup> The works were a series of paintings, called the *Cord to Alcheringa*, that portrayed a dreaming story. They were owned by the University of Western Australia and had been hanging in Winthrop Hall for forty years. Nevertheless, it was only when a Kimberley Aboriginal man signed off that the works were “free to be seen by everyone” that the exhibition went ahead.<sup>23</sup> Bromfield felt that whilst these works were the most interesting in the show, perhaps the rituals that informed the works “should never have been seen or interpreted by an outsider.”<sup>24</sup>

But Durack is not considered to be an outsider by the Aboriginal group whose material she had utilised. It is clearly understood that she has a classificatory place in the Ord River Mirawong language group.<sup>25</sup> Consider for a moment that Durack, during the 1940s, would walk with her Aboriginal “family” on ceremonial business. Some journeys took over two weeks, as the group walked to “manage country.” Durack remembers once such journey undertaken to meet up with others and discuss unfinished wet-weather business. On these trips, Durack would spend her time sketching women digging for yams and seeking small animals for tucker or she’d make drawings of the men as they stood or sat around, painted up

for the ceremonies to be conducted at night.<sup>26</sup> These journeys and the life Durack shared with her Aboriginal “family” gave her an unusual degree of insight into Aboriginal culture.

Durack described the artistic “team” that produced the Burrup works as “mild old Eddie Burrup who has nothing in mind but reconciliation and old Elizabeth Durack who has been in contact with and overtly been working with the influences of Aboriginal life for over 50 years.”<sup>27</sup> Perhaps Burrup can simply be understood as a conduit for Durack’s vast reservoir of knowledge of and experiences with Aboriginal people and culture.

One ethical issue remains to be considered; that is the marketing of the Burrup works as Aboriginal artworks and their inclusion in indigenous-only art exhibitions and awards. Regardless of her connection with Aboriginal people, Durack is not indigenous. Durack’s daughter, Perpetua Hobcroft, managed the Durack Gallery in Broome through which the works were distributed. Gabrielle Pizzi recalls being approached by Perpetua to organise an exhibition of the Burrup works. “They were clearly promoted to me as Aboriginal work and one would presume that [Ms Hobcroft] knew they were painted by her mother.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Doreen Mellor who curated *Native Titled Now* explained that the exhibition “show(s) what Aboriginal artists and people feel about native title and in that forum... [it] is just an enormous betrayal and another breach of trust between black and white Australia.”<sup>29</sup>

The use of an alter ego is not new in art. In fact, it is a relatively common strategy employed by contemporary artists to direct or affect the meaning of their work in the viewer’s mind. It could be argued that a false or fictitious author operates much like a material or method in the same way that these contribute to meaning. For example, indigenous artist Gordon Bennett has produced a number of works under the name of John Citizen. Citizen is an invention of Gordon Bennett’s, a character without an indigenous identity used by Bennett as a device to further his investigation of identity.<sup>30</sup>

Contrary to Mellor’s statement implying that Durack betrayed us all, black and white, for Durack the Burrup works are an act of reconciliation. Durack talks about the two mythic figures of Djanba, the spirit of co-operation and reconciliation, and Mulunga, the spirit of vengeance and retribution. She said that at the end of the 1800s, both cults were circulating widely but she believed Mulunga is dominant today. For Durack, the Burrup paintings and notes are produced in the spirit of Djanba. She said “I see it as working within the spirit of reconciliation – as *gissa-gissa* – arm in arm, within mutual respect, within progression together, within unity.”<sup>31</sup>



Durack's vast knowledge of Aboriginal life and the Kimberley was once called upon by the Northern Territory Law Department at the time when the whole area that "Ivanhoe" and "Argyle" stations were on came under a Native Title Land Claim. Ironically, it could be argued that Durack automatically qualifies, through her classificatory relationships, as one of the claimants.<sup>32</sup> This slippage between black and white in Durack's life and her art makes the Burrup works rare and rich reflections of our culture; one that needs to be understood as a product of complex histories.

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Elizabeth Durack, *The Last Meeting* from the series *The Art of Eddie Burrup*, 1998, mixed media on canvas, 93 x 84 cm.  
Paintings © the Estate of Elizabeth Durack

### THE FANTASIST: ELIZABETH DURACK AND EDDIE BURRUP

Why would a well-established artist create a fantasy that she was an Aboriginal man from the Pilbara and submit “his” paintings to a major Indigenous art prize, and a leading commercial gallery, and then insist on publicising the deception, only to recoil at the predictable response? This is the fascinating conundrum that prompted Louise Morrison’s article “The Art of Eddie Burrup.”

Let’s clear the air first of all. Was it fraud? Yes it was clearly fraudulent for a non-Indigenous woman to create a false identity for a fictional artist and to present the artworks he was purported to have painted to an Indigenous only exhibition. As Morrison confirms in her article this act of deception was compounded when the artist’s daughter, in the hope of securing a commercial exhibition, submitted other paintings to Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi.

But that doesn’t answer the intriguing question of why the artist acted fraudulently. Was it a desire to rekindle the waning critical interest in her work or the hope of making money from this deception? Was it envy that prompted her to act, anger at the success of Indigenous artists no matter what the quality of their work and as such a mischievous attempt to undermine the Aboriginal art market or did she indeed believe she had an authentic Aboriginal story to tell? Or perhaps it was a potent mix of some or all or even other motives?

It’s not inconceivable that Durack was seeking recognition of her talent at a time when she felt overlooked by critics, curators and collectors. In an interview recorded by Film Australia for the Australian Biography series, she reports that according to her daughter and dealer, her new “morphological works” were unlikely to find a market under her own name but, “if these were done by an Aboriginal then they would get somewhere, but you’d never agree to doing that, you’ve always played things so dumb

and so straight, you'd never sign things under another name."<sup>1</sup> Her rather quick take up of the idea suggests both her excitement about showing the paintings and her eagerness to have them recognised as works of significance. The monetary gain may also have been a motivation but her comments later in the interview that the creation of Eddie Burrup was "a device to liberate me, and it did liberate me" draws the focus back onto her work and her desire to re-energise her creative practice.

This sense of liberation is one of the central motivations for artists adopting anonymity or pseudonymity. As Morrison points out, the contemporary Aboriginal artist Gordon Bennett has created the pseudonym John Citizen, a non-indigenous person, "... as a device to further his investigation of identity."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Joyce Carol Oates the American author sought the freedom to explore a new genre, mystery fiction, when she created Rosamond Smith. "It was a new birth. I was renewing myself. Everything was being given me one more time," Oates explains.<sup>3</sup> It seems clear that Durack also felt she was given "one more time" and a chance to make work that broke through boundaries and opened up new possibilities.

It's also possible that the decision to accede to her daughter's suggestion may have been motivated by the phenomenal success of so many Aboriginal artists who had taken up art late in life and quickly achieved a level of critical acclaim that surpassed Durack's own, despite many years of hard work. Indeed the comment that if her new paintings been "done by an Aboriginal then they would get somewhere" seems to confirm this view of the art market as favouring Indigenous artists and whether or not it was malicious it was clearly an attempt to deceive. That said it does seem clear that this is not a case of plagiarism. The new paintings were strongly influenced by Durack's knowledge of the rock art of the Burrup Peninsula, as she admits in the notes written to explain Eddie Burrup's inspiration, but she was not appropriating the work of another artist, she was Eddie Burrup.

This is the central core of the whole controversy and it's why Djon Mundine, Wayne Bergmann, Doreen Mellor, Kaye Mundine and many other Indigenous Australians have been so outraged and affronted by what Bergmann describes as "the ultimate act of colonization."<sup>4</sup> Did Durack really believe she was channelling an Aboriginal person and speaking with an authentic voice? She may have been delusional but even if she believed this conceit why did she choose a male persona?

It is generally accepted that Durack knew Aboriginal society well enough to understand the clear demarcation of men and women's business,

so was this an attempt to create work from an entirely new perspective or was it anger at the success of more famous male artists, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous? If the latter then it is more easily explained, if on the other hand she was hoping to liberate herself and her creative practice, as she suggests, then it raises other issues.

Artists throughout history have adopted pseudonyms of the opposite sex to tease or taunt their viewers or readers and to gain new insights from taking on a different persona, but with Durack's knowledge of Aboriginal society it seems incredible she didn't realize the added insult to Indigenous people attached to her adoption of a male persona. Although, as Morrison points out she had previously created works under her own name that contained secret/sacred men's business,<sup>5</sup> so it is possible she was less empathetic than was supposed throughout her life.

Morrison argues that the complex histories involved in the Eddie Burrup fiasco provide us with "rare and rich reflections of our culture" but the real fascination it offers is the psychological case study of a fantasist whose fiction undermines her credibility as an empathetic advocate of Aboriginal culture and reveals the emotional and intellectual turmoil of an artist's musings at the end of a long career. This is fertile ground indeed for further research, discussion and conjecture.

## NOTES

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4 Wayne Bergmann quoted in Morrison.

5 See the discussion of the *Cord of Alcheringa* series detailed by Morrison.

# ROLAND LEACH

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## FOR MY MOTHER

My father's muscles were earned from decades  
lifting timber onto the back of trucks.  
When he flexed his arms they rose like  
a great swell over deep water,  
not threatening till it closed on shore,  
which was often the local bar  
where he drank and had fights,  
but on growing old  
he became sentimental and died.  
My mother is much tougher,  
she's over eighty and hasn't been to a doctor  
since her last childbirth,  
puts her shoulder into moving wardrobes  
and drags back her german shepherd  
as if wrestling a lover when he tries going over the fence.

She refuses to die.  
Standing at the flywire door armed with her broom,  
ready to fight death when she hears the click of the gate.

## THE WATCHFUL MOTH

the river is so  
black and the trees a  
mesmerism of  
matt finish thinking  
as I wait for hard  
sun to find skin. a  
wattle bird chases  
song, waves move atop  
moving and the March  
solstice sits painted  
unequal on me.  
and leaves do leaving  
best? light gone to grain.  
sell me only the

scent of things, moistness  
not from home, talk to  
me in the language  
of spoons and couches,  
in vowels able to  
hold. the out wanders in,  
spins infinity.  
loose-limbed traveller,  
was that, tierce da  
picardi at each  
digs. Oban the last,  
the way the train looped  
like Christmas lego,

no pieces missing,  
Oban lost, fine mist,  
“haar” they call it there,  
skinless lake, swept to  
share with unthinking.  
where sits the watchful  
moth? there, not still, but  
looping and feeding  
on fluorescent moon,  
the river now a  
thousand cuts on cream  
satin, the river  
a home for stones in  
pockets, the river  
a last deed yet done

## THE NIGHT OF THE LOTUS

It's late evening in one of the several hundred thousand villages of India, and a woman lurches through the thick rain pounding the main street. She holds a cloth wrapped bundle so close to her chest as if she can never own anything else. Her hair is plastered like tar to her skull, and her thoroughly soaked sari is stuck against her small pubis, her thin thighs. Everyone in this village of less than six hundred, barring a few dozen children perhaps, knows her. She is Kamala but the meaning of the word – lotus – is clearly inapt if one were to only consider her physical condition.

Her mental condition is much worse. She shoots desperate glances left and right, at the few brick houses, the many huts. Just one window of a small house is open. A light comes on and a bald head pops up. It's Palekar, the postman. He's about to close the window when he sees Kamala. She tries to shout over the watery din but can't. She manages to bring her palms together in utter supplication, utter appeal. Palekar jerks back and slams the window shut.

Kamala stands where she is, hoping Palekar will have second thoughts. He'd spoken kindly to her at the flour mill just last week when she'd gone there to grind ten kilos of rice. He'd told her that he'd kept a letter for her safely at the post office, a letter from her ageing mother who lives in a distant village. The letter was brief, just a few questions in raggedy handwriting: is Kamala all right? Have there been more fights with her husband? Can she somehow obtain permission to visit because the mother fears death is approaching?

But Palekar's window stays shut. Just like all the other windows and doors, mouths and ears that have been shut to Kamala for the last two years. Because of Sharat Deshpande, her husband. He employs much of the village to work in his fields of paddy, sugarcane, and maize. No one owns as much land as he. No one is prepared to risk his ire. Jobs would of



course be taken away, but worse, houses can be torched, wives and sisters can be raped, husbands and brothers can be murdered. Such things are common in India's forgotten villages.

Through the rosy blurs of the rainstorm, Kamala sees that three shops farther down are still open. Shetty's tea-stall with a signage in blue and white: *Wah! Taj! The taste of real India!* Then the Vodafone shop with a banner in red and white: *Magic Box with FM Radio – only Rupees 1999!* And a third – *Tata Internet – Stay connected!* Strange exhortations in this forgotten village.

Two men at the tea stall eye her over the rims of their steel cups. She hasn't seen them before. Good. Strangers may help her. They know nothing about her or Sharat Deshpande. She staggers towards them. But one cocks his head and then turns and looks the other way. The other man follows suit. And Shetty, who is pumping the kerosene stove, is the very picture of innocence. Kamala realises what may have happened. Shetty has warned them. Something like "If you want to stay alive, don't even *look* at her."

Farther ahead a few people scurry beneath umbrellas and plastic sheets. Kamala tries to scream but the rain batters her face and she can't quite fill her lungs. A hood of plastic approaches her from the right. At last! Someone with courage, thinks Kamala. The plastic folds back to reveal a thick beard and a scarred face. Kalia, the blacksmith, the strongest man in the village. Last week, he'd extricated the damaged wheel of Sharat Deshpande's cart as if it were a toy.

"Brother Kalia," she begs. "Please come with me to—"

Even before she completes her appeal, the plastic hood flips down and glides past.

Kamala stands where she is, tempted to sink to her knees, to just embrace the slush and let the thick rain drown her but then another thought grips her: what has she got to lose now?

The police *chowky* is fifty yards away. She knows what she will encounter there – the vigorous crotch scratching, the abusive mouth, the drunken eyes. Head Constable Ajit Vartak, somewhat like Sharat Deshpande, only bigger and coarser. Vartak has nothing but contempt for this village. Kamala has seen him wield his bamboo *laathi* on petty thieves and gamblers at the market square. He's also rumoured to have forced himself on a couple of women whose husbands were jailed for theft and cheating. But Kamala has nowhere else to go. Her aged mother is dying if not dead already. Her lone brother has run off to that richest of all cities, Mumbai. Her father is no more; his heart gave up when he was ploughing his field. He couldn't take it any more, the daily harassments of money lenders to return their money.

Money that he'd borrowed to marry off Kamala to Sharat Deshpande. She could have run away, one may say. Women in India's forgotten villages don't, can't run away. Not from husbands like Sharat Deshpande.

The police *chowki* comes up. Kamala pauses at the entrance. The bundle at her chest rises and falls. From above descends an orchestra of tiny drums; rain beating on thousands of leaves. It's a *peepul* tree. The irony! Peepul is considered sacred, a symbol of Shiva, and believed to make any womb fertile. Kamala had tied dozens of vermillion coated threads in prayer rituals around such a tree near her house. Now she can only whisper: *O Shiva, at least protect me here.*

She drags herself up the steps. There is the acrid smell of *beedi*, and something else, a stench like food gone several days old. Is that man already drunk? She's tempted to turn and run but her feet, as if of their own volition, now the left, now the right, go forward.

Head Constable Ajit Vartak is a forest of black curls slumped over a table. To his left sits the only other staff of the police station, Rahman, the junior constable, and he's engrossed in a Bollywood magazine.

"Hey! What do you want?" Rahman asks in a loud whisper.

"He ... he forced three servants to—" Kamala can't go on because it all comes back to her: on the floor of the storeroom, her arms pinned to the sides, someone slamming into her with the vigour of a husking machine, and then another in his place, and yet another, and all the while, Sharat and his two brothers lolling against the walls, passing a bottle of whisky to one another, laughing, quaffing, spitting.

"He? Who is he?" And then it dawns on the junior's mind. "Wait, you are Sharat's wife, aren't you?"

"You have to arrest him. You have to—" She can't speak any more. The floor tilts. *Shiva!* In a trice the junior steps forward, preparing to catch her. Somehow she rights herself and wards him off. Vartak stirs awake and peers with barely open eyes at Kamala. "Huh? Whatthefuckisthematter?"

Rahman goes to his table and crouches low. "Sahib, it's Sharat Deshpande's wife. She wants us to arrest him."

Vartak ups himself some more, stretches his arms and yawns.

"Three of them, Vartak Sahib, three of them ..." Kamala's voice breaks. Vartak shoves a hand inside his shirt and scratches an armpit.

"What three of them?" he mutters and turns to Rahman. "Get tea or coffee or whatever that motherfucker Shetty has in his two bit shop. My head is splitting."

The junior closes the magazine with exaggerated care.

"What the fuck are you doing?" bellows Vartak.

“Going, Sahib, going.” Rahman grumbles and shuffles off.

“And you, what is this story you bring? Can’t you ...” he stops. Kamala sees a shine slide into his eyes as they rake her up and down.

“Sit,” he commands. Kamala wobbles towards the bench against the wall, leaving a trail of wet footprints.

“Not there. Here.” Vartak points the bamboo *laathi* to the chair before his table. Kamala hesitates. Vartak slides the cane up and down through his cupped left palm. It’s such a vulgar gesture that Kamala trembles. She goes up to the chair. Vartak’s gaze is on her wet throat, on the only gold she has been allowed to keep, the *mangalya*, two small medallions signifying that she was married in Lord Shiva’s presence.

“I am waiting.” Vartak’s voice has taken on an exquisite softness, sheerest silk rubbing on the smoothest metal.

She narrates what happened. “Then they beat me and threw me out, Sahib. This ... this is all I have.” She extends the bundle and a corner of the cloth comes away to reveal two saris, a towel, and a bed sheet. But Vartak is staring at her wet blouse, at the outlines of her small breasts, the too large nipples. She hastily pulls up her sari. Vartak comes around and sits on the table edge. His left foot starts to jig, inches from her knee. She tries to ignore the black boot but isn’t prepared for what happens next. The end of the bamboo comes beneath her chin. Her head tilts back.

“You must have done something, eh? You must have abused your darling husband. Or you must have slept with someone else. Why else would he throw you out, eh?”

“Sahib, I ... I have not given him a child ... I mean, I couldn’t. I ... I think so. I am not sure. But it could be his mistake, Sahib. That he is unable to give me a child. Today ... today I told him we should go to Manickpur. To the hospital. To find out what is wrong. Why I couldn’t have a child. For that ... for that ... ” She chokes but somehow controls herself and looks at Vartak. The man’s eyes take in her right cheek that is pink and going blue, the lower lip that is puffed and split at the corner, the base of her throat that has four ugly bite marks. And then she feels the bamboo leave her chin. The wood travels down her throat and stops above her left breast. *Shiva!*

“Sahib, no tea, just coffee.” It’s Rahman who’s come sprinting back; he doesn’t want to miss anything.

But Vartak’s eyes do not leave her and she continues to look at him, all along the length of the wood right up to his face, the oily skin, the glaze in his eyes, the thick dark lips that are thicker and darker than Sharat Deshpande’s.

“Don’t lie to me woman,” says Vartak. “We police have our methods to get the truth even out of a stone.”

“Sahib ... I am ... telling the truth,” she gasps. The bamboo is sliding. The hard wood is now on her left breast. She speaks fast, the words tumbling over one another, “His brothers raped me repeatedly. This went on for the last two years. Ever since my father died. And today they made three servants—”

“Sahib!” It’s the junior again.

“Get the fucking coffee,” snarls Vartak without taking his eyes off Kamala. Rahman sprints out and Kamala shivers but something tells her to hold the Head Constable’s gaze. To look away would signal defeat. Then she feels the cane below her breast. The wood moves, her breast lifts once, and once more. She braces her feet against the floor, takes in a deep breath, and calculates how quickly she can get off the chair and run. But suddenly it’s over; the cane drops and Vartak goes back to his chair. Rahman returns with a glass of coffee. From outside an eerie silence seeps in. The rains have ceased.

“Get the complaint register,” Vartak orders the junior.

“But Sahib! Sharat Deshpande would—”

“Who the fuck is he? Eh? Bigger than the law? This is the day I was waiting for. For someone to complain against that bastard. Now I have his wife. His *wife*. If only more women had this woman’s courage, I would have thrown half the men in this hopeless village behind bars. But no matter. This is going to be an example. Sharat Deshpande is finished. We will take this woman to the hospital in Manickpur and get her examined. But first write whatever she says. Every fucking thing, understand. Not one word should be missing or I will strip the skin of your backside quicker than a wild dog would.”

The junior tumbles about in a tizzy and Kamala places her little bundle of clothes on the floor. Her lungs relax. Even the terrible pain in her groin seems bearable. She starts to talk. Rahman scribbles in the complaint register. Vartak slurps. Great big noisy slurps. And a lotus has defied the murkiest of waters.

### FROM *SOUNDINGS* TO *YEERA-MUK-A-DOO*: THE EARLY YEARS OF FREMANTLE ARTS CENTRE PRESS

Western Australia represents 10% of the Australian population and is home to approximately 6% of the total number of publishing houses operating in Australia. Western Australian publishing houses produce roughly 3% of the total number of new Australian titles published in a given year and are responsible for less than 1% of all book sales in Australia in which the book was produced by an Australian publishing house.<sup>1</sup> The mind boggles at the infinitesimally small percentage claimed by Western Australian publishing houses of total book sales in Australia, including both Australian and imported titles.

Of course, comparable statistics could be produced for any Australian state or territory excepting New South Wales and Victoria – arguably the cultural centres of the nation and, without a doubt, the traditional centres of book publishing in Australia. Therefore, this analysis is not a specific indictment of the Western Australian publishing industry, but rather an indication of the difficulties common to regional publishing houses.

Still, there remain features distinctive to book publishing in Western Australia:

In this state because of geographic and, it might be argued, psychic distances, previous governments have made decisions to support Western Australian publishing. This remains a distinctive feature within cultural policy and planning in Western Australia, and virtually unique across the nation (certainly through its longevity and levels of support). This investment has, without question, paid off manyfold.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, many Western Australian publishing houses share a common concern: “It is as important a writer now feel free to conceive work in terms of a local environment as it once was to feel able to conceive it in terms of an

Australian environment.”<sup>3</sup> These two features – state government subsidy and a commitment to local or regional expression – define the distinctive publishing environment of Western Australia. This article examines this environment and, in particular, a publishing house that has tapped these features on its way to achieving national and international success. Unsurprisingly it is also Western Australia’s best-known publishing house – Fremantle Arts Centre Press recently renamed Fremantle Press.

The Press receives a substantial subsidy from the Government of Western Australia, an important aspect of its history that has been justified on the basis of “Western Australia’s relatively small population, its distance from large markets and the attendant difficulties in marketing and promotion – all of which contribute to high unit costs and difficulties in market penetration.”<sup>4</sup> As a result, this publishing house has been more successful in establishing a profile for Western Australian writers and writing than any other publishing house in the state and “is seen in other states as a model for a regional publisher which is achieving national prominence.”<sup>5</sup> Western Australian writer Peter Cowan has remarked that “the day of orientation to English or American publishers has not gone, but it has been lessened, and if it is passing for West Australians it is because of the existence of the Fremantle Arts Centre Press.”<sup>6</sup>

This article continues with an in-depth exploration of the early years of this most significant Western Australian publishing house. This relatively brief period of time had major consequences for the future of the Press, not least because it was in the first five or so years following its foundation – remarkably quickly, by all accounts – that the Press made itself known as an astute and distinctive contributor to the Australian publishing and literary landscape.

In 1972, the Fremantle City Council established the Fremantle Arts Centre, and local poet and visual artist Ian Templeman was appointed its inaugural Director. The newly renovated Fremantle Lunatic Asylum, a colonial gothic structure built using convict labour and opened in July 1865, was chosen as the Centre’s first home. This imposing historic landmark building in the port city of Fremantle, Western Australia, had served many different purposes in the intervening years between the closure of the Asylum in 1900 and the opening of the Fremantle Arts Centre (in 1973, the year after it was established), but it was particularly well-suited to the latter organisation’s needs; it is still the Centre’s home after more than thirty-five years.

One of the earliest developments at the Fremantle Arts Centre was the establishment of a Community Arts programme, through which it offered practical, hands-on classes to the public in painting, sculpture and various crafts. The Centre also offered creative writing and literature appreciation classes. In addition to the Community Arts programme, the Fremantle Arts Centre exhibited the work of Western Australian painters, sculptors and craftspeople in specially designed galleries on the premises. The Centre did not, however, have an established means of “exhibiting” the work of the writers participating in its Community Arts programme, nor indeed the “wealth of writing activity in W.A.” then perceived by staff at the Centre.<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, the Fremantle Arts Centre began to publish *Patterns*, a poetry magazine, and *Pinup*, which Templeman describes as an “experimental project aimed at making more widely known the work of Western Australian writers”; it was a poster “devoted to the work of a single writer, either in poetry or prose” and “designed with accompanying graphics to ensure that the poster is attractive and could be pinned up on a school notice board, kitchen door, or in a public place.”<sup>8</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Pinup* was phased out of existence, while *Patterns*, which had attracted a limited term guarantee against loss from the Literature Board of the Australia Council, became a regular feature of the Centre. *Patterns* was published quarterly and distributed through a small number of retail outlets in Western Australia. In 1981, the format was changed to include short stories. This continued until the end of 1985, after which *Patterns* ceased to be a separate publication and appeared as a section of *Fremantle Arts Review*.

Even in the early days of *Patterns*, however, Templeman felt the magazine presented insufficient opportunities to Western Australian writers. More generally, “in Western Australia it was felt that there was limited publishing access for local writers, with markets also concentrated in the eastern states.”<sup>9</sup> Consequently, Templeman “seized on an election promise [in 1974] by [Western Australian Premier] Sir Charles Court that, if re-elected, a West Australian Literary Fund would be established to help local writers get published.”<sup>10</sup> Court was re-elected and just such a fund was established. It was an important early contributor to what would become known as Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

Prior to this, however, a feasibility study into the establishment of a publishing unit within the Centre had to be conducted. Fremantle local Terry Owen was commissioned for the job, and after she returned with positive results, she also played an integral role in the drafting of a

constitution for the proposed press, which included the following mission statement:

To publish and promote to the widest possible audience the works of Western Australian writers and artists who may otherwise not be published by commercial publishing houses, and to record the cultural heritage of the State in a form that is easily accessible to the widest possible audience.<sup>11</sup>

The constitution, which was submitted to the Department of Corporate Affairs for approval, identified the proposed publishing unit as a non-profit distributing organisation.

Owen had further recommended that the organisation be called Centre Press, but this name was rejected by the Department on the basis that another business with a similar name was operating in Western Australia at the time. This confusion over the name of the press was reflected in the first newspaper article to mention its formation:

The City of Fremantle through its Arts Centre is about to publish poetry and short stories. A publishing unit, called Centrepress, has been formed, a typesetting composer bought and a manager commissioned to produce the first book of poems by next March.<sup>12</sup>

The press was not actually referred to in the media as Fremantle Arts Centre Press until its first book (published in March 1976, as predicted above) was reviewed in *The West Australian* on 24 April 1976.

In the meantime, the name on the application to the Department of Corporate Affairs was changed from “Centre Press” to “Fremantle Arts Centre Press” and the application subsequently accepted. Owen was named General Manager of the Press, with Templeman, who was still the Director of the Fremantle Arts Centre, appointed to the role of its Chief Executive. The Fremantle Arts Centre functioned as a host organisation and provided limited use of its staff, including Clive Newman, who was Deputy Director of the Centre and offered accounting and financial support to the Press. However, the vision was always for Fremantle Arts Centre Press to have as much financial and managerial independence as possible, and a Board of Management was formed, consisting of “representation from the literary community of Western Australia, the Fremantle City Council and people with publishing and business experience.”<sup>13</sup> The members of that first Board included Ian Templeman, Terry Owen, Clive Newman, Bruce Bennett, Ronald Warren, Anthony Evans, and John Birch.



The Western Australian Arts Council provided a grant (the Western Australian Literary Fund would not start distributing funds until 1977) of \$11,500 to cover Owen's initial salary, as well as to purchase a typesetting composer, and promised a further \$3,500 in working capital. It was expected that the Literature Board of the Australia Council would provide further funding in the form of publication subsidies for selected titles, as well as subsidise book production operations through the Book Bounty scheme it operated with the Department of Customs. An important distinction between funding received from the Literature Board of the Australia Council and State Government funding, is that only "the states ... provided general subsidies towards the operations of ... publishers," while both the Literature Board and State Government offered "project grants ... towards a single title or a group of titles."<sup>14</sup> Of course, all "state-subsidised presses were located outside Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra."<sup>15</sup>

Fremantle Arts Centre Press, established in 1975, published its first book, *Soundings*, an anthology of Western Australian poetry edited by Veronica Brady, in 1976. The book literally fell apart as a result of poor binding and had to be returned to the printers where it was stapled through the cover and spine to hold it together. Nonetheless, it was received positively:

For present trends in West Australian poetry *Soundings*, from the Fremantle Arts Centre, provides a catholic selection (including full-page photos of the poets). [...] In general, the book is one of the best offered to lovers of poetry for some time. Perhaps our isolation and our emptiness are spurs to poetic achievement.<sup>16</sup>

This reception did not, however, signal an end to Fremantle Arts Centre Press' trouble with *Soundings*. Lloyd Davies, solicitor and ex-husband of writer Dorothy Hewett, whose poems were included in the volume, threatened to sue the publishers for allegedly libellous material contained in one of Hewett's poems. Fremantle Arts Centre Press received a letter from a law firm citing action pending, and *Soundings* was subsequently withdrawn from the trade. Happily for the fledgling publisher, however, most copies of the book had already been sold.

Fremantle Arts Centre Press' second publishing venture was a companion volume to *Soundings*, an anthology of short fiction by Western Australian writers titled *New Country*. Local artist Guy Grey-Smith's woodcuts adorned the covers of both books, a feature of the Press' commitment not only to Western Australian writers, but also to Western

Australian artists. However, unlike the poetry anthology, which contained a few poems from each of a large number of poets, *New Country* presented the work of only six short story writers, with each writer contributing between two and four stories. Fremantle Arts Centre Press went on to publish stand-alone collections of short stories by all but two of the contributors (Iris Milutinovic and Hal Colebatch) to this early anthology, and single-author books by all but Milutinovic. *New Country* was fittingly edited by the single most vocal proponent of a regional conception of Australian writing, University of Western Australia academic and Fremantle Arts Centre Press Board member, Bruce Bennett. In his introduction, Bennett notes that “this is the first book devoted to short stories by Western Australians since Henrietta Drake-Brockman’s anthology *West Coast Stories* was published in 1959.”<sup>17</sup>

The two books that rounded out the first year of publishing at Fremantle Arts Centre Press were Nicholas Hasluck’s *Anchor and Other Poems* and Elizabeth Jolley’s *Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories*. These two titles marked the beginnings of the West Coast Writing series, “a paperback series from Fremantle Arts Centre Press devoted to the work of Western Australian writers whose work has appeared in journals and anthologies but who have not yet had a collection of their work published. Each volume in the series is devoted to the work of one writer.” This passage appears on the back covers of both volumes, where it also notes that the Press “receives financial assistance from the Literature Committee of the Western Australian Arts Council and is supported by the City of Fremantle.” The support the Press received from the City of Fremantle did not come in the form of a direct subsidy, but rather in access to some of the resources (including staff) at the City-funded Fremantle Arts Centre. This same acknowledgement appeared in *Soundings* and *New Country*. Another point of similarity with *Soundings* and *New Country* is that the early volumes in the West Coast Writing series all feature cover and interior illustrations or photographs by Western Australian artists.

Hasluck’s *Anchor and Other Poems* was not a great sales success. Nonetheless, it marked the beginning of a distinguished literary career. Hasluck would go on to publish a further four books with Fremantle Arts Centre Press, including a volume of short fiction and a novel. Eventually, he left the Press and took up with Penguin, who published his *The Bellarmine Jug: A Novel*, which won *The Age* Book of the Year Award in 1984.

At the time *Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories* was published, Jolley had a very limited and local publishing record, yet she had been writing for a long time and sending her manuscripts to publishing houses in Melbourne

and Sydney. She had received rejection letters from nearly every publisher in Australia prior to her first book being taken up by Fremantle Arts Centre Press. Clive Newman, Deputy Director of the Fremantle Arts Centre at the time *Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories* was published, recalled the event on the occasion of the Press' twentieth anniversary:

Elizabeth Jolley, in the mid-seventies, was not yet published in book form. Her *Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories*, provided our first rush of adrenaline when enthusiastic reviews prompted strong sales in Perth. We boldly sent review copies of the book to literary editors around Australia, most of whom responded by running prompt and positive reviews, and discovered what was to be a major problem for the Press for many years – how to effectively and efficiently distribute our titles on a national basis. Discerning readers outside WA had to demonstrate remarkable persistence in order to acquire a copy of the book. Not many stores outside WA responded to our telephone promotion of a new Australian writer from an unheard of publisher, and those that did tended to order in minimum quantities. Many copies of *Five Acre Virgin* found their way interstate in single book parcels and we spent an inordinate amount of time chasing up outstanding invoices for ridiculously small amounts of money.<sup>18</sup>

As Newman says, distribution problems were a recurring theme in the Press' early development, as indeed they are for most Australian publishers, but particularly for those located outside the traditional centres of book publishing.

Another theme in the development of Fremantle Arts Centre Press – one not restricted only to the Press' early years – is the loss of successful writers to larger, mostly multinational publishing houses based in the eastern states. Jolley is a prominent example of this trend. Her first book, published in the latter half of 1976, had to be reprinted the following year to meet demand. She published seven books with Fremantle Arts Centre Press, including three collections of short stories, three novels, and a final book – a slim volume of poetry and personal observation in diary form. This last book, *Diary of a Weekend Farmer*, was published in 1993, but Jolley had long since moved away from Fremantle Arts Centre Press. *Mr. Scobie's Riddle* and *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*, both published in 1983 by Penguin and University of Queensland Press respectively, are the two books that confirmed Jolley's national literary reputation, and from this time her star was set to rise far beyond the reach of the small Western Australian publishing house that had given her a start.

Even allowing for the commercial success of *Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press recorded sales of only \$3,058 in its first year of publishing.<sup>19</sup> This figure amounted to 17.6% of the Press' costs in 1976, the remainder of which were made up for by a grant from the Literature Committee of the Western Australian Arts Council. The following year, Fremantle Arts Centre Press improved on this figure: a recorded \$8,985 in sales constituted 26.4% of costs.<sup>20</sup>

In this year, 1977, the Press published five new titles. The first three were single-author volumes in the West Coast Writing series by writers featured in either *Soundings* or *New Country*. These were presented in the same black-and-white format as earlier Fremantle Arts Centre Press books, with artwork by local artists featured both on their covers and in the interior. The most significant of these titles is a collection of short stories by T.A.G. Hungerford, *Wong Chu and the Queen's Letterbox*, since Hungerford would go on to be a major author for the Press. *Wong Chu and the Queen's Letterbox* was also the first book from Fremantle Arts Centre Press to receive its funding from the newly established Western Australian Literary Fund.

The other two books published in 1977 deviated noticeably from the Press' previous publishing programme. The first of these, *Other Earth: Four Greek-Australian Stories* by Vasso Kalamaras, is a bilingual edition in Greek and English, translated from the original Greek by Reg Durack in collaboration with the author. This was only the second book published by the Press that was supported by a publication subsidy from the Literature Board of the Australia Council (the first was Lee Knowles's collection of poems, *Cool Summer*, published earlier in 1977).

Another development in the Press' publishing programme involved its decision to accept non-fiction manuscripts. This move was initiated when Peter Cowan presented Fremantle Arts Centre Press with a collection of his great-great-grandmother's letters, which were eventually published as *A Faithful Picture: The Letters of Eliza and Thomas Brown at York in the Swan River Colony 1841–1852*, edited by Peter Cowan with an introduction by Alexandra Hasluck. Although it was not the case with *A Faithful Picture* in 1977, non-fiction would eventually prove to be one of Fremantle Arts Centre Press' most lucrative publishing areas.

In March of the following year, Fremantle Arts Centre Press effectively announced its presence on the Australian publishing scene in a way that even Jolley's *Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories* had been unable to. *The Weekend Australian Magazine* reported that Fremantle Arts Centre Press' "public 'coming out' was really Writers' Week in Adelaide earlier this year. They arrived armed with their catalogue and their books ... both amazing

and being amazed by the interest they generated.”<sup>21</sup> The Press still did not have in place an efficient mechanism for national distribution of its titles, but at least their presence at the Adelaide Writers’ Week ensured that from 1978 onwards most Australian booksellers knew Fremantle Arts Centre Press by name and, with increasing frequency, by reputation, as well.

By the time this article appeared in July 1978, Fremantle Arts Centre Press had published ten books under its own imprint and five more as commissioned work using the Press’ staff and facilities but not its limited distribution networks or imprint. The latter included titles such as *Woodline: Five Years with the Woodcutters of the Western Australian Goldfields* by L.R.M. Hunter, and *Let Me Learn the Steps: Poems from a Psychiatric Ward* by Mary Morris and Bill Hart-Smith. These publications did not contribute to the establishment of Fremantle Arts Centre Press’ reputation as a publisher of fine books, but the income they generated through the hiring of Press machines and on-staff expertise provided a valuable, though modest, source of income for the Press. This arrangement would continue for several more years before tapering off (though it would be briefly reinvigorated following the 1995 “Review into the Investment of Government in the Publishing of Literary Works” as a way of reducing the Press’ reliance on Government subsidy, and again in the last couple years as a “corporate consultancy” service).

One arrangement that came to an end in 1978, however, was Terry Owen’s appointment as General Manager of Fremantle Arts Centre Press. She was replaced by Ray Coffey, and the role’s title was changed to Managing Editor. At the time of his appointment, Coffey was the only full-time employee of the Press, as Templeman remained Director of the Fremantle Arts Centre in addition to his role as Chief Executive of the Press. Furthermore, the Press’ accounting and financial support continued to come from Newman as Deputy Director of the Centre.

In 1978, the Press published five books: two more titles in its West Coast Writing series (Alec Choate’s book of poetry, *Gifts Upon the Water*, and Nicholas Hasluck’s short story collection, *The Hat on the Letter O and Other Stories*), an anthology of autobiographical writing about childhood by Western Australian writers (*Memories of Childhood: A Collection of Reminiscences*, edited by Lee White and featuring drawings by children of White Gum Valley Primary School), the Press’ first natural history book (*Grasstrees of Western Australia*, by Hal Missingham), and *Westerly 21: An Anniversary Selection* (edited by *Westerly*’s long-standing editors, Peter Cowan and Bruce Bennett).

However, the Press' most significant contribution to literary culture in 1978 was not a book it published but rather a seminar it organised. In October, the Press convened a three-day gathering that explored the theme of "Time, Place and People: Regionalism in Contemporary Australian Literature." The seminar featured speeches by well-known writers such as Frank Moorhouse, Thomas Shapcott, Elizabeth Jolley, Peter Cowan, and T.A.G. Hungerford. Their presentations were later reprinted in *Westerly*, which gave them greater circulation and cultural currency. The conversation about literary regionalism in Australia did not begin to take shape until the late 1970s and into the 1980s, and Fremantle Arts Centre Press' first seminar was of unparalleled importance in this development. The Press would host further seminars in 1980 ("Writers and their Audience"), 1982 (concerning biography and autobiography), and 1984 ("The Writer's Voice"), but none would replicate the influence of this first seminar.

After publishing four books in its first year in operation, and five books in its second and third years, Fremantle Arts Centre Press took the major step of publishing ten new titles in 1979. Most notable among these publications were the Press' first collection of short stories by Peter Cowan, *Mobiles and Other Stories*, and Jolley's *The Travelling Entertainer and Other Stories*. Both writers had published collections of short stories on previous occasions (Jolley with Fremantle Arts Centre Press, and Cowan with several different publishers); therefore, the publication of these particular titles by Fremantle Arts Centre Press marks a shift in the emphasis of the West Coast Writing series. The series was originally conceived as "a paperback series devoted primarily to the work of Western Australian writers whose work has appeared in journals and anthologies but who have not yet had a collection published." In fact, this statement still appears on the back covers of Cowan's and Jolley's books, though it would be removed from books in the series beginning with those published the following year. This event, coupled with a new cover design for books in the West Coast Writing series (trading the old black-and-white format for a four-colour, full-bleed image), seems to signal a shift in the Press' self-understanding: it clearly no longer saw itself as merely an amateur outfit servicing new writers and a small local readership, but rather a publishing house with significant commercial concerns, providing a valuable service to a broader community of both writers and readers.

Several more important publishing events happened at Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 1979. First, the Press published Dorothy Hewett's play *The Man from Mukinupin* in conjunction with Currency Press, the Sydney-based publisher of theatrical and film scripts. In the foreword to this first edition

(a second edition was published in 1980), Katharine Brisbane of Currency Press writes that “this book ... is the first fruit of what we hope will be a rewarding partnership between Fremantle Arts Centre Press and Currency Press in the publication of West Australian playwrights.”<sup>22</sup> While the two presses would publish a few more books together, including Rod Ansell’s and Rachel Percy’s *To Fight the Wild* in 1980 (published to coincide with the release of a film by the same name), this venture never gained traction. Whether this failure *resulted in*, or was *the result of*, a lack of theatrical and film scripts being written in Western Australia, it is difficult to say.

Another important publishing event that occurred at Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 1979 was the publication of *Fremantle: Landscapes and People*, a photography book with text by T.A.G. Hungerford and photographs by Roger Garwood. This black-and-white production is the first of many photography books published by the Press, undertaken in many cases for their potential commercial appeal; the profits from these books were typically intended to subsidise other, less commercial projects.

The final book in Fremantle Arts Centre Press’ 1979 publishing programme was *Out of Water into Light*, a collection of poems by Wendy Jenkins. This title was the first in the short-lived Shoreline Poetry series, which the back cover of the book describes as “a paperback series devoted primarily to the work of new Western Australian poets whose work has appeared in journals and anthologies but who have not yet had a collection published.” Clearly, this series was taking over from the West Coast Writing series, which (as mentioned above) in 1980 switched its focus from Western Australian writers “who have not yet had a collection published,” to simply “poetry and short stories by Western Australian writers.” Furthermore, the design of the Shoreline Poetry series is simpler and, therefore, less costly; the books are so short they resemble chapbooks, and the bindings consist of staples through the spine, rather than the “perfect” binding used for books in the West Coast Writing series. It is clear that even in this early chapter of its history, the Press was taking actions expressly designed to maintain the delicate balance between commercial sustainability and “publishing those titles which they believed needed to be produced.”<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that titles in the Shoreline Poetry series were nonetheless attractively produced and could be purchased for a small sum, all of which accorded with Fremantle Arts Centre Press’ hopes for the series – “to bring new poets to a wider audience.”<sup>24</sup>

The following year, 1980, saw the publication of a further three titles in the Shoreline Poetry series. A collection of poems by Philip Salom, *The Silent Piano*, was also published in the West Coast Writing series. Salom

had not previously published a book of poetry, and his work had not been anthologised in any collection of Western Australian poetry, such as *Soundings* and *Sandgroppers*; in fact, prior to the publication of *The Silent Piano*, Salom had only ever had two poems published, both of which appeared in the Press' *Patterns* magazine. Nonetheless, the book went on to win the prestigious 1981 Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the Best First Collection of Poetry.

In addition to expanding its programme of poetry publishing, Fremantle Arts Centre Press published its first novel in 1980. Reflecting on this event in a 1996 magazine interview, Clive Newman had this to say:

"There seemed to be a certain novelty value in short stories by new Australian writers. It was not for some years that a novel came along deemed strong enough to publish" [said Newman]. That novel was *Southfalia*, a complex satire by Antonio Casella, chosen, said Mr. Newman, because it suited the sort of publisher Fremantle Arts Centre then wanted to become, producing quality books that wouldn't have got a second glance from mainstream publishers. *Southfalia* seemed a worthwhile challenge and all copies were sold – eventually.<sup>25</sup>

The publication of *Southfalia* is exemplary of something Newman discussed in a 1998 interview:

There's no question that in our early career we were seen as elitist in some quarters because we were doing works of literature, not commercial works. That comes from the charter that said "books that mightn't be published by commercial publishers." We didn't ever see it quite like that, we certainly didn't consider ourselves elitist, although we did some specialist books along the way. We published Elizabeth Jolley for instance and she is undoubtedly a literary writer, but she has a wide readership.<sup>26</sup>

From the way all the copies of *Southfalia* are described as "*eventually*" selling, it is clear this was not a book that enjoyed a "wide readership." The description of *Southfalia* given on the flap inside its front cover sheds some light on why this might be, as well as giving credence to the observation that Fremantle Arts Centre Press was "seen as elitist in some quarters":

*Southfalia* is a burlesque novel in the manner of Voltaire's *Candide*, Johnson's *Rasselas* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* that concerns itself



with Australia's contemporary social, political and intellectual life. And in the larger context it is a satiric parable which examines what the author sees as the social and spiritual dilemma in modern western civilization.

Clearly, the book is couched in high literary terms, as were many of the Press' early publications. This would change with time, both as the Press grew savvier about the way in which it presented its books to a reading public, and as the Press' publishing programme shifted to include more "popular" titles.

Though certainly not "commercial," titles in Fremantle Arts Centre Press' Community Publishing Project were not "literary," either. The first of these titles published under the Fremantle Arts Centre Press imprint, *Yeera-muk-a-doo*, relates the story of author Nancy E. Withnell Taylor's ancestors in the late 19th century, in the process providing a social history of north-western Australia. In fact, this was the fourth book published under the auspices of the Community Publishing Project, a special funding initiative of the Western Australian Literary Fund; the first three titles, however, had been handled by the production unit of Fremantle Arts Centre Press without ascribing the Press' imprint to the books. The Project produced its first title in 1979 and proceeded to produce a further ten titles before the Western Australian Literary Fund was dissolved in 1982, putting an end to the Fund's Community Publishing Project.

Following the dissolution of the Western Australian Literary Fund, Fremantle Arts Centre Press (which had continued to ascribe its imprint to each of the titles in the Community Publishing Project following on from *Yeera-muk-a-doo* in 1980) attempted to perpetuate the legacy of local and social histories, usually with a very limited geographical or industry-based scope, first made possible under the auspices of the Project. In 1983, the Press published *Selected Lives*, a collection of writings by four Western Australians, which it explicitly linked to the Community Publishing Project. Coffey wrote in the introduction to this book about the Press' "aim ... to make available, to both the general public and historians, books of local and family history, written from first-hand experience, which contributed to the understanding and recording of the social history of Western Australia."<sup>27</sup> It has been noted elsewhere, however, that titles in the Community Publishing Project had a "smaller print run" than other Fremantle Arts Centre Press titles, and that "the best biographies or social histories are promoted into the FAC[P] lists."<sup>28</sup>

The new format first seen in *Selected Lives* was meant to allow more writers to be published than was previously possible, as gathering together multiple writers in a single volume reduced the costs associated with publication. The Press would publish another book in this format – *Working Lives* in 1984 – before abandoning the project. While there may be an element of truth to Coffey’s observation that “these ‘selected lives’ are living, personal reminiscences which are an important contribution to the life story of Western Australia,” the books were perhaps too poorly written and their scope too narrow to attract an audience large enough to justify their publication based on economic or even social terms.<sup>29</sup>

The publication of *Yeera-muk-a-doo* in 1980 seems a world away from the phenomenally successful publication of A.B. Facey’s *A Fortunate Life* just one year later. After all, *A Fortunate Life* has now sold nearly one million copies. Yet, *A Fortunate Life* is a close relation of the less commercially successful Community Publishing Project titles and shares many of their characteristics, including first-person narrative and a focus on social history and the life of “ordinary” Australians.

The Press’ handling of *A Fortunate Life* was markedly different, however, from its treatment of these earlier publications. There was no marketing budget for the book, so the Press approached well-known figures such as former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, and renowned historians Humphrey McQueen and Geoffrey Dutton. These endorsements, as well as a particularly strong recommendation from the host of a books segment on a high-rating Sydney radio station, drove a national demand for *A Fortunate Life*. Furthermore, the Press had negotiated extract rights for both a national and a Perth-based newspaper.

Fremantle Arts Centre Press had already built a significant profile for itself as a publisher of literary works by the time it published *A Fortunate Life*, but this one title changed everything. Much has already been written and said about *A Fortunate Life* as it contributed to the growth of this small publishing house, as well as its links to Western Australia’s sesquicentenary and the Australian bicentenary. *Yeera-muk-a-doo*, on the other hand, has gone largely unremarked in the history of Australian letters. Yet both are significant; *A Fortunate Life* because it marks the beginning of a new era at Fremantle Arts Centre Press, and *Yeera-muk-a-doo* because it marks the beginning of the end of an earlier era. This era was characterised by many experiments, only some of them successful (and even fewer commercially successful), though their cumulative effect would be to provide the foundations for the future success and national recognition of both the Press and Western Australian writers and writing.

## NOTES

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- 6 Cowan, 86.
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- 11 Taylor, 22.
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- 15 Glover, 88.
- 16 "No Ecstasy," *West Australian*, 24 April 1976.
- 17 Bruce Bennett ed, *New Country: A Selection of Western Australian Short Stories* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1976), viii.
- 18 Clive Newman, "Fremantle Arts Centre Press ... Twenty Years On," *Australian Book Review* (February–March 1996), 53.
- 19 Derrick Tomlinson, Chairman, Fremantle Arts Centre Press Board of Management, letter to Haydn Williams, Chairman, Western Australian Arts Council, 29 March 1983.
- 20 Tomlinson.

- 21 Geraldine Doogue, "Literary View," *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, 1–2 July 1978.
- 22 Katharine Brisbane, foreword to *The Man from Mukinupin*, by Dorothy Hewett (Fremantle and Woollahra: Fremantle Arts Centre Press and Currency Press, 1979), iii.
- 23 Templeman, "A Two Book Wonder," 81.
- 24 Templeman, "A Two Book Wonder," 81.
- 25 Graham Nowland, "Fremantle Arts Centre Press," *Western Review*, 30 (August 1996), 9.
- 26 Winn, quoting Clive Newman.
- 27 B.R. Coffey, introduction to *Selected Lives* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1983), 3.
- 28 Miranda Sadka, "An Increasing Band with an Urge to Write," *West Australian*, 5 October 1982.
- 29 Coffey, 3.

## Toys

the gulf  
lays itself

flat & broad  
& blue

a sun  
finally takes

off its  
overcoat to

nudge what  
lies queued

along the horizon  
as a child

would stack toys  
at the end of the day

# MARLENE MARBURG

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## KEW GARDENS, LONDON

Sinister technology wraps the upper trunk and,  
attached to the branches of the *Eucalypt*,  
earphones dangle; a willowy weeping for visitors  
to hear each gulp and grind transforming sun and air.  
Sounds, once hushed in secret whorls, amaze

as a moment's vivid sunlight in a dappled day.  
There is the thirsty click, tongue on upper palate;  
branches slurping as children with the dregs of milk.  
I look through scattered foliage to bulging clouds  
suspended in drab malignant blue. Memories shuffle greedy

koalas and bickering corellas in a long pink twilight.  
Rain bounces heavy light heavy light silver green.  
Leaves pressed and rubbed are fresh and pungent.  
Here in Kew, the scraggy freckly trunk peels away the hiding place  
of wood lice, panicked and rolling over and around sap oozing

from syrupy sacs along the too straight speckled girth.  
Where are the shapely stumbling roots; the chair and table  
in the shade? This is the banished tree searching deep,  
burying what should be bared, adapting as exiles do.  
And here I am exposed and sharing peppered air.

## I HAVE WALKED BETWEEN THE WIND AND THE DYING LIGHT

I have walked between the wind and the dying light

I have emptied your chalice into the sleeping fire

where there was once stillness

there is a turning dizziness

where there once was sand

the waves have broken

in the time it takes

to bend an oleander branch

the morning will have escaped us

and tethered itself

to a wandering breeze

and awakened the need we have

to claw at the sky

and give back

what the past has taken

## AT THE CROSSROADS: AUSTRALIAN POETRY 2008–2009

The opening sentences of a forthcoming article in *Five Bells* on Australian poetry by anthologist and publisher John Leonard make a large claim: “Australian poetry is at an interesting crossroads. An opinion can be heard, and I share it, that more poetry books of quality have been published here over the last few years than at any period in our past.” Do the fifty one recently published books under review here bear this out? And are we at a crossroads where new ways radiate out, or is it just a bend in a well-known road?

First impressions. Despite the quantity, there’s no doubt about the quality of the production of current poetry books. Compared with the 1970s and 1980s, print, paper, editorial care, production values are highly professional, and of a quality not seen since Edwards and Shaw books of the 1950s. As is obvious from the attached list, some publishers have embarked on ambitious programs of multiple volumes a year. How has this come about? There are no longer generous government grants and bounties as there had been from the 1950s to the 1980s, mainstream publishers have cut back their lists in other genres because of high costs and fickle markets, yet the stream of Australian poetry publishing is running a banker. Despite most commentators’ beliefs, perhaps there are more readers out there than poets reading each other’s work.

But that’s a judgment of the covers. Second impressions. What’s inside? In a review in the *Weekend Australian* (21–22 February 2009) Geoffrey Lehmann gives some indication: “But what is surprising about Australian poetry now is the sheer number of poets who have written outstanding poems.” He even goes on to say “Some readers may be surprised by how enjoyable much of this poetry is.” He’s right. And many of them are by poets who are only just making their names.



And third impressions. These are text-based literary poems. The wider public and more popular poetry of performance poetry, song lyrics, bush poetry are not there. Which leads me to the obvious question which puzzled Geoffrey Lehmann: “Australian poetry is enjoying a golden age. This claim is true, but I doubt whether the Australian reading public is particularly aware of this fact.” So why are there so few readers? John Leonard reflected on the lack of this necessary complement to the current high point in Australian poetry. Part of the problem is the standard of reviewing and criticism: “Most poetry reviews, though – and there are plenty to be found in various literary corners – are addressed to the simpler task of being promotions for the genre. Speaking as if to an almost empty room, they value the unremarkable and the excellent with an equal gladness. Sometimes the best books receive only a couple of notices, since there are many books to be busily covered.” This reviewer is very conscious of these pit-falls, and no doubt such limitations will be evident in this article. However, the result is to estrange the general reader, for as Leonard observes “Poets have taken over the care of poetry almost entirely. They pitch in like family, as if readers other than poets have little stake in the art. This of course locks poetry up: ‘recognition’, for a poet, starts referring mainly to the institution’s own cycle of inclusions and rewards. That self-containment has come to seem perfectly natural.” A quick glance at the back-cover blurbs of the books under review confirms that view. The general reader would be led to believe from them that genius, originality, and importance are to be found in all of them. So how to choose? And who would trust such devalued currency?

The cure Leonard believes is a wider engagement of readers rather than poets in the critical process, whereby curiosity and delight would drive the written response, rather than the routine performance-review vocabulary of fellow poets. In the United States, newspapers run short articles (1000 words or less) on significant poems, for example Michael Dirda in the *Washington Post*, which when well-done, drive the reader to Amazon and an order of that poet’s latest work. Where is the equivalent in Australia? Happily in this year’s collection of books is an example of this sort of exercise, though it is by a poet, Geoff Page, and not a reader/critic. Page’s *60 Classic Australian Poems* has short essays on poems from Adam Lindsay Gordon to Bronwyn Lea which set historical contexts for the poems, comment on their prosody, and share with the reader his delight in them. ABC Radio National’s *Poetica* program also conveys that element of delight and surprise which can arouse the listener’s curiosity, but such interactions with the wider reading public are rare. Yet the publishers keep

publishing, and there are still many well-endowed prizes, so somewhere out there among the twenty million scattered across the continent there must be readers apart from other poets.

What will they find in this season's crop? Fourth impressions. There are significant collections from senior (mainly male) poets, a very strong group of early volumes by young women, some substantial works by mid-career poets (mainly women), a miscellany of well-known names, and some idiosyncratic non-columbaria. In all of this there are a couple of volumes which really hit the spot for me (more of that later), and quite a few which needed a more sympathetic reader, which I suppose is not unusual in a list this long. Of the first group there is a posthumous collected works, Vincent Buckley; selected poems from several decades, Jan Owen; or many decades, Peter Steele; and new and selected from a long and fruitful career, Robert Adamson. Add to them John Kinsella's ambitious epic length *Divine Comedy* and you have enough evidence of the broad highway which brought us to this year's crossroads.

Vincent Buckley shows us the Romantic pieties of the 1950s landscapes, more directly and brutally revealed than Judith Wright's. The great poems that moved me in the 1960s and 1970s are there: "Stroke" and "The Golden Builders" with their passion and grace, and most surprisingly for me, late poems which chart the course of ageing: the elegiac lament to an older A D Hope of memories of young women:

Eyes everywhere, ready  
to guide us into old age,  
vestals, anxious lovers,  
hurrying the past

back, reaching out to see  
if something transparent  
waits in the flesh, reserved,  
rousing to shine at last.

And more poignantly, the waning of creativity in 'Pen Sickness':

Well, the glossy white  
Is there, wanting its darkness,  
The stroke by which music passes  
Out of the head.

There are no such uncertainties in Peter Steele's retrospective. Art and the spirit flow in liquid stress-based verse (more fluent even than Auden's syllabic essays), as a subtle and well-informed mind charts the decades from the 1960s:

The last big reading time was years ago,  
with Proust and Mann unfolding steadily  
day after day in summer. Hooked, of course,  
I padded back and forth at home,  
devouring print with all the manic air  
of one hoping for wisdom straight.

There is plenty of feeling in this selected, yet not of the *sturm und drang* confessional type; but it is thought which dominates in calm meditative odes on works of art, places, people, and all bound together with remarkable modulations of tone. As well, he has a precise and intuitive eye and ear for sights and sounds which give the poetry a warm brilliance. It is a very satisfying and moving volume.

While Peter Steele uses a classical formulation of language, Jan Owen has formed a language of her own: direct, phrasal, energetic, worrying the sense out of a feeling or an experience. Her poetry has a relaxed urgency, and if that's an oxymoron it might have an explanation in some lines from the prize-winning poem "Scent, Comb, Spoon" in which a man searches for meaning in the memories of a lost relationship:

He writes the idea down,  
remembering how they watched two otters once –  
that sinuous skein more fluid than water itself.  
Do thought and feeling twine like that,  
a spiral helix speeding time?

The twining of thought and feeling is in Owen's verse, and it has remained remarkably consistent throughout the last three decades as she has ranged across whatever experience took her fancy. This might lead to dull repetitive exercises, but her imagination is too powerful for that. The last, hitherto uncollected poems show her powers at their peak and bear out the back-cover's blurb: "glowing labyrinths of thinking and language."

John Kinsella's ambitious project to domesticate Dante's *Divine Comedy* to the West Australian wheatbelt landscape (perhaps that could be the

other way round) is a daunting task for the reader. Individual poems catch the imagination and attention, but it is hard to hold in the mind as well the overall architecture of how the poem fits into Dante's plan (despite the titles of the poems suggesting these links). Somehow the more opaque of Pound's Cantos seem more approachable, but that is possibly because of the weight of commentary they now carry with them. Kinsella has written some direct and immediate evocations of the small area of his habitation (both physical and intellectual), and some rank with the best landscape poetry written in Australia, but the "bigger" picture that the Divine Comedy parallels suggest were beyond my capacity in a first reading. I couldn't help thinking of another collection of poems which used a great work as its foundation: Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, where the greater sense of narrative kept the epic parallels alive as one read the foregrounded poem. Although there are domestic story-lines embedded in Kinsella's poem, I felt the metaphysical had a higher priority and that attenuated the impact of the fine descriptions of the physical world, but perhaps that was a product of my failure as a reader, rather than his as a poet.

Les Murray in his Bunyah Idyll-wheels and Robert Adamson on the dark estuarine reaches of the Hawkesbury have also explored in imaginative detail a contained landscape, but the results are very different. Adamson has a long-recognised gift, as the back cover with generous compliments from Ashbery, Tarn, Creeley and Malouf recognises, of keeping the energy of Romanticism alive in Australian poetry. In contrasting his poems about birds, including new poems in the last section of this book, with Judith Wright's bird poems or Les Murray's "translations from the natural world," you realise that this is not like their versions of Organicism, but closer to the traditions of the late nineteenth century, the Parnassian, Yeatsian sense of Art over-riding Nature. His late style, spare and direct shows this clearly. It is an important moment in Australian poetry's accommodation of its inherited traditions to its still-strange natural world. In the new and opening poem of this collection, "A Bend in the Euphrates," Adamson evokes the mythic Garden of Eden, the challenge of art, and the "reality" of the here-and-now:

In a dream on a sheet of paper I saw  
a pencil drawing of lovers: they seemed perfect,

Adam and Eve possibly. Steeping into reality,  
I read lines of a poem on a piece

of crumpled rag I kept trying to smooth ...

The poem ends with an open-ended introduction to the whole collection which asserts an independent vision and the craftsman's intellectual and emotional control over the material world:

The map's folded away, I travel by heart now,  
old lessons are useless. I shelter from bad weather

in the oyster farmer's shack. The moon falls in a  
column of light, a glowing epicycle –

this pale wandering spot on my writing table  
these fragments of regret:

Moving away from ego-based poetry of observation and reflection to more expansive poetry strong on story and narrative drive was a bracing change. Barbara Temperton's three verse stories in her collection *Southern Edge* were one of the highlights of this annual review. She writes in the long and great tradition of Australian radio poetry—these poems are alive in characterisation, imagery and sheer sound and they plunge on with their stories of love, madness, murder and mystery, all set in the booming sea-world of coastal south-west Western Australia and the Kimberley coast. The greatest challenge with the long poem is variation, and Temperton has solved that decisively. She varies pace and point-of-view, carries it off with a muscular and lean verse which matches the immediacy of tone which poetry for radio must have. This collection is definitely an exciting *reading* experience nevertheless, and an example of what Geoff Page said about how enjoyable (and approachable) some recent poetry is.

Another revelation was the strength of the volumes by younger or less-established women. I put aside eleven to return to at leisure, for all of them gave me considerable pleasure and excitement at a first reading. There is an openness and clarity of vision and diction in these books which seem to be the mark of this decade's poetry. Whether it's Elizabeth Campbell sharing her passion for horses and music, or the spare processing of grief:

as if my heart were laid beating  
in the mouth of some creature

on the soft tongue of a knife-toothed creature:  
tyger or more alien: crocodile, shark

I have felt the cold teeth  
as claw-setting to heart-gem

as the bars on my crib when I roll  
and I think they are your teeth

and you are that creature, dead brother  
by your own hand dead and I know

you are always my present & future  
ghost-writer, dead hand  
and that you have been gentle till now.

or Sarah Holland-Batt's diction, keen as her subject in "Table Addresses  
Cleaver":

The arctic joy of a clean  
spine; the dull nub

of the heft. You, rusted  
murderer, filleting splice –

how many throats  
have you split  
easy

as soft grapefruit,  
tremors pumping  
still air?

I soak up your blood. I receive  
everything and ask for nothing.

The clever distancing of the poet into the not-so-passive table turns violence into wry observation. Violence and despair inspire Bel Schenk, but the poems are playful as well as desperate, helped by a language which is off-hand and racy. It's attractive and intelligent, full of the teasing suggestion which she describes in "Index poem 1":

Those lines you write,

I try to read between them  
but get caught  
in the flash of the pop-up ad  
and the ratio of alphabet  
to on-screen white.

There is the same yoking of violent insight with a creative eroticism in L K Holt. Her poem “Portrait” shows her lyric gift and a striking economy of language where poetry and paint are indistinguishable:

Once paint dries  
there is left only an air of bone,  
a cleaned and stretched hide:  
the body’s brute-matter loan.

More relaxed in her metrics, mimicking conversational rhythms but with sharp flashes of brilliant imagery, Kate Middleton also treats the ‘secret alchemy’ of creativity in “Whistler’s Boatman” where the painter is asked by a boatman to teach him to paint and the poet concludes:

From the oar to the brush, from mud-  
bottomed river to the peculiar chemistry  
of the palette, it is all one action,  
one arc, one journey through the shimmering slurry.

Sandy Fitts and Jessika Tong are very different stylists. Fitts likes the long line and flowing syntax and a good argument with her reader, while Tong is spare and taut, poking her lines in your face, the verse sounding sometimes like fragments of a voice heard in a howling wind. But despite the differences, the similarities are striking. A deliberate and uncompromising engagement with the world out there, both past and present – a sort of resolute empiricism unlike the crypto-Romanticism of earlier generations. The same observation might be made of Petra White’s *The Incoming Tide* where a clear eye and a highly evolved and subtle style are evident in a very convincing first volume. And Marcella Polain takes risks skirting the inheritance of the powerful women poets of the previous generation, but always something unexpected happens, as in “in their gut” where ten medium grannies (apples) can be eaten (alive), but the cook has prepared them so well there are “no seeds to settle in their gut/sprout roots from which a tree might grow.” Bronwyn Lea has a lot of the physical

world in her poems, but they are mediated by the demands of art and the spirit. These are bright, discursive poems which bear their weight lightly, and art often has to defer to the real as in “The Ballerina’s Foot”:

six petite bones suffer  
one hundred & six pounds

as the foot aspires to walk  
upright on the extreme tips

of the toes. The long vamp  
draws the foot closer

to the shank & the arch breaks  
your heart as art arrives

at the pointe.

More established poets, Pam Brown and Alison Croggon, also arbitrate between the physical and the metaphysical, though Brown’s poetry is much more placed in the here-and-now with a collage-like catalogue of sensation as it strikes her. Croggon revels in the bricollage of political-speak on television, but in other poems mythology, religion, opera predominate. The collection is called *Theatre* and one is unsure where the stage ends and the audience starts, a potent emblem of the subject/object split and the nature of the real.

The strain of empiricism is also strong in Anthony Lawrence’s *Bark*, another book I shall be coming back to for many re-readings. Fragments of the real cohere into story and argument; subjects of a poem, a bird, a landscape, a black telephone are given presence and transmuted from object into numinous subject, as in “Style”:

He used half an acre of fallen timber  
and fifty tractor tyres  
stacked in the manner  
of an old time bonfire  
bound together with fencing wire  
to provide light for his signature  
on a document of closure  
for the ravens and the banker:  
his fingerprints on the trigger



Andrew Sant's Mr Habitat trails along after the poet in a world-wide anabasis, in which he and the reader try to catch up with the speedy poet. It is a world of speed and translocation in which identity and experience blur, as the poet says "In the beginning, there was never / a getting away from stretching / and backflips – propulsion" ("Alpha") – it's clever and frenetic, as a story of sorts evolves, that of a hard-boiled detective poet trying to solve the mystery of his own identity.

John Jenkins, on the other hand, deals with his history directly in a series of memorials, places, times, people: Melbourne in the 1950s and 1960s under the watchful eyes (and eyebrows) of Australia's headmaster, Robert Gordon Menzies:

In my dream, Mr Menzies is leading me down dark corridors. "Of course, there are facts, secrets too, but everyone sees them through the prism of their own interior life," he says, and pats me on the head. "History is always like that, and political necessity must never try to overstep the impossible."

Menzies might be an object of fun, but the times were not, as these poems show. It is a tour de force of memory, and the taste and smell of the times, as well as its corrosive conformity return uneasily to those who were alive then. Jenkins' easy style, with its careful evocation of the conversational rhythms of the times, is another example of the approachable and enjoyable poetry Geoff Page noted in his review.

If, on the other hand, you want to be challenged, and profit by it, try Alex Skovron's prose-poems *Autographs*. The density of thought is mirrored in the hieratic rhythms of the language, mimicking music and sacred texts. These are true autographs: direct transcriptions of the author's cognitive and intellectual processes. That sounds very serious, but there is wit and fun here as well, and an engaging autobiography at the heart of it.

And of course there are those unpigeonholeable books mentioned earlier. The most idiosyncratic would be S S Prasad's *100 Poems*. They are concrete poems inscribed microscopically onto printed circuits and printed in their millions. They can only be read in their natural state through a powerful microscope, but helpfully they are reproduced in slim book form. Like many concrete poems they are witty but soon exhausted.

The other, very moving volume, is Janet Frame's posthumous collection of poems *The Goose Bath*, so titled because she used a goose bath to store her unpublished poems. What a presence is in them. It starts with the first poem:

I take into my arms more than I can bear to hold  
I am toppled by the world  
a creation of ladders, pianos, stairs cut into the rock  
a devouring world of teeth where even the common snail  
eats the heart out of a forest  
as you and I do, who are human, at night

yet still I take you into my arms more than I can bear to hold

and is still ringingly there in the last “How I Began Writing”:

Vowels turn like wheels: the chariot is empty.  
Tall burning consonants light the deserted street.  
Unwrapping the world,  
unwrapping the world  
where pine trees still say lonely, sigh, night, and refuse,  
refuse, and their needles of deceit drop in my eyes,  
I began to write.

A best-seller in New Zealand, the volume has now been published in Australia where it should be widely read as an example of how strongly an individual mind can inform a voice so that it becomes free of artifice and manufactured feeling.

So where are we in Australian poetry? On the Nullabor Plain or approaching some suburban nine-ways? It seems to me that I sense a change in direction, away from the established routines of the past where a search for the numinous in the natural world, for revelation in art, for revolution in politics, relationships and identity were the implied programs, to a greater sense of the empirical and the cognitive and affective processes by which we make sense of reality. Stylistically poets have turned to hard-edged modelling of those thought processes and how the world impinges on us – sharp imagery, fluent syntax, a strong individuality in line and phrasing – and from this year’s selection it would seem the younger women have already taken this exit from the cross-roads. This is not to make less of those who got us to this point, and there is plenty to be proud of there, but I think there is change in the air, a sense that the poet does not make things, but things make the poet. Perhaps we could take our lead from New Zealand. Janet Frame had already been there in her poem “The Place”:

I do not remember these things  
– they remember me,  
not as child or woman but as their last excuse  
to stay, not wholly to die.

## POETRY RECEIVED 2008–2009

*Those marked with an asterisk are mentioned in the above review.*

- \*Adamson, Robert, *The Golden Bird*, Melbourne: Black Inc., 2008.
- Aitken, Adam, *Eighth Habitation*, Artarmon: Giramondo Poets, 2009
- Albiston, Jordie, *Vertigo*, Elwood: John Leonard Press, 2007
- Anuraag (translator and editor), *Mehraab ... The Arch ...*, Ajmer: A.R.A.W.LII. Publications, 2008.
- Anuraag, *Papa & Other Poems*, Ajmer: A.R.A.W.LII. Publications, 2008.
- Brennan, Michael, *Unanimous Night*, Cambridge: Salt, 2008.
- Brooks, David, *The Bakony*, St Lucia: UQP Poetry Series, 2008
- Brooks, David (ed.), *The Best Australian Poetry 2008*, St Lucia: UQP, 2008
- \*Brown, Pam, *True Thoughts*, Cambridge: Salt, 2008
- \*Buckley, Vincent, *Collected Poems*, Elwood: John Leonard Press, 2009
- Bellamy, Suzanne and Susan Hawthorne, *Unsettling the Land*, North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2008
- \*Campbell, Elizabeth, *Letters to the Tremulous Hand*, Elwood: John Leonard Press, 2007
- \*Croggon, Alison, *Theatre*, Cambridge: Salt, 2008
- Deane, Joel, *£10 Poems*, Warners Bay: Picaro Press, 2008
- De Franceschi, *Strands*, Woodford: Island Press, 2009
- \*Frame, Janet, *The Goose Bath Poems*, Elwood: Wilkins Farago, 2008
- \*Fitts, Sandy, *View from the Lucky Hotel*, Parkville: Five Islands Press, 2008
- Harrison, Martin, *Wild Bees*, Crawley: UWA Press, 2008
- Hart, Kevin, *Young Rain*, Artarmon: Giramondo Poets, 2008
- Hodgson, Elizabeth, *Skin Painting*, St Lucia: UQP, 2008
- \*Holland-Batt, Sarah, *Aria*, St Lucia: UQP Poetry Series, 2008
- \*Holt, L K, *MAN wolf MAN*, Elwood: John Leonard Press, 2007
- Houen, Christina and Woodhouse, Jena (eds), *Desires Hidden: Australian Women Writing*, Charnwood: Ginninderra Press, 2006

- \*Jenkins, John, *Growing up with Mr Menzies*, Elwood: John Leonard Press, 2008
- Jones, Rae Desmond, *Blow Out*, Woodford: Island Press, 2008
- \*Kinsella, John, *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography*, St Lucia: UQP Poetry Series,
- Kosovel, Srecko, *The Golden Boat* (translated by Bert Pribac and David Brooks), Cambridge: Salt, 2008
- \*Lawrence, Anthony, *Bark*, St Lucia: UQP Poetry Series, 2008
- \*Lea, Bronwyn, *New Poems*, Artarmon, Giramondo Poets, 2008
- \*Middleton, Kate, *New Poems: Fire Season*, Artarmon, Giramondo Poets, 2009
- \*Owen, Jan, *Poems 1980-2008*, Elwood: John Leonard Press, 2008
- \*Page, Geoff, *60 Classic Australian Poems*, Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2009
- Parkin, Andrew, *Star of a Hundred Years*, Ajmer: A.R.A.W.L.II Publications, 2009
- \*Polain, Marcella, *Therapy Like Fish*, Elwood: John Leonard Press, 2008
- \*Prasad, S S, *100 Poems*, Chennai: STD Pathasala, 2008
- Quintessence Poets, *Amber Contains the Sun: A Poetry Anthology*, Subiaco: Quintessence, 2008
- Rose, Peter (ed.), *The Best Australian Poems 2008*, Melbourne: Black Inc., 2008
- \*Sant, Andrew, *Speed & Other Liberties*, Cambridge: Salt, 2008
- \*Schenk, Bel, *Ambulances & Dreamers*, Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 2008
- Shepherdson, Nathan, *what marian drew never told me about light*, Toombul: Small Change Press, 2008
- \*Skovron, Alex, *Autographs*, Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers, 2008
- \*Steele, Peter, *White Knight with Beebox*, Elwood: John Leonard Press, 2008
- \*Temperton, Barbara, *Southern Edge*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2009
- \*Tong, Jessika, *The Anatomy of Blue*, Cottesloe, Sunline Press, 2008
- Verna, Satish, *Beyonds & Between*, Ajmer: A.R.A.W.L.II Publications, 2008
- Verna, Satish, *Obiter Dictum: Umbra Penumbra*, Ajmer: A.R.A.W.L.II Publications, 2009-05-11
- Verna, Satish, *Via & V/s (New Poems)*, Ajmer: A.R.A.W.L.II Publications, nd
- \*White, Petra, *The Incoming Tide*, Elwood: John Leonard Press, 2007
- Wicks, Les, *The Ambrosiacs*, Woodford: Islands Press, 2009
- Wilson, Edwin, *My Brother Jim*, Lane Cove: Woodbine Press, 2009
- Yu, Ouyang, *The Kingsbury Tales*, Blackheath: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2008

## WHILE I AM WALKABOUT, WHO WILL TELL MY HEART TO BEAT?

Unstable. Unstable. Sand collapses,  
reversible volcanoes descending.  
From my lawn, through the anthill, and into  
a stir of antennae. "Taste this! Taste this!"  
All crowding to give, all shouting to share,  
and I, overwhelmed, burst out, burst up, thrust  
from a grass tree, shredding my nakedness,  
reforming in the black burning of years  
with neck craned, legs locked, to become a spear  
to pierce freedom, alone. To hook a star  
with a webbed foot and fling it under dirt  
where metal-shelled scorpions devour  
its riches, squirting poison in tailings  
lost men scabble and hoard away. Let them.  
Extend my wings, turn away. The dark call  
of the river, its long lazy curve, sweeps  
me down to splinter the barley sugar  
reflection of city lights. Down to wait  
in the mud and stink of endings  
for the cockatoo flaring of sunrise.

Oh God, wash me out with the tide, beach me in the blue,  
tumble me clear as a jellyfish, and tender with pain.

Sun on the angled leaf of silver green.  
The kookaburra hoots his cackling claim  
to the tall shadow of a flowering gum.  
I am that laughter. I dance in the heat.

In the shimmer, in the sun-blaze, I am.  
In the dazzle and the dance I dive deep.  
In the lap and retreat of the river  
I hear the pulse of the land, my heart beat.

# RICHARD DAVIS

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## MARKAY I

*(Depending on context markay means 'spirit' in Kala KaꞰꞰ Ya, the language spoken in Northwest Torres Strait)*

I began with a desire to disincarnate the dead, those shadow-folk of memories past.

Back then they were nothing to me  
but images, stories, hiding under blankets.

Once though, I saw one as a lad, shading through my bathroom door.  
My sister didn't but I knew the corner of my eye gazed on that spectre.  
It was a confirmation, my initiation.

The dead avoided me from then on, had made their point, no need for  
rappin' and tappin'.

Sent their kin to me from time to time though.  
Devil-types.

Had a hell of a hard time getting rid of them.  
Haven't heard from them for a good while now  
No complaints there, too much screaming and twisting for my liking.

But one night, not so long ago, a dead man hitched into my dream.  
It wasn't really mine, he met me on the way to say goodbye to his mother  
and boy.

You see, a bullet had torn through his lung on the left side  
He was sitting on a bucking backhoe knocking through the scrub chasing  
deer with his mates drinking and laughing with irises wide for light  
When the bloody thing went off.

Christ it was a big hole, weeping and crying all that good stuff.  
Lucky someone knew something and irrigated a stream into his arm  
Said his veins carried pink cordial when he flopped on to the morning  
helicopter.

Say goodbye to a breathing man, got to think about digging now.

Death isn't nothingness, but he passed there  
sleeping days and nights  
While our bodies shivered towards grief  
Here, back home.  
Day after day we twirled and prayed in the cool dark of the church of the  
setting sun  
And I stumbled in, wrong way.  
"Might die now, stupid bastard."  
Didn't say it straight, too much peril, but I knew I was a dead man  
walking.

That was when we met.  
At the backdoor of his house.  
I lived there too.  
He had come a big stretch, a thousand miles, knocking hard.  
I got up out of my night cairn  
Wondering why it was this gate and not the other.  
I talked to him under the leaning frame.  
Went something like this:  
"I want to see old lady and my boy."  
I saw his abode long way, a hospital trolley-bed, and couraged hard,  
"You can't, go back to where you belong"  
He turned, walked off and I lurched into daylight.

Months later he got off the plane and walked back into his room.  
All cigarette smoke and puckered skin  
flushed gently as living does.  
And me still stinging from the bite of pointing pith to peel.  
I freighted that thing for a long silent time, all spike and fear when his  
mob went by.  
Didn't want the spirit burden that came with that magic and  
there had not been a ghost-talker for a generation in that place.

Turning and turning I flew away and set loose my reverie on his cousin-  
brother  
who knew what strides markay can make if calling is on their mind.  
"That's our way, talking with spirits,  
You got it now, you savvy that thing."  
Seems they all walk, the dead, through one place and another.



# FIONA WRIGHT

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## ULLADULLA

For Peter

Each year the road winds a little less  
the clustered coastal towns  
    progressively bypassed  
to local traffic only,  
to longer twilights, saltburn  
and white ants.

We know each car's trajectory now,  
who'll stop just out of Nowra for strawberry milk and petrol,  
who detours to the blowhole,  
or delays their toilet stop  
    until the crumbling doughnut shop  
    on High Street.

What it is that makes tradition out of chance:  
the kilo box of stonefruit  
    that squeezes stomachs hard and round  
    as peach pips overnight,  
the stubborn chaos of communal groceries,  
    the fridge filled with strings of sausages  
    longer than all our intestines combined.

We stack the beer fridge, stand  
    windswept on the headland,  
feed our ankles to wet sand.  
as the firstnight waves hiss towards the dark,  
    inexorable as breath, as carsong.

## ADVENTURES IN AUSTLIT: THE GOLDFIELDS BARDS OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The great discoveries of gold in Western Australia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sparked what was arguably the greatest and most spontaneous flowering of writing in the State's history, but it has been relatively ignored by researchers over the years.

This is probably because access to this writing has always required disproportionate effort. Hardly any of the work was published in book form; virtually all of it appeared in local newspapers. AustLit, the online resource for Australian literature has recently taken up this challenge to recover and document the work of Goldfields poets.<sup>1</sup> Beverley Smith's pioneering MA thesis on goldfields literature remains a valuable starting point for anyone contemplating studies in this area.<sup>2</sup> Smith had estimated that there were around sixty goldfields newspapers publishing literary work, but AustLit research suggests that the number was even higher.<sup>3</sup> Tens of thousands of men from all over Australia and overseas had descended on the WA goldfields to try their luck as a result of the economic fallout from the so-called Long Depression of the 1890s. These T'othersiders were from all socio-economic backgrounds and they seemed to have a burning need to write about their "exile" and the new experiences they confronted on a daily basis in the harsh outback. In booming towns like Coolgardie (which quickly became the third largest settlement in Western Australia after Perth and Albany), Kalgoorlie, Boulder, Cue, and Meekatharra, as well as many others now virtually forgotten, talented newspaper editors quickly set up printing presses and actively sought contributions from local writers in the belief that topical verse was an integral component of good journalism. They were especially interested in verse (and to a lesser extent prose) written from personal experience and with local "colour" and they were prepared to pay for it. In nineteenth century parlance, this was

referred to as “Manly Writing” and “Manly Wit,” meaning working class writing and working class wisdom derived from the so-called “University of Life.” To encourage and develop the talents of local versifiers and storytellers, work by eastern Australian and overseas writers was often re-printed from sources such as Sydney’s *Bulletin* and *Smith’s Weekly*. It was also supported by criticism covering contemporary literary developments. In some ways comparisons can be made between the editorial policies of the goldfields newspapers and contemporary talkback radio, insofar as there was a continuing dialogue between the newspapers’ journalists/critics and their literary contributors/readers. But, unlike talkback radio where feedback from listeners is mostly “off the cuff,” the material submitted to the goldfields newspapers was edited and polished before it was printed.

As was commonplace at the time, many Goldfields writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries published under pseudonyms. And while some famous names emerged from among them, much of the work accepted for publication appeared anonymously. To address the problem of attribution of this work, AustLit has established an “identity” known as “The Goldfields Poet.” While the anonymous work is inevitably of uneven quality, some interesting aspects of Australian history are being uncovered. “The Song of the 16<sup>th</sup> in the Trenches, Gallipoli,” describes daily life during the battle and reveals that field cooks were braving Turkish sniper fire and shelling to bring hot stew up the line to Quinn’s Post, the most forward of the ANZAC positions.<sup>4</sup> Colloquialisms long lost to our language are also being rediscovered. But mostly the works shed light on the colourful local characters who rubbed shoulders on the fields, including those who made fortunes and many others who did not, along with the politicians, police, entrepreneurs, labour exploiters, claim jumpers, drunks, conmen, wowsers, the women and the often formidable but inevitably dispossessed Aborigines. Some of the works also recover the sounds and noises of the times, such as the rhythms of the great quartz-crushing stamps,<sup>5</sup> the “Tinned Dog” chime of Kalgoorlie’s town centre clock<sup>6</sup> and the “Cock-a-doodle-doo” steam whistles of the trains speeding troops to the ships that would carry them to the trenches of World War I.<sup>7</sup>

Another outcome of AustLit’s goldfields research has been to uncover details about the life of the so-called ‘Meekatharra Poet’ whose 1925 book, *Selected Poems from the Works of J. E. Liddle* (published in three editions), contained a substantial body of work written against the trend of “Manly” poetry.<sup>8</sup> Virtually nothing was known about Liddle beyond his book but AustLit has now established that he was a “Hatter.” In Goldfields speech this meant that he was a man who lived and worked alone (in a house on

Queen Road, at the outer edge of town). Tall and thin, he owned a bay horse and buggy and sometimes hired the rig to others. In Post Office records he is listed as a resident of Meekatharra between 1920 and 1930, describing himself as an insurance agent. He also corresponded with the Library of Western Australia about the loan of books during these years. But mostly he wrote poetry, and his work was often published in various Murchison district newspapers. Liddle left town in 1930, and his trail is cold after that. What we have discovered is that he left behind a wooden crate of manuscripts that he intended to send for. Alas, as time passed and no word from Liddle was forthcoming, local children accessed the pages that were soon lost in a game that involved tossing them into the air to be whipped away by the desert winds.<sup>9</sup>

Hesperian Press author and tireless Henry Lawson researcher, Chris Holyday, has recently made an important discovery that he has shared with AustLit. It has long been known that Lawson made his 1896 trip to Perth with his wife Bertha with the intention of travelling on to the goldfields. Until now it was thought that he remained in Perth with Bertha, living in a tent near Perth's Causeway, because accommodation, due to the gold rush to the West, was scarce. But Chris Holyday's discovery of an article by journalist and poet, Andrée Hayward in an early Perth newspaper has overturned this notion. It recounts a meeting with Lawson in Perth at the now long demolished Grand Hotel in Wellington Street. Also present was the mining promoter and writer, Randolph Bedford, and an unnamed photographer. Lawson had arrived at the Grand after finishing a job of house painting and his coat was marked with white paint. Bedford, a long-time friend of Lawson from Sydney, introduced him to Hayward. Hayward reports that during conversation Lawson mentioned that he had visited the WA goldfields before setting up his well-documented tent dwelling.<sup>10</sup> The notion that Henry Lawson made it to the goldfields (possibly without Bertha) throws new light on some of his writing, and in particular, his short story, "The Shanty Keeper's Wife." In this story, written for and published by Perth's *Western Mail* newspaper (12 September 1896), the narrator tells of a stop along the way during a bone-shaking Cobb & Co. coach journey to a rail connection at a place named Dead Camel. Dead Camel? Yes, satellite maps show that there is such a place, north of Coolgardie. In 1896 the rail link from Perth ended at Coolgardie, but prospectors had headed north into the Murchison and the rail to the various strikes was piecemeal. Was Lawson's story coloured by details from first-hand experience of such a journey? In his book, *Into the West: Henry Lawson and Other Writers in Western Australia: 1890 to 1930*, Holyday had speculated that stories and poems

by Lawson with West Australian themes, such as “The Shanty Keeper’s Wife,” and “The Bulletin Hotel,” were probably influenced by information he had gathered through correspondence with some of his mates on the fields, such as “Smiler” Hales, “Crosscut” Wilson and Charlie Webb (who owned the Bulletin Hotel at Yundamindra). Now it seems Lawson may have had his own knowledge of the goldfields.

Randolph Bedford made several fortunes by grub staking prospectors in return for a share of their gold if they struck it rich. He was a close friend of Norman and Lionel Lindsay and Lionel worked for Bedford for a while when the entrepreneur established Melbourne’s *Clarion* newspaper (1897-1909). Norman Lindsay was a contributor to this publication. It is known that Lionel Lindsay accompanied Bedford on a visit to the West Australian goldfields in search of copy and advertisements for the *Clarion*, but a column recently discovered in *The Sun (Kalgoorlie)* suggests that brother Norman may have been along as well. The unnamed correspondent claims that Norman Lindsay captured the likenesses of Murchison “publicans, store keepers, agents and general hustlers at so many guineas to be afterwards immortalised in the Bedford journal”.<sup>11</sup> AustLit has tracked close to seven hundred works of poetry and prose written by Randolph Bedford, and while he was certainly prolific, “Dryblower” Murphy was apparently not impressed, claiming that Bedford’s work made him “yell for salt”.<sup>12</sup>

As mentioned earlier, writers frequently used pseudonyms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and it seems that many women masked their identities in this way. Lists identifying the birth names of writers using pseudonyms once held by various newspapers are no longer available. The famed editor of the Sydney *Bulletin*’s literary pages, A. G. Stephens, was compiling a list of pseudonyms linked to the identities of these writers that he was planning to publish, but this project was never completed.<sup>13</sup> AustLit has obtained a copy of Stephens’ manuscript containing about two hundred names and cross-checking has confirmed that many of the writers listed were women masquerading behind pen names. Unfortunately, Stephens was inclined to link the initials of some of the married women’s husbands to their names, making it sometimes difficult to establish their given names. It was thought that very few of the West Australian goldfields writers were women, and that they tended to recite the works of others rather than write their own verse and prose.<sup>14</sup> This now seems unlikely and it appears that women were writing but often hiding their identities, possibly to increase their chances of publication. As AustLit research into the Goldfields Bards continues, more fascinating information about them and their lives will emerge.

## NOTES

- 1 AustLit has been assisted in its research by gaining access to an invaluable collection of photocopied material from goldfields newspapers held by the Perth-based publishing house, Hesperian Press.
- 2 Smith, Beverley, *Early Western Australian Literature: A Guide to Colonial and Goldfields Life*, 1961, MA Thesis, History Department, The University of Western Australia.
- 3 AustLit has established records for seventy WA goldfields newspapers and this number is expected to increase as more are uncovered.
- 4 *The Sun (Kalgoorlie)*, 1 August 1915.
- 5 The Goldfields Poet, "The Song of the Stamps," *The Sun (Kalgoorlie)*, 29 November 1903.
- 6 The Goldfields Poet, "The Tinned Dog Chime," *The Sun (Kalgoorlie)*, 24 October 1909.
- 7 M.E. Morrell, "Sixty Years Ago," in *Geraldton Graphic*, No. 4, 1976, 43-44.
- 8 *Selected Poems from the Works of J. E. Liddle*, Meekatharra, Western Australia: Telegraph Printing and Publishing Company, 1925; Perth, Western Australia: Albert and Son, 1925; Mullewa, Western Australia: Mullewa Mail Newspaper, 1925.
- 9 Recounted to AustLit by a former Meekatharra resident born in 1919 who was involved in this incident.
- 10 Hayward, Andrée, "Men I Ha' Met," *The Spectator*, 18 June 1904, 3.
- 11 *The Sun (Kalgoorlie)*, 21 December 1924.
- 12 Dryblower (Murphy, Edwin Greenslade), "Featherbed (Ford): Spasm from Bedford's *Bulletin* Pome [sic] on Tanami," *The Sun (Kalgoorlie)*, 19 September 1909.
- 13 *Austrazealand Pen Names: Compiled by A. G. Stephens* (unpublished).
- 14 King, Norma, *The Daughters of Midas*, Victoria Park, W.A., Hesperian Press, 1988, 143.

## WHERE MAMMON MEETS THE DESERT

Bark watches the tourists dressed in Nike shoes and surf shirts milling around the shops, buying knick knacks for their third drawer down back home that houses the forgotten. The town wasn't always like this. Bark remembers the days before the expensive villas spotted along the coast went up, when there were tin boatsheds on dirt tracks and not much more, and he was one of the only whitefellas in town.

He sees a lady speed walker trailing her buttocks and fisted hands behind her and regards her floppy skin timed off bone. Too young for the *SAD* brigade, she's probably one of the new boomer variety keen to back an artist hobbyist. Rich with dollars and poor of sense - there's an attitude in town among the boomers that the paintbrush is a consecrated icon. Out here they can be at one with their zenith, if they can only supply the necessary cash, whereupon approval is granted to watch over the shoulder of the artist-giant whose splashes of colour are pursued with hedonistic zeal. It's a hippie-yuppie attempt at creativity by proxy: artist and Mammon are one.

Two Mormons ride up on their shiny black bikes.

"I'm deaf" he tells them winding up the window of his 4WD, and they hurry away. The town is full of them - Mammons and Mormons: *M&Ms*, Bark chuckles.

The sea and red dirt, the boabs and the heat - the landscape will survive them all. He knows this is why indigenous art will outlast the mongrel breed of white man art out here.

He goes back to watching his girl who is sitting on the side of the road with her younger brother and sister by her feet, arguing with each other. The one with bangs in her hair starts to cry as she wipes her brother's snot from her arm onto the footpath and she stands up and hits the boy who promptly hits her back, harder.

Eupheme, his girl, is striking. She has dark curled hair, black eyes, and milky brown skin. He never tires of looking at her but hasn't spoken to her yet. She has the thin legs of her people, yet is in perfect proportion, petite, with softness to the jaw and forehead. She ignores her sister's tears and moves further back along the footpath trying to get away but the younger girl only moves closer.

"Shut up and leave me alone," she yells at her sister. They're waiting for someone or so it seems, perhaps for their mother? Bark realises Eileen could be there anytime and he feels a rising panic. He twists the ignition key and turns the air-conditioner full bore. It's hot as hell in the car. He wants to keep watching his girl, but the blonde biddy who owns the local IGA store comes outside for a smoke.

*What's her name again?* Bark racks his brain. The woman looks at Bark a little longer than he cares for and he can almost see the recognition tightening in her face: *what's that bastard back in town for now?* He can read her mind. Bark smirks and waves and puts the car into gear.

In the rear-view mirror Eupheme is standing. She hits the boy smartly on the back of the head. Bark chuckles as he wheels the 4WD round past the town council buildings where the blackfellas are asleep on a shredded mattress under the shade of a gum tree, empty grog bottles littered beside and dogs sniffing about. He squashes a fly with his fist on the driver's side window. He wants to see Eileen alright - to make her a proposal about Eupheme, but it's been decades before all these kids - before *his* kid.

\* \* \*

That afternoon the rain starts up like clockwork. Heavy, warm drops fall and release the scent of the ground and trees – a fertile smell Bark realises he has missed since living in the city. He passes the sign on the outskirts of town:

DUMPING THE FOLLOWING IS PROHIBITED  
CAR BODIES FENCING WIRE  
RAINWATER TANKS  
DEAD ANIMALS SKINS OFFALS

He takes the turnoff to the cemetery with its headstones like white teeth jutting out, just before the fuel station pit stop, last one for 250k's. Only the Aboriginal dumpies lie beyond, and the open road.

Eileen's mother was buried somewhere in the town cemetery with her



head bent like a black rose growing down. He walks along the neat rows, stopping at the only unmarked headstone, assuming it is the one.

He remembers there had been an outcry about Eileen's mother's burial some fifteen years ago. The traditional setup of the town cemetery was to bury Catholic feet pointing toward sunrise and Protestant feet pointing toward sunset, with wooden markers for the Japanese and the Malay who died water deaths in the pearling tides. He whistles *the times they are a'changing* and empties the water atop of his akubra before sitting down beside the blank headstone to pay his respects.

Until Eileen's mother, the blackfella was never buried in the cemetery, as per council regulations. That was until the new shire president, hot on the inspiration of the Aboriginal right to vote and in the spirit of feigned utilitarianism, passed an order the blacks would be buried just like the whites. Not willy nilly somewhere out in the desert where anyone could stumble upon their bodies. The shire president had argued it was no good for the kiddies - Johnny Dexter had seen one dead and so had little Eliza Roe.

Eileen's argument was that her mother was wrongfully buried in the town's multicultural death compass. She and her people went into deep mourning of the kind that displaces the body and leaves the soul amoebic. The burial had been the first sign of what was to come. It had stripped Eileen away like a ringbarked tree denuded of its bark and starving without a conduit of nourishment from root to leaves.

\* \* \*

Twenty years ago Bark had been carpet bagging around Australia. He had stopped off in town close to the petrol station, fuel gauge on *E*. After parking his old bomb he'd gone off to get a few supplies and thought maybe he'd schmooze up to a woman – give them the old traveller's luck story and the Rhett Butler twinkle.

What he found was this woman doing these drawings, crazy patterns in the path of shoppers who stopped and stared at the Aboriginal with beautiful hair, long and wild about the shoulders. People watched as she created loops and curves like portraits of the wind or some spirit endlessly traced and retraced by her dusted ochre fingers and an old and lost compassion seemed to flutter up inside and surprise them. They reached into their pockets and pulled out gold coins. Bark put his coin back into his pocket, reached down and took the woman by the hand.

After that, Bark commissioned Eileen to produce art for him – *only*

for him, he explained his terms and she didn't ask questions. He kept her in a hotel in town in a room with a small Kelvinator refrigerator and a double bed. The overhead fan turned in lazy orbit and made cutting noises through the air above the huge canvasses she stretched out on the floor. Bark supplied the paints and promised to keep her well fed and clothed. He let her keep the small monetary token offered by the town shire for her Tuesday art demonstrations in the mall. Otherwise, when a painting was sold he kept the money himself.

He raked it in after that. The market was ripe for dots and swirls, dust devils and the shifting sands of a land-soul that mystified the whitefella. Bark remembers telling his dealer back in Perth his thesis: how the whitefella would suck up indigenous art in an effort to stave off that fear of a distance beyond themselves – trying to tame that wildness out there where the mountains are in shreds and the plains are the colour of dried blood, where the spinifex spears are poised like arms at the ready in the silent wake of eternity.

He had spent the next few years laughing at the befuddled white man's effort to give meaning to the unknown, trying to eek out a sense of place. The white man lie – believing they had usurped the indigenes by way of an easy relationship to a bought piece of canvas hanging proudly on the mezzanine wall, had Bark laughing all the way to the bank.

Then something happened. The market matured and became saturated. People began to regard sacred knowledge as the domain of a few Aboriginal elders and Eileen's work went cold. After her mother was wrongfully buried in the town cemetery, Eileen's comprehension, understanding and perception – her ability to know and work became clotted and filled with too many selves auditioning for reality. One night they found her dressed in a dark hessian sack clawing at the dirt over her mother's grave. There were worms in her hands and her hair when they found her was like Medusa's.

The town copper was called. They brought in a mobile floodlight. It lit up the hole Eileen had dug, revealing the tip of her mother's decomposing brow. Eileen was taken away and the hole respectfully filled and turfed. He'd heard later that Eileen had gone walkabout after they had released her. He hadn't seen her since. It was only a few days before the grass on the plot of her mother's grave had turned to a brown crunch.

\* \* \*

His girl's name, *Eupheme*, is Greek. He looks it up on the internet one night. The name means *well spoken and the nurse of the muses*. It sounds special

– the lightness of a feather. He can't imagine where the name has come from. It couldn't have been Eileen's choice, rather someone else in the fray back when his girl had been born who suggested it – some educated tosser sniffing around Eileen's art after he'd left town, maybe his old dealer?

*A nymph of Mount Helikon, Bark reads, wherever the Christ that was. She nursed the goddess Mousai, was loved by the god Pan and bore him a son named Crotos.*

His daughter was gloriously young. She wouldn't be bearing sons anytime soon, of that he was sure. The plan – his plan – was to carpetbag a modern shift in the desert sand dreaming. Youth and romance was where the Aboriginal art market could be at. Bark wanted to shove it up the rule-like insistence that had robbed him all those years ago – the idea that a soupy eyed elder Aboriginal was required for good art, as if the eye developed keenness of spirit with the pooling of age. Bark was willing to stake his return on a new kind of dreaming: getting away from all those damned dots, the ancients supplanted by the modern obsession with youth that takes its rightful place, the same way it had done in the European market. He was thinking of Banksy's graffiti and street art in particular. If the girl had a good eye she could be the next big thing in an indigenous art world reformulation, but first he had to get past Eileen.

\* \* \*

In the morning Bark drives the 4WD onto the track leading up to the dumpies. Dogs and children weave through the tumbling dwellings that look like the withered weed and an old Koori seated in the middle of the road is swaying and dozens of random, jagged scars mapped across his chest puzzle through the air. He is dressed only in a pair of jeans and has dirt up to his neck. Bark stops the car and walks over. He can see the blackfella is pissed, his eyes blood wet like open wounds.

"Eileen here?" he is careful to avoid eye contact with the old man.

"Paint dreamin'" the old man mumbles and points a talon to a lone figure a hundred metres up the track. She is standing beside a stringy-bark eucalypt, "dat way," he ushers.

Bark tips his hat and walks over. He looks around the camp for Eupheme, but his girl is nowhere to be seen.

He finds Eileen stripping bark that is harvested near the end of the rains when it comes off soft from the tree. It is used for cheap canvas after it has been laid out in the sun to harden. He knows Eileen is still painting. She's been significant, but never successful like in the good old days. Yet if

the established market was anything to go by, Eileen's best years were still to come – in the twilight of old age.

"Eileen," he steps into her line of vision. She regards him with suspicion and at first it seems like she doesn't recognise him then she starts laughing.

"You back ta make money outta me?" she grins. A fair call, there was history after all.

"You owe me lost income," she challenges him.

So that was how she is going to play it. Bark isn't surprised. He tells her to wait and walks back to the car. He takes an envelope stashed under some parking tickets in the glove compartment and returns.

She counts the money quietly and without expression.

"Not enough though is it?" Eileen knows he's made nearly a hundred thousand on the back of her work over the years.

"All that's left Eileen." There is a moment when Bark isn't sure what will happen next.

"How have you been Eileen?" he steps closer toward her, brokering peace.

"Tired."

Her matter-of-factness is disarming. He always knew her to be passive, quiet – not untruthful, but never to give away her misfortunes.

He is sorry to hear it – "of what?"

"This," she gesticulates impatiently towards the camp. "Always this," she sits down heavily on a broken tree stump.

Bark doesn't want to lay his cards down just yet.

"Some folks been doing real well though – making thousands. Your best years are yet to come," he gives her his best smile but they both know there are few opportunities in the camp. That it's been dead around here for years. Only Mimmupakka, an elder, is doing well out here. Bark read in the paper before he left the city that the old fella had delivered thirteen Toyotas to his family last year. Yet even poor Mimmupakka didn't have enough money for a pack of cigarettes.

"You got to get away from camp," he knows the suggestion could offend her. What he means is "away from family."

Bark decides to go for it, "it's tough – that's why I'm back. I think I've found a way out. About our daughter," he began.

\* \* \*

Eupheme is even more beautiful up close. She has her mother's features

but there is something in her mouth that belongs to him. Eileen had laughed at his plans, “that girl has never held a paintbrush in her life,” she cracked.

Now it is time to see.

Bark knows what he wants – what will sell. He doesn’t want dots and swirls or mythical figures and sacred sites. He wants worlds to collide – the graphic and raw edge characteristic of modern street art with the black, yellow, red and white pigment colours giving it an indigenous twist.

“Like Emily Kame Kngwarreye,” he explains to Eupheme, “but more modern with more graphic hard detail.” If he gets the style right the drawcard of his daughter’s youth will mostly be in marketing.

He shows Eupheme pictures of works on surfboards and skateboards and he brings out the acrylic paints and the canvas from the back of the 4WD. For the first time her parents stand together united, instructing her how to paint.

\* \* \*

What resulted was breath-taking. Abstract and colourful, the work obscures the underlying tradition.

“A blackfella Pollock,” Bark quips and opens a bottle of champagne but before he touches the glass to his lips, Eupheme comes at him with the back end of a shovel.

“Cheap bastard,” he hears Eupheme quip, “and where the fuck have you been all these years,” she accuses just before he falls heavily to the ground unconscious.

Then he sees his girl coming at him out of the spinifex grass covered hillocks where she strides past the white contorted trunk of a ballerina gum in dance. Eupheme is commanding him to dive deep into the land. He will grow there, she tells him and he will live there and be there, where the dealers and white-man collectors are buried with their golden heads growing down. “It is the dollar-dreaming,” his girl is saying to him as he feels his legs harden and lock cold, “where Mammon meets the desert.”

## CONVERSATION

“The whole vocabulary of nakedness.”  
Garrison Keillor

In time look how eloquent  
we have become –  
even in night’s blindness  
the braille of your back  
parentheses of hips  
breasts that pout  
and insist on pampering  
each unedited kiss punctuating  
sentences that all contain  
love’s eccentric syllables  
encyclopaedias of reach  
and touch and all  
the footnotes of desire  
paragraphs full of the same  
inflexible message  
hidden deep in the lexicons  
exclamations of our only  
second language.

## MORPHECOLOGY

linguals ascend the escarpment mo-  
mentarily trapped like salt in the a-  
ir between ocean and mountain but  
terflies and pollutants fly around her  
b gardens the peppermint and sage at-  
tacked by unsavoury organisms orga-  
nic pollen causes muscle spasms in no-  
strils and *gesundheits* in exotic accents trun-  
cated patches of forest are lonely in the c-  
ity morphs are followed by emes auss-  
ie bush mythology is more than a pic-  
nic with emus and busy thumbs thun-  
bing sms codes the beach interr-  
upts the view of steelworks the ill-  
usion of romance is alive each nigh-  
t by a gas flame above the pac-  
ific in valleys and along the coa-  
stline currawong calls echo recall hi-  
story through images of anima-  
ted pterodactyls and tall ships shared me-  
anings don't begin with the end  
eavour sailing through the heads le-  
arn how not to forget the burning fat-  
igue of summer afternoons prod-  
uces a guttural nonce a worldview art-  
iculated in alphabetic smoke sign-  
als travel without vitamins and anti-  
malarials try to photograph the de-  
nse terrain of memory cloud plant

ations thrive in highlands the fu  
ture is not a package tour synch  
ronicities of fake watches and the hum  
id smell of desperation sticking to haw  
aiian shirts a tour group forms a tribe a  
nd discovers in its collective psych  
e a small endangered mammal



## WE'RE ONE AND MANY: REMEMBERING AUTO/BIOGRAPHICALLY : THE YEAR'S WORK IN NON-FICTION 2008–2009

This year as in years past, the story of self told by self or other is strongly represented in this article review, and ranges from Brian Dibble's impressive and endlessly fascinating biography of Elizabeth Jolley, to the earnest memoir of Paul Crittenden, crafted with integrity but a little too much attention to the dross of life, to Kim E. Beazley Sr. monotonous but historically worthy recording of his time as a politician who attained high office at state and federal level. Susan Lever's critical study of David Foster's *oeuvre* draws on "the writer and his life" template, and frequently reads as a biography of sorts of a writer of a rather odd sort but also of a body of work that, as she notes, is quite indistinguishable from its author; Rosemary Lancaster's *Je Suis Australienne: Remarkable Women in France 1880-1945* takes the prize for the most abstruse title while delivering an engaging and well-crafted study of a range of Australian women who spent time in France in the stated period. A couple of works from UQP's Series, Creative Economy and Innovation Culture, provide knowledgeable overviews of the fields of research they explore, and no doubt will prove extremely useful earners through that venerable profession of the "set text book." Among this year's work Philip Mead's *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australia History* stands out head and shoulders above the rest, at once a real pleasure to read and an intellectually prevaricating study of Australia's culture of letters. On occasion a little less scholarly brio would not have gone amiss, though it is a joy to engage with such uncompromisingly intellectual writing. A number of other works by renowned and unknown authors complete the list of non-fiction received by *Westerly* this year.

Brian Dibble's *Doing Life: A Biography of Elizabeth Jolley* is an excellent contribution to Australian literary scholarship, a product of thorough research, patient analysis and mature intelligence. Although there is never

any doubt how close the biographer is to his subject, Dibble's work shows that it is possible to write about that subject with deep affection and unflinchingly honest scrutiny. To say that the book offers a celebration of Jolley and of her work is not overstating or misrepresenting what it does with such critical insight and analytical sophistication. This is a densely researched study of the writer *in* the novels but equally of the novels as works of fiction that draw closely on the life experiences of their author. Each work is explored with patience and insight, its richness brought alive by an obvious closeness between the biographer and his subject, intellectual as well as emotional. As it comes to a close the biography opens up into a gentle and loud acclaim of the life and work of one of the most significant Australian writers in the last quarter of the twentieth-century and a woman whose life was as complex as her fiction. Jolley's work is today far less popular than a decade ago or so, as Dibble points out, yet it remains no less radically subversive and inexhaustibly enjoyable for the passage of time. The biography will not only fill in the gaps in knowledge for Jolley's extensive and varied body of readers but it will go on giving pleasure to generations of readers interested in the work of the much-loved and rather quirky West Australian writer.

Dibble quotes in his study Jolley's view that autobiography is only ever half as good as the life one has lived, a view of which she often reminded herself. To have experienced much and richly is no guarantee of a good story, or a story told well and entertainingly. She should know, having spent a lifetime mining what Dibble shows us to have been at all times a complicated but clearly rewarding existence. Paul Crittenden's *Changing Orders: Scenes of Academic and Clerical Life* seems set to illustrate Jolley's words. Crittenden is obviously a good man who has lived a remarkable life. As a philosopher he achieved enormous academic success, reaching the pinnacles of the philosophy establishment in Australia as professor and chair at the University of Sydney, and eventually Dean of Arts for two terms. He was, even if we hear of it first hand, a gentle and just leader, an inspirational teacher and an exemplary mentor; he is also, unusually in an age when everyone is a celebrity, a modest man who prefers not to dwell on his achievements. One of the book's most memorable aspects is the care and respect Crittenden conveys for the many "others" in his life, in a classic instantiation of the generosity of his memories, crowded not with his own self-importance but with touchingly ethical recognition of the masses of men and women he met and worked with. Among these there is an array of men, not all particularly appealing human beings, who played key roles in the recent history of the Catholic Church in Australia

and the memoir's drearier dimension rests in the detailed debates about Catholic intrigue and fine, or crude points of theology. To be sure, as a lapsed Catholic I found these laborious sections quirkily soporific.

In 1983 Crittenden abandoned his career as a Catholic priest for a life in the contemplative world of academic philosophy, a shift highlighted in the title of his book. It was, we read, an unbearably difficult decision, but clearly one for which he was fated. In the kind of behaviour that speaks volumes about the man, Crittenden himself regularly struggled with his own crises of faith but somehow stuck to his chosen vocation. At times it seems that this was less the result of his commitment to his beliefs than of a fear to hurt the men who taught him at the seminary, most of them teachers about whom he speaks with great affection and respect. In the final section of the memoir, and perhaps the most engaging for those whom the incestuous world of intrigue of the Catholic church explored earlier in the memoir did little to excite, Crittenden writes at length about the problems in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Sydney, infamous in the 1980s and early 1990s and of his role in the conflicts and their resolution. As a life, Crittenden's has been rich, complicated, adventurous, courageous, joyful, painful, and what he has to say in the memoir is a central element to Australia's recent cultural make-up. I wondered, though, if a more supportive editor might have persuaded him to let go of the minute detailing of a life lived most worthily but hard to narrate with the same intensity and nuance.

Kim E. Beazley's *Father of the House* is no less lead-footed in its obsessive concern with the act of remembering as an academic exercise, memoir less as an act of memory than as a list of things remembered chronologically. In between there will be moments worth recalling and some which by sheer dint of their historical significance ensure that the memoir will endure in its recording of a time in Australia's recent history. Reading the memoir some time after finishing Paul Crittenden's, I was reminded of the latter's comments, about a colleague: "unimaginative in outlook but well-meaning and proper in his ways." This is autobiography whose significance derives not from its memoro-aesthetics nor the revelations made, or indeed the peculiar insight provided on them. Its importance, perhaps its function, is deeply entrenched in the social history of contemporary Australian society, even if it is hard to imagine that any reasonably informed Australian will be surprised by what Beazley Sr. recalls or recounts. These are generally well-trodden historical memory paths he walks. The writing is methodical, perhaps even mechanical but also lively; Beazley writes with energy and a great sense of the drama that framed some of the events, and of his place in them.

The real significance of texts such as Beazley's is as historical documents for the use of scholars in search of direct witnessing of a colourful and problematic period of Australian political history. As a key actor in many of the most salient phases of Australia's twentieth-century life, Beazley Sr's portrait provides readers with an extensive account of dates and details, personalities and temperaments. Significantly, it provides also a representation of a certain way of being Australian. For while the memoir is often remarkably candid in its depiction of Beazley Sr's love for his wife Betty this is essentially the story of a man's world. This was most certainly not the Australian Labour Party that now includes among some of its top leadership women ranging from Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Health Minister Nicola Roxon, Climate Minister Penny Wong and the current Queensland Premier, Anna Bligh. To read *Father of the House* is to travel back to a time of overt, even naturalised sexism and unreconstructed patriarchal power. Betty's presence obviously meant the world to her husband but her role was to stand beside him, the quiet and unquestioningly supportive and loyal partner whom Beazley acknowledges so generously. Indeed, the theme of Australian masculinity is picked up in a different way in Crittenden's memoir, and here it is no less remarkable for its cloistered nature. To read Crittenden and Beazley is to visit a period of Australian history when "men were men," even (especially?) in the walled world of Catholic schools for boys, seminaries and the parliament.

Rosemary Lancaster's *Je Suis Australienne: Remarkable Women in France 1880–1945* is thus a welcome journey into a different world, noticeably away from Australia. The book consists of a series of stand alone chapters devoted to figures such as Daisy White, Jessie Couvreur (Tasma), Stella Bowen, Christina Stead, Nancy Wake and some of the nurses who served in European theatres of war. As Lancaster explains she is concerned with the "Australian women's changing sense of self and place, sharpened not in Australia, but, significantly, abroad". At her best, she stresses in her readings a cross-cultural sensitivity that the author obviously shares with her subjects, even if she treats them with a little too much reverence. Ironically, as an intellectual and structural conceit, the focus on France as seen through Australian eyes is most effective when the study addresses the experiential self the writing evokes, as in the case of White, Bowen and Wake, for example. Lancaster is especially insightful when discussing Australian women artists who spent varying periods of time in France through analyses of their autobiographical writings, diaries and even letters these women wrote to friends and relatives in Australia. The chapter on Stella Bowen is especially strong, as the material is rich, Bowen's writing

persona vibrant and honest and her life in Europe gripping. Lancaster's book is a labour of love and is marked by a deep sense of admiration for her subjects' risk-taking *personae*, for their exhilarating and messy lives, and the unpredictability of their daily experiences. In "Digger Nurses, the Western Front," the chapter she devotes to nurses who spent time in WWI, the material is "intimately revelatory" in Lauren Berlant's words, and captures the unique ways in which the self is shaped by often traumatic but also pleasurably memorable life experiences. While the chapters on the fictional writing of Tasma and Stead fail to produce the same level of insight and subtlety, as a whole this is the kind of study that will amply reward its readers.

Susan Lever's *David Foster: The Satirist of Australia* is an equally timely study of Foster's entire oeuvre to date, but as in the case of Lancaster and Dibble here too the tone at times is a bit too deferential. Lever is right to argue that Foster's work deserves greater critical attention than it has received to date; but to say that its intellectual and aesthetic complexity eludes most critics is to over-simplify the issue. There are many reasons why certain writers "go out of fashion," not least their own propensity to alienate the very public who reads their work and supports their artistic vision. Foster's writing can be intellectually provocative, ambitious in form and subversive in its treatment of complex themes and issues. And satire, his preferred *modus operandi*, is notoriously slippery as a form. But his work is also so obsessively concerned with the performance of a peculiar mindset in Australian society as to position itself at the most irrelevant margins of its cultural maps. Lever seeks to counter the veil of silence that shrouds Foster's writing through readings that are critically informed, imaginative and insightful. For this alone the book is a worthy enterprise and a genuine contribution to contemporary Australian historiography. For example, the decision to place the novels side by side with a series of essays that Foster himself has closely aligned with his creative work creates some interesting echoes and underpins some of the most polemic critical observations. Lever writes with authority and deep knowledge, in part the product of her long engagement with Foster's writing.

However it is hard not to let the unreconstructed narrow-mindedness Foster's non-fiction proffers overwhelm works of fiction that might otherwise have managed to go on to tease and taunt their readers, and through the latter's uncomprehending resistance to elicit original and intellectually gratifying responses. However, to be faced with the obvious links between the vitriol Foster likes to dish out in his non-fictional essays as the outpourings of an alienated soul and his imaginative writing is to see

the integrity of the latter undermined and compromised. Foster's growing sense of living in a state of siege, exiled in his own country because of his gender and of his skin colour, a man assailed at different points by women, gays, "multiculturalists" and Indigenous Australians, possibly also by the weather, has led to much cloyingly self-pitying nonsense. As a reader, I struggled to respond to Lever's meticulous and scholarly study of Foster's writing; her insistence on taking the reader from the novels back to Foster the man leads to a sense of critical schizophrenia that I felt I could not overcome. Ultimately, Susan Lever's critical skill, her patience and obvious analytical sensitivity simply could not make Foster or his work any more appealing, and I found myself, repeatedly, returning to Leigh Dale's comment that men like Foster love playing at being victims, a view that Lever quotes but clearly disagrees with.

The last of the works I have been tempted to place under the life writing category, though loosely understood, is Catharine Lumby's *Alvin Purple*. This is a study of the film by that name rather than of a "real AP", though the point of the book is that for a generation of Australian men and women *Alvin Purple* gained a unique sense of embodiment in a society caught up in challenging currents of social and political change. Lumby aims to place the film in the period of its production, and explores its reception and circulation partly to gauge the political temperature of a particular period of Australian culture. She writes: "*Alvin Purple* is a film that arrives on the brink of enormous social change but before the broader Australian public had processed their own positions on issues around sexual liberation and feminism". However, she also notes that "it would be a mistake ... to read too much social or political comment into the movie, despite the radical and avant-gardist pedigree of many involved in its production. But it is, in hindsight ... a valuable document of a particular moment in Australian film-making". Lumby's investigation of the film's outrageous treatment of gender roles is thus done with reference to what she sees as a quest by the film-makers for a form capable of taking Australian cinema out to a public yet to be persuaded of the value of home-grown product. Lumby suggests that Tim Burstall was determined to show to others as much as to himself that it was possible to create work with popular appeal and artistic integrity. To an extent he succeeded but the critical response and the vocal debates the film occasioned about censorship, changing social mores and the evolving power dynamics between men and women, not least in matters of sex and love, meant that *Alvin Purple* was immediately swept up in a whirl of ineffective controversy and noise. Lumby's study offers a thorough and critically provocative analysis of the film as an artefact, of

the networks of power and influence that framed it and of the limitations it exposes in the Australian collective psyche.

Philip Mead's *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian Poetry* (Australian Scholarly Publishing) is the result of its author's "equal fascination with poetic language and with the networks of culture and history within which it lives." It is impelled by a desire to understand how poetry is linguistically embedded, and politically, institutionally, and so on. As Mead points out, one way of speaking of this web of relations might be to consider it a "discourse" but the term is now so weighed down with meaning as to be virtually meaningless. At another level, inextricable from the latter aim, the book's attention to poetry as an activist genre seeks to highlight its value as a thing of beauty. By insisting on a reading that places the poetic work in open dialogue with the material and ideological forces that frame it, the book ultimately underlines the relevance of verse as a cultural form. In the words he borrows from the American poet, Lyn Hejinian, "Poetry [...] takes as its premise that language is a medium for experiencing experience." This is a serious intervention in Australian letters, offering a series of erudite and conceptually very sophisticated readings of a number of influential and often contentious twentieth-century Australian poetic texts. Mead's obvious passion for the material, combined with an authoritative view of the field and his ability to cross-reference between Australian, American and British poetry and literary criticism means that there is hardly a dull moment in this book. Mead posits the book as a step in the articulation of "a small, fragmentary contribution to a less conventionally 'literary,' and in fact largely unwritten project, the sociolinguistic history of language art in Australia (theoretical and applied)." In *Networked Language* he succeeds admirably, producing six essays dealing with verse as diverse as that of Kenneth Slessor, James McCauley, Judith Wright, Lionel Fogarty and πo. In the process he creates a map for what might be described as Australia's long twentieth literary century, a project echoed in the book in a reference to Deleuze's own acknowledgement of Bergsonian *durée*. This is not an easy read, for Mead's writing is theoretically dense and critically challenging. However, the persistent and discerning reader will be rewarded by a critical study of Australian poetry that is simultaneously original, gutsy and generous.

Among the miscellany received by *Westerly* this year there are a number of unusual contributions that do not fit easily in any particular category. Cameron Raynes's *The Last Protector: The Illegal Removal of Aboriginal Children from their Parents in South Australia* is one such work, an earnest and painstakingly researched study of William Richard Penhall, a devoted

functionary whose actions resulted in so much suffering among Indigenous Australians in South Australia. Penhall was the last Aboriginal Protector in South Australia, between the years of 1939 and 1953 a force that determined with unflinching brutality and cold-heartedness the fate of countless Indigenous Australians. At seventy six pages this is a short book, a passionate polemic, but it is also so tiresomely repetitive that it feels as if it might never end. Given that so much of that knowledge is anything but new, this is the kind of work preaching to the converted while doing little to persuade those who will always refuse to see in Australia's treatment of Indigenous peoples a betrayal of basic human values. After all, it is worth recalling the mood of the period in which the actions Raynes finds so objectionable took place; perhaps far more shocking is how in recent years such actions have once again emerged as justifiable by governmental structures that remain primarily concerned with performing the deeds of a hegemonic whiteness. "Sorry" has a long way to go.

In *//Creative\_ecologies// where\_thinking\_is\_a\_proper\_job* John Howkins draws on the scientific understanding of ecology as "the study of relationships between organisms and the environment, which probably includes other organisms. An *eco-system* is an ecology of several different species living together" to explore the synergies between art and science, creativity and innovation. Howkins is concerned also with the structural and material networks that underpin creativity and innovation, ranging from institutional settings to the way individuals access, process and generate knowledge and creativity. While he does not set them in terms of a dichotomy, and might even be said to differentiate between knowledge and creativity, there is a sense in which they are inextricable. As he asserts in "New\_Places, New\_Policies," "A government's job is to know and control, but creativity is often not knowable and never controllable". Although the book seems designed with the academic market in mind, it is also a valuable contribution to the study and theorisation of "creative industries". Ultimately Howkins seeks to get to grips with how certain ideas and movements emerge and flourish, and others do not. Some of the issues he raises are especially topical in a world obsessed with objectives and outcomes, suggesting that true creativity is the product of imaginative processes – "thinking", as he puts it, "is a proper job".

John Rainford's *Consuming Passions: Australia and the International Drug Business* is a lively and informed story of the murky business of drugs. Rainford focuses as much in the drugs that make the 6 o'clock news as on the banal and perhaps far more pernicious trade in legal drugs. As he convincingly shows, this is indeed big business and not a pretty one either.



The key difference is that “[t]he market in illicit drugs operates in the same way that markets in other commodities operate” and the “degree of risk” varies. Rainford’s book offers a comprehensive exploration of how Australia and Australians engage in the business of drugs, legal and illegal, as well as of the equally labyrinthine economic and political structures that frame it. He is especially good at situating the debate about drugs within broader concerns that relate to political and economic power blocs, and aims in this way to argue that there is a close link between control over drugs and drugs as a form of control.

Colin Dyer’s *The French Explorers and Sydney* is one of those books that settler societies are wont to generate, yet another layer in the narrative of the white nation, variously refocused and rewarding. Through a reading of the writings of French sailors who visited Sydney over a period of many years Dyer in turn produces a history of Sydney’s growth from a campsite-like settlement to a vibrant, busy and sophisticated town that leaves lasting impressions on many of the visitors. Time and again the French visitors write of Sydney’s beauty, of the striking growth they notice between visits and, most of all, they remark on the hospitality of Sydneysiders and the elegance of their lifestyles. As a narrative conceit, the use of Sydney as a focal point on which to anchor the vast body of material Dyer draws on works well, the growth of the settlement providing simultaneously a foil for a detailed and insightful discussion of the relationships between the residents of Sydney and the visiting French. Through detailed analyses of the writings of French explorers such as Lapérouse, Bougainville and Freycinet, to name but the best-known among a large cast of French travellers moving through Sydney Dyer shows the differing viewpoints on matters of politics, culture, social mores and, indeed, etiquette. The French are less than impressed with the treatment of convicts, too, though for their part the English are shocked when they hear reports that one particular French expedition shot at a group of Indigenous Australians. Generally, the mood is one of mutual admiration, with one René Primavère Lesson asserting that “everything we saw in the settlements of New South Wales [*la Nouvelle-Galles du sud*] gave us a wonderful idea of the English genius for colonization”. He goes on, lavishing his praise on the spirit Joseph Conrad too would come to celebrate, only then with reference to Africa: “This nation’s understanding and organisation of the smallest details needed for the success of a civilisation, implanted onto shores once inhabited only by poor wretched people [*les peuples misérables*], deserve sincere praise”. [sic]

To see the above books as generally representative of non-fiction published in 2008–2009 might be a stretch, but it reflects a general mood in the field that is as capacious as it is unpredictable.

## NON-FICTION RECEIVED 2008–2009

*Those marked with an asterisk are mentioned in the above review.*

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\*Beazley, Kim E.. *Father of the House: The Memoirs of Kim E. Beazley*. Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2008.

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\*Dibble, Brian. *Doing Life: A Biography of Elizabeth Jolley*. Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2008.

\*Dyer, Colin. *The French Explorers and Sydney*. St. Lucia: Queensland University Press, 2009.

Fox, Michael Allen. *The Remarkable Existentialists*. Amherst: Humanity Books, 2009.

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\*Hartley, John. *//the\_uses\_of\_digital\_literacy//*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009.

\*Howkins, John. *//Creative\_ecologies// where\_thinking\_is\_a\_proper\_job*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009.

\*Lancaster, Rosemary. *Je Suis Australienne: Remarkable Women in France 1880-1945*. Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2008.

\*Lever, Susan. *David Foster: The Satirist of Australia*. Youngstown, New York: Cambria Press, 2008.

\*Mead, Philip. *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian Poetry*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008.

\*Rainford, John. *Consuming Passions: Australia and the International Drug Business*. Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2008.

\*Raynes, Cameron. *The Last Protector: The Illegal Removal of Aboriginal Children from their Parents in South Australia*. Kent Town, South Australia: Wakefield Press, 2009.

Rickels, Laurence A.. *The Devil Notebooks*. Minneapolis and London: Minnesota University Press, 2008.

Wickström, Owe. *The Icon in My Pocket*. Strathfield: St. Pauls Publications, 2008.

## THE JACKET

on the chair  
there's a filthy spring jacket  
light enough  
to catch every stray hair

a landscape  
deep with ridges  
from weeks spent crushed  
into couch cushions, an ant might  
spend a season in exile  
dragging a single  
crumb like penance

how important tomorrow  
becomes, for the mooses  
of this desert is  
your jacket, its pockets  
full of stubs and receipts

I could map out  
days and weeks, movies  
you've seen, coffee  
at hudson's and gelati  
for summer

in the jacket  
you linger in traces  
and I rake them with my hands,  
collect every scent.

# BENJAMIN CORNFORD

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## FIRST HARVEST

I saw my first harvest today  
– it was all dust and sunset.  
On a byroad to Grantchester Village  
in a leonine August, I halted  
my bicycle. Wheels still, saddle-seated,  
air like a malty basket;  
in its belly plumes of chaff.  
Lengthwise and widthways  
the land spread, ruched, in low undulations.  
On the one side, the grass green and trodden, full of cattle;  
from the other blew a dry, oily meal wind  
– the husk and raw of severed wheat.

Yellow sky, yellow field. A far off machine  
– like a child's plaything – rolled its scythe;  
funnel pumped seed into the dump.  
Closely huddled were the waiting fecund heads,  
their fattening done. As the broken  
stalk and stem-stump wake expanded,  
I was minded of a rending imperfection.  
How even the agents of ruin  
are picturesque.

## THE MOMENT IN THE DRAUGHTY CHURCH AT SMOKEFALL

He doesn't remember the climb being so precarious. Looking up, he considers the unevenness of the ancient cobbles, the steps with no handrail, the ache of his bunions and bad choice of shoes. As a boy he would make the climb to the church of Santa Maria Del Soccorso barefoot and in less than half an hour. But at seventy-five he knows he will have to spend most of the afternoon on the trek, stopping far more often than he really wants to survey the hills panting in the sun, the huddles of buildings wedged like ticks in their folds, all the time thinking of the pumice of his tongue and the grind of his petrified knees. He will listen to the steady pulse of the crickets keeping the afternoon alive and worry about the dubious beat of his own heart rattling in his throat.

He hadn't imagined it would be so physical, such a constant companion, this business of dying. Like someone unsavoury reading over your shoulder on the bus. His breath tastes permanently of old pennies and his skin seems to secrete the scent of boiled asparagus. Even his extremities no longer feel his own, like he is already dead around the edges. Perhaps that is why he has come back to the beginning – to make the end a little easier to bear.

He traces the wispy line of the river winding through the valley, a silver hair left behind on a sofa. Elizabeth had always wanted to visit Italy, to see where he grew up, but he never did bring her. There were always good excuses: the children, the cost, so much of Australia to see on their doorstep. But now he would have liked to watch her face squinting up at the bell tower slapped against the summer sky, or looking down on the tumble of rooftops in the village below. His eyes follow the patchwork of terracotta until he fancies he can see the roof of the old house in Via Garibaldi, until he is staring through the distortions of the ancient glass at his mother creaking in the walnut chair, nursing his new brother. There is mirth in

her black eyes and he can almost feel the liquid tremble of her laugh, as he leans against her belly to suckle at her other breast, the milk bursting tepid and sweet against the back of his throat.

He stops for water at the roadside shrine of Santa Lucia. The statuette under her stone arch has recently been whitewashed and in her hand a plastic, battery-operated candle flickers weakly in the afternoon sun. She is his namesake. "The Saint of Light shines through you, Lucio," his father liked to tell him randomly, while they were laying corn to dry or stacking firewood under the eaves of the pig house. "The night you were born, the Madonna of Succor smiled down on me from her litter during the Festa. She told me I would have a son who would shine with the pious light of Santa Lucia."

A shining, exemplary life. Is that what he has led? He thinks of all the years behind the Formica at the Deli in Brookvale, slicing salami for young Australian housewives dreaming of Mario Lanza and thinking themselves a little adventurous. Perhaps he did shine for one or two of them, although not in the way his father had envisaged. He prefers to remember the story his mother whispered to him when he dreamed of blindness and cried out in the dark. Her lips on his ear, she would tell how she had climbed the mountain at Colle Lungo with him swaying in her belly, just to smell the living rock of the cave and taste the mossy water of its natural spring. Cupping her mouth under the stream, she had felt water fill her shoes and saw them steaming in the freezing December air. Alone, she delivered him into the blanket of dusk, while across the valley she watched the trembling snake of lanterns winding up the mountain to the Church of Santa Maria del Soccorso for the Festa. He was her light, her Lucio, she told him. She brought him down the mountain in the dark and he lit her from within.

He looks at the Church of Santa Maria squatting stubbornly above him on the hilltop, the clouds and time rolling on behind it. Its immutable, looming presence exhausts him more than the climb itself. He leans back against the cool stone of the shrine and listens to the sawing complaints of a donkey rising up from the valley. At his feet a column of bull ants is circling a discarded peach stone.

In the honeycomb light of morning he would squat in the Vigna Alba, lining Father Ruggiero's willow baskets with fig leaves. Wedged in the fork of a peach tree, his father would twist off the fruit with woody fingers and roll them, precious as eggs, into his palms. He would imagine those stiff hands growing gnarled and ancient from the branches, would will his father to turn to wood and disappear into the hoary trunk. But when he looked up again, there he was, industrious and sullen, not leaving a single

split fruit for the ants, never stopping to let either of them taste the orange flesh. Afterwards, Lucio would be sent to Santa Maria's to deliver the basket to Father Ruggiero. More than once, stamping up the track, he had gorged himself, biting into the velvet skins two at a time, choking on the juice and his own breathless anger. Later, at evening Mass, he would not take communion and looked away when the padre placed the wafer on his father's cracked tongue, still tasting the yeasty sweetness on his own.

His father left the village for the first time in his life, marching under the flag of the axe and rods. He could not single out his face among the lines of men being blessed by Father Ruggiero in the piazza. He could think only of the empty pocket of his father's new uniform, the space where his gift should have been: the perfect ripe peach wrapped in a fig leaf and cradled in his hand all the way to the piazza. He had wanted to run up and press it into the bark of his hands, but the sun flashed on the lines of new boots and liquefied the cobbles until all he could see was the flag tugging impatiently at the air. As the soldiers moved out along the Viale Roma, he had squeezed the peach in his fist. The juice had dribbled down the backs of his bare legs and dried sticky in the wind.

Halfway up the track to Santa Maria's, he reaches the boulder of split granite. His shirt clings with sweat and his legs tremble beneath him. He steadies himself, placing his hands on either side of the fissure in the enormous rock. *Rocca del Spacone*, they had called it – Braggart's Rock. It was his brother's game. "Sono Re!" he pants into the crack, "I am king!" And Thomasino's voice, high and still unbroken, answers back across the years, "Salta! Salta, Re!" Of course, the king had to jump. It had been worth their endless errands up the mountain, loaded with fruit baskets or sacks of vegetables for Father Ruggiero. The King of the Mountain had to climb the split rock and jump into the scree twelve feet below, rolling with the cuts and bruises. That was how they had found the ammunition left behind by the Germans. It was their secret, their one toy. They would squat, the two of them, across the split in the stone platform, the languid valley breathing below and the line of bullets winking, complicit in the sun. Only a true king had the skill and the courage to smash a bullet with a rock thrown from his bare hands. When the explosion bounced back at them from the valley, the ravens chasing the echo and the quail beating out their applause from the nodding grasses, they felt they had the power of kings, standing up there with the world coming alive before their eyes.

He calls a little louder, now that his legs have become solid again. "Sono Re!" But this time there is no echo. Only Thomasino's eyes staring back at him, wide as a snared hare. His brother's arm had pumped glossy rivu-

lets of blood which snaked between the rocks, copying the river below. An American soldier had snatched them down. He remembers his hair, yellow as maize and the jacket of his uniform thrown inside-out at his feet. In the lining under the arms there were dark wet circles and, on one side, a small tear. Lucio had stitched and re-stitched it with imaginary thread. When he could look up again, he saw the soldier pissing on Thomasino, pissing all over the raw stump of arm and into the pools of blood that curdled in the dust. Just as Thomasino was folding into the chalk road, the soldier had scooped him up around the waist and run the rest of the way to Santa Maria's, the boy swinging limp as dead quarry under his arm.

The Virgin of Succor had watched Lucio, vague and expressionless. He had sat at her feet listening to the silence rising up from Father Ruggiero's rooms and sucking on the brown bar the American had given him. It was sweet as honey and sultry as the dregs of the coffee the padre used to drink with the Germans. He let it melt on his tongue like the communion wafer, but it felt warm and comforting and wrong. He wanted her to look wrathful as a powerful Queen should, or draw him to prayer with a mother's soft look. But she didn't. Afterwards, under a pale fingernail of moon rising in the watery sky, he had vomited into the lake behind the church. On the way down the mountain, the American spoke to him in a soft voice, but he didn't understand a word.

The heat of the afternoon bears down on him like a burden. On the ribbon of track winding below, he watches a willow basket swaying rhythmically towards the village. Underneath it a woman intermittently sings the chorus of an American pop song in unintelligible English. She has been collecting snails. Elizabeth would always order the polenta with snails and wild mushrooms at *Fellini's*, urging him to taste it every time, but he never could stomach the irony of war food becoming a delicacy. On the slope below, the long grasses exhale, the crickets are silent and the world stops turning.

His mother would sing at harvest time, strange songs in the mountain dialect. The harvest before the Germans left, she put his father's scythe in his hands and rocked him in her solid arms, teaching him the rhythm of the *raccolto*. He had felt glad then that his father was on the other side of the world. His mother kept the letter from the POW camp at Hay tucked behind the picture of the Weeping Heart of Jesus. In the letter his father told him to remember communion and to ask Father Ruggiero to watch over them. He was to pray to the Virgin and Santa Lucia to become a guiding light for Thomasino and the children of the village. At night he would hold a candle to the frail envelope and wonder whether the water



stains were his father's tears or just the rain, the elements of countless countries as it travelled across the world.

It had been a good harvest that year. Father Ruggiero held a Mass and asked Santa Maria to deliver it from the Nazis. Afterwards the padre had asked his mother if she could not spare two more sacks of maize. Back down the mountain, they watched the rest of their crop disappearing down the Viale Roma in the back of a German truck. He prayed to the Madonna to help him shine, but he knew it was just the habit of words. When you were hungry prayers tasted bitter.

At the Festa of Light that December, Father Ruggiero had asked him to carry the Virgin's litter. He wanted to feel grown up and proud, but he knew that he and a few scrawny kids were all that were left since the older boys had been taken in the Nazi recruitment. In the clean night with its lacing of frost his stomach creaked louder than his shoes along the frozen mud of the lake. A group of German soldiers were stamping the ground like horses and he could see their white breath in light of the lanterns. His mother nodded at him as the procession passed. The Virgin on her dais surveyed him blankly, her skin pearlescent beneath the golden coronet of rubies that flashed red as coals, black as blood.

She was stripped of her crown that night. After mass, Father Ruggiero closed the vestry door on him and he stood watching the torches floating down the mountain, waiting for his mother to come forward from the blackness. A dog howled in the valley and the icy night cracked in two, as if the beginning and the end of something had come at once. His fear drew him to its source among the naked chestnuts. At first he thought the soldier was stabbing his mother, her body rocked so violently against the tree, her mouth slack, her head lolling backwards. But the soldier's grunts subsided and she pulled away, letting her skirts fall and her eyes open. Lucio watched her walking alone towards the dark bulk of the church, while he stood with his lantern among the trees.

No one in the village knew for sure who took the crown, so they blamed the Germans. After all, they had taken everything else. But Father Ruggiero never did leave him alone again as he prepared the silver censers in the vestry. He didn't care. They had food on their plates after the Festa that year. His mother would hum and rock on her heels as she stirred the polenta or kneaded gnocchi and he would think of the Loaves and the Fishes when he and Thomasino delivered bowls to half of the houses in the Via Garibaldi. Sometimes he even sensed a faint glimmer of light within himself.

Long after Liberation, when the days and nights had begun to follow each other again without notice, he came home from school and found his father kneeling at the Weeping Heart of Jesus, the rosary turning in his wooden fingers. In the kitchen he saw his mother with her head bowed over the sink, struggling to breathe. The next day, his father had taken him door-to-door asking their neighbours for money, calling on their love of the Virgin, their pride in the village, their own self-respect. His father wrote the donation of each family in his little pocket book, like a tax collector. Only Assunta Onorati, who had lost three sons in North Africa and two grandsons to the partisans, stood square and silent in her door. As they turned away, the old woman's voice rumbled like gunfire in the mountains, "Plenty of food in Australian prisons, eh Guido?"

On the table his father counted more money than he had ever seen. Lucio watched as he drew an even bigger role of notes from his own pocket and added them to the pile. "Weaving baskets can make a lot of money in the right country," was all he said. He pressed his lips between his teeth for a moment and then bowed Lucio's head with his hands, closing his eyes emphatically, just as Father Ruggiero did when he wanted him to pray for forgiveness. In the kitchen, a pan clattered and rang on the flagstones. Through the door Lucio could see his mother on her knees, running her hands through the passata, smearing it over the stone and up the cracked walls as she sobbed.

His father went to Rome to collect the new crown. He had over a million Lire rolled up to look like a *panino* in his pocket. Afterwards he said the jeweller looked him up and down and complained because he thought the notes smelled of salami. He would have liked that, his father. Christ was just a peasant, after all. And he would have liked that it was drizzling slightly that year at the Festa as he solemnly handed the coronet to the Bishop of Segni, the rain dripping down his neck and running into the sleeves of his uplifted arms, the jewels shining through it all. But all Lucio saw was the Virgin's face, languid and apathetic underneath.

It was all he could see then and it is all he can see now as he leans in the draughty doorway, breathing in the damp stone and feeling the years come and go with each trembling rise of his chest. It is just the two of them, now. She is not conscious of the past or the future. She looks down, but not quite at him in particular. He might be one of a million motes of dust spiraling at her feet, or a mosquito buzzed into the musty quiet from the throb of summer outside. He looks up at her ageless face, her radiant skin, the slender grace of her figure under the blue robes. She is timeless. No one can touch her. How could she ever understand the conflicts of the

world of men or of the human heart? He shudders and coughs, the sweat chill on his skin in the dank air. He is dying around the edges, dying right at her feet and she looks on, oblivious. She always has.

Behind her through the high windows he can see the honey light turning smoky. He moves towards her. He wants to get it done before nightfall. He wants to feel the gold, cold and solid in his hand as he takes the crown from her head; he wants to watch the rubies blink in the last of the sun outside; to see the grey glass of the lake shatter as it hits the water. But most of all he wants to watch each ripple fanning out from the circle of gold as it sinks to the silent depths.

# SHEVAUN COOLEY

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## LACRIMIS SIMONIDES

*Simonides of Keos, 556BC–468BC, was a poet renowned for his moving elegies, so much so that an elegy was sometimes referred to by later writers, such as Catullus, as lacrimis Simonides, or the tears of Simonides.*

On the city bus, today,  
I saw your childhood best friend, red-haired,  
in a nice shirt, and thought, too quickly,  
of the story he'd told of the two of you –  
how, with a new crossbow, you decided to experiment  
firing straight upwards. With enough power,  
two kids could have split troposphere, stratosphere,  
mesosphere, thermosphere;  
it was a good experiment,  
until an arrow landed deep in the earth  
at your feet.

I think he stopped crying to tell the story.  
And surely we all thought the same thing;  
that to have you this long  
may have been a miracle,  
and also we wanted to laugh.

It's a small city, stepbrother, at times.  
Your friend stepped off the bus for a moment  
to let others alight, and I touched him  
on the sleeve, uncharacteristically.  
You see it now, stepping out into it –  
the cranes and their great hooks

hauling up the air, and the new cavities  
of knocked-down buildings, everywhere,  
as if we too wanted to make more room  
in the sky.

## EMU IN THE SKY

because our dreams  
were always linear  
our markers white  
we only saw the crux  
(a dot-to-dot for balladeers  
and madding flag wavers)

because our dreams  
were white lines  
we did not see  
a beaked nebula  
and neck stretched  
along the milky way

because our dreams  
were white fences  
we did not see  
a mounded lacuna  
and legs trailed  
between stars

we did not see  
a great emu in the sky

## DOROTHY HEWETT'S PATHS TO *THE CHAPEL PERILOUS*

In 1958, after a silence of over ten years, Dorothy Hewett announced her return to writing with the novel, *Bobbin Up*. Years later she wrote that she had been “silenced by political activism, the deep-seated anti-culturalism and socialist realist dogmas of the Australian Communist Party, plus the terrible struggle to survive.”<sup>1</sup> Once the silence was broken, in the decade following *Bobbin Up* she published numerous poems and stories, many of them going against the grain of those socialist realist dogmas. But she did not, in fact, leave the Party until 1968. What happened in those intervening years that led her finally to renounce her membership, but also enabled her to write again, and prepared her to produce the extraordinary plays and poetry that flowed from her pen during the 1970s?

I am interested in Hewett's transition from a Communist writer in the 1960s to a poet and dramatist recognised (though not always self-identified) as a feminist in the 1970s. This article considers the work she produced in the 1960s in its political and intellectual contexts, and so traces the paths she took towards the achievement of her controversial play of 1971, *The Chapel Perilous*.<sup>2</sup> The play's heroine, Sally Banner, is a social rebel who refuses to bow to the authority figures that loom over her life. She is a bold seeker after intensities of sexual experience, with male and female lovers, and she is a poet, who needs to “answer to her blood direct” and “walk naked through the world.” As a woman, these needs and desires can only bring her trouble. She horrifies her parents and teachers, suffers rejection and disillusionment with her lovers, and the loss of her children. As the play's title suggests, she is on a quest, like the knight seeking the Chapel Perilous,<sup>3</sup> confronting her own weaknesses as well as external dangers. Seeking to escape the shadow of annihilation, she wants to believe in love and poetry. When these fail her, she throws herself into the Communist Party and its dream of a free and equal world.

The parallels with events in Hewett's own early life are evident, and were widely recognised at the time. Yet the play's historical significance was also seized upon: it was "then and now understood as a watershed moment for second-wave feminism in the theatre, and a play that undid and made new the possibilities for a feminine subjectivity in an Australian imaginary."<sup>4</sup>

Hewett's own accounts of her transition from Communism vary. In *Wild Card*, an account of her life up until the late 1950s, when she wrote *Bobbin Up*, she creates a romantic narrative of a sexual and political rebel who always went to extremes,<sup>5</sup> projecting a self that might readily cross over from communism to feminism. Yet her comment quoted above, and others, about having been "silenced" by the Party suggest a deep split between her younger and her older self, and a sudden liberation from the constraints of dogma. Only the opening chapter of a second intended volume of her autobiography, "The Empty Room," was completed before her death, and so we have to work to imagine how she made the transition. It may not have been as dramatic and sudden as all that, however, given the ideological currents flowing around the rebirth of her career as a writer in the 1960s.

### **The Political Context: Communist Intellectuals and the New Left**

In that excerpt from "The Empty Room," which she published in 2000, Hewett recalled how the success of *Bobbin Up* brought her into contact for the first time with a whole community of Marxist writers and intellectuals. She paid tribute to "all the old icons of the left who once came to celebrate the launch of a first novel by a young woman of thirty-five" when she visited Melbourne to publicise the book. These "icons" included Stephen Murray-Smith, Ian Turner, Brian Fitzpatrick, David Martin, John Morrison, Alan Marshall and Aileen Palmer. She had spent her life from the late 1940s to the late 1950s believing that being a writer and being a Communist activist were incompatible. Now, she wrote, "I began to feel culturally deprived," for "a whole period of Australia's literary life had come of age while I, enclosed in my proletarian gulag, had hardly been aware of it".<sup>6</sup>

By 1958, when Hewett met these "icons of the left" in Melbourne, many of them were renegade Communists, having left the Party after Russia crushed the Hungarian uprising, and Khrushchev attacked Stalin's crimes and the "cult of personality" surrounding the former leader. Ian Turner, then secretary to the Australasian Book Society, was expelled, and *Overland* editor Stephen Murray-Smith left in sympathy. Aileen Palmer was still a member but her sister Helen had been expelled for publishing her magazine, *Outlook*, without the Party's permission.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, among



the “proletarian gulag” that Hewett inhabited in Sydney only Frank Hardy appears in her memories of the period as a Communist intellectual, one who encouraged her to write, and who at times criticised the Party line, especially on cultural matters. However he did not turn in his Party card in the late 1950s, and nor did Dorothy Hewett.

What Hewett did do, however, was just as momentous for her: she revolutionised her personal and intellectual life. She left the home she had shared in Sydney with fellow Communist Les Flood, scene of the “terrible struggle to survive” that she describes in the second half of *Wild Card*, and took their three sons with her back to Perth. Her family helped her to settle there, and she returned to the University of Western Australia to complete the degree she had abandoned in 1942. She met up again with Merv Lilley, whom she had first encountered on the triumphant visit to Melbourne when *Bobbin Up* was published. They married and had two daughters. In 1965 Dorothy was appointed to a teaching position in the English Department where she remained until the family left Perth for Sydney in 1973.

At first she had no contact with the local Communist Party in Perth (from which she had made a “scandalous departure” ten years before). Her new love was also a writer and a Communist, though the Party disapproved of him as a bit of an anarchist.<sup>8</sup> His apostasy evidently suited Dorothy very well: she was no longer constrained to prove herself as a perfect cadre, although her loyalty to the idea of socialism remained. She read voraciously, mostly literature but also Marxist cultural theory. Ian Syson, who found some of her unpublished essays of this period, concludes that the Communist Party of Australia was eventually “not Marxist enough for Hewett, and this was revealed to her in its attitude towards cultural matters”.<sup>9</sup> Before going on to consider how her ideas developed during the 1960s, we should consider the broader political climate.

Communist parties in the West underwent significant changes in the 1960s. They were affected by the movement now known as the New Left, when many intellectuals left the Party but maintained an allegiance to Marxist ideas, returning to the founding texts to undertake their own readings of Marx, and other writers long outlawed by the Party, such as Trotsky and Gramsci. This loose alliance of non-Party Marxists and left-wing social democrats was represented in Australia by *Outlook*, Helen Palmer’s journal, and the later-established *Arena*.<sup>10</sup> With the New Left came the possibility of distancing the socialist project from Soviet Communism. Within Communist parties the Sino-Soviet split produced conflicts of loyalty, and some national parties began to move away from Moscow’s stranglehold on their

policies. In many places a process of reconstruction began, which accelerated after 1968, the year of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to crush the “Prague Spring” liberalisation, and also the year of the “events of May” in France that announced a new kind of Left activism independent of the Communist Party. **By the end of the 1960s there were many more Marxists outside the Communist parties than in them.**

In Australia, a split in 1963 resulted in the formation of a breakaway pro-China CPA (Marxist-Leninist). The Communist Party of Australia’s gradual assertion of independence from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union dramatically intensified in 1968, when the leadership’s pro-Dubcek stance led to a strong condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. This aroused the hostility of a previously silent opposition within the Party, and eventually **resulted in a split in 1971 between the Communist Party of Australia which was in the process of reforming along New Left lines and a pro-Soviet Socialist Party of Australia.** While this reconstruction was initially driven by the desire to develop a Party more responsive to Australian conditions, interested in the Italian model of socialist pluralism and even a parliamentary presence for the Communist Party, it was soon swept up into the broader social and political radicalisation that marked Australia after 1965. The anti-Vietnam war movement, student radicalism, a revived struggle for Aboriginal rights and the new Women’s Liberation Movement, together transformed political opposition into an extra-parliamentary force to be reckoned with. Communist activists of various hues were a presence in all these movements, despite the majority of their participants’ lack of interest in working-class politics and suspicion of any kind of organisation as “Stalinist”.<sup>11</sup>

The anti-war and anti-conscription movement made leftist politics more populist than they had been since World War II, with a strong emphasis on grass-roots organisation as well as the international scope required by its anti-imperialism.<sup>12</sup> In terms of political traditions, the early Women’s Liberation Movement in Australia grew out of the radical student movement and opposition to the war in Vietnam, and had earlier links with union – and extra-union – activism for equal pay. It was at times aligned with the extra-parliamentary Left, the Communist Party and Trotskyist groups.<sup>13</sup> **Because of these links between the political Left and Women’s Liberation, in the early 1970s the meanings of “Marxist” and “feminist” in Australia were far from incompatible.** This has a particular bearing on later analyses of Hewett’s work, which have been described by Nicole Moore as **“a critical scramble for Hewett as either feminist or Marxist, and never**

both, a stalemate that resulted in the separation of Hewett's work into two parts: that completed before 1968, when she left the Party, and work done after that".<sup>14</sup>

The Women's Liberation Movement also grew out of a decade of fierce debates about censorship, particularly of sexual matters, and initially it had strong links with the sexual liberation movement of that time. This meant that the sexual freedom practised by Hewett's dramatic heroines like Sally Banner of *The Chapel Perilous* was readily greeted as a forerunner of Women's Liberation, whatever her creator might have intended. It was ironic that this work by an ex-Communist who had rejected any idea of writing a thesis-play was seen as a statement of women's liberation, but on sex and marriage Hewett's views were easily unconventional enough to qualify. She told an interviewer in 1969 that marriage can be an escape from the real world for young women, that sex without love is fine, and indeed "if you've been a promiscuous girl you're more likely to have a happy marriage".<sup>15</sup> Such a public statement from a Communist Party member would have been unthinkable ten years earlier.

Despite this radicalisation both within and outside of the Communist Party, the events of 1968 spelled the end of her long commitment to the Party for Dorothy Hewett. On 30 May she wrote to her friend David Martin in Melbourne: "My disillusionment with the world of politics grows deeper while I sense that your feelings David are undergoing some sort of mellowing". In a reference to the events of May in Paris, she writes: "A profound pessimism informs everything I think and yet the young are marching and cheering all over Europe. Have I at last grown old ... is it as Yeats says 'Who would have thought that the heart grows old?'" It seems that her "years of Utopian idealism and tender belief" have withered and "I am now as clear eyed and cynical as the 20 year olds I teach every day". She thinks "the Czechs or some of them seem to be the hope of the socialist world".<sup>16</sup> The timing of this letter, between the May uprisings and the Soviet invasion of Prague in August of that year, suggests that the crushing of Czech hopes was the final straw for her.

By that time she had redefined herself as a writer first and foremost, and it seems that she was less interested in the possibilities of developing socialism outside the Soviet model than in the role of writers and the Party's benighted attitudes to cultural matters. Besides, the Party no longer offered the only possible home in a hostile world, as anti-establishment ideas gained popular appeal. Over the ten years between 1958 and 1968, the world changed radically, as did the writer.

### The Intellectual Context of Hewett's Writing in the 1960s

Together with Merv Lilley, Hewett produced a collection of poetry, *What about the People?* (1963), which included many poems and songs of social protest, drawing on older folk ballad traditions. Folk music linked them to a more populist version of socialist struggle that rejoiced in its connection with older rural traditions, discarding Party prescriptions for writing about the urban proletariat.<sup>17</sup> So too did the stories Hewett published during the 1960s in *Overland* and other magazines: these had mostly rural settings and drew on the Lawsonian tradition of Australian fiction. A clue to her thinking at the time comes from her review of *Australasian Poetry 1959*, where she saw “a clear pattern of myth-making,” of reaching “inwards to explore and discover ... the abiding meaning” of events and places in “that frighteningly empty Australian landscape”. This kind of myth-making in poetry goes back to Lawson and Gilmore, she wrote<sup>18</sup> – and clearly it had great appeal for her, as she would demonstrate in poems about her own family such as “Legend of the Green Country”.

Another move to free herself from the prescription that the urban working class was the only proper subject of socialist literature was to forge imaginative links with socialist writers elsewhere. One poem in this book, “My Party,”<sup>19</sup> is a roll-call of writers associated with Communism, but outside of Russia. It is as if Hewett were trying to conjure up a heroic world-wide communism that she could still call home. The opening words are especially poignant in this respect:

I am not alone ... in the beating of my heart  
Are the songs of Lumumba, the poems of Neruda.  
Brecht's lost children wander through the Polish snow,  
'The Rail Splitters Awake' in my heart each morning,  
With Nazrim Hikmet I have seen beautiful days  
And my Party is the Party of Aragon.  
I have loved all beautiful things,  
Flowers and music and Robeson's songs,  
Seeger's guitar and Woody Guthrie singing,  
The Tennessee Valley blooming under his lips... .<sup>20</sup>

This poem was omitted from the *Collected Poems* published in 1994, yet it is a crucial clue as to what kept her commitment going during the 1960s. She would make another visit to Russia in 1965, a deeply disillusioning experience which is reflected in the long poem, “The Hidden Journey”.<sup>21</sup> In this poem, published close to the moment of her resignation from the

Party, the roll-call is of Russian writers who have been persecuted, some of them executed, by the Soviet regime. It is heroism in a different key.

Two previously unpublished essays from the 1960s show Hewett addressing literary issues that preoccupied her.<sup>22</sup> “The Times They are a’Changin” is concerned with the obsolescence of *The Realist Writer* as a separatist publication which attempts “to impose a left sectarian point of view”. While Realist Writers groups and the journal had provided a crucial sense of “identity” and “purpose,” at the same time they became “closed shops” that resulted in “dogmatism” and “kicks and bouquets delivered with embarrassing self-confidence.” She urges “young progressive writers” to join various writers’ groups, to seek help from “some sympathetic older writer” and eventually to send their work “into the market place, to all the journals ... and to take part in the struggle of ideas.” Citing recent issues of *Overland* and *Meanjin*, she notes: “Never has there been such a ferment of anti-establishment ideas.” She lists her own connections with “broad writers’ groups in Perth,” and activities including fund-raising for students charged with burning their draft cards.<sup>23</sup> Anticipating charges from her comrades of biting the hand that once fed her, she ends this article with a call to question the concept of the Realist Writer “as we are questioning so many ideas the left once thought axiomatic.”

The title “Eat Bread and Salt and Speak the Truth” quotes a Russian proverb, which she uses to argue that both political analysis and creative imagination are needed – the first without the second is like bread without salt. She opens with a key quotation from Jack Beasley’s study of Katharine Susannah Prichard: the creation of the revolutionary hero will only be possible “when full expression can be given to imagination, to the emotional faculties.” She accuses realist writers of being afraid to “free their characters to question, suffer and grow,” adding “the taboos against sex operate strongly in this context.” She concludes:

Static characters, soberside Communists, the hero who becomes a flat, non-hero, fear of sex, love, conflict and death, the shrinking away from unpalatable truths, distrust of symbolic language, the smoothing out of contradictions; all these seem to me to be the symptoms of a fatal division between the head and the heart; intuitive imaginative understanding, and broad, honest, intellectual analysis. We have to free ourselves to both think and feel deeply.

These were indeed the qualities of the poetry and drama she would go on to produce, with prominent themes of sex, love, conflict and death, explored in symbolic language.

Letters to fellow Communist David Martin during this period illustrate how she grappled with such issues. She had abandoned “complexity and individualism” in the hope of “the communion with all men,” she wrote, but still her poetry is rejected. Although it is meant to be read aloud, and to work by accumulation “not from paring down,” it attracts “remarks like romanticism and not enough originality of metaphor or triteness of thought or too loose” from someone like *Meanjin* editor Clem Christesen. Hewett blames “our terrible modern mistrust of romanticism” which is really a “terrible mistrust of emotion, of feeling, of faith in life,” something both Left and Right have in common.<sup>24</sup> Her first solo book of poetry, *Windmill Country* (published by *Overland* in 1968) was a reassertion of this faith in romanticism as a style and a stance. In it she added to the ballads a number of overtly autobiographical poems.

In another letter to Martin she refers to having finished a three-act play: “It is a rather odd play, in that I’ve tried to use realism plus symbolism a la O’Casey, which is all that really interests me now.”<sup>25</sup> She worries that it may not be a successful marriage perhaps because of “the hangovers of the naturalistic style.”<sup>26</sup> She is ready now to abandon the “crime of naturalism” for which she had been criticised by comrades who disliked *Bobbin Up*, but not the attention to sexual matters that they particularly objected to.<sup>27</sup> The distinction between realism and naturalism that she had in mind is evident in her 1960 article about Kylie Tennant. She praises *The Battlers* as the best thing Tennant ever wrote, comparing it with Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* for its “romantic realism.” By this Hewett means a “juxtaposition of lyrical romanticism with a kind of hardheaded laconic realism of speech and characterisation,” which enabled Tennant to create heroines out of “battling” men and women. This description could equally well apply to Hewett’s style in *Bobbin Up*, which was by no means orthodox socialist realism. Yet when she goes on to charge that Tennant later allowed herself to be sidelined, as Steinbeck also was, by “the grotesque and the bizarre, the rejects of society,” we can hear a clear echo of the Party line. This is classic 1950s Communist Party scorn for the kind of “naturalism” that took “society’s outcasts” as its subject: socialist heroes must be made out of the respectable working class, not the lumpenproletariat.<sup>28</sup>

Realism, too, would have to be jettisoned before Hewett found her theatrical metier, but not yet. In the meantime she was investigating literary theory. In 1961 she wrote a long letter to Jack Beasley about the need to create “the revolutionary hero or heroine,” where she castigates herself for missing this opportunity with Nell Mooney, the Communist cadre in *Bobbin Up*. Nell “thrust herself out of the body of the book and

began to take on something of the lineaments of ‘a heroine,’” and if her creator had let Nell have her own way she could have given the novel its “poetic and revolutionary centre.” Hewett has been reading Lukacs, probably *Studies in European Realism*, and believes the fragmented form she used in her novel prevented this from happening: “There is something capitalist in this very mode of presentation ..., the fleeting glimpse rather than the built up subtly analysed character (Gorki, Tolstoy, Balzac).”<sup>29</sup> Hewett is getting ready to create dramatic heroes, but perhaps Lukacs’ requirements for realism delayed the development of her distinctive theatrical style, where protagonists are not “built up and subtly analysed” as characters but are larger than life figures, presented through fragmented time frames and a range of non-verbal theatrical devices.

### **Making a Spectacle in the Theatre**

Hewett’s return to university meant that she could read English, Australian and American literature to her heart’s content. She mentions becoming “obsessed with Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Hemingway.” Her letters to David Martin tell of investigating a number of Australian topics for a Masters thesis, at one point “the split between realism and symbolism” in Randolph Stow, at another Vance Palmer’s novels.<sup>30</sup> In the end she seems to have taken Katharine Susannah Prichard’s advice to give up the thesis as it “will not advance you as a writer.”<sup>31</sup> She devoted her time instead to working on a play, which would become *This Old Man Came Rolling Home*. It was at this point in her life that Hewett turned seriously to writing for the theatre. When *This Old Man* was produced in Sydney in 1968, even though it was not conventionally realist, a famous Sydney critic was heard to exclaim as he left, “Old, old, old. Call me a taxi.” Stung, Hewett began to read “all sorts of new playwrights, Europeans in particular” – Brecht, Beckett, Artaud, Orton, Bond, as well as Wedekind and other expressionists.<sup>32</sup>

Theatre was a difficult milieu for a woman dramatist. In a 1980 article about women and writing, she pointed to a long tradition of female stereotypes in theatre, and no tradition of female playwrights to speak of.<sup>33</sup> Yet at the time she was writing *The Chapel Perilous*, her third play, Hewett did not consider such feminist perspectives: rather, she was concerned with the problem of writing plays in Australia.<sup>34</sup> The attempt to do so is “a peculiar form of masochism,” she claimed at the time. In this 1970 article she mulled over the problems of establishing an Australian drama that could without self-consciousness leave behind “the sentimental bloke and the roaring nineties.” At that time the “new wave” of Australian theatre was only just emerging – the Australian Performing Group in Melbourne and

the Nimrod Theatre in Sydney - and in Perth she felt especially isolated: "This is the greatest problem for any Australian dramatist ... where can he work, who can he work with?" She was also concerned with problems of form: neither a tragic nor a comic view of existence would do. The "black comedy" of her new play, *The Chapel Perilous*, was "the only way I know anymore of dealing with emotions and circumstances which are too painful to allow any other kind of discipline but ironic laughter."<sup>35</sup>

She records in this early piece that she had been encouraged by her old friend from university days, then lecturer in Drama, Philip Parsons, who insisted that she "had the sort of imagination that created plays."<sup>36</sup> It had been Parsons' idea to incorporate the New Fortune theatre into the new University of Western Australia Arts building and, as Hewett later recorded, she was inspired by the three-tiered Elizabethan style of this theatre with its large platform stage. It recalled the theatre of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, and also Brecht's boxing ring. This was, for her, "the great uncluttered room of the imagination, the empty room with no curtains to go thump at the end of each act, little or no props, just an empty space inhabited by bodies and words."<sup>37</sup> Theatre in such a space could be free to mix music, dance and song with words, puppets with players, comedy with tragedy, farce and burlesque. These directions she explored in a series of plays: 1969 *Mrs Porter and the Angel*, 1971 *The Chapel Perilous*, 1972 *Bon bons and Roses for Dolly*, 1974 *Catspaw* [a rock musical], 1974 *Joan* [a rock opera], 1974 *The Tatty Hollow Story*, 1976 *The Golden Oldies*, 1978 *Pandora's Cross*, 1979 *The Man from Mukinupin*, and so on through the 1980s.

Philip Parsons would continue to be her most important support in the theatre, giving feedback on her drafts, arranging readings and full productions of her plays, and publishing them in the Currency Press list that he set up in the early 1970s with his wife Katherine Brisbane. These two friends were her crucial link with the theatre world in Sydney, and Aarne Neeme, another of Parsons' protégés, would direct some of the most satisfying productions of her plays, including the inaugural *Chapel Perilous* in Perth. As Dorothy wrote to Philip in 1971: "Just as well the Parsons believe I'm a playwright or I should cease to believe I exist at all. I think I'll go back to writing novels. This is a mug's game."<sup>38</sup> Little did she know at the time that *The Chapel Perilous*, which had premiered in January that year, would rapidly achieve productions in Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney as well, and be published in Currency Press's first list, in 1972. It was a huge success, and made a lasting impact on Australian theatre. It takes pride of place among the seven plays reprinted in the 1997 book *Australian Women's Drama: Texts and Feminisms*, as a founding text of Australian feminist drama.<sup>39</sup>



### ***The Chapel Perilous* and the Moment of Women's Liberation**

Thus it was that in January 1971 at the New Fortune Theatre at the University of Western Australia, a flamboyant figure made her first appearance on the stage: Sally Banner, heroine of *The Chapel Perilous*. "Wearing her hair 'like armour' [she] storms her way to a place in the Australian imagination," an "incandescent heroine," wrote Sylvia Lawson.<sup>40</sup> In a Prologue and two acts, the play covers Sally's life from schoolgirl to woman in her 60s. Its visual and musical elements evoke the passing of time from World War II through the Cold War to the late 1960s "make love not war" era, in a kaleidoscopic presentation of political events and ideas, popular songs and dances. Sally interacts with a series of lovers and power figures (represented on stage as giant puppets), while a chorus offers the outsiders' view of her quest, where she so often flounders: "Poor Sally, she never made it," they sing. There is a repeated contrast between Sally's romantic view of her destiny, her lovers' failure to live up to that view, and society's disapproval or ridicule. At the end she reaches a kind of apotheosis as she makes a gesture of acceptance that is ambiguous enough to be readable as a bow of defeat. Her almost-final words are often quoted: "I had a tremendous world in my head, and more than three quarters of it will be buried with me."

Critics quickly recognised that Sally was a figure of her time, whether they admired or disapproved of the way she was presented and what she represented. Leonard Radic, theatre critic in the Melbourne *Age*, recognised Sally's historic importance: the play is "highly evocative, highly personal," but it goes beyond the autobiographical. It speaks for her generation and later ones too, "a kind of secular Pilgrim's Progress." Sally is "both a rebel and an early women's liberationist" but (he seems relieved to note) Dorothy Hewett "resists the temptation to glorify Sally's attempts at emancipation."<sup>41</sup>

A reviewer wrote of the published play that it was "magnificent in conception," a personal credo that ends with a question mark. In her view, "the theatre of the 1970s is enriched by this play in many ways: by the character of Sally Banner, by poetry, by the sheer massed effect of vast assembled material, by the play's orderly transcendence of the limitations of time and space, by the bid of a woman to speak the naked truth."<sup>42</sup> The *National Times* published a full-page article based on an interview with the playwright, where Kevon Kemp praised Hewett for "starting to put together some sort of a definition of the Australian woman... [S]he is set on a big and lonely task – that of building a realistic notion of what it is like to be a strong and questing woman in Australia, and of the difficulties such a role encounters sexually." *The Chapel Perilous* is a big play, he wrote,

and it “puts modern woman’s problems so directly and freely on stage as to light up the name Hewett along with Greer.” He concluded, with no little patriarchal condescension: “for an enormous population of women it is a work that will make things suddenly and blindingly clear.”<sup>43</sup>

The discursive terms that shape these comments are worth noting – it is not “feminism” but “Women’s Liberation;” and the novelty and boldness of Sally’s quest for sexual freedom, and her desire to speak the truth about her female experience, are the points of interest. This emphasis on Sally’s historical significance has its most eloquent expression in Sylvia Lawson’s Preface to the published play, from which I have already quoted. She makes explicit the difference that “women’s liberation” meant when she writes that: “it is only in an age when emancipation [which meant careers and votes for women] has given place to liberation that the Sally Banners of the world can begin to tell us who they are.” She also took up the implications of the play’s title and drew out its link with the resonant line from Greer’s recently-published *The Female Eunuch*: “It is exactly the element of quest in her sexuality that the female is taught to deny.” Lawson adds:

Dorothy Hewett’s real audacity is that she summons up the whole rich tapestry field of heroes and heroic questing, and by implication insists that a demanding, gifted woman’s confused and confusing experience in the twentieth century can actually be its living equivalent.<sup>44</sup>

### **Feminist Responses to *The Chapel Perilous***

As Women’s Liberation became “feminism” and developed its own ideologies, feminist critics began to distance themselves somewhat from Sally Banner. Anne Summers, in her 1975 landmark book *Damned Whores and God’s Police*, welcomed *The Chapel Perilous* as the single exception to the rule of the silent/absent woman in contemporary Australian drama. She regarded Sally as ultimately “capitulating to the forces that defeat her,” but read her anguish as a pioneering example of a woman expressing “universal problems” without their sounding “incongruous or pretentious.”<sup>45</sup> Carole Ferrier’s 1976 account of Sally’s significance was more critical: she saw Sally’s problem as a female one, not a “universal” one – the difficulty for women to combine writing, political activism and personal relationships. But she was not impressed by Sally’s exceptionalism, by what she saw as Hewett’s ‘essentially individualist view’ that “collective transformation through revolutionary change” is unlikely. This judgement illustrates the kind of socialist-feminist perspective that was common among 1970s Australian Women’s Liberationists.<sup>46</sup>

Different reservations were expressed by students when I taught this play as a text in the late 1970s and 1980s. For many of them, Sally's search for fulfilment in romantic heterosexuality, and her susceptibility to men who used and discarded her, were problematic. How could such a woman be a feminist hero? Wasn't she, rather, complicit with patriarchy? Sally Banner's dramatic role as hero became implicated in the sociological idea of a role model, which was prevalent at the time. Margaret Williams, in her 1992 monograph on Hewett's plays, *The Feminine as Subversion*, also reports that such misgivings about Sally were more often voiced by women than written down. In counteracting their objections, Williams makes good use of the then-new feminist emphasis on women's difference, and of the related recognition that there was no free space outside of patriarchal culture in which to operate: feminists had to work both within and against patriarchy, subverting it at the same time as they sought to create alternative values and practices. *The Feminine as Subversion* argues that "the extreme case is valid... in exploring the frontiers of experience" and that Sally Banner and other Hewett heroines dramatise role-playing as a means for women to explore alternative selves.<sup>47</sup>

In a major collection of essays on Hewett published in 1994, it was possible to place earlier feminist views in a longer perspective. After her prolific publication of poetry as well as theatre works during the 1970s and 80s, the essentially *literary* qualities of Hewett's imagination were by now undeniable. Critics identified her interest in mythologies of the feminine, rather than using a more sociological notion of the ideology of femininity. Considering the five plays Hewett wrote about women in the 1970s, Peter Fitzpatrick noted that whatever her theatre lacked in "ideological soundness," it was "absolutely committed to the experience of its central women. Moreover, it reflected an increasing concern with those ways of feeling and understanding which have always been defined stereotypically as female; they range from the more socialised kinds of intuitive knowledge to forms of magic."<sup>48</sup> Jennifer Strauss, in one of the first sustained discussions of Hewett's practice of self-mythologising, pointed out the "engrained masculinity of the literary patterns of ... the archetype" of the questing hero that Hewett tried to adapt to a female protagonist. She added that the incongruity between "woman" and "quest" cannot be altogether resolved by substituting a female figure in a narrative whose structure is essentially unchanged.<sup>49</sup> In this collection, too, Susan Lever observed that Hewett's writing "criss-crosses the lines of feminist approval, so that she may be seen as both radical experimenter and pioneer, and a reactionary romantic individualist."<sup>50</sup> While this observation

captured the openness of Hewett's text to variant readings, it also alluded to the fact that there was enough diversity in feminism to produce such contrary judgements.

These literary judgments of Sally Banner and *Chapel Perilous* might not have been so polarised if there had been more recognition of the play's theatricality. Peter Fitzpatrick pointed out that Hewett's kind of theatre, although it appeared at the same time as the "new wave" of Australian drama, was nevertheless quite distinct, and remains a challenge to any construction of a canon featuring that new wave (which was made up of male playwrights like Williamson, Buzo, Blair, Hibberd and Romeril). "It has never been comfortably clear what level of reality we were confronting in a Hewett play," he wrote (97). He went on to note that her techniques make her plays especially difficult to analyse as scripts (rather than performances), because musical and visual effects are crucial, and verbally they are rather sparse (98-9): they do not take the more conventional form of "the theatre of meaningful conversation," like David Williamson's plays (113). Sally Banner, for example, is "framed" both physically and verbally in the opening sequences, in a way that sets up an initial barrier to audience identification with her, and even though 'as the action develops the sympathy solicited for her trials and errors make her seem larger than the dramatic world she inhabits,' (108) the initial framing causes audiences to experience ambivalence about the central character and her manifest confusions. There can be no simple embrace or rejection of Sally for the audience who experiences her in action, in the play's performance, Fitzpatrick concluded.

Nevertheless, Joanne Tompkins' feminist analysis of *The Chapel Perilous* as a performance piece rather than a play on the page runs counter to this emphasis on ambiguity.<sup>51</sup> Aiming to re-situate the play as one affirming female resistance rather than confirming oppression, she uses details of the original staging at the New Fortune theatre to argue that the play has a strongly feminist conclusion. It ends with Sally's image in the stained glass window finally being illuminated, so that "Sally has reached the pinnacle of the stage, her likeness towering over the Authority Figures." (53) Tompkins argues that this symbolises a feminist triumph, at least in terms of reversing the hierarchy of patriarchal authority over the female individual. She sees it as a personal triumph that does not require radical change in the social structures that discriminate against women, and identifies it as "a kind of feminism that belongs to the 1960s and 70s." (52) Such an individualist liberal feminist stance was not the predominant one in the Women's Liberation phase of the movement. As I indicated

earlier, in the early 1970s socialist feminism, and an emphasis on sexual liberation, shaped a different climate of ideas. Where social conditions for women were seen as the problem, any individual woman's rebellion, though heroic, would inevitably be compromised, as in Anne Summers' reading of Sally's final gesture.

Nicole Moore's later reading of the play does not try to name the kind of feminism that the play enacts. Rather, she emphasises its caustic, sardonic edge. She suggests that Sally might be seen as standing at the centre of a "solipsistic wheel" of possibilities which she must choose among, but her choices bring only "suffering, humiliation, chastisement." The liberal feminist model of choice is thus, in her view, "lambasted as foolish, as illusory." Yet still Sally haunts the imagination as an image of the complex, contradictory, desiring woman, whose subjectivity is a matter of "re-performance" in multiple subject positions.<sup>52</sup> That *The Chapel Perilous* can be read in such postmodern feminist terms is a tribute to the text's formal inventiveness as well as its political openness.

### **Dorothy Hewett's Feminism**

As Hewett saw herself, she was always a feminist, and she resented being told by the new feminists of the 1970s that "I wasn't carrying the flag at the right angle" – in this respect feminism was too like Communism.<sup>53</sup> She had reservations, now, about any kind of political organisation, and its demands on a writer. She is famous for having intoned, at an Adelaide Writers Week forum on women's writing in 1980: "I fear the habit of the sheltered workshop: its safety and its inevitable, even justifiable, paranoia." This surely alludes to her experience of the Communist Party as inward-looking, a closed shop, as well as suggesting a frequent objection to separatist tendencies in feminism. Yet even as she questioned the very rationale for the women's forum, in the next breath she made a claim that many feminists at the time were wary of: "I suspect that there is a definite feminine sensibility, a certain style, diction, rhythm and flow which is supremely female, and has its own rules of logic and syntax which can enrich and extend the language and experience of the tribe." At the same time she said, "I also know the arguments [in defence of women-only forums]... the constant struggle of women, still, to legitimize their artistic credibility, the limited access to a wide range of male possibilities, the crippling suffocation of the roles imposed upon us."<sup>54</sup>

In fact, she was active in feminist cultural projects. She participated in Sisters Publishing, the women's press set up by Hilary McPhee and Diana Gribble, both as a member of the Board and as a contributor to *Journeys*, the

volume of poems by herself, Judith Wright, Rosemary Dobson and Gwen Harwood, edited by Fay Zwicky.<sup>55</sup> A further indication of the kind of feminism she espoused can be seen in her association with the journal *Hecate* from its very beginning in 1975 until her death in 2002, both as contributor and as the subject of others' attention. *Hecate* was never a separatist journal and always advertised itself as socialist feminist, and this breadth suited Dorothy Hewett well. In 1976 her play, "The Golden Oldies," had its premiere publication in *Hecate*. The journal also published: in 1977 an interview reproduced from the ABC radio program, the Coming Out Show; in 1979, a piece on "Creating Heroines in Australian plays;" poems on at least three occasions in the early 1980s; an interview in the anthology *Hecate's Daughters*; and in 1995, the two previously unpublished essays discussed above.

Hewett was a feminist who criticised separatism but favoured a position of permanent opposition; one who proposed a "feminine sensibility" but never attributed moral superiority to her female characters. Embracing contradictions was ever Dorothy Hewett's style. Her Communist past, and its residue of critical thinking, underpins her capacity to create out of contradictions. In her quest as a writer, her errant path to her own Chapel Perilous, she brought along the best of Marxist thinking as well as her passionate commitment to "free [herself] to both think and feel deeply" and to use all the resources of poetry and theatre in her work. The worst of that earlier experience, the requirement that writers produce ideologically correct work, led her to reject any kind of prescription for artists, and this was a crucial bequest to feminism and women's writing.

## NOTES

- 1 Author's Introduction, *Bobbin Up*, London: Virago, 1985.
- 2 *The Chapel Perilous*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1972.
- 3 From Sir Thomas Malory, *The Tale of King Arthur*, 1485 (cited in *The Chapel Perilous*, 92).
- 4 Nicole Moore, "Dorothy Hewett," in *Companion to Australian Literature*, eds. Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer. New York: Boydell and Brewer/University of Rochester Press, 2007, 321-334, 321.
- 5 Hewett, *Wild Card: An Autobiography 1923-1958*, Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1990, p.175.
- 6 "Excerpt from 'The Empty Room', an autobiography in progress," *Overland*, 160, 2000, 4-10, 9-10.
- 7 "Empty Room," 8.

- 8 Hewett to Jack Beasley, 10 Feb 1961. Jack Beasley papers, National Library of Australia [NLA] MS 9266, Series 1Box 1 Folder 3. The author thanks Kate Lilley, Dorothy Hewett's literary executor, for permission to quote from unpublished materials in this article.
- 9 Syson, "A Note to the Dorothy Hewett essays," *Hecate* 21, 2, 1995, 129.
- 10 Alan Barcan, *The Socialist Left in Australia 1949-59*, APSA monograph 2, 1960.
- 11 Winton Higgins, "Reconstructing Australian Communism," *Socialist Register* 1974, London: Merlin Press, 159-65.
- 12 Peter Beilharz, "A Hundred Flowers Faded" in *Staining the Wattle*, eds Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee, Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1988, 164-72, 166-69.
- 13 See, for example, Ann Curthoys, "A short history of feminism, 1970-1984" in *For and Against Feminism*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988.
- 14 Moore, "Dorothy Hewett," (2007), 327.
- 15 *The Independent Magazine* [Perth] Dec 14, 1969; Hewett Papers, NLA MS 6184, Clippings file, Box 32, folder 3.
- 16 Hewett to Martin, 30 May 1961, David Martin Papers NLA MS 6885 Series 2, folder 6.
- 17 As discussed, for example, in David Carter, "The Story of our Epoch, A Hero of Our Time" in *Frank Hardy and the Literature of Commitment*, eds Paul Adams and Christopher Lee, Carlton North, Vic: Vulgar Press, 2003, 93-6.
- 18 "Mediocre Competence," *Westerly*, n.2, 1960, 38-9.
- 19 Ian Syson, "It's my party and I'll cry if I want to:" Recent Autobiographical Writing by Australian Women Communists, *Hecate* 22, 2, 1996, 144-53, draws attention to several poems from this book which were omitted from *Collected Poems* (1994), and quotes "My Party," noting that it was first published in the *Realist Writer* (9, 1962: 20).
- 20 Reprinted in *Hecate* 22, 2, 1996, 146-7.
- 21 Published in *Overland* 1967, then in *Windmill Country*, 1968. In the USSR from the mid-60s, as David Carter notes, "literature played a key role in marking off the new regime from the old" during de-Stalinisation, but "a series of liberalising moves [was] followed by exemplary attacks on writers:" *A Career in Writing: Judah Waten and the Cultural Politics of a Literary Career*, Toowoomba, Qld: ASAL, 1997, 177-8.
- 22 Hewett, "Eat Bread and Salt and Speak the truth," and "The Times they are a'Changin'," with note by Ian Syson, *Hecate* 21, 2, 1995, 129-36. The first is dated March 1965; internal evidence indicates that the second of these was written in 1966.
- 23 In this she is recommending her own publishing practice during the 1960s, when she published with the Party's *Realist Writer*, with non-aligned Left-wing *Overland* and *Meanjin*, and also with non-Left *Westerly* and *Australian Letters*.
- 24 Hewett to Martin, 24 May 1961, David Martin Papers NLA MS 6885 Series 2, folder 6.

- 25 That is, in the style of Irish playwright, Sean O'Casey.
- 26 Hewett to Martin, 27 July 1964, David Martin Papers.
- 27 "The Empty Room," 6.
- 28 "How beautiful upon the mountains," *Westerly* n.3, 1960, 4–7. When, referring to the well-known story of Tennant's research for *The Joyful Condemned* (1953), Hewett writes disapprovingly of "highly coloured reportage on the delinquent out to catch the easy-money Yanks, with Kylie roaming the streets disguised as a blonde-wigged prostitute," can we detect a slight note of regret, or envy?
- 29 Hewett to Jack Beasley, 10 Feb 1961. Jack Beasley papers, NLA MS 9266, Series 1 Box 1 Folder 3. *Studies in European Realism* was published in English in 1950.
- 30 Hewett to Martin, 27 July 1964 and 2 Oct 1964, David Martin Papers.
- 31 Prichard to Hewett, 16 Jan 1963. Hewett Papers NLA MS 6184, Box 1, folder 1.
- 32 Brian Kiernan, "Seeing her own Mischance" in *Contemporary Australian Drama*, ed. Peter Holloway, Sydney: Currency Press, 1981, 49.
- 33 "Isis in Search," *New Poetry* 28, 1, 1980, 49–56, 50.
- 34 A redefined cultural nationalism was part of the "New Wave" in Australian theatre; the Australian Performing Group's motto was: "Make it Australian."
- 35 "A peculiar form of masochism," *The Critic*, University of WA Literary Society, 11 (2), 1970, 14–15.
- 36 "A peculiar form of masochism," 14.
- 37 "The Empty Room," 4–5.
- 38 Currency Press Papers NLA MS 8084, Box 21: Hewett Correspondence Folder.
- 39 Edited by Elizabeth Schafer and Peta Tait, Sydney: Currency Press 1997.
- 40 Preface, *The Chapel Perilous*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1972.
- 41 "Sally's cry for understanding," *The Age* Friday May 5, 1972, n.p. This and other reviews for which incomplete details are available were consulted in the Clippings file, Hewett Papers NLA MS 6184, Box 32, Folder 11.
- 42 Jo Gibson, "Nice, Seamy Drama," *Canberra Times* 30/9/72. n.p.
- 43 "Dorothy Hewett writes the roles she would love to play," *National Times* Sept 4–9, 1972, 20.
- 44 Preface, *The Chapel Perilous*, 3–4.
- 45 *Damned Whores and God's Police*, Ringwood, Vic: Penguin [1975] 2002 ed., 92–3. Wrongly cited as a negative critique of the play by Tompkins (see footnote 51).
- 46 "Dorothy Hewett: Australian Dramatist," *Lip* 1976, repr. in Peter Holloway ed, *Contemporary Australian Drama*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1981, 363.
- 47 *Dorothy Hewett, The Feminine as Subversion*, Currency Press, 1992, 133, 135–6.
- 48 "Dorothy Hewett and Contemporary Australian Drama" in Bruce Bennett, ed., *Dorothy Hewett: Selected Critical Essays*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1994, 97. Subsequent quotations from this article are indicated by page numbers in parentheses.



- 49 "Writing the Legend of a Glittering Girl" in Bennett ed., 58.
- 50 Lever, "Seeking Woman: Dorothy Hewett's Shifting Genres" in Bennett, ed., 149.
- 51 "I was a rebel in word and deed": Dorothy Hewett's *The Chapel Perilous* and Contemporary Feminist Writing," *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, n. 10, December 1993, 41-56. Subsequent quotations from this article are indicated by page numbers in parentheses.
- 52 "Asking for more: The impact of Dorothy Hewett," *Overland*, 153, 1998, 26-31, 27.
- 53 "Coming to terms with the Ghosts" in Jenny Digby, *A Woman's Voice: Conversations with Australian Poets*, University of Queensland Press, 1996, 218-40, 222.
- 54 "Isis in Search," *New Poetry* 28, 1, 1980, 49-56, 49.
- 55 *Journeys*, Carlton South, Vic: Sister Publishing Inc, Carlton South, 1982.

## THE GIVE UP

It was late at night and Josie was visiting again. She and Hans were naked and sweating. We were all in the kitchen. Hans was trying to roll a cigarette, a sleepy third attempt. He sat scratching and rubbing, legs spread on the old wooden chair, tobacco covering both him and the floor. Josie stood uncertainly at the sink wavering and nodding as she made tea, spilling water, milk and sugar everywhere.

“Jesus Josie,” Hans, slit eyed, swaying, “let Tom do it.”

“I’m giving up this shit.” Josie, ignoring him, sugar crunching under foot. “That’s it. I’ve had enough. I mean it this time Hans.”

The room seemed to tilt slightly. I shook my head, trying to steady and clear it.

“Okay then, let’s start now,” Hans emphatic, eyes widening, hand slapping the table.

I laughed out loud, couldn’t help myself. “You,” I said incredulous.

“Fuck off Tom,” croaked Hans. ‘You’re right Josie. This is bullshit, I’ve had it too, let’s do it,’ voice rising, cracking slightly. The light intensified.

Josie, suddenly decisive, moved coolly at Hans. “Give us your fit.”

Hans still half awake, perplexed but caught in Josie’s motion, in the growing strangeness, handed Josie the fit. “You know that’s our last one,” he said tentatively.

“Fuck it, fuck this shit, this life.” she spat, grabbing paper and firewood heading for the fireplace the room becoming smaller with her speeding actions.

The smell of burning plastic filled the room. Josie spent now, an apparition, a haggard wraith, wired and rigid, sank shipwrecked to Hans’ knee. A strange triangle, we watched, entranced by the fire.

\* \* \*

I find myself in bed. Scraping sounds awake me. I can hear birds. It must be morning. Entering the kitchen the cracks of light through the windows hurt my eyes, hurt me all over. Josie and Hans still naked are on the floor, fingers splayed, awkward on their hands and knees. Josie's head and shoulders are lost in the fireplace as I move through the doorway.

"Fuck it," she curses, ash everywhere, stuck to their sweating bodies, a grey circle.

"It must be here somewhere, fuck it." Hans' nose inches from the floorboards, sifting through the ashes, Josie still scraping in the fireplace. "Aaah, Ha!" He leaps up like a child. Josie emerging backwards like some night creature. That feeling in the room again, a slow rotation, the light hardens.

"Down there! In the drawer." Hans at the sink and yelling now, "in the bottom drawer," "come on quick! In the bottom one, there!"

He is manic, washing the burnt, melted syringe under the tap and snapping the burnt plastic off, trying to blow through the needle. He slips prodding himself. Blood mixes with the sweat and ash.

"Where is that fucking thing," he snarls, knowing its close now. Josie empties the drawer onto the floor finds the pipette hands it to him.

"Get me the lighter, quick." "Don't worry," he says to me a quiet aside, winking. "I've done this before." We are caught in a whirlpool room.

Placing the burnt needle in the end of the pipette, Hans lights the gas stove. Josie, anticipating already, has spoon in hand and is onto the mix. Carefully, like a scientist, Hans melts the plastic of the pipette around the needle. He cools it under the tap, tests it in a glass of water, squirts Josie. She squeals, they laugh.

Standing in the light, smeared in ash, sweat and blood, Hans draws up the mix from the spoon. We all hold our breath. He inserts the needle; it's rough from the fire and tears the vein, drawing blood. I can feel the rush in the back of my throat. Hans draws once more, puts an anxious Josie away. With the bloom of the rose she sags in relief.

We sit on the morning floor, drinking tea. Silence amidst the rhythmic nodding.

"It'll be summer soon," says Hans. "We'll go east, up the coast. I've got some friends that live near Byron on the beach. Good food, the sea. We'll do it there."

"I look healthy with a tan," says Josie drowsily.

"Yeah, we'll do it there," Hans, staring out the window, at the coming light.

# ROBYN CADWALLADER

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## BLANKET BAY, VICTORIA

This bay has no class, no sense of style,  
of deep white sand that gently curves  
around the smooth arc of a cove.

And where one could expect to hear the rhythmic  
plash of foam-frilled wave upon the shore,  
this heedless surf spills in from every side  
to meet in broil and clash of white cap, sea spray,  
laughing, brawling, falling finally exhausted on the sand.

It tosses up a thick green seaweed slimy tangle  
heaped with shark eggs, fish heads, scraps of rope and wood,  
instead of artful undulating lines of tiny shells  
that yield a delicate sigh beneath the bather's foot.

It has no sinuous lines of sandstone carved with thought  
to cup, at rest, the swimmer's weary body,  
but a jumbled mass of tumbled rock  
that must have struggled lately in from wild sea onto sand.  
While over here, this outcrop dark and jagged is a patchwork  
cobbed carelessly together from the rocks  
that other beaches tossed away.

As the day declines and tide recedes,  
it leaves behind white rings of salt upon the rocks  
like yesterday's abandoned teacup left unwashed.

And finally, up where one might imagine stately cypress rows  
that offset nicely tufty white-green grasses in the dunes,

these cliff-tops offer only she-oaks blown and ragged,  
almost bare of needles.

And so we come again to ask forbearance of this beach  
that has escaped, for now, the ravages of class and style,  
and ask that we might lightly rest awhile.

## SOMETHING GENTLE ENTERS THE SEA

Something gentle enters the sea and steel  
gathers and shots of grey join cloud to swell.

Containers trip on the edge of a world  
and fall away beyond the line, when gulls

are gust. But waves deposit a flotsam  
of foam frothed like detergent. And wind is

stir. Too salt to imbibe a deep green ale  
forms a head and will not dissolve. In chaos

the beach is sand and scuff and weathered home  
and houses' squawl. Anionic, the air

is clear: a dense embrace, the tang of salt.  
We are all of us laundered by gale,

a woman, two dogs and me. The dogs' approach  
is not linear. There are only we four

and some gulls when, incessant, a world hangs  
from skies that brood upon this scape of kin.

## BARELY DRESSED FOR SLEEP

you'd been taken by the undertow.  
Your body softly blushing  
still.  
Your left hand holds  
a tissue,  
scrunched as a rose.  
Nothing cut from a block of sleep  
has been done like this.

## WOOF

dancing in the empyrean

Laika leading us  
by her simple bark  
so the honour went to a dog  
best friend went first  
to test the void  
big dumb canary  
one great coal seam out there

and so  
pathos of stars



## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

RAMESH AVADHANI lives in Bangalore, India, and is a regular contributor to a range of international journals. His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Gastronomica*, *Woman's Day*, *Dragonfire*, *The Reader*, *Woman This Month*, *The Times of India* and other publications.

CAROLINE CADDY's latest book *Esperance* won the 2007 Wesley Michael Wright prize for poetry. Her next book "Dirigible" will be published by Centrepress next July 2010.

ROBYN CADWALLADER is a medievalist who has lectured in literature and creative writing. She writes poetry and short stories.

ASHLEY CAPES teaches Media and English in regional Victoria, while co-editing *holland1945*. His first collection of poetry, *pollen and the storm*, was published with the assistance of Small Change Press in 2008 and his second collection is due for release through IP in 2010.

BENJAMIN CORNFORD has a Masters in Creative Writing from the University of Technology, Sydney, and a PhD in early Medieval Italian History from the University of Cambridge. He despairs of ever publishing a novel after six first attempts, but is philosophical about the whole thing. He lives in Sydney and teaches English as a second language.

TONY SIMOES DA SILVA teaches in the English Literatures Program at the University of Wollongong, Australia. He is the author of *The Luxury of Nationalist Despair: The Fiction of George Lamming* (Rodopi, 2000) and of articles on Anglophone and Lusophone postcolonial writing, with a particular focus on Southern Africa, Australia and the Caribbean.

PERPETUA DURACK CLANCY has been involved with the visual arts throughout her life, both nationally and internationally. At present she is coordinating the production of an archival web site for Elizabeth Durack.

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SHEVAUN COOLEY is a Western Australian poet, whose work has been published in *Island*, *HEAT*, *Meanjin* and *Poetry Wales*. Her poem "Expeditions with W G Sebald" was highly commended in the 2008 Newcastle Poetry Prize.

JULIAN CROFT has published several books and poetry, a novel, a music drama (with John McCallum) and literary criticism since his first poems were published in 1962. He lives in Armidale, northern NSW.

RICHARD DAVIS is an anthropologist who teaches at the University of Western Australia, and works primarily with Queensland Torres Strait Islanders and Kimberley Aborigines. He has edited and co-edited a number of books including *Woven Histories, Dancing Lives: Torres Strait Islander Identity, Culture and History* (Aboriginal Studies Press); *Dislocating the Frontier: Essaying the Mystique of the Outback* (ANU Epress); *Power of Knowledge, Resonance of Tradition* (Aboriginal Studies Press).

STEPHANIE DICKINSON lives in New York City. Her first novel *Half Girl*, winner of the 2003 Hackney Award (Birmingham-Southern) for best unpublished novel of the year, is finally (miraculously) out from Spuyten Duyvil. Along with Rob Cook, she edits *Skidrow Penthouse*.

ROBERT DIXON is Professor of Australian Literature at the University of Sydney. His most recent book is *Impact of the Modern: Vernacular Modernities in Australia 1870s–1960s* (SUP 2008), and with Bruce Bennett he is co-editor of the Sydney University Press Australian Classics Library.

ANNE ELVEY is a poet and researcher living in Coburg, Victoria. Her poems have appeared in journals including *Antipodes*, *Cordite*, *Eureka Street*, *Meanjin*, and *PAN*, and are forthcoming in *Going Down Swinging* and *Mascara*. Her work is supported by the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Monash University.

PAUL FEARNE is currently undertaking a PhD in Philosophy at LaTrobe University, and has completed a Masters degree from the University of Melbourne. His poems have appeared in *Stylus*, *Unusual Work* and *verb-ate-him*.

CAMERON FULLER is a poetry co-editor of *Wet Ink* Magazine. His first volume, *Low background noise*, was published in 2006 by Friendly Street Poets and Wakefield Press. He is currently working on a PhD at the University of South Australia.

KEVIN GILLAM is a West Australian poet with two books of poems published, *other gravities* (2003) and *permitted to fall* (2007) both by SunLine Press. He works as Director of Music at Christ Church Grammar School.

RORY HARRIS won the 2008 Satura Prize, and he teaches at Christian Brothers College, Adelaide.

SUSAN HAWTHORNE is the author of five collections of poetry, *The Language in My Tongue* (1993), *Bird* (1999), *The Butterfly Effect* (2005), *Unsettling the Land* (2008) and *Earth's Breath* (2009). Her work has been included in *Best Australian Poems 2006* and *2008* (Black Inc). She is an aerialist, a student of Sanskrit and a publisher. In 2009 she will take up an Asialink Residency in Chennai.

ANDREW HEATH lives in South Hedland and mainly writes poetry and short stories. He has recently completed a novel tentatively titled, "A Quiet Sip at Corella Elbow", and has also completed two plays.

PER HENNINGSGAARD is a Fulbright Scholar from the United States, who recently completed a PhD at The University of Western Australia. He is currently a Tutor at Curtin University of Technology and continues to conduct research in the fields of book history and Australian literature.

SIMONE HUGHES recently submitted her PhD for examination from Curtin University and has a Masters degree in Clinical Psychology. She indulges in a gratifying love affair with the short story form, lives in the Mundaring hills and enjoys eking out a sense of place there.

CHRISTOPHER KELEN's most recent volumes of poetry are *Dredging the Delta* (book of Macao poems and sketches), 2007, Cinnamon Press (UK) and *After Meng Jiao: Responses to the Tang Poet*, 2008, VAC (Chicago). Kelen has taught Literature and Creative Writing for the last nine years at the University of Macau in south China.

JEAN KENT lives at Lake Macquarie, NSW. She has published three books of poetry. The manuscript of her fourth collection, *Travelling with the Wrong Phrase Books*, was highly commended for the 2008 Alec Bolton Prize. Her first book, *Verandahs*, will be republished by Picaro Press, in its Art Box Series, in 2009.

ROLAND LEACH is a poet and short story writer. He is the proprietor of Sunline Press which has published eleven books of poetry by Australian poets. *The Anatomy of Blue* by Jessika Tong is the most recent collection.

MIRIAM WEI WEI LO lives in Margaret River with her husband (the local baptist pastor) and three small children. Her next book is forthcoming with SALT.

MARLENE MARBURG is a spiritual director, currently engaged at the Melbourne College of Divinity in PhD research about the relationship of poetry and spiritual direction.

SUSAN MIDALIA has a PhD in contemporary Australian fiction and has published in national and international journals on the subject. Her collection of short stories, *A History of the Beanbag*, was short-listed for the Western Australian Premiers' Award in 2008.

LOUISE MORRISON is a Western Australian sculptor whose practice ranges from large, collaborative public artworks to small assemblages and wooden works. She works part time as an Art Consultant and as a casual Lecturer in Fine Art with a focus on contemporary practice in both roles.

CHARLES McLAUGHLIN is a researcher of Western Australian Literature for AustLit, based at UWA.

HELEN NORTON is a West Australian painter whose work has been exhibited nationally and internationally in leading galleries. Her subject matter is generally drawn from meditation upon the human condition where she often refers to historical literature and mythology to make creative analogies to our present day life. The cover painting is part of a major exhibition "Purgatorio". The works are based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, presently touring Australia, and showing in Perth at Linton and Kay Fine Art Gallery in September this year.

MARK O'FLYNN's poems and stories have been published in a wide range of magazines, both in Australia and overseas. He has published two novels. His third collection of poems was published by Interactive Press in 2007. He lives in the Blue Mountains.

MEREDI ORTEGA has had articles, short stories, and poems published in various newspapers and compilations. She lives in Fremantle, WA.

RHODORA PENARANDA's third poetry volume *Headhunter's Gaze* is forthcoming in Fall 2009. She is the author of *Touchstone* and *UnMasking Medusa* (Menagerie Arts, New York, USA).

JOANNE RICCIONI has a Masters in Medieval Literature from the University of Leeds in the UK. She lives in Sydney and her stories have placed in competitions in Australia, Ireland, the US and the UK and published in *The Momaya Review*, *Taralla*, *Stylus*, *Best of the Skive Short Story Prize*, and *Her Story: What I learned in my Bathtub* (Adams Media, US).

JENNY SCHWARTZ grew up in Perth, tried life as a public servant in Canberra, and returned to Perth. Her poem is a celebration of her sense of belonging to the West.

SUSAN SHERIDAN is Adjunct Professor of English and Women's Studies at Flinders University. She has published widely on women's writing, Australian cultural history and women's studies. Her latest book is *Thea Astley's Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006, edited with Paul Genoni).

TED SNELL has moved recently from his position at Curtin University as Professor of Contemporary Art and Dean of Art, John Curtin Gallery to the University of Western Australia as Director of its new Cultural Precinct. He has published several books and curated numerous exhibitions, many of which document the visual culture of Western Australia. Ted Snell is also a visual artist and his work is represented in many public and private collections, including the National Gallery of Australia, the Art Gallery of Western Australia and Artbank.

JENNIFER STRAUSS is a retired academic, poet, feminist, co-editor with Bruce Bennett of *The Oxford Literary History of Australia* and, recently, editor of the two-volume edition of the *Collected Verse* of Mary Gilmore.

ROB WALLIS lives in Castlemaine, Victoria. His first collection of poetry, *The Match of the Hunter* was published by Woorilla Press in 1996. He won the 2006 FAW John Shaw Neilson Poetry Prize.

MICHAEL WILDING is emeritus professor at the University of Sydney. 2009 sees the publication of his novels *Superfluous Men* (Arcadia), and *The Prisoner of Mount Warning* (Press On), and his edition of Cyril Hopkins' *Marcus Clarke* (Australian Scholarly Publishing), coedited with Laurie Hergenhan and Ken Stewart.

MARC WOHLING is based in Fremantle, WA. He has worked as an ethnoecologist/ecologist in the Oceania region for the last fifteen years, and also as a professional musician. Marc is currently working on a number of larger writing projects.

FIONA WRIGHT is a Sydney poet, whose work has been published in journals including *Going Down Swinging*, *Cordite*, *HEAT*, *Antipodes*, *Asia Literary Review* and *Voiceworks*. She works as an editor at Giramondo Publishing.

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