WESTERLY

STORIES · POEMS · ARTICLES · REVIEWS

SEPTEMBER 1988 NUMBER 3 $5.00

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WESTERLY
VOLUME 33, No. 3, SEPTEMBER 1988

STORIES

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ARTICLES

REVIEWS

CONTRIBUTORS

Cover design by Susan Eve Ellvey of Designpoint using her own photograph of a ferris wheel at the Perth Royal Show.

WESTERLY

The National Quarterly
from the West

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WESTERLY is excellent value at $16 p.a. (4 issues, posted); students $14; $30 for 2 years (8 issues, posted); $5 single copies (posted); back copies and Indexes of past issues available.

Subscriptions sent by mail should be addressed to:

The Secretary, CSAL
Department of English
The University of Western Australia
NEDLANDS, WA 6009

WESTERLY

a quarterly review

ISSN 0043-342x

Westerly is published quarterly at the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature in the English Department, University of Western Australia with assistance from The Literary Arts Board of the Australia Council, the Federal Government's arts funding and advisory body, and the Western Australian Department for the Arts. The opinions expressed in *Westerly* are those of individual contributors and not of the Editors or Editorial Advisors.

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Recommended sale price: $5.00 per copy (W.A.)

Subscriptions: $16.00 per annum (posted); $30.00 for 2 years (posted). Special student subscription rate: $14.00 per annum (posted). Single copies mailed: $5.00. **Subscriptions should be made payable to *Westerly* and sent to The Secretary, CSAL, Department of English, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, Western Australia 6009.**

In other States *Westerly* may be obtained from:

New South Wales, Victoria, ACT and Tasmania: Hale & Iremonger Pty. Ltd., Tel: (02) 560 4977 and (03) 537 1624.

Queensland: Tema Agencies, Tel: (07) 378 6190.

Work published in *Westerly* is cited in: *Abstracts of English Studies, Australian Literary Studies* Annual Bibliography, *Australian National Bibliography, Journal of Commonwealth Literature* Annual Bibliography, *Arts and Humanities Citation Index, Current Contents/Arts & Humanities, The Genuine Article, Modern Language Association of America Bibliography* and *The Year's Work in English Studies.*

Two *Westerly* Indexes, 1956-77 and 1978-83, are available at $8.00 from the above address.

OBITUARY

Westerly notes with sorrow the death of Stephen Murray-Smith, the founder of *Overland* in 1954 and editor of the magazine from that date. He was the chairperson of the National Book Council in 1981, and wrote or edited ten books. In all these roles his contribution to Australian literature was substantial, and he will be sadly missed.

VINCENT O'SULLIVAN

Exposures

T (time) is a shutter setting used for long exposures.

It was the heat, and the wind, that had driven him away from the town as a young man. His earliest memories, which he disliked, were the sound of naked feet slapping across lino and bare boards in the hours when he lay in bed with the light out, and on the other side of his closed door his parents walked between room and room, so it had seemed to him, for most of the night. Between the small sitting room and the veranda, from the back porch through to their bedroom where the netting on the windows made it seem that the paddocks he looked out on were always under a kind of fog. In his own room there was a white net across his bed, a huge bandage that encased him in heat and impatience he could do nothing about. He dreamed sometimes that he could not breathe, because he was already buried. When he thought of home or of childhood it always came to that: the stifling he could do nothing to fight off, the paddocks hazed by wire and net, his parents slapping on the tacky warmth of the lino, which was green and orange squares. Those things, and of course the wind.

It would shake the house for days. When he watched his father with the black doors of the Ludo set unfolded on the kitchen table, revealing the bright pattern of the board, and his hands making a box in which he shook the dice before he threw it, the boy thought of their house in the hands of the wind. Once his mother had stood on the veranda and tried to scream over the wind's insistence. He did not even hear his father's hand fall against her several times, but saw it in that strange silence which is there, always, in the centre of its blowing. It makes a cage where nothing is heard but the bars one looks through at the bending, tumbling world. He thought as a ten year old that one day he would leave forever this place where the heat and the wind allowed him to think of so little else. He would light out for somewhere. His dad said that. "Light out" for other places once these rotten times were over. A place where things were as still, as quiet, as the ice-tray he would touch until his fingers hurt.

He married a woman who said to him that as a girl she had looked from the train window when she travelled once a year to her grandmother's at Christmas, and saw the hills behind where he lived, where the rocks she said were kind of milky and slipped in wavering heat, and once she had seen in a paddock a fallen iron water-tank bowling over and over, so quickly that it almost kept level with the train. In the calm suburb at home, in the garden where the leaves were crusty with frost some years by Easter, she would think of those things, the milky moving rocks and the huge rim of corrugated iron hurtling out there on the yellow earth. His wife said they remained in her mind as a place that must be free.

Anyone who has taken a time exposure looking towards a window inside a church may have been disappointed with the result because the window may appear on the print as a white space surrounded by a halo. This is halation.

It was extraordinary the number of places they had been to together. Neither of them was interested in cameras, so there were no evenings later on when they looked at the frozen images, the congealed days or nights that were supposed to be held by those quick and everlasting shots. Unless you were an expert it was really so much chance in any case. The light was predetermined, the emphasis depended not on you but on a fistfull of Japanese machinery that you then pretended showed you life as it had been lived. But it was as close to *that*, they would say, as those rows of specimens in the lab. "This is a fox's liver" — and you peered at a cloudy thing like a large bean floating in its liquid frame. And from that, were you meant to envisage the red nervy dash across a living hillside or the eyes quick with intelligence, crouched beside a rock? The past might be the past, but that was no reason to treat it like a corpse. No reason to use a camera to help lay it out.

So no scenes then of Radetz castle under snow, no Loch Fyne with its long slate-coloured reaches to make them think all that was *then*, and we are trying to look at it now, its liver in a jar, its life frozen in this little coloured cube. "No", she used to say, "if life goes on then it goes on organically, doesn't it? I am yesterday's dinner and today's sunburn and the warm stones at Epidavros against my sweating backside in August 1974, I don't need X-rays to prove any of that". She said it wryly, and only when they were alone. They knew to say it beyond themselves would sound a false note. So they would joke when asked what photos they had to show. They would say they were hopeless with anything mechanical. Or they had tried a camera last trip and every shot was a disaster. They admitted to no one that they were too happy together to tempt time into giving up images that could never possibly match the real thing.

The best type of lens is the Anastigmat kind corrected for most aberrations such as astigmatism, colour refraction, curvature distortion, flare, and uneven illumination.

So when she died, after an illness that was more drawn out than most of us would hope for, Thomas and his daughter would talk about Lucy a great deal. He encouraged the girl to think she must never be silent with her grief, or spare anything for his sake. So when Rebecca said, "was she always as pretty as when she was sick?", Thomas would say "She seemed like that to me everyday, love". He did not try to say it had nothing really to do with how pretty someone is, because he knew that would sound insincere to a child. And naturally life went on. He took a job in another city, so they would not be surrounded by old friends to make Rebecca always aware of what she had lost. The girl was bright and popular, as Lucy had been. She made new friends quickly, and learned to ride the same year as they shifted towns. Sometimes she would ask her father such things as how old her mother had been when they first met? Was her hair long in those days or was it short? At the end Lucy's head had been covered by a scarf. Rebecca remembered her nearly always like that, although since she was an infant she had watched her mother in front of the dressing table almost every day, the long strong brushstrokes that made her hair shiny as wire. "Let *me* do it", Rebecca used to say, and as her mother handed over the tortoise-shell brush, she was told "You need the strongest wrists in the world to do it properly".

Thomas said "There was one summer in Greece when we were students when she cut it short." But after a time the questions were fewer. Her friends would say

to others that Rebecca lived with just her father, her mother had died two years ago. There was no melodrama, ever. She put on rather a lot of weight when she was twelve or thirteen, and her complexion turned raw. When she was alone in her room she put slivers of potato on her face, and tried to lie very still before she slept, with the white slices across her eyes. She would go for days without speaking more than a few words. That's adolescence for you, Thomas would think. He was patient and kind and in her schoolbooks he saw that she was writing Lucia as her second name.

Light bends when passing through a prism of glass. Thus a triangular prism changes the direction of a beam of light by bending it twice.

When he and Lucy talked about places they had visited together, the best part was what utterly different things they remembered. Take Guatemala, for instance. They had spent several days walking above and around exquisite blue lakes, where the *Indianos* passed in embroidered tunics, their perfect bodies that made you feel clumsy, as though for generations your forebears had been forgetting how to walk. It was sharing a cigarette with one of the men that he remembered most vividly. The man had pointed to the packet in Thomas's shirt pocket, and there was only one left. They sat side by side as they smoked, passing the cigarette between them. The man's teeth were red from chewing that narcotic leaf which was supposed to dull one's sense of time. His mouth looked as though it constantly bled. But Lucy remembered the designs on pottery, the symbolism of the colours that went into the weaving, and how many levels there were to that temple where they climbed until they were high above the jungle, an endless grey froth in the light between darkness and real dawn. She would draw designs and patterns to remind him. And he told her the names that for the moment escaped her — San Antonio de las Aguas, where they bought a piece of cloth, orange and green and blue, that hung still above his desk. There was a kitten in that same hotel, she said, that spent half the day on its hind legs, playing with the spikey flowers in a black vase on the lobby table. Thomas would say, But of course there was! Lucy smiled as they talked. Chichicastenango, remember? two ugly mongrels unable to separate as they copulated, while a bemused crowd looked on and a policeman booted the dog's agitated arse, and behind them the cathedral facade, webbed and fissured by earthquake? And there was an American wasn't there, telling them mescalin had opened the focking skies, man, you would not believe it . . . Thomas's fingers had met around his wife's diminished arm and she smiled at him, alert and eager. And the Chinese restaurant, she said, with the two dead fish floating in the tank like soggy chips?

The wider the angle of the lens the greater will be the depth of field and vice versa.

Rebecca sat during the video clips and sorted the pictures she cut from the magazines. They all looked much the same to her father. The young men with their crotches exaggerated as though stuffed with wads of newspaper, the long-haired women whose breasts thrust upwards, their legs suggestively wide, while the microphones were raised in their hands like weapons, lollipops, organs. He wondered how much of it Rebecca was aware of. Sometimes there were scenes from Elvis films and he could scarcely credit how blatant they had been, and that was thirty years ago. The whole message was sex, to get into it, to become obsessed. And now there were half naked girls who broke up cars with enormous hammers while bands erected their guitars as though to impale the world. He loathed the whole commercial hype of the stuff yet he quite saw its vitality. If that was life, if that was fire, wasn't it

better to know? Knowledge is always better than ignorance. He and Lucy believed that.

Thomas sometimes said to his daughter, "You can't say you like the *look* of them, love?" He glanced up from his paper at an English group in black singlets, their arms pale as radishes, their heads shaved and oiled. He said it so that Rebecca would know it was a joke, a closeness between them, certainly not a reprimand.

She did not look up from her treasures. "Don't worry about it", she advised him.

Rebecca did well at school. For a fourteen year old she was painstaking and accurate. She enjoyed projects where she was left to herself to organise material and carry through an argument. She was capable of working as she sat in front of television, her legs crossed in her tight pale jeans. Her hair was dark, so unlike Lucy's which was straw-coloured. But she already was the same height as her mother had been. "I'm working on images" she said when her father asked her what she was getting ready.

When the aperture of a camera is opened light activates chemicals on a specially prepared plate so that images are left. These images vary according to how much light has been allowed to enter, and what kind of lens are placed in the aperture itself. There are drawings which accompany this information. They are very accurate, copied from an encyclopedia and done with finely controlled lines in red and black. The text is enclosed in neat boxes at the side or beneath the diagrams. *The word photography means writing or drawing with light. A camera picture is a picture drawn with rays of light.* There were diagrams too of the human eye, of how images were received from the retina and stored by the optic nerve. There was one sentence Thomas read several times, and disliked. There was also a list of phrases that applied to photography, a brief glossary for the uninformed. *Lens shade*, one was told, *is an attachment that keeps light from striking the lens directly and making glare spots appear in the picture.*

There was a joke in the project that made people smile. A dozen photographs of different kinds were taped to the large display sheet. There was a reflecting lake among snow-covered mountains, and a white Greek village that from the distance looked like piled sugar cubes, and the famous Hiroshima photograph of a human shadow on a wall. Each exposure was technically excellent, and there were details to explain such things as timing, the type of film used, and the make of camera. And among these careful images there was a snapshot of a wedding. Heaven knows, Thomas thought, where the child had dredged it up from. It was he and Lucy on the steps of St. Luke's, their faces large and blurred a few feet from the camera. There is perhaps a grin on his own face, as he turns to his wife who is holding back her veil with one hand. He had forgotten how windy it had been that morning. Rebecca must have found the thing between the pages of some book, for they would never have meant to keep it. The top edge of the print in fact cut right across both of them, and the heads were at an angle that made them tilt towards one side. Someone's elbow must have been jogged at the instant the shutter clicked. Or someone simply didn't know what to do. Thomas found in unpleasant to see himself so long ago, and not to know who on earth it might have been who moved in so close, distorting them forever. *Chopped Off Head. Make sure all of the subject appears in the viewfinder at the exact moment that you snap the picture. Otherwise you will remember things like this.*

"Couldn't you find a better one than that?" Thomas asked her.

"It was perfect for what I wanted", Rebecca said.

Her work was so much better than anyone else's in her class. He looked again, more closely, at himself and his bride, two blurred ovals that had become a joke.

He musn't mind that. The faces were too blurred for anyone else to know. Two decapitated eggs.

On the train Rebecca seldom bothered to look out from the window. Her father said to her in the late afternoon, "Your mother loved this part of the country. More than anywhere else."

The girl allowed her gaze to drift across the flat country to the rise of rock outcrops, and then the shallow cliffs of the hills. She said nothing, while her father waited for her to speak. Then he told her "The first time I ever flew over here I couldn't get over what the hills were like from above. Like a great scoop of clinkers in a shovel. That's what I thought of. This dead ancient tumble of crumbling rock. Nothing like what it looks like from here." He meant the ochre bleeding streaks across the bluffs. At noon they would have quivered in the glare.

Rebecca waited until her father finished speaking, closing her magazine but holding her place with one finger between the pages. The thought of a week in this place with her grandfather bored her out of her skull. She had told one of her friends that in 1946 a man had hanged himself from a post in the one rotten little street. He dressed up in his army uniform and put his medals on to do it. That was the first and last excitement the place had ever known. Tomorrow her grandfather would point out the post yet again, as if he were showing her the Eiffel Tower. She would hear from every neighbour how she had grown and Bertram the mongol from next door would grin at her until she wanted to throw up. They even let him come inside and sit at the table, snorting on his hot tea before every mouthful. Her father would take her onto the veranda and say "You can always bike to the river if you're bored, you know". As if a pool in a creek were some really big deal. And of course she couldn't touch the telephone to phone her friends in town. You'd think it was gold to put a call through.

Thomas watched his daughter's head sway above her magazine. He saw how her hair was surprisingly light in such brightness, now that the sun lay almost level with the land. For a moment he saw himself as an old man sitting in his father's kitchen. His hands on the table in front of him were speckled and dry, and he wore a cardigan with old-fashioned wooden buttons. A middle-aged woman moved briskly about the room, placing food on the table and calling through the bead curtain that it was time for the party to begin. There was the sound of children interested only in food, and someone had tapped his paper hat into place. They were all told to look up, and the flash of an instamantic. There, said middle-aged Rebecca, kissing him peremptorily on the cheek.

"Can't we pull this thing down?" the girl asked him.

The sunset blazed into the carriage, forcing her to shade her eyes. "The blind?" she repeated, frowning against the light that seemed to pour at them from some great torn reservoir behind the hills.

"Of course, if you want to", Thomas told her.

"I want to alright", Rebecca said. The blind closed on them like a door.

The retina is inferior to the camera because of death.

MARGARET SCOTT

WEDGE ISLAND

Out where the log-track ends
huddled rocks wade from the low shore,
stand out to sea in stunned black companies,
as though that barren wedge-shaped island
beyond the channel rode by a watching tribe
like a great bird, or, deaf to hailing,
sailed on down the coast
leaving some ragged shipwrecked crew to starve.
It fills the lifted eye, a solid tawny lump
with a bone in its teeth, no house, no trees,
only here and there a brushing of bare rock
and the shadows of clouds. It comes in dreams
of huge sheets of baleen looming out of the fog,
of distance holding nothing but emptiness,
and when I walk through hills into new inlets
or emerge from trees, is always there,
unmoving, seeming to follow.

MARGARET SCOTT

After Their Kind

I am lying flat under an old quilt
moving the memory's eye round lost rooms,
discovering forgotten shapes; texture and shine
rise like the flicker of fish in the murk of the sea.
I name them one by one in the great game
of re-creation: silver candlestick, ebony elephant, mantlepiece,
grandfather clock and hunting print —
the things that crouched to watch the family
gather at a round table for Sunday dinner.
An interlude:
my father, a British Israelite, is carving beef,
my mother offering advice and serving peas,
my brother, who is doing evolution at school,
mentions the apes. My father drops his knife
and bangs the table: "God created man
in His own image. D'you think God looks like a monkey?"
Too shocked to giggle I push my potatoes about
making a nice little scenic park in the gravy.
My brother is stubborn for truth, mother near tears.
How could we understand rage in that mild man?
Not even my mother knew how his natural parents,
insolvent, dead or deserting passed him on
to learn to be a stranger couple's son.
Having each other, we had less need to believe
in a stately benevolent Father in nightshirt and beard.
Such readings come like light, the beginning of wisdom,
but how can I conjure that scene in the others' eyes?
Was there a hole in the carpet that bothered my mother,
a smaller elephant, curtains with a meaning different
from the wavy lines of blue I summon up,
a row of clocks muttering away to my father,
another tree, evil or good, in the window,
heavier shadow?
How can I make the descent to another's darkness,
that welling ocean-bed of nascent forms,
of objects drowned and changed,
breeding-place of the mind that shapes a world?

ELLY McDONALD

Someone Famous, With Girl

stops at the sound of
his name called by
a stranger — then
recalls
who she is and forgets
himself: it's you
he smiles (he always means it)
he laughs (and feels abashed)
her eyes mirror his
she is his (they always are)
they are both young
veterans
they both can
remember
moments of belief, of the only kind
he'll know
all strangers
his kind. He is
kind, or he could be, this singled out
outsider:
he takes her
camera and asks
Am I in there?

KAREN VAN ULZEN

Operator 1493

I

The computer always says "Goodbye!" each time I finish my shift. I press the buttons on the keyboard and the letters line up on the black background of the screen. An exclamation mark stands at the end of the word.

The computer is silent, but I know exactly how that "Goodbye!" would sound if it had a voice. My father used to say goodbye the same way, with a smile lifting his voice at the end of the word, so I could hear the exclamation mark. The word on the screen has a friendly sound, but I am never quite convinced by it. I often say a silent "goodbye" in return, but my letters never assemble with the same neatness, and the exclamation mark wavers.

But today I have not yet finished my shift and the computer says "Goodbye!" The time is 14:25 according to the digits at the bottom centre of the video screen, and my shift doesn't finish until five o'clock. I press all the buttons on the keyboard. I thump the video display unit with my fist. The letters will not change. The word is stuck, the exclamation mark as straight as an arrow, the smile frozen on the black of the screen.

The technician will fix my computer.

II

It is not unusual for the computers to play up. In my years as a telephone operator, I have seen many flashes of temperament displayed on the screens.

For five years I have sat, four or five hours a day, in this room. Two hundred and sixteen telephone operators sit with me. When we finish our shift and leave the room, two hundred and sixteen other operators take our places. The shifts keep changing well into the night. So many operators work here that I have seldom sat next to the same person twice, and few faces are familiar to me.

I am operator 1493.

Today, like any other day, I sit with eight other operators in a circle around a work-station. I push buttons and arrange letters and numbers on the screen of my video display unit. The twenty four work-stations squat on the floor like small spaceships, their nine windows filled with moving green lights. We operators stare into the windows without interest. I have given up trying to work out what kind of life is inside.

My headset is attached to the computer by a long plastic-coated wire, which I plug into a socket on the left side of the keyboard. I am embarrassed by this cord that dangles from my ear and links me to the work-station. I feel as if the cord is some private part of me exposed; a secret umbilical tie to the computer which I am ashamed of.

III

The light in the room is kept low. In the gloom the operator's faces look blurred. Though the green light from the screens glows softly on their skin, it is a light that smooths out the bumps on each forehead and arch of each brow, so each face becomes a flat plane that seems to float in the dim light.

Each operator speaks to a voice somewhere at the other end of the phone. Two hundred and sixteen operators all speak at once and no one voice can be distinguished from another. Lips move ceaselessly on the blank surfaces of faces but the murmuring that fills the room is a single sound which has no relation to the movement of the operators' mouths. The sound rises and falls in the room with the weight of a tide.

I am a voice at the end of a line. A client picks up his telephone from the hallway table or kitchen bench. He presses the buttons or turns the dial and I speak. The same words every time. The speed with which my words are uttered seldom varies, the inflexion of my voice rarely changes. My voice is a babbling stream that leaves my mouth and eddies around me, flowing at a constant pace.

I am the only snag in the stream; it is by my being here in the middle of the stream that the force of the flow can be judged, by the way the stream breaks into folds as it rushes around me. Even then the current is not always visible, and I must mark out the muddy borders with my hands.

Without my presence, the stream is insidious, its depth and its speed can't be seen. I sit, like a rock, while the voices batter me. But I am scared the current is too powerful, and I will be dislodged and carried away.

IV

While waiting for the technician to arrive, I watch the operators working, and the green letters and numbers moving on the screens.

The figures line up and jerk upwards in rows. It takes eleven rows for the figures to reach the top of the screen and disappear. Each letter and number seems to tip over the edge of the screen and fall somewhere behind the glass, into a great green pool in the centre of the work-station. If I press the right buttons on the keyboard I can retrieve those figures, even if they have lain deep at the bottom of the pool for years. Some enormous arm, with the sleeve pulled back and the hand extended, plunges in and pulls out the letters and numbers and puts them back on the screen.

I don't understand how it works.

If I am honest with myself, I know the mystery of the computer system can be explained in part as a matter of intricate wiring. While I work with my computer I try to concentrate on those wires. I imagine them humming with the voices coming in on the telephone lines, and bulging with letters and numbers and dashes and commas, plus signs, dollar signs and exclamation marks. I think of the voices of the two hundred and sixteen operators in this room, and the thousands of figures that tip over the screens. There must be millions of wires to carry so much information without everything getting mixed up.

I begin to see wires all around me, in the walls and floors of the building. If the carpet squares were pulled up and removed, the floor underneath would be a mass of wires, layer after layer trampled down by the weight of operators' feet, matted like hair. Each wire is transparent, and the figures can be seen pouring around corners, crowding at intersections and jamming where the wires have twisted into knots. The figures travel so fast they leave a streak of light behind them and, in the strange twilight of the room, the walls and floor shimmer with green sparks.

As I follow the course of the letters and numbers, along the twists and turns of the wires, I see them travel out of the telephone room and move along the walls

and floors of the corridors of this building until they reach the main computer room. Here the wires finish, suddenly severed at the ends. The figures spill out, bursting from the walls and flooding the floor, and a rush of voices escapes from the wires and fills the room with a murmuring sound.

A man stands in the centre of the room. The flood of figures is up to his knees. He stands in front of a box-like structure so high it reaches the ceiling. The only feature on its white walls is the opening to a shute. This box is the main computer.

I see the man with his sleeves pulled back, digging his hands deep into the pile around his knees, and tossing handfuls of the figures down the shute. He scoops the figures with practised skill, and tosses them into the computer with a flourish of his hands. Each time a handful drops into the hole, the man pauses to watch the figures fall. "Goodbye!" he says, calling down the shute, "Goodbye!" I can hear a smile lifting his voice at the end of the word.

Thinking of wires carries me away.

V

The main computer room is silent. Twenty computers line the walls. The room does not buzz and hum with voices. No green figures flood the floor. The computers are completely still, except each has a panel of tiny red lights in front, glimmering discreetly, and one computer has a green light that darts from one side of the panel to the other, like a mad eye darting around in its socket.

VI

My father had a computer eye. When I was six years old, he took his eye out of its socket and showed it to me, lying in the palm of his hand. The eye was green with a round black spot. I could not see what my father looked like without the eye, because his free hand covered the empty socket. Dad said he had bought the eye from a special hospital that made thousands of eyes a day.

"It's better than a normal eye," my father had said. "It never wears out. If it breaks down I just take it to the hospital and they fix it up for me."

I tried to imagine a doctor with spanners and pliers in the pocket of his gown, holding Dad's eye and poking it with a screwdriver. I couldn't understand why the eye in my father's hand wasn't connected to anything. I could have made more sense of the eye if there had been some tiny wires attached that connected somewhere inside his head. Or one thick wire, like the cord of an electric kettle, travelling from his eye socket and plugging in to his heart. I thought there must be something inside my father that controlled the eye, and that the eye didn't work all by itself.

My father said he didn't have much control over his eye. He couldn't even blink with that eye, he said. Sometimes the eye went on looking at things even when he didn't want to see them, especially when he was asleep. He said he always saw me when I sneaked past his bed. The eye could go on looking at things even after he was dead.

"That's what they can do these days," he had said.

It was three years before I realized my father didn't have a computer eye. He had played a trick on me. I found the green marble with the black spot in a plastic icecream container on the kitchen bench, amongst the jam jar lids and candle stumps. But even though my father is now buried in his coffin, I still keep seeing that computer eye, working away while the rest of him is dead. The eye is glowing green and seeing things, while my Dad's body rots into the blackness of the earth.

VII

The technician arrives to fix my computer. He is only a boy.

"Playing up, is she?" he asks, in a voice so loud two operators nearby turn away from their screens to look at him. Their faces remain blank and their mouths keep moving. I show the technician the word on the screen.

"We'll soon put her to rights," the technician says. He presses a few buttons on the keyboard and looks closely at the screen. He lays his hand on the top of the video display unit, where the heat from the screen warms the plastic surface. At the foot of the work-station is a small door, and the technician kneels down and opens it. Pulling back his sleeve, he reaches inside the machine and pulls out a small square box. Dragging behind the box are ten red wires, which are attached somewhere inside the work-station. The technician puts the box on the floor, and the wires lie tangled and twisted around each other. They are slightly shiny, as if wet.

I can hardly bear to look at them. It makes me feel sick to see the guts of the computer spilling out of the hole and lying exposed on the carpet. But just as I am about to turn away, the technician plucks out a wire and lays it aside, and puts the box and its attached wires back inside the work-station. The floor is clear, except for the thin trail of red wire.

"Here's the culprit," the technician says, picking up the wire and letting it hang limp between his fingers. "Faulty connection. I'll be back in a moment."

I admire the technician. He is as skilled as a surgeon. This is routine work for him. He goes off to a room in the centre of the building and tinkers around with wires and squares of plastic. We operators sit on the outer circle of things, staring blankly in, our daily lives a green monotony of punching buttons and dialing phones, of questions no longer asked and hence forgotten, left behind in pools of foolishness, in the unwinking of a computer eye abandoned on the kitchen bench. I have left my questions to rest in the palms of a few white-gowned technicians whose day-to-day man-made miracles grow in brilliance but render most things within their light duller still. I do not understand.

XIV

The technician comes back. He replaces the wire. The "Goodbye!" disappears from the screen. I can begin my work.

I take a deep breath. Something inside me always resists before I give myself up to the glow of the screen.

I put on my headset and plug myself in.

BARBARA BRANDT

Sister Cuckoo

"I'm back being friends with God, Jackie."

Sal with her bountiful chest and the look of a newly shorn sheep. Bleached dreadlocks are out this year. Mother always said they encouraged lice. Sal perches on the chair between me and the window like a great predatory bird, wing-shoulders hunched over a heavy duty bra. She's back into underwear too. A pair of black rims sit on her two year old nose job, the contact lenses got the hatchet as well. The glasses slide occasionally and she pushes them back with blunt tipped fingers. The eye catching toss of the head is still there but seems odd without her thick yellow hair flying back. Her roots are showing.

"Going to be here long, Jackie?"

She lights a cigarette. The matron will have her if she comes in, the nurses sneak out the back door to smoke outside my window.

"We've moved out of the farm. Found a place closer to town. The old bloke across the road said he'd take care of the animals. The cat wouldn't come down the tree."

Sal was always good at taking my space, and messing it up. She even moved in on my man.

I'll never forget that day. I was on my way over to the Post Office when I ran out of petrol at our front gate. I walked the winding kilometer back to the house. It was mid-afternoon and the sunlight slanted down through the forest. The blackboys were tipped with gold and the wild grasses were a dry, brown carpet under the trees. Sal and Mark were on the lawn under the kitchen tree, rolling around like a pair of geese in season.

It seemed a much longer walk back to the car. I watched the traffic flash past on the highway, the view swam through a window of tears. It should have rained, I'd always imagined that when the world ended it would be raining. The sun shone. Across the road MacElvinney's horses strolled casually across his home paddock and a tractor towed a trailer of hay up to the barn. The schoolbus swung to the side of the road. Sal's two eldest kids tumbled down the steps.

Sal has three children and each one a different father. One a red headed, screaming three year old boy and a blonde girl of six, the latter a legacy of the Southern Folk Festival and the other a souvenir from the Gold Coast. Her eldest was a suspicious eight year old siren with black hair and see-through almond eyes. Sal was in Singapore that year. I had a cat, forty geese, twelve chooks and a rented vege patch on a broken down farm that wasn't a farm at all. There was Mark of course but Sal says that a man never really belongs to a woman.

The children ignored me like they always did, walking past the car without a sideways glance, heading towards the house. I followed them. Sal was in the kitchen throwing vegetables into the soup pot. Her hair was wrapped up in a towel. She tucked a wet strand up under the turban and stirred the soup, finding something fascinating in the depths of the pot.

"Any mail for me today?"

"No, nothing." I said and walked on through. The bathroom door was open, a trail of damp footprints meandered down the hallway rug. The shower curtain was pulled back and water splattered out onto the tiled floor. Mark stood under the spray lathering soap into his groin. He smiled.

"Wash my back, Honey?"

I took the soap, he turned toward the wall. There were wiry patches of hair on his shoulder blades, I couldn't remember seeing them before, it was a stranger's back. A long, thin scratch curled across his buttocks, I traced its path with the cake of soap. Our eyes met over his shoulder, blue eyes, liar's eyes.

"That bloody cat got me again," he said.

He turned, slid his slippery arms around my waist and drew me under the water.

"Been so long since we made out in the shower."

He pulled me close against his body, then he went stiff and cold. His arms fell away. Sal was standing at the door.

"Dinner's ready," she said.

I hope MacElvinney's fed the cat and that same barmy creature hasn't been spending all its time up the kitchen tree. Even the shade there isn't mine any more. Sal took it from me, piece by piece and made it hers. She stole my solitude the same way she used to steal my dolls. After she came back the fields were never silent. I'd sit under the cover of the Marri trees watching the sheep merge across MacElvinney's paddock, she'd be there as well. That was just like Sal. She'd move in on you at the drop of a hat and a year later she'd pack up and vanish. Sooner or later she'd be back.

"What's yours is mine and what's mine is ours," she used to say. That's just the way she was.

There's a place on the farm, right back in the forest, where someone bent a young gum tree over and buried the tip in the ground. It's a blind and flightless bird with its head embedded in the sand, a little like me. I'd go to that living green arch, sit and think, hearing nothing but the cry of summer in the voice of the crows and the whine of the wind through the trees. Sal came back. She lay sunbaking in the winter sunlight, in parka and boots, clover and gooseshit, in the bottom paddock, while her ratbagger kids strained and tore the tree from the earth. It stayed bowed, after all those years it couldn't stand up straight.

She's still prattling on.

"We go to meetings three times a week now. The children are being blessed next Sunday, by Brother Francis. Will you come?"

She helps herself to a glass of green cordial from the jug on the locker.

Not on your bloody life. "I'll see," I said.

The drink slops over the rim of the glass. The cleaner will be furious.

"Tell me what you are thinking?" she asks.

I ignore her.

Mark was always out of place. He stood around like a lost soul the day the plumber came to fix the septic tank. He watched as the man slopped sludge onto the lawn.

"Good fertiliser," he said. The plumber grunted.

Sal burbles on at the bedside. I've turned her off but her voice slips over me seeking a crack into which it can insinuate itself. She stops. I say nothing. Sal slides out of the chair, the vinyl making farting noises. She kneels and says a loud prayer, thinks I've fallen asleep.

We are such liars we women, just who were we trying to impress?

Dad never liked Mark, not even the first time he met him.

"Don't like that man, got cold eyes." Then he had another drink. Mother scrunched herself up on the bench under the Jacaranda.

"Don't bring him here again, Jackie."

I never did take him back but then that was my last visit too.

Sal calls the nurse.

"She's crying again," she says.

There is a painting on the wall brimming with desert hues, a red and purple blot on a white wall. There's a murky trough in the corner and a windmill floats off toward the horizon. The painter has forgotten to plant its legs into the ground. A fence line, old, probably termite ridden, trails the windmill on its ethereal jaunt to the foothills. There is no life in it, it is an empty red picture. Sal's face blots it out. A nurse hovers behind her.

"Are you awake, Jackie, just thought I'd drop in. I've brought some flowers, brought them out on the highway. Carnations, you always liked carnations."

Mark tried to grow carnations on the weekends. He tried to grow lots of things. Looping green caterpillars devoured them all, except the carnations. He kept his rifle handy on a rack by the kitchen door and shot the rabbits that chewed the flower heads off. By the time he and the worms had finished there was nothing else left alive.

It was a Sunday. Sal packed her two eldest off to the forest with a picnic lunch and her three year old dribbled mushroom pie down his shirt sleeves at the verandah table. Mark took relaxed potshots at a noisy cluster of crows in the kitchen tree.

"Kill one and you get rid of them all," he said.

He ejected the spent shell from the rifle and leant it against the verandah post. He was the picture of the Monday to Friday city boy transformed, a weekend warrior. I saw Sal eye him with interest.

Zac sidled down the kitchen tree and limped, glassy eyed and dripping blood, across the yard. A back leg dragging behind him. I followed.

"Mum. He's shot the bloody cat," yelled the kid. "It's gonna die."

"Jackie?"

It was Sal again. She turned aside.

"She did speak to me last week. Said she'd come to the blessing."

The nurse shakes her head and leaves.

The bastard shot my cat. Zac's leg was hanging off. I threw a towel over him and bundled him into a box. On the way over to the vet's place Zac clawed his way free and screamed in the back seat. There was a lot of blood for a cat. The vet amputated the leg.

"Jackie. Listen to me will you? It's real important!"

Sal takes my face between her hands, then frees it, goes to the door, looks around and comes back. She sits on the bed.

"Listen! We didn't tell them, Jackie. They don't know. Nobody knows." She hits me, across the face. "Will you look at me!"

I don't want to look at her. She looks awful. Her hair's all shaved off and she has huge dark rings around her eyes. She looks like she's been on a month long bender.

"I didn't tell them, Jackie. I knew Mark wouldn't. You've been lying here for bloody weeks not speaking to anyone, except me, once. They all reckon you're in shock. But you aren't, are you?"

She looks into my eyes.

"I'll move back to the farm, Jackie. I'll look after you."

"Mark?" I ask.

"He's gone," she said.

The pain! The pain, the surprised look in his face. Sal lies under him on the verandah couch, his jeans are on the floor, hers hang off one ankle. Blood runs out of a hole in his leg and makes puddles on the verandah.

Later, I go home. Out on leave. Someone's cleaned up the mess on the porch, the couch is gone. I shower in my own bathroom and wash my hair. MacElvinney comes over to feed the chooks and tells me the cat's stuck up the tree again. "I tried to get him down but he scratched the shit out of me." He bares his wounds. I tell him it's okay and the cat will come down, eventually. MacElvinney trudges off down the driveway toward his rattly old ute.

"When are ya comin' back for good?" he yells from behind the wheel.

"Soon," I promise.

It's all right Jackie, you can come back now. Sal did everything right, good old Sal took care of everything. Sat you down, cleaned off the rifle and gave it to the red head to play with until the police and ambulance arrived. No one ever charges a three year old with accidental shooting. Mark, well he was gone but then you can't lose what you never had.

Sal vanished again, early on a Monday morning. She left the kids and a note on the front of the fridge.

The Hostage

Now that you are here, and the blind
rush a mad blur of plans in the memory
of another place, you no longer

curse traffic clogging city blocks
the clutter of fools, customs, clocks
mapping their lines across continents

— with altitude the red of factions
becomes vague blue and vulnerable —
the one sign waited for and waited for

and cursed in coming. You are becoming
the scholar of delay. The hermeneutist
for whom the most holy text is the moment

itself hostage to this silent place
where history tilting rolls around
you, connoisseur of the incomplete

of the tease and transition. The plane
on the tarmac, refuelled, goes nowhere.
The past has not yet been answered.

This is the time where nothing happens.
Only absence burns you with its meaning.
You remark every intimation of change:

strange birds singing in the false dawn
the rivetted hull creaking from the frost
the first faint chirrring of helicopters

Shifting House Again

Taking down from these few familiar rooms,
from this known and measured house,
taking down, piece by piece,
the measure of the known and familiar.
The posters of the Pop Art Show
which we bought to remind us of that holiday
the year before last, and that wine
we drank beside the river
and we looked for ages but could never
find another of that vintage; have gone.
The library is an empty room, where men who read
nothing heavier than the sports pages grunt
beneath the weight of pedants
and poets. The flowers, the phoenix
palm in its backwrenching pot, have gone.
It is becoming as when we first came here
when our feet first echoed in its emptiness
room by room the past
recovers the present
uncovers the future.
The order has gone. All our little loose things
from the bathroom and from the bedroom
marking a mosaic of emotion, have gone.
In time the chaos too will have gone.
Relieved of the human, the house breathes
becoming itself, it is becoming the other again
where spiders drift
on their own threads
across the emptiness.

LAWRENCE BOURKE

Pastoral

Changing gears the Zephyr winds
through the back country. Jolted
from dreams among fragmented voices:

apparently her lungs were full of it.
She could hardly breathe, toward the end.
I remember her, singing like the morning.

In that cold gathering over the dark hole
crumbling the good earth between fingers
clay clings to skin, streaks clothes yellow.

At the house, with no-one at home
only moving between uneasy greetings
the priest consoles his frightened flock.

Further voices drift: *She was the last*
who knew those old songs. At your wedding
how her voice rang in the parish hall.

Familiar phrases laying the dead to rest
move in the room among the black dressed shapes,
the old ones in their well worn mourning.

On the honey-lucent side-board
daffodils and jonquils corrupt the gloom.
The terrible sweetness of the yellow,

the fragrance which fills the lungs.

LAWRENCE BOURKE

Displacements

Now that St. Christopher has gone
the way of all travellers, into
what for those who frequent the ways
of their ancestors is dark oblivion,
who can you call upon, what god, saint
or hero to translate the strangeness
invading your heart? That oblivion.
Just for something to do in the blank
room, you put the strange grammar
on the table and step into the dark
the noctilucent clouds, breathing,
the cross collapsed in southern skies.

NOEL MACAINSH

A Fair Menace — Images of Womanhood in Early Australian Poetry

Not long ago all the cyclones that menaced Australia had female names. Cyclone *Tracy* demolished Darwin in 1974. Cyclone *Althea* wrecked Townsville in 1971. Nowadays, however, half these dangerous whirlwinds have male names. While the grand, ordered round of the Cosmos still appears to remain solely in His hands, the hitherto instinctive or habitual attribution of elemental vagaries to "feminine" forces in Nature has been supervened upon by claimants to sexual equality. Nevertheless, it could be doubted whether this change does much to dislodge the primitive animism or psychological projection implied in labelling Nature as female. In what follows here examination is made of some varieties of this labelling and projection in two representative anthologies of Australian poetry, covering approximately the period 1825-1925, that is a century in which the poetical projection of femininity could be argued for as largely free of modern sophistications. The anthologies are *The Oxford Book of Australasian Verse*, 1918, edited by Walter Murdoch, and *An Australasian Anthology*, 1927, selected by Percival Serle, assisted by Frank Wilmot and Robert H. Croll.

A feature of many poems in these anthologies is the repeated projection of the feminine onto Nature, and vice-versa. Whether a poem is overtly addressed to Nature or to a woman, the end result is more often than not simply a fusion of the two.

An early instance of this fusion, in what is overtly a "Nature" poem, is provided by Charles Harpur's celebrated, "A Midsummer Noon in the Australian Forest." Here, the not uncommon motif of woman as "rest" is blended with Nature:

> Every other thing is still,
> Save the ever-wakeful rill,
> Whose cool murmur only throws
> Cooler comfort round repose;
> Or some ripple in the sea
> Of leafy boughs, where, lazily,
> Tired summer in his bower
> Turning with the noontide hour,
> Heaves a slumbrous breath ere she
> Once more slumbers peacefully . . .

Harpur's poem refers to a specific point in time, the mid-summer noon. Nevertheless, in the course of reading the poem a time-axis is produced, on which are successively assembled the imagined particulars of the poet's conception. In the course of their accumulation, these particular events on the time-axis run together; they produce contrasts, differences and mutual modifications, so as to gain individual identity in a whole. Factors of movement, such as the "ever-wakeful rill" or "some ripple in the sea," contrastively intensify the overall effect of slumber: the "cool murmur only

throws/ Cooler comfort round repose." Thus there emerges, in the course of reading, a single imaginary object set against a background of particulars that already belong to the past. This object is the passive woman. Harpur's poem is particularly effective because the meaning arrived at in the course of reading, namely the transformation of the time-sequence of particulars into a timeless structured whole posited in the stillness of midsummer noon, coincides with the all-inclusive image of a sleeping woman, that is of a consciousness of time momentarily extinguished. This image of the woman, fully disclosed only at the poem's end, closes off the poem and contains all the poem's particulars in a slumbrous suspension of normal activity. Thus, there is foregrounded an experience of the natural world in its passivity as woman. The poet, as the sole consciousness (the "ever-wakeful rill"), contemplates in hallucinatory reverie the forest as a woman. Given the general cultural context of the poet's time, including ideas of "Mother Nature," it is not easy to avoid the suggestion that Harpur's image of the "lazy," "tired" woman is also that of a mother tired from the morning's activities in a household (even the "household of Nature"). The absence of erotic hints conforms to this impression. Furthermore, the absence of mention of children, while not aiding the suggestion of maternity, nevertheless leaves open the question of the psychic disposition of the poet, that is the stance of the persona in the imaginary forest bedroom contemplating the slumbrous woman at noon. It would seem that the way is open here for filial projections, if not for re-evocation of the symbiotic relationship of mother and child. Not the erotic, but the comforting maternal aspect is foregrounded in this poem.

In contemplating the forest, the poet comes to be surrounded by a world that is both Natural and female, and this to such an extent that the stirring of leaves is literally experienced as the breath and turning of a tired woman, with whom the poet is closely present. In general, it could be said that while Nature of itself says nothing it nevertheless answers the interrogating gaze of the poet, or as the scholastic tag would have it: *quidquid recipitur, recipitur ad modem recipientis.* That is, the interrogating gaze of the poet meets a response that is in accord with his own nature.

A further point implied in the aesthetic success of Harpur's poem is that the fictionalising of the forest particulars into a structured whole under the overriding image of woman is involuntarily accompanied by an idealising of the woman. Here however, the reader not only finds the power to enjoy himself in the aesthetic perfection of the poem and in the concomitant idealisation of its object but must also sense that this idealisation stands in contrast with his own experience of the imperfect world outside the poem. That is, the kind of aesthetic practised by Harpur, which pursues the classical ideal of articulation in a self-completing or so-called organic form, both idealises and falsifies its object. In modern literature, this tendency to aesthetic idealisation is broken by ironies, self-mockery, alienation, fragmentation, montage and so on, all of which is absent in Harpur's work. It could be said that the presentation of woman in early Australian poems generally is singularly devoid of these relativising devices.

Another version of the Nature-as-woman poem is provided by James Lister Cuthbertson (1851-1910), who, in his poem "Wattle and Myrtle," invokes a timeless feminine presence while, as it were, colonising wattle and myrtle for the Classical Tradition:

> Come with saffron diadem, and scatter
> Odour of Araby that haunts the air;
> Queen of the woodland, rival of the roses,
> Spring in the yellow tresses of thy hair.
> Surely, the old Gods, dwellers in Olympus,
> Under thy shining loveliness have strayed,
> Crowned with thy clusters magical Apollo,
> Pan with his reedy music might have played.

Here, in contrast to Harpur's poem, specifically historical and cultural attributes are given to the feminisation of Australian Nature. Wattle and Myrtle are fused in imagination with an idealised feminine presence intuited as preceding and informing the gods of Greek culture.

Victor Daley (1858-1905), in "The Woods of Dandenong," expresses what is also a frequent motif in this kind of poem, namely the loss of a sexual harmony that is longed for:

> Rose, lovely rose — a fairer rose was she —
> Rose, white rose, I kiss your tender leaves!
> Speak, speak, speak, O Soul white rose for me,
> Say, say to her my heart in silence grieves.
> lonely and sad it grieves amidst the careless throng . . .
> Ah, green are the waving trees in the woods of Dandenong!

Victor Daley also has a poem in the Oxford collection, on "The Muses of Australia." In this poem, he describes the Muses loved by Henry Kendall and Adam Lindsay Gordon. These muses are intimations of womanhood projected onto Nature. Kendall's Muse, who is sweet and shy, "dwells/ In secret hollows of the hills,/ And green untrodden dells." We are told that

> Her voice is as the voice of streams
> That under myrtles glide;
> Our Kendall saw her face in dreams,
> And loved her till he died.

The Muse of Gordon has blood that "runs like the blood that streams/ Out of the mountain's heart." She has "strong brown thighs,/ Her panting breasts are bare." To these Muses, Daley adds one of his own: "It is the Desert Muse, and she/ Is veiled from head to feet." Men will follow her till they die, for some believe she has the power to wake the world:

> In silent dread she walks apart —
> Yet I have heard men say
> The song that slumbers in her heart
> Will wake the world some day.

Another category of verse, directed more to the specifically human than to Nature, has a virtually inexhaustible repertoire which demonstrates, again, the blending of Nature and the feminine. For instance, Patrick Moloney (1843-1904), in his "Sonnets — Ad Innuptam," that is to an unmarried woman, transfigures his subject in a plethora of nature imagery:

> As brides white-veiled that come to marry earth,
> Now each mist-morning sweet July attires,
> Now moon-night mists are not of earthly birth,
> But silver smoke blown down from heavenly fires.
> Skies kiss the earth, clouds join the land and sea,
> All nature marries, only thou art free.

In another of these same sonnets, Patrick Maloney seeks to feminise a city, harmonising it with his beloved, as well as with stars, street-lamps, angels, gods and Olympus:

> O sweet Queen-city of the golden South,
> Piercing the evening with thy star-lit spires,
> Thou wert a witness when I kissed the mouth
> Of her whose eyes outblazed the skyey fires.
> I saw the parallels of thy long streets
> With lamps like angels shining all a-row,
> While overhead the empyrean seats
> Of gods were steeped in paradisic glow . . .

This sonnet concludes with a not unexpected grand historical gesture:

> On high to bless, the Southern Cross did shine,
> Like that which blazed o'er conquering Constantine.

Each of the three poems by Hugh McCrae (1876-1958) in the Oxford anthology presents a transfiguration of woman in Nature. That which Christopher Brennan has called "transposition" in poetry is complete in each of McCrae's poems here; that is the subject is completely assimilated to a purely "poetical" context so that no trace of mundanity remains. The first poem associates its central motif, "She", with images of decline reminiscent of the English Decadents:

> She looked on me with sadder eyes than Death,
> And, moving through the large, autumnal trees,
> Failed like a phantom on the bitter breath
> Of midnight; and the unilluminated seas
> Roared in the darkness out of centuries.

The rest of the poem, three stanzas, dilates on the theme that "she cannot come again." Nevertheless, the poet seeks her. She is fair and sweet, indeed "more fair than all imagining." She is associated with God, holiness, angels, flowers, stars. Only within the "limits of the secret ring/ God walls about His Kingdom" might her like be found. The poet's searching for her is "In vain, in vain."

This conclusion makes an interesting contrast to the immediately preceding poem in the Oxford Anthology, namely "The Lonely Woman", by M. Forrest. In this poem, which ends on the same page where McCrae's poem begins, the final line reads: "Crowded town or dreary seaboard, everywhere some woman waits." "The Lonely Woman" indeed has five stanzas, each of which gives a more-or-less realistic description of some part of Australia and finishes with the assertion that there a "lonely woman waits." While McCrae's poem invokes the Divine Order and a perspective of centuries, in which the focus is on the unimaginably fair "she" who will never come again, the poem of M. Forrest contrastively presents a geographically broad survey of the present with emphasis not on the vain hopes of the man but on the loneliness of the woman. The object of the woman's waiting is not clearly specified though there are suggestions that it is for her "mate". Mrs Forrest's poem gives no hint of the kind of transfiguration of the other sex found in McCrae's poetry. Both protagonists, it seems, are waiting in vain, one for an impossible female ideal, the other for an over-due, merely life-size male.

In one way or another these poems show that the consummation of love is impossible. Various factors intervene, such as death, unbridgeable distance, age and "cares". These factors reduce the hope of erotic union to a dream. Indeed, a number of poems simply recognise the longing for love as only a dream, even if fatal to peace of mind. Christopher Brennan (1870-1932) sets the tone for several works by other poets:

> I am shut out of mine own heart
> because my love is far from me . . .

(I am Shut Out of Mine Own Heart)

or

> Of old, on her terrace at evening
> — not here — in some long-gone kingdom
> oh, folded close to her breast

(Of old, on her Terrace at Evening)

Somewhat like Brennan, Hugh Cleland McKay, born in Melbourne, 1880, presents an imagery of forest and night in which the poet encounters the ideal woman, only to then "wander blind at dawn through the streets of waking." His dream has become a "Witch Mistress" who ruins his days:

> Soft eyes by an ebony mirror in midnight flower,
> And certain doom that, brave to its undoing,
> My soul must spire to the vision that robs its power,
> A living dream for a prize and the price, eternal,
> Eternal night between worlds . . . for a captured hour.
> (Witch Mistress)

The note of bewitchment and tortured longing, itself an intensification of nostalgia for the harmony of woman and Nature, appears in no small number of poems to give rise to a fear of chaos. It is as though the poet were threatened by loss of both self-control and social existence. A number of poems suggest a sense of instinctual, sexual pressure, not willingly touched upon. Here, bodily desires are turned away from as a potential source of chaos. The poet's longing for an overall harmony of femininity, Nature and history could be seen here as an immense mental effort against one's own physical nature. It is as if the individual poet must subject his own body to the same process that economic development has determined for the species, that is the discipline of mass industry and organized labour. Prudishness, stiffness, inhibition in personal relations becomes stylised in a projected harmonious Whole, wherein sexual drives are sublimated into ethereal nostalgia.

A rather frank example of the ruinous role of bodily desire in the struggle for Divine Harmony is given in Michael J. Tully's poem "The Wanton". Tully was born in Melbourne, in 1866. His poem, included in Percival Searle's *An Australasian Anthology*, has a religiously dutiful protagonist partnered to a sexually needy wife. His soul is purely adjusted to the Divine order, but chaos lurks in the form of a latent urge to kill his wife. The poem opens:

> Our marriage-bond was sealed at birth
> With God's fair seal and sign,
> Though daughter of dark Eve, the earth,
> I, son of light divine.

But the wife's desire is not harmonised with this godly scheme:

> The fleshpots dost though still desire,
> That, panting night and day,
> Though burnest like a raging fire
> Seas cannot quench nor stay?

The protagonist finds that neither appeals to remorse nor prayer can curb his wife's concupiscence. He cannot save himself from loss of cosmic face, that is from "shame/ Before my starry kin." He is caught in a sexual bond and longs to be free of it. He would "No longer passion's bondslave be,/ But home to me return." It is his own sense of self, conceived of as identity with the Divine Whole, that may well drive him to kill his wife:

> O wayward heart, with love of thee,
> Sore-hungered, still I yearn;
> No longer passion's bondslave be,
> But home to me return.
> Make not of love too rash demands,
> Lest, for mine own self's sake,
> I seize thee in hate-frenzied hands,
> And thee, thou wanton, break!

Here, the subject is murderously racked between public and private demands, between those of God and the bedroom, the spirit and the flesh. His very notion of love and "me" is ideological, giving precedence to a philosophical monism, wherein the parts gain their meaning from their conformity to the Whole, with the corollary that those that cannot or will not contribute to the divine Whole must be exterminated.

The subject who thus defines himself as aspirant to the divine harmony of God and Man must not only be alert to the menace of instinctual deviance in his wife and others but also in himself. Daniel Henry Deniehy's much admired poem "To His Wife", collected in Searle's anthology, emphasizes the purity of a wife. She is addressed as "God's holiest gift, thou woman pure . . ." She is asked to lift up her "holy voice at morn and eve/And pray for me," The reason for this request is that the protagonist is "Not from the dread sin free" but is beset by sexual temptations:

> Hard by the Isles of Truth doth Circe prowl;
> Oh, pray for me.

The protagonist confesses that he has a "wrung and rifted heart" and that the "prize" he has "brought to be" was "too dearly earned". In this poem, the Sydney poet does not mention the word "love". It is implied for his readers in his praise of his wife's purity of soul, her holiness, patience, happy household toil and prayerfulness, that in those qualities of sublimation required of the Divine Order, from which the protagonist is guiltily sundered by his own inability to achieve the same apparently trouble-free sublimation as found in his wife. The notion that his sexual drives might, under other conditions, lead to greater happiness, appears to be out of the question. Instead, these drives are associated with descent into bestiality, the chaos of the non-human.

Adam Lindsay Gordon (1833-1870) projects this sexual descent onto the trees of the forest. In his extract from *Lightning and Tempest*, printed in Searle's anthology, the wind of desire whispers to the female cedar and the male oak, driving them to sin and chaos:

> The spring-wind pass'd through the forest, and
> whispered low in the leaves,
> And the cedar tossed her head . . .

The poem develops this imagery into a tale of retribution, showing what happens to those "cedars" and "Oaks" who depart from the Divine Order, that is those who follow their "own devices" and foster their "own desires". These wanton creatures are brought to cry out:

> "God! we have sinn'd, we have sinn'd,
> We are bruised, we are shorn we are thinn'd,
> Our strength is turned to derision, our pride laid
> low in the dust,
> Our cedars are cleft by thy lightnings, our oaks
> are strewed by Thy wind,
> And we fall on our faces seeking Thine
> aid, though Thy wrath is just."

The same idea of punishment for departure from Divine Order is repeated in the next poem of Gordon's, in Searle's anthology. This poem, a long excerpt from Gordon's "The Rhyme of Joyous Garde," is anything but joyous. It expresses the agonies of remorse consequent on the protagonist's sinful yielding to the "evil seed" in his soul, so that his "traitorous kisses stained/The snows of her spotless forehead." That is, he appears to have tempted a married woman. Not much of a view is afforded

of the woman and her presumed shame. We are told that she is pure, spotless, golden-haired. The main information about her is conveyed in the opening lines:

> The deep dusk fires in those dreamy eyes,
> Like seas clear-coloured in summer skies,
> Were guiltless of future treason . . .

The protagonist sins repeatedly with the woman "Till my heart to the sin grew harden'd." Nevertheless, when he hears she is dead he wishes that he might go to Hell if thereby her soul could be "wafted skyward":

> Lord! let her stand in the light of Thy face,
> Cloth'd with Thy love and crown'd with Thy grace,
> When I gnash my teeth in the terrible place
> That is fill'd with weeping and wailing.

There follows three stanzas of speculation on the after-life. The poem then concludes with the advent of the Last Judgement: "And the souls shall be summon'd from land and sea,/ At the blast of His bright archangel." The sense of sin is set off strongly by the presentation of the persona as a true swordsman faithful to his King and God. It could be mentioned here that Gordon's more famous poem, "The Sick Stockrider," printed in both of these anthologies, has a protagonist who looks back over a life long seemingly void of any interest in woman at all. There is no hint that his lack of interest may itself be 'sick'; rather it is indicative of an ideal manly outdoor life, free of sexual bother.

An interesting variant of the potentially disruptive role of individual desire, of the "downward" tendency of sexual nature, is found in Sir Archibald Thomas Strong's poem, *Australia, 1905*, included in the Oxford anthology. Here, the notion of the "wanton", that is the "licentious, unchaste, lewd" woman, is projected onto the country as a whole:

> Careless she lies along the Southern Main,
> The lovely maiden, wanton with the spell . . .

This maiden is also lazy and soulless. She will not amount to anything until her "lord arrives to control her:

> Her fated lord
> Shall kiss her lips, and all her will control,
> and fill her wayward heart with holy fear,
> And cross her forehead with his iron sword,
> And bring her strength, and armour, and a soul,

Sir Archibald (1876-1930), born in Melbourne, included this poem in his *Sonnets of the Empire* published in London, 1915. Another of the *Sonnets*, also in the *Oxford Book*, is called *Australia, 1914*. It continues the same metaphor while suggesting that the "sword" may indeed bring the wanton to her senses:

> Not yet her eyes are clear: throughout her brain
> Still swarm the antic creatures of her dream,
> The idiot mirth, the sports that kill the soul,
> Yet shall not night lay hold on her again,
> For through the rack she spies the morning gleam
> Clear on the sword that lights her to her goal.

Other versions of the woman-as-country-to-be-tamed can be found in these anthologies. Generalising, it could be said they suggest that the contemporary need

for social consolidation favoured an aesthetic of harmony, in which the threat of any kind of "chaos" was met by the promulgation of ideas of historical, even imperialist order. The violence done to individual longing, in the interests of the Whole, comes to have historical justification. Self-control and suppression of instinctual needs have the good of all in view. Historical optimism is presented as having an ethical basis.

In conclusion, a few hypotheses are suggested. First, that the more women were tamed, domesticated under Victorian patriarchy, the more the patriarchs and their poets were unsettled by their fantasies of the untamed, non-domesticated woman. The wild woman, the free woman with the "strong brown thighs" belongs out in the never-never land. Her urban counterpart, the "wanton" or slut, belongs in the street. Neither of them belongs in the home. They represent that part of female freedom that has escaped male or simply, social control. Out of control, their imagery assumes in the male imagination menacing shapes. They are the source of anxiety and reprobation, and at the same time of wonderment since they answer to a need of the male hard-pressed by the social order. Images of provocative and scandalous women have existed from at least the time of Lilith onwards: Judith, Salome, Delilah, La Belle Dame Sans Merci. With Victorian times, however, the repression of sexual need as required by social discipline grew to such a degree that deviance came to be labelled perversion and to exhibit symptoms of sadism and masochism. Significant of the male fantasies in these poems is that they are generally referred to locations outside the official "system".

This anti-social element is also present implicitly in the avoidance or passing-over of the reproductive function. The dream woman may certainly be presented as maternal but there is typically no suggestion of the poet's inseminating her and accepting the burdens of fatherhood. With John Shaw Neilson, for instance, the girl is typically parted with before she reaches reproductive maturity. The desired woman is of Nature, not of civilisation. Her pregnancy, seemingly a natural thing, takes her out of Nature and binds her into the familial structure and social order. The encounter in moonlight amid roses leads to the suburban street, mortgages and industrial bondage.

Some of the poems in these anthologies suggest the viewpoint of the French author Gilles Deleuze, namely that anti-motherly versions of the poetic imagination may represent an Oedipal situation in which father and daughter unite, to the exclusion of the mother, motivated by desire for each other and resentment of the maternal role. Here, patriarchy rears against matriarchy, dreaming to possess the natural woman prior to her socialisation through reproduction. It would lead too far afield to examine this suggestion in the present context. Suffice it to say that the poetic persona in these anthologies generally does not dream to possess the daughter but rather be free of all hint of the family system.

GRAEME HETHERINGTON

For Helen

(1)

A diamond in a bed of snow,
You flash and glitter as you rage
Against your "vile, perpetual cold",
Or else you splinter into ice,

Use words like "bronchiectisis"
Then run into a storm outside,
Place hailstones on my open palm
And try to force my fingers round.

(2)

You sit propped up in bed and paint
The black umbrellas in the street
As coloured petals on a stream.
Another one of many days

To be endured with images,
The pageant of the rush hour fades
And leaves you with a sea of death
That drowns the scattered flowers you'd saved.

(3)

As flesh wastes on the human frame
And skeletons disintegrate,
Snow melts and ribs the mountain range,
Allows the darkness to emerge

Until it overtakes the bones.
With charcoal in your frozen hand,
You started drawing it at dawn
Despite the sharp pain in your side.

(4)

I didn't know the flower's name
And thought of gold tossed at my feet
Before I bent to take it home,

A gift from my long evening walk
For you still ill and left behind
As love that glows among grey stones.

(5)

I felt myself mocked by the flowers
Bright yellow and richer than gold,
With love woven into a chain
And carefully hung round my neck.
Unable to stand their loud laugh,

Their sun-happy dance round my head,
I threw the gift back in your face
That closed up as tight as a bud.
Oxalis, you said, was their name,
Though Sour Sob was better for some.

(6)

Late winter's isolated flowers
Have lit the stone-strewn ancient fields
As weather-beaten shepherds move
Their golden sheep to safer homes.
Like one of the anemones

You listen to their tinkling bells
That with the birdsong thrills your soul
As you have mine for ten years now.
I turn to catch your smile and lose
Your pale face in the evening sun.

Song of the Locust

as the speed of the vehicle
increases the worn wheel
bearing sings louder
suddenly the car comes
to a screeching halt
its goggled ghost driver
vanishes high into the
inconspicuous trees
of summer

a fantastic automobile
as small as a toy batman's
car a young boy would amuse
himself with
later finding it
lying on its green
enamel side
its wheels locked up
like bent finishing nails

the dull undercarriage
the white-wash color of
fence Huckleberry Finn
painted while humming
off key like a wheel
bearing gone bad as he
sped through his
afternoon
chores

At Thebes

A year was the somnolence
Between the river's floods.
Beneficent, like them, dynasties
Would swell and burst and wash away;
The fat-wet Nile slurped towards the sand
Which, detesting water, rolled repelled
Away out over Africa. It never rains.
In the stony dunes above the Nile
The scarab feeds on camel turd
Yet Ramses' priests thought him divine:
Ramses who stood ten times life height,
In stone ten thousand times its weight,
Now lies in bits. A camel's back bore
Too much straw, perhaps, a beetle
Nosed away three grains of sand,
Provoked the thunder of those mighty tons.
The earth in Egypt rarely quakes,
It must have trembled then
At history's massive hiccup.

JAN KEMP

Bela Vista, A Traveller's Tale or The Man from Angola

From the outside it has the appearance of what Jessett imagines a hillside hacienda would be like. A sprawling shape made of yellow-painted stucco dressed with brown shutters built against a slope. The verandah overlooks a low white pillared wall which girds the children's hop-scotch court on the second plaza, a floor below. Jessett leans over the verandah balustrade the better to read off the chalked roman figures and wonders at the multitudes of languages children speak without thinking. They chuck down small pieces of slate as markers. Now and then their chatter and laughter bursts into a squabble over the position of a marker in relation to the chalk lines, faint in the dusk light. Phonemes of Portuguese float up. But Jessett cannot break these exacting linguistic bubbles except for the odd number or expletive that any traveller soon picks up. She settled back at her table, to sip at her glass of wine and watch the evening.

The bay's brown water sifts in, gone silver in the light the casino casts across the bay from its dominant position on the further headland. Cars wind around the bends of Rua da Praia Grande keeping to the level horizon of the waterfront road. Their lights are intermittently visible through the trees all along the sea-wall where she walks past the fishing-nets, giant pale-brown cobwebs suspended on stilts over the water, this afternoon. The elegant span of the Vista Bridge asks the eye to follow it from the tip of the further headland right across the estuary. From each lamp on the bridge, a tall reflected tunnel shimmers on the water's surface making an ephemeral grille of light. On this side, the shimmers disappear into the tops of the Morton Bay fig-trees that edge the Rua da Praia Grande another level yet below the plaza. Two small cannon sit on either side of the plaza facing the bay. One of the children sits desultorily astride a cannon, back to the bay, watching the others.

Jessett can now hear the sounds of a diesel motor from an invisible boat about mid-bridge. Before dusk, sampans and fishing trawlers sailed under the bridge and up the length of the bay. Perhaps the boat will come into view as a silhouette passing through the shimmering light of one of the grille bars and shift course, just past the bridge, to centre itself in the channel that leads right up the Pearl River estuary and into China.

Jessett's gaze pans back to the Lisboa, opposite the entrance to the Vista Bridge. Occasionally car-lights driving off the bridge glint on the metallic gold S bends that architecturally and decoratively trim the hotel-casino, so that in the half-light it looks like a giant golden wedding cake or an elaborately dressed flamenco parlour, from which dancers might pour. Instead, a river of money flows here from the pockets of the Cantonese-speaking, smoking, hawk-eyed, amahs of Hong Kong who guard the gaming boards within, into the ocean of China's foreign exchange, hidden behind the facade of Macau.

It is at this spot, on the headland, and seated on the Hotel Bela Vista verandah, that Jessett meets Vasco da Gama. She is drinking her second glass of wine and

watches a table of deaf and dumb people, their faces caught animated in expressive poses by the candle-light, who are talking in the dining room beyond the brown door-shutters that open onto the verandah. They appear to be enormously happy, despite their handicap. Or, are they merely gesticulating and Jessett, at this distance is unable to hear them over the sounds of cutlery being washed in the kitchen or above the low drone of traffic that comes like an inhuman hum from the bay?

Da Gama steps out through the door-shutters and before she knows it, he's asked Jessett if he can sit at her table. Jessett thinks him extremely forward but she admires audacity. How can she refuse? She likes his boots. And the way he sits. Sprawls actually. It's not often the world's reversed, but the minute she looks in his face she knows he's seeing things. She wants to know if he's keen on jaialai or dog-racing, if he has the abandon of the gambler about him.

— Who are you then?
— I'm Vasco da Gama, he volunteers, as if he was all Portugal.
— Truly! she says, mockingly.
— But of course; here is my card.

Jessett looks at it as he says ah, it is Portuguese wine you are drinking. He sniffs at her glass. I can tell from the aroma. May I buy you another?

Jessett nods weakly. His card reads Vasco da Gama, Explorer and Wine-Merchant. On the reverse side are engraved Chinese characters Jessett knows say the same thing in those intricately-drawn, stylish strokes. She tucks one corner of the card under the empty wine carafe and it makes a sharp flicked sound as it hits the hard table.

Drinkers sit on verandahs and also men who have lost a woman and want to examine their thoughts to find out why, whilst masquerading as devils-may-care. Jessett notices one of this kind beyond Vasco da Gama, while the latter is calling imperatively for the waiter, one whose thin shoulders show their thinness through his shirt. The man she watches cannot be more than twenty-five. When he turns profile to look at the bay and suck in at his cigarette, Jessett can see he has an undershot chin and lips that stick out like blisters imagining they are being kissed. Quite ugly. Yet he has beautiful well-lashed eyes like a portrait in a Greek mosaic. She wants to remark on this to da Gama, but he is so full of waiters and wine that there is no space for her words and to draw his attention to another gentleman would not be seemly behaviour so she keeps her silence.

Napoleon looked longer at the Russian snow and with more bitterness, for men take defeat to heart in such a way that women might well teach them to ride it with a kind of patience, Jessett is thinking. It would describe this Vasco accurately enough, she would imagine, if a grant plan of his got botched. Yet somehow you knew his plans wouldn't be of the botching kind. They'd work, however mad they were, or he'd phase them out and others in like tides so you'd never know exactly what failed. He was too cunning for that or just too street-wise to let it show.

Jessett wondered if he wanted her. It was hard to say at this stage. But how could she tell him she wasn't any longer in the habit of picking up strange men, without putting her palms right up to his eyes for him to read the progress of the lines? There was little time for courtship. Her jet-foil for Hong Kong was leaving the next day at noon, unless she took the three o'clock ferry, for which, as yet, she had no booking. No would have to be no, and that, that and it would be best for him if he realised this soon, then he couldn't accuse her of leading him on. Or maybe she'd read him quite wrongly and all he wanted was verandah conversation and a chance to boast or to test out his mental machisimo, by having her have to smile at him unable to keep the dazzle out of her irises. A conquest of the mind. She couldn't be sure. Men after all are men.

Jessett remarked that the fishing trawlers at sea looked like giant arachnids walking the water and asked him if he knew how to sail or rope a horse and didn't they come to the same thing? Da Gama laughed loudly, then sipped his wine saying, that as he was an explorer, adventure was what thrilled him most. It couldn't buck him off. And that he knew how to ride discoveries.

— I came over on the Flying Ibis, Jessett said by way of distraction, and you?

— I came over everywhere on anything, Da Gama said and laughed again. I told you, I explore. I don't die off. I've been around life-times. I'm historic. Was he telling her something mystical? Jessett pinched herself. The guy was nuts. She liked a wild eye but not wilder than an egret's. The thing must have some thought to it. Some sane chord that ties it to a common sense. Her glance wandered over the grille of light. Otherwise it falls apart.

She looked back at him to see Da Gama, profile turned to the estuary. And before her eyes, the boy beyond with the blistered lips vanished as a separate entity and became part of Da Gama, who pouted more now than he had done at first; and when he turned back to her, a sadness made his expression far less bullish.

— You see before you, he said, another of my selves, another lifetime of mistake, disappointment and failure, another discovery that I must ride. Now will you come to my room? I wish to share something with you.

Jessett went not like a lamb, but like a goat, intrepid, tasting the air, musty in the Hotel Bela Vista passage from the humidity, keeping her mind off Da Gama's boots, which, however much his lips may now have pouted, swaggered and seduced her. I shall keep my mind focused on the damp ceiling patches, she determined. No-one can lure someone to bed to have them look up at green mould, however spectacularly emerald it is. He was telling her with his lips, not his boots, of Luis de Camoes, the sixteenth century Portuguese poet who wrote his epic by the rocks near the Camoes Grotto and how he would take her there after breakfast the next morning, if she liked.

Why go to men's rooms? Jessett was kicking herself. Doomed again. It must be the wine. If only she had a husband! Some excuse. Did she truly need another fly-by-night discovery of this particular kind? Jessett determined in that second she'd had enough, sure that Camoes' poem read aloud in Portuguese would be merely an excursion before the main voyage, which would be her, apologised for the manner of her exit to the onward-walking boots and retreated, tiptoeing quickly back down the passage.

Jessett was back by the darkened alcove where the hotel receptionist's desk sat at the top of the wide stairway that led up from the street, where the taxi delivered guests to the back-entrance of the hotel. The clock above the desk read five past eleven. And then he emerged from behind an internal pillar, near the vestibule where guests sat, whilst a bill was being toted up, or sat to catch their breath, waiting for the porter to carry the bags up, the boy-man with those beautiful eyes and the blistered lips.

— Would you talk to me? He tentatively asked Jessett who nodded and indicated the vestibule seat.

As they moved towards it, the dining hall door opened and like a troupe, the deaf and dumb crowd walked past, all dark-haired and dressed up for the dinner they'd had; perhaps three families. They walked through the reception area and moved up the second staircase that lead to the choicest rooms in the hotel, each with a balcony that looked over the bay. They called out their goodnights to one another, Boa Noite, Boa Noite; and Jessett knew then it must have been the cutlery and no charade.

— My English is not so . . .

— Never mind, Jessett said, my . . . my whatever it is is probably not so . . . what do you want to talk to me about?

— Ah, such sad things.

— Where are you from? Why are you here?

— I'm from Angola.

— In Africa? But then . . .

— Yes, you see, not all Africans are black. It was a Portuguese colony, you know. And I myself have married to a black woman. The fighting, the civil war, the killing, my country, his lips explained. His eyes.

— So I come here to work. To send the money to my family. But I have not seen my wife and children for three years. I come tonight to sit, to think on the verandah, to drink wine. I come every Saturday. And I see you alone. Like me alone. And think I might talk. Some words.

— Where do you work?

— On the far island. I am construction site engineer. We build a town. You work?

— In Hong Kong. For a film company. I translate Chinese and English for the films we make.

— We are same generation. Not like that older man you talked to.

— You watched us?

— Yes. The one with the pretty boots. The one you followed away. Forgive my saying, I think you had spend the night with him?

— No, he just wanted to show me something, that's all . . . a book . . . a poem.

— A poem? Ah, this is song without music. I sing you poem I can? About my country. Will you hold my hands?

His voice shook and despite the warm night his body shook too as if he were cold.

— It is three years since I touched woman.

They sat in the near dark in the vestibule and he sang and Jessett held his hands and her mind roved over the unlikelihood of predicting she would be gently holding the hands of a man from Angola, who sang so sadly for his country and the tortures it knew, as a man from the Lebanon or an Iranian or a man or woman from countless war-torn countries she'd never been to might.

In the morning after breakfast on that verandah beyond the brown door-shutters and at the far end where the wind blew your hair away and she could watch the Portuguese families, the children would be cousins because the three mustachioed gentlemen were brothers she surmised, she glanced back over the bay and up towards the estuary. The light came totally from another slant and the tide was out, making huge reflective mounds from the mud-flats. The grille was gone. And of course, so too, the empty wine carafe, the card.

She read the hotel register as the slow old Chinese clerk added up her expenditure. As she had thought, no Da Gama in Room 207. Nobody at all. So she had imagined him?

And Alonzo from Angola would be back tomorrow on his construction site under a hard hat, interpreting the Cantonese phonemes of the workers he supervised, trying to give clear instructions while his heart turned over like the raw soil under the bulldozer.

Jessett thought over all this again on the slow ferry back to Hong Kong, the long, old, slow ferry built like a real boat. She looked at her hand on the railing, resting lightly there, the aquamarine stone of a ring reflecting the sunlight, translucent for a moment, against the great wash and churn of water the ferry's propellers sent up from under the sea, as if the sea was foaming with pleasure as the boat moved into it.

And though she was alone, she felt that her solitude had opened, that it was full of space, and that there was a landscape there, over which she could move; and that it was peopled with strangers, with whom, however new they were to her, for the moment, she could however detachedly, begin to share small things.

DIANE FAHEY

Hill Walk

1. VIEW FROM A HILL TOP

Fields sliced and harmonised into a topography
of miniature kingdoms, perfectly interlocking
and, yes, 'timeless' — a version of history
that never got to happen. Stark hedgerows divide,
less fragile than the more thorny minds of men.
In each meadow, a planned randomness of cows
nibbling at the old myth of territory . . .

All this beneath an overhang of running mist,
revolving cloud — infinite to the eye, itself
another atom, kingdom, spinning, evolving.

2. VIEW FROM A HEDGE

In a hedge one might feel the vibrating life
of earth — meeting of inchworm, ley line —
touch with certainty spined bracken, bone
capillaries, dry copper oakleaf ready to etch
itself on stone. There would be birds, of course,
and hedgehogs deep down nuzzling the debris:
rubied fur, curled parchment, green mosaic
of tiny creeper-spear. A life so busy, silent . . .

Exposed and secretive, microcosm of, if anything,
restless evolution beneath reptilian scales of bark.

3. OBSERVING SHEEP

Am I watching sheep, or are sheep watching me?
Incuriously curious, their luminous blank eyes
stare out from soot. Ravenous dreamers,
they inch up the hill growing back their wool,
the sound of cropping like tearing cloth,
rustling in a wall . . . On the hill top they stand
with postures more singly vocal than ever speech,
then leap or waddle to another field,
reclaiming privacy.

Birds rise in air, tracing on a glass map
the instinctive flow of sheep, old migrations
of whales and stars — signs unfolding into silence,
as is the watcher, who falls from time.

DONALD MOORE

How Different

to be a mole, every comfort
from dark pungent earth
that crawls against the fur;

to be a bat, hear all directions,
know echoing distances,
evade cruel light;

to be a bird, watch fields and trees
unroll beneath the wind,
dive, strut or swim for food;

to be a cat and know the world is low
until one leaps upon it,
cozens a fireside chair;

to look at things with eyes from which
our spectrum slips away,
flowers become redder, skies less blue.

Cleethorpes

The damp, salt wind pushes
as I grip the green, rust-gnawn
railings of the promenade.

This is where I first acquired
my taste for desolation,
scouring the ribbed beach
for shells and fossils
on Saturday afternoons whose core
of nothingness I seemed
to have tracked to its lair:
boyish vigilance near a mist
that baffled all searching.

Memories of the resort in season
are tenuous: a big wheel
ferrying couples to the pale sky
and back; a race to the helter-skelter
slowed in yellow sand.
And the men working levers
wiping oily hands of it:
YOU RIDE AT YOUR OWN RISK.

The rusting skeleton
of a ride's bucking course
is stranded in the off-season.
I watch from this shore,
where sea and sky
are an indivisible grey,
as I've watched
from its counterpart where the sea
is the sky's blue vitrified:

as if my crossing
could finally be made out;
will glint like a ship
then be claimed, spent of light,
by the distance.

ALAN URQUHART

Objectivity and other stances in the poetry of Robert Gray

On opening Robert Gray's *Selected Poems* (1963-1983) one is dimly reminded of Paterson's "Clancy of the Overflow". As in "Clancy", the volume's opening poem, "Journey: The North Coast", deals with the contrast between a sordid, mind-crimping city life, and images of the bush. The poem is not written from within an office, however, but from within a train that is already headed through the North Coast countryside. Gray, drawing attention to the parallels and differences with another Australian poem, Slessor's "Night Ride", makes this point: "the important underlying [difference between Slessor's poem and his] is a sense of alienation from nature on the one hand, and a sense of belonging with it on the other".[1]

But Robert Gray's "belonging" with nature does not celebrate the simply romantic "wondrous glory of the everlasting stars" of Paterson, and is not completely devoid of the darkness of "Night Ride". Gray's relationship with nature is complicated by a need to overcome some of the less ideal aspects of his personality in order to achieve a truly objective relationship with natural objects as things in themselves. The notion of *dharma* and the ideals of Buddhist "Detachment"[2] become the intellectualised form his poetry adopts to conquer this darker side of personality. On the personal level, the desire to "get back" to the countryside, which often means the countryside of his youth, is also clouded by dark memories of his family and, what he terms "the other side of country experience".[3] The poems, especially in his first two books, *Creekwater Journal* and *Grass Script*, present the poet's struggles to overcome this darker side, both of himself and his memories, to achieve some sort of "Detachment". Yet this "Detachment" or the desire to find the dharmic truth about things, as the title of "Dharma Vehicle" implies, is just a vehicle, not only for self-realisation, but also for poetic realisation. It is the vehicle for Gray's search for poetic objectivity, in the most traditional Modernist sense. By this I mean, much of Robert Gray's poetry aspires to the poetic ideals of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, where haiku-inspired imagism is directed toward the production of the poetic artefact, which was supposed to be independent of its speaker, and whose form and content were supposed to be intrinsically bound to one another. With Gray, however, as with many such poets, much of the inherent drama and interest of the poetry is generated by the poet's struggles to overcome aspects of his own personality, as much as by any success he may have in attaining the impersonality that is desired.

In this article, I propose to examine three poems in detail: firstly, "Journey: The North Coast" as an example of a poem that searches for, but fails to obtain objectivity; secondly, "The Dusk", as an example of "Detachment" achieved; and finally, "Watching by the Harbour" as an example of a post-*dharmic* poem. It is not an accident that these are chosen one from each of Gray's first three books. Although one cannot talk about "periods", there is evidence that in *The Skylight* Gray has come to terms with his past, and his poems tend towards what Dennis Haskell has claimed to be a sort of Humanism.[4] I would amend this, however, and

claim that with some resolution of personal conflicts having taken place, the need for *dharmic* "Detachment" has lessened. This is reflected in the poetry by a retreat from Modernist ideals of objectivity, as reflected, for example, in the obvious influence that Imagist poetry has had on Gray, towards a neo-romanticism.

In this essay I do not wish to get involved in the complexities of either Buddhist philosophy or Imagist theory. Yet a few words are unavoidable in order to clarify the terms as I use them. Dennis Haskell's article constitutes a more than useful introduction to Gray's use of Buddhist philosophy. In applying it to "Journey: The North Coast", for example, Haskell remarks "that in reading the lines (of "Journey: The North Coast") we tend not to notice the speaker, and think perhaps of his 'losing himself'."[5] This "losing" of oneself looks forward to a sense of self-transcendent Nothingness, explained at length in "Dharma Vehicle" in Gray's second volume, *Grass Script*. In *Creekwater Journal*, however, this losing of oneself is perhaps best evoked in "On Climbing the Stone Gate Peak", which concludes with the lines.

> Only one who knows Detachment and lets his thoughts grow fleeting
> can love these mountains: his mind is light-footed upon all things.

From this perspective, Gray's return to the natural world of the bush is a desire to escape the collective ego-ridden acquisitiveness of human civilization, where things have only the value of the "eternal cashbook and the journal" (to quote Paterson), which inevitably results in sterility and environmental destruction. The journey to the North Coast, then, represents a journey from the world of having things, to a world where the poet's mind is free to flee *over* things "like a bird's,/ . . . on the blue and silver paddocks". The rapid succession of images in the core section of "Journey" could thus be regarded as an example of the poet's "Detached" mind running "light-footed upon all things" and hence losing itself *in* them. "Detachment" can thus be seen to be realised in the Imagistic projection of things in poetry: the Buddhist theory can thus be seen to complement the Modernist method.

From this perspective, it may seem as if Gray's desire is simply an intellectualised version of Paterson's romantic desire for the bush. However, although the desire may be typically "romantic", the poetry constitutes an attempt to make the ideal real. Paterson's poet remained in his city office railing against the "eager eyes and greedy", while dreaming of "erratic fancy visions". Gray's poet, on the other hand, has boarded the train to try and realise those visions. "Journey: The North Coast", and many of Gray's other poems, are interesting by virtue of the honesty with which actual and psychological reality is portrayed as getting in the way of the desired ideal.

In "Journey: The North Coast", Dennis Haskell points out, it is precisely the presence of the "I" figure that stands between the poet and the "Nothingness of Nature".[8]

> Next thing, I wake up in a swaying bunk,
> as though on board a clipper
> lying in the sea,
> and it's the train, that booms and cracks,
> it tears the wind apart.
> Now the man's gone
> who had the bunk below me. I swing out,
> cover his bed and rattle up the sash —
> there's sunlight teeming
> on the drab carpet. And the water sways
> solidly in its silver basin, so cold
> it joins together through my hand.
> I see from where I'm bent
> one of those bright crockery days
> that belong to so much I remember.
> The train's shadow like a bird's,
> flees on the blue and silver paddocks,

over fences that look split from stone,
and banks of fern,
a red clay bank, full of roots,
over a dark creek, with logs and leaves suspended,
and blackened tree trunks.
Down these slopes move, as a nude descends a staircase,
slender white gum trees,
and now the country bursts open on the sea —
across a calico beach, unfurling;
strewn with flakes of light
that make the whole compartment whirl.
Shuttering shadows. I rise into the mirror
rested. I'll leave my hair
ruffled a bit that way — fold the pyjamas,
stow the book and wash bag. Everything done,
press down the latches into the case
that for twelve months I've watched standing out
of a morning, above the wardrobe
in a furnished room.

Ostensibly, on first reading, the "I" figure seems to lose himself in the external world. Gray himself has emphasised the lightness of the succession of images seen from the train window. Comparing the diction in his poem with the "stolid" diction and dark images of Slessor's "Night Ride", Gray remarks that his lines "sway a little like the train, and the diction helps to make them feel light".[7] From this perspective, the immediate sensation is the poet's mind "running light-footed on all things".

On closer inspection, however, the relationship between the external world and the "I" figure is more problematic. Of the poem's thirty six lines, the images seen through the window make up the subject matter of only sixteen. The other twenty, over half the poem, are devoted to the activities of the "I". Again, in the sixteen lines describing the countryside, as Haskell has pointed out, the most striking images have been made highly anthropomorphic. The landscape is not simply "there", it *does* things to the poet: it "unfurls" itself; the beach is compared to man-made "calico"; the trees to Marcel Duchamp's painting "Nude Descending a Staircase"; the shininess of the scene to "bright crockery". In other words, the poet's mind does not wander light-footed over the countryside for what is already there in itself, but for those images of the city and civilization that it reminds the poet of. In short, the poet is not as cut off from his past as the "Next thing" of the opening line would seem to suggest. The poet has inevitably brought all the baggage of his history with him, and super-imposed it on the innocent being of the countryside.

Childhood memory is explicitly alluded to. Gray claims that his poem gets back to "the detachment of childhood"[8] in "one of the bright crockery days/that belong to so much I remember". The "swaying bunk" and the dark of the train cabin that begin the poem almost recall a sensation before childhood: that of the womb. In this, there is a sense of escape and regression beyond the worries of the past. The poet is safe within the train, letting it do the work against reality, as he listens to its booms and cracks, as it "tears the wind apart". The notion of the womb, also, is not inappropriate in another sense. For there is a sense of rebirth as the poet suddenly finds himself transported to the country world from the city life as if no time has been spent in getting there. This is the effect of the sleep and the overnight train journey. There is an immediacy in the contrast between the two states that leads to a sense of almost Proustian joy in "Time regained"[9] and perception revitalised with the "sunlight teeming/ on the drab carpet" of, one is tempted to think, the poet's proximate past in his "furnished room".

Yet the sense of "Time regained" is double-sided. The joy of a past recaptured is also a reminder of a past that is ineluctably gone. Many of Gray's poems, such as "Late Ferry", "Flames and Dangling Wire" and "Watching by the Harbour", explore these negative aspects of time. Also, as other poems clearly demonstrate

(for example, "Poem to my Father", "Back There", "The Farm Woman Speaks"), Gray's childhood is not as "detached" as he claims, and indeed, many of his poems have as their subject matter the exploration of ways to come to terms with the problems of his past (see, for example, "Diptych", "Curriculum Vitae"). This double-sidedness is implied in the language. There is a sense of joyfulness, for example, in the discovery that "the man's gone/ who had the bunk below". One needs aloneness to establish a sense of communion with one's self and one's surroundings. (This feeling is brilliantly evoked in the later poem, "The best place . . .".) Aloneness, however, also has a feeling of separateness and alienation. Haskell, for example, says "there is still a tenuousness, a sense of not quite belonging".[10] This "tenuousness" arises partly from the physical separation of the poet from the countryside that is inevitably "outside": beyond the safety of the train's womb; but it also arises from the sense of the scene's own separateness: the sense that its being may have an independence and independent effects that the poet does not desire. That is, there is a distinct feeling that the scene outside may be beyond control. The "teeming" nature of the sunlight, for example, has an unnerving insistence, provoking a sense that it is crowding out the cool of the poet's detachment. Again, the ostensible pleasantness of "those bright crockery days" is undermined by the fragility of the image, as if the "detachment of childhood" that Gray speaks of could be easily shattered.

Those considerations, then, represent the obstacles to the poet losing himself to his surroundings. Yet the poem definitely moves towards such a position. As the poet is bent over the basin, the water is "so cold/ it joins together through my hand". The water thus achieves in the poet a sense of physical self-obliteration. Then, the scenery outside is not sought, or willed, but *glimpsed* as the poet is occupied in something else. The scene reveals itself in rushing by him, in bursting open and "unfurling" itself, as if speaking its own innate dharma. In the veritable shopping list of impressions, it would seem indeed as if the poet's mind ran "light-footed over all things":

> banks of fern,
> a red clay bank, full of roots,
> over a dark creek, with logs and leaves suspended,
> and blackened tree trunks.

Yet there is a sense too, that these images are a bit prosaic. As poetry, they work only if we rush by them at the same speed as the train (which seems to be the intended effect). If we think about them too much, however, there is a sense in which these incidental impressions are a bit arbitrary, as if the casualness with which they are enumerated is a bit studied. There is a sense in which they seem to be used to mask the actuality of those "bright crockery days/ that belong to so much I remember", which is the line that immediately precedes their enumeration. In other words, just as the reader looks forward to being treated to a bit of "remembrance of things past" one is given a descriptive passage. This suggests the concealment of the darker side of the poet's personality. The ambiguity inherent in the metaphors confirms this.

The first is the image of the "train's shadow, like a bird" fleeing "on the blue and silver paddocks". This fleeing, at first glance, functions to evoke the light-footedness of the poet's mind but, notably, it is a *shadow* that thus flees. Shadows may be ethereal and transitory, but they are also dark. The temptation to associate the darkness with the poet's memories is irresistible. Again, the allusion to Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase", while immediately suggesting the "geometry and balance"[11] of the gum trees from the rather Futurist perspective of the rapidly passing poet, also brings to mind the fractured Modernist world where things are constantly eluding their "true" nature, or dharma. Duchamp's painting brings to mind a world

out of control which ushers in the tumultuous "flakes of light/that make the whole compartment whirl". These whirling "flakes of light" remind one of the dazzlingly destructive lights of the "Busby Berkeley spectacular" which causes the poet of "Late Ferry" (from *Grass Script*) to lose sight of the friendly, old fashioned world of his ferry. In "Journey: The North Coast", it brings home the "teeming" effect of the sunlight's first entrance into the poem. The light, at first welcomed in as a relief from the drab world of the immediate past, is now so blindingly insistent, as it rushes headlong into the poet's memories of the coast, that the poet spends the last lines of the poem desperately trying to bring it under control.

In "Late Ferry", darkness harbours a feeling of safety since it allows visibility to the comforting "honeycomb" effect of the ferry lights. Similarly, in "Journey: The North Coast", the poet retreats from the rushing bright images of the outside world, into the relative gloom of the more controllable, ordered world within the train cabin. "Shuttering shadows" negates the earlier breezy rattling up of the sash, and brings the poet to a fuller self-consciousness:

> I rise into the mirror
> rested. I'll leave my hair
> ruffled a bit that way

There is such a studied effort to *look* casual here, that one suspects the poet is far from *feeling* it. Ostensibly, the escape from the city and the recent communion with nature has left him feeling relaxed, where his mind has performed

> like a mirror
> in which things pass and leave no stain

This is the ideal mode of perception evoked in "Dharma Vehicle". Yet one recalls other lines from the same poem where the poet asks himself:

> How shall one continue
> to confront every morning
> this same face in the mirror?
> Anxiously peering,
> demanding —
> such intolerable self-pity,
> hysterical and without decency.
> Impossible marriage
> with such a face, that eats up other people.

The poet of "Journey: North Coast" would thus seem to fail to achieve the mirror-like quality of mind as he becomes absorbed in his own appearance. Perhaps even the desire to "eat up other people" is there in his decision to "leave my hair/ruffled a bit that way". It is almost as if the poet is assuming a deliberately studied air to confront the memories of his past, wilfully suppressing, for example, the self-pity that consumes the poet of "Poem to my Father", who begins his poem with a similar air of studied detachment: "Dear father, you were buried . . .".

The feeling of wilful suppression of unwelcome thought continues to the end of "Journey". The poet busies himself with mundanities such as folding his pyjamas, and stowing his book and washbag. As if the untidy edges of his world are now under control, with an air of smugness the poet claims:

> Everything done.
> press down the latches into the case
> that for twelve months I've watched standing out
> of a morning, above the wardrobe
> in a furnished room.

On first reading, the pressing down of the latches seems to fulfil the promise of escape from the furnished room that their "standing out" has held all year. But it also suggests a locking away of unwelcome thought and the untidy ends of life. Indeed, on reflection, the "Everything done" seems somewhat of an overstatement in terms of what has been actually achieved. It seems like a bit of attitudinising similar to that of the narrator of "The Meatworks" who, having come to the coast looking for an alternative life style at the beach, is forced to look for work at the "Works": the local abattoir. Towards the end of that poem he provides an "analogy" by which he tries to justify this employment:

> We said that working with meat was like
> burning-off the bush live
> and fertilizing with rottenness,
> for this frail green money.

The narrator is deliberately given a sense of semi-awareness of the orgiastic pleasure he has derived, despite his overt revulsion, from his work with the sausage machine, and this "analogy" represents his attempt to get over the intellectual difficulties he has in washing its blood and its desire from his hands and his memory. The narrator goes on to comment: "There was a flaw to the analogy/ you felt, but one/ I didn't look at, then . . .". We are thus lead to think that the poet has deliberately suppressed his emotional and intellectual response at the time of experience, but his poem is supposed to reveal those difficulties "I didn't look at, then". The juxtaposition of the "you", perhaps the reader, and the "I" of the poem, makes this clear. In the same way, the reader is given the feeling that the narrator of "Journey: The North Coast" is not as "rested", or detached, as he asserts. This poem, like "The Meatworks", should be regarded as a dramatic monologue[12] where the narrator reveals more about his feelings than is overtly analysed. The images, like the images in "The Meatworks", reveal, with the wisdom of hindsight, the suppressed feelings of the time.

"Journey: The North Coast" and "The Meatworks" reveal not only the separateness of the poet from his environment, but the mental and temporal distance between the poet who is writing and the person who experienced. Thus in both cases, the relationship between the poet and his environment would seem to be one of alienation rather than the ideal of "Detachment" where the poet's mind is supposed to function "like a mirror/ in which things pass and leave no stain".

The poem, "The Dusk", however, comes closer to presenting such a mind. Most obviously, of course, this is apparent in the lack of an overt "I" figure in "The Dusk". The perceiving mind presents images directly. The poem images a confrontation between a kangaroo and an old man in his vegetable garden. Here, the antimonies of light and dark, which generate such dramatic tension in "Journey: The North Coast" and "Late Ferry", resolve themselves into the even light of dusk, the still point in the change from one to the other. Unlike these other poems, there is little story or temporal change within the poem itself; dramatic tension is generated *within* the image rather than by a contrasting change of images. "The Dusk" is like an extended *haiku*: it is suspended over the space of the page, rather than over the time of an event. Yet since "The Dusk" is a poem, it is also prey to the "ineluctable modality of the audible" (to quote Stephen Dedalus)[13], so its tableau can only be presented serially in words. This is very much in the Modernist/Imagist tradition. Indeed, one could relate the tableau of the kangaroo and the old man, to Yeats' "Long Legged Fly" — as an image constituting a unity of being, absolute unto itself. The mind of the invisible narrator has become invested far more securely in the objects themselves, than in "Journey: The North Coast" whose "I" always threatens to appropriate objects to his own needs, like the character in D.H. Lawrence's "Snake" who cannot resist killing the snake for the sake of his own ego.

The kangaroo of "The Dusk", on the contrary, is allowed to "flit" away by both the character within the poem (the old man) and the poet. This, the only event in the poem, thus has this much symbolic importance. It is a symbolism, however, that is neither spelt out nor made specific. It is present in the disinterested dignity with which the kangaroo makes his exit:

> And the kangaroo settles down, pronged,
> Then lifts itself
> Carefully, like a package passing over from both arms —
> The now curved-up tail is rocking gentle counterweight
> behind
> as it flits hunched
> among the stumps and scrub, into the dusk.

I describe the movement as 'disinterested' for two reasons. Firstly, the kangaroo "flits" away exhibiting neither hope nor fear. The very verb "flits", indeed, suggests a being which "knows Detachment" and which runs "light-footed upon all things". Secondly, this image is not appropriated by the poet into a romanticised one of bounding beauty and grace (such as an advertisement for Qantas might use). Rather, the flitting is "hunched" and goes on among homely "stumps and scrub" instead of the towering majesty of eucalypts. Indeed, the sense of movement is only captured in the assonance of the rather unlovely repeated "u" sounds and the rhythm of the strong monosyllabic words that thump iambically off "into the dusk" like the beat of the kangaroo's tail. Again, the almost mechanical precision with which the kangaroo's settling as "pronged" and lifting as "a package passed over from both arms" is described, images the commonplace awkwardness that dispels any temptation to romantic appropriation. The poet is purely concerned with what is there, rather than with what he wants to be there.

From the beginning, this kangaroo is very much an integrated part of the landscape into which it finally vanishes. In many ways, the final flitting actualises the metaphorical invisibility that characterises the kangaroo from the start. The merging process is achieved in part by the use of vegetable metaphors. Firstly it is perceived as "dwindling like a plant/with a single bud"; later, we are informed that it is "mushroom-coloured" and has a white chest that is "the underside of a growing mushroom". The invisibility is stated when we are told that "The tail is trailing heavily as a lizard lying concealed". Yet there are two metaphors that belie this total integration. Firstly, it is strange to find that its crest is compared to a "bow-wave/ under slanted light, out in the harbour" and later to be told that the kangaroo "turns its head like a mannequin". These images constitute a reminder of the subjective poetic presence, as the poet brings the history of his experience to bear on the otherwise natural and timeless kangaroo. They do not, however, *swamp* the object in the way that the "bright crockery days" or the "nude descending the staircase" overwhelm the scenery of "Journey: The North Coast", or the "Busby Berkeley spectacular" drowns the "Late Ferry". Thus, although the kangaroo "holds the forepaws/ as though offering to have them bound" the poet, metaphorically, and the old man in the poem, literally, exhibit disinterest and refuse to do so. Both refuse the temptation proffered by the "mannequin".

It is in the second stanza the observer, the "you" of this poem, gets inside the object itself:

> And its fine unlined face is held on the cool air;
> a face in which you feel
> the small thrust-forward teeth lying in the lower jaw,
> grass-stained and sharp.

In the long third line of this stanza, one almost feels the teeth grinding the grass. As an example of Buddhist "Detachment", this is not, as Haskell asserts about Gray's desire for "No thought", "a denial of a continuing conscious self",[14] but a consciousness of separate selves beyond the self, but now, communed with, within the "continuing conscious self". The idea of separateness and community, the idea of the consciousness of the being of others without the need to appropriate such things to one's own needs and desires, is objectified in the poem by the relationship between the old man and the world around him. He is mentioned only in the third last verse, and objectifies the poet's response to the kangaroo's proffered forepaws:

> An old man stands on a dirt path in his vegetable garden,
> where a cabbage moth puppet-leaps and jiggles wildly
> in the cooling sunbeams,
> with the bucket still swinging in his hand.

This old man constitutes an image of serenity, his mind, like that of Yeats' Caesar or Michelangelo in "Long-legged Fly", moving "upon the silence", in Gray's poem, literally. There is no disturbing burst of "teeming sunlight" (as in "Journey") or "silver blizzard of light" (as in "Late Ferry"), nor even the looming "mountainous night" that terminates another crepuscular Gray poem, "Watching by the Harbour". Here, the still instant of dusk is suspended in the paradoxical "cooling sunbeams", in the rhythm of the swaying bucket, and in the silent refusal of the old man to take the offered forepaws of the kangaroo. Only the cabbage moth that "puppet-leaps and jiggles wildly" brings an unexpected touch of liveliness to an otherwise static scene. The lightness of its movements foreshadows the final flit of the kangaroo: yet there is also a sort of suspension, as if the motions of the moth will be eternalised or frozen in the cooling sunbeam, as if in amber. This most insignificant detail captures the fragility of the still moment in the onrushing movement from light to dark. When the kangaroo finally "flits" away this fragility is realised, and most importantly, accepted. This poem does not modulate, like "Watching by the Harbour", into regret for the transitory nature of this perfect moment. It resolves itself because the poet's mind here is not an observer's expressing its otherness, but is *in* the object itself.

This brings me to the last Gray poem I shall consider in detail. "Watching by the Harbour" comes from Gray's last volume in *Selected Poems, The Skylight*:

> There is a late Sunday over the leaf-smoke suburbs.
> The sidling of a candle snuffed
> sets forth
> above the burred metal plate of the bay.
>
> And that smoke quickly becomes as frail and failing
> in the strength of wintry light
> as Oates
> walking out alone into Antarctica.
>
> Now the sky has paled like a butcher's clean shirt.
> Far beneath it a spread seagull
> idly tries
> its segments of a compass inscription.
>
> Afternoon seems light that's escaping beneath a door.
> In a cooling breeze the water shrivels
> the same as flesh —
> It happens mostly on the surface of the mind.
>
> The plaster-thick paint of an end wall, in that hillside,
> is golden-leafed, a moment, among
> makeshift eucalypts.
> Cattle-tracks of clear light trodden on the water.

At this reserve, the deep shadow of a ligamented fig,
a tilted lawn, the harbour set with sails
like restaurant tables.
Now early lights come out, smoky as lanterns.

"O time too swift, O swiftness never ceasing." — This world
it seems, is rattling in a gypsy's
hands, that part
and reveal how the things we love have gone.

The hills shall be valleys, and the valleys will be hills.
And someone who could drag open
a bow, in youth,
has fired their life, lost with the arrow.

Fully dark; lit by distant hordes. And along the foreshores
you see now where there is nailed
a human warmth.
Our bivouac's encircled, in mountainous night.

Superficially, this poem has many similarities to "The Dusk". Again it is set at twilight, and again there is an absence of a visible "I" figure. There are, however, many more striking and original metaphors in this poem, and if the poet is not personally visible, his will holds the scene in a vice-like grip, as each image is not simply allowed to be, but is funnelled into an overwhelming argument that leads the reader unerringly to the final vision of the impending "mountainous night".

Nearly every image in the poem is turned into evidence that points to the transitory nature of the crepuscular moment, which in turn, on the larger scale, becomes a metaphor for the transitory nature of life. The first six stanzas constitute a series of metaphoric arguments towards this conclusion. In the first stanza the "leaf-smoke" over the suburbs becomes the "The sidling of a candle snuffed". Then in the second stanza the smoke, which is "frail and failing", is compared to the hopeless but heroic Oates of the Antarctic. In stanza three, the poet's attention is switched to the sky, which is compared to a "butcher's clean shirt". We are reminded of death by the implication that even at its cleanest, the butcher's shirt is still pink with blood stain. Also the idleness of the gull's circular "compass inscription" life becomes expressive in this context of a sense of futility. In stanza four, the light ebbs away as if like water "escaping beneath a door". The breeze on the water causes it to shrivel like ageing flesh, but also, perhaps more importantly, it suggests the shrivelled surface of the brain in the last line of the stanza. The images in the fifth stanza seem to be the most strained. We are told of a transitory "gold-leafed" glow on a wall, and the eucalypts are asserted to be "makeshift" in the rapidly failing light. Here, the use of the word "makeshift" asserts a transitoriness that does not arise naturally from the image of a eucalypt tree. The "cattle-tracks", too, seem a bit arbitrary, perhaps bringing to mind cattle being herded to market towards their doom in some meatworks. Although stanza six does not contain images of transitoriness, it begins to evoke images of "human warmth" that substantiate the second last line of the poem which is the thematic countersign to the impending "mountainous night".

Some of these images are as striking as anything in "Journey: The North Coast" or "The Dusk". Their connotative load, however, does not take place beneath the surface as in the earlier poems, but surfaces in explicitly stated metaphors. Some, like the Oates imagery (that recalls Stewart's *Fire on the Snow*) and the snuffed candle, seem hackneyed to the point of sentimentalism. This effect seems intentional as it is caught up in the quotation from George Peele's "A Sonnet", "O time too swift, O swiftness never ceasing". At this point, the injection of a personalised, if quoted, voice comes as a shock after the succession of impersonal images. The effect is repeated and reinforced in the prophetic, biblical thunderings of the eighth stanza:

"The hills shall be valleys, and the valleys will be hills". Indeed, it almost seems as if the poet of "Watching by the Harbour" has suddenly, in mid poem, decided to rebel against the impersonalities of the imagist method and the "Detachment" of his Buddhist philosophy.

This rebellion against the technique of impersonal observation perhaps registers a realisation by the poet that such objectivity can never be objectively "objective", but simply another mask or pose. It registers, for example, the realisation that the images and metaphors of the first six verses are not as "objective" as they seem, but in fact reflect the poet's state of mind. The contrast between "The Dusk" and "Watching by the Harbour" makes this obvious: the way the crepuscular moment is made a metaphor for a still moment in the earlier poem, and for transitoriness in the later. The final three stanzas of "Watching by the Harbour", indeed, seem to register a sort of impatience with, and despair over, the ideals of "Detachment" and Objectivity, the things that Gray has loved, and which now seem to have gone.

One is almost tempted to identify the pursuit of these ideals with the lost arrow of the eighth stanza. The image of the arrow carries a symbolic overload of courtly and sexual love. It is as if the poet has come to regret a youth wasted in a rebellious pursuit of independence at the expense of human warmth and contact. There is a feeling, perhaps, that the arrows of his desire have targeted the despair of alienation rather than the calm of "Detachment". This, at any rate, may account for the yearning for "human warmth" that the poem concludes with. The final verse, indeed, reverses many of the values we have found in the earlier volumes of Gray's verse. The ostensibly joyful aloneness that characterised the poet's discovery that the bunk below him was empty in "Journey: The North Coast", for example, is replaced by a feeling of need for and solidarity with the "early lights" that have come on around the foreshores. The "nailed" "human warmth" recalls obvious connotations of Christian sacrifice, combining the Biblical rhythms of the previous stanza with the earlier Oates imagery. The lighted suburbs become "*Our* bivouac" against the encircling "mountainous night". Only the "distant hordes" remain ambiguous. On first reading, it seems as if they are the crowded lights of the city, threatening the poet's solitude. But as we realise that such lights have been identified with "human warmth", we begin to think that the "distant hordes" are the coldly distant mass of stars represented by the Milky Way, which, in turn, are the camp fires of the threatening armies of the encircling, "mountainous night".

This reading accords with Dennis Haskell's perception that the poems in *The Skylight* are more "directly concerned with human presence"[15] than the poems of the earlier books. Gray's pessimism in "Late Ferry", "The Meatworks" and "Flames and Dangling Wire", for example, result from a perception that human civilization, far from constituting "our bivouac" against the "mountainous night", was the main reason for its imminence. In "Flames and Dangling Wire", which is comparable to "Watching by the Harbour" in its use of the four line stanza to discipline the burgeoning pessimism of its subject matter, human presence is reduced to Dante-esque devils and the pathetic figure from Gericault's "The Raft of the Medusa". The city contains no human warmth, but actually constitutes a violation or rape of nature as its buildings are perceived as being "driven like stakes into the earth". From here, it is gradually transformed into an Eliot-like nightmare of an "unreal city", literally, as first it is reduced to a silhouette "stencilled in the smoke" and finally to a "mirage" as it consumes itself in its own waste.

Unlike "Watching by the Harbour", however, the earlier poem ends on a note of ambiguity. In the later poem, the images become more and more subject to the poet's will to make his point about the passing of time. "Late Ferry", which is also about passing time,[16] is ambiguously so. The final images of "Flames and Dangling Wire" also take a life of their own, that belies the poet's desire to reduce the world

to his vision of a sort of post-holocaust Inferno. Ostensibly, the final verses suggest a universe "riddled" with a cancerous growth of human technological excreta:

> Going on, I notice an old radio, that spills
> its dangling wire —
> and I realise that somewhere the voices it received
> are still travelling,
>
> skidding away, riddled, around the arc of the universe;
> and with them, the horse laughs, and the Chopin
> which was the sound of the curtains lifting,
> one time, to a coast of light.

Yet these voices, which "are still travelling", have gained a degree of immortality, like the Chopin music, that is conceived in the final lines as "one time" having had the ability to raise the curtains "on a coast of light". Despite the fact that his passing of human accomplishments would seem to be being regretted, the final image of "the coast of light" is so unexpected in this hell-like poem, it would seem as if the narrator's determination to find gloom and doom everywhere is finally undercut by the independence of the imagery, which does, in fact, take off on immortal wings, as if against his will. As in "Journey: The North Coast" and "The Meat Works", the imagery undercuts the poem's narrator, its "I" figure, which thus achieves a sort of objectivity that is lacking in "Watching by the Harbour" *despite* its lack of a personalised narrator. Indeed, in the later poem, the very lack of an ostensible "I" figure, along with the Biblical thunderings with which it concludes, tends to give that poem a sort of spurious prophetic authority. While "Flames and Dangling Wire" purports to give a view of the universe, "Watching by the Harbour" seems to want to deliver unto its reader *the* universal Truth.

To my mind, then, the human presence that many poems in *The Skylight* seem to strive towards is somewhat blighted by this lack of poetic, if not dharmic, objectivity. It is this sense in which I would see "Watching by the Harbour" as being somewhat sentimentalised. A similar conclusion can be reached if the end of "Poem to my Father" (from *Grass Script*) is compared to the end of "Diptych" (from *The Skylight*). The earlier poem is unusually direct in chronicling the poet's relationship to his father. The closing lines state unambiguously his ambiguous relation:

> Dear Father,
> you did everything badly;
> the most
> "difficult patient"
> in the nursing home.
> *Poor man.*
> I cannot believe
> your wretchedness
> on all the occasions I recall.
> If I think of you
> I'm horrified — I become obsessed
> with you. It is like
> love.
> I am filled with pity
> I want to live.

Here, the poet's attempted objectivity in the beginning "Dear Father" is dissipated totally in the emotion generated by the short, broken lines. The "objective" descriptions of the father's "wretchedness" modulate into a frantic obsession which is *likened* to love. It is characteristic of the early Gray poems that love should be a metaphor for the relationship, rather than constitute the relationship itself. This obsession, however, this opportunity for "human warmth", is not something the poet desires: it is something he desires to escape. The final "I want to live" cries out for

an independence from the human ties of his childhood. These scarcely controllable emotions in the face of his relationship with his past may account for the fragility in the image of "those bright crockery days/that belong to so much I remember" in "Journey: The North Coast". It accounts too, for the studied detachment as the poet of that poem leaves his "hair/ruffled a bit that way", in his preparations to prepare a face to confront his past once more.

The poems of *The Skylight*, on the other hand, reflect a poet working towards a resolution with this past. The final lines, of the final poem, "Curriculum Vitae", for example, find the poet declaring when he travels that "the landscapes that come far more vividly before my eyes/were all memories", in particular, memories of those forests where

> my mind first opened, like a bubble from a glass-
> blowers tube,
> and shone, reflecting
> things as they are —
> there, where I felt, anxiously, I would find them
> a while longer;
> after passing Kempsey, once more, on the mail train of
> an early morning.

Thus this last poem circles back to the first, but this time *looking for* the memories of the North Coast, rather than avoiding them. The same fragility is still there (with the mind "like a bubble from a glassblower's tube") but now the fragility comes from an anxiety not for the past the poet dreads to face, but the past he dreads may no longer be there.

The conclusion of "Dyptych", perhaps, provides the clue to this changed attitude. It proposes a human resolution to the tension between the poet and his past. It is another poem that explores the tortured relationship between the poet and his attitude to his parents. "Diptych" concludes with a statement of finality, an assertion that the last word has been said on the subject of his father, after the discovery of the blood-brother-bond between the poet and his father:

> For all his callousness to my mother, I had long accepted
> him.
> After all, he'd given, or shown me, the best advice,
> and left me alone. And I'd come by then to think that
> everyone is pathetic.
> Opening his plastic, brick-sized box, that morning,
> my pocket knife slid
> sideways and pierced my hand — and so I dug with that one
> into his ashes, which I found were like a mauvish-grey
> marble dust,
> and felt I needn't think of anything else to say.

This rather macabre mixing of blood and ashes, like something out of a "Boys Own" romance, attempts to assert that the longing to live at the end of "Poem to My Father" is, in fact, the continuation of the father's life in the son. It implies, for example, that the poet now feels himself to be as "pathetic" as his father. There is no pretence at superiority, no affectation of leaving the hair "ruffled a bit that way". Yet, like the "mountainous night" that concludes "Watching by the Harbour", the feeling that the poet "needn't think of anything else to say", is a trifle flattening. The "human warmth" generated by the realisation of blood-brotherhood with his father in fact amounts to a credo of stoical survivalism. In fact, throughout *The Skylight*, there seems an abandonment of the idealism that was the hallmark of the first two books, and a retreat into the assertion of a community with common, "pathetic" man.

In terms of art, for example, in "Journey: The North Coast", the allusion was to Duchamp's masterpiece, "Nude Descending a Staircase"; in "Flames and Dangling

Wire", it was to Gericault's "Raft of the Medusa". In "Curriculum Vitae", however, the masterpiece seems "too strenuous and too elevated", so the poet turns to "one's faithful mediocrities" in the "Ecole francaise/ XIXe siecle". Most telling, however, would seem to be a retreat from the intellectual rigours of "Detachment" into desire for escapism. In "The best place . . .", for example, the poet evokes the womb-like safety of his room as the rain beats outside. The poem defines "happiness" as freedom from outside discipline, such as editorial demands, or such poetic ideals as portraying "things as they are".[17] In this poem, we are told

> The desk lamp
> curves its shadow across
> all the shelved books, and they become
> a crowd canopied in that vast South American football
> stadium,
> whose voices now, in the midst of play,
> you can no longer hear.
> You're alone, the night before you.
> The rain overwhelms itself outside. It is happiness.

This extraordinary image of the poet losing himself in the play of writing, like a Pele or a Maradonna, is betrayed only by his need for the imaginary applause of the "shelved books", the approbation of masterpieces, from whom he asserts a sort of freedom in the heat of pure creativity. I say "betrayed" in the sense that it reveals the dependent nature of this solitary bliss. The joyful sense of aloneness implied in "Journey: The North Coast" was achieved only at the expense of repressing many of those memories that were productive of that joy, in the sense that their *rediscovery* was productive of joy. Here, the aloneness produces happiness by summoning an imaginary euphoric audience, far from the niggardly carping of the critic, editor and teacher. It is in this sense that I say that "Detachment" has become escapism.

In this essay, I have been concerned to demonstrate the dramatic tension that informs Gray's imagism. I have avoided detailed discussion of his Buddhist theoretics, partly because they have already been addressed, and partly because of the conviction that, like the theory of Yeats' *A Vision*, while constituting a useful intellectual bridge to march his images across, it is the effectiveness of the images themselves that finally counts.

This essay bears witness, I hope, to the strength of Gray's poetry, by demonstrating its consistency, its changing perspectives, and the degree of fruitful, detailed analysis it will bear. If, as Dennis Haskell puts it, "Gray's great subject is the relationship of the individual voice to the physical world at large",[18] one could summarise this relationship in the first two books as the tendency to realise the self through an attempt to empathise with objects, whereas in the last book, *The Skylight*, objects are used as an escape from the self, as if to express the state of mind of that self and its desires. If *Creekwater Journal* and *Grass Script* can be regarded as a search for an ideal self, *The Skylight* is an attempt to accept an actual self. In the earlier books, the relationship between the poetic voice and the object is dialectical: the poet's voice comes to the object to discover what it is in itself, and only as an inevitable accident, only as a sort of flaw in the theory does it happen to reveal things about the poetic voice itself. In *The Skylight*, however, there is a more consistent tendency for the poet to appropriate objects completely and turn them into metaphors for what he desires them to say. In reading "The Dusk", primarily, we are invited to perceive the thatness of the scene at hand: it is an image of a poetic voice attempting to refuse to take the kangaroo to be an image of anything other than itself. Only by accident, as it were, does it reveal that ideal of perception. But such "accidents" are endemic; in "Watching by the Harbour", the poet accepts the reality, and overtly gives up the objective ideal. The poem does not primarily disclose the inner truth

of harbours at dusk, but the inner truth of the feelings aroused by such objects in the poet. Dennis Haskell praises this retreat into such "human" emotion in terms of the pleasurable aspects of "humanism"; yet it could also be regarded as an inevitable retreat, not only from the objectivity of Buddhist "Detachment", but from the ideals of Imagism and Modernism, to an older sort of romantic expression. Indeed, many of the poems in *The Skylight* that deal with the poet's memory, are hugely reminiscent of Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity". Many of the poems contain "spots of time" that may one day emerge as Robert Gray's *Prelude.*

NOTES

1. Robert Gray, "Some Comments on My Poetry" (from *Access Related: Resources for H.S.C. English* ed D. Jensen and P. Stubback (Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, 1987)), p.31.
2. See "On Climbing the Stone Gate Peak". All poems are quoted from Robert Gray, *Selected Poems (1963-1983)* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1985).
3. Robert Gray, "Some Comments on My Poetry" p.31.
4. Dennis Haskell, "Humanism and Sensual Awareness in the Poetry of Robert Gray", *Southerly* 1981 (June) p.268.
5. Haskell, p.263.
6. See "Dharma vehicle", Part 3.
7. Robert Gray, "Some Thoughts on My Poetry", p.31.
8. As for 7.
9. One is also reminded, in this context, of the young Marcel's first train trip to Balbec where the effect of an abrupt change of place is analysed, and how it revitalises perceptions. (See *A L'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs* (Editions Gallimard, 1954) p. 227ff.
10. Haskell, p.262.
11. Robert Gray, "Some Comments on My Poetry", p.31.
12. Haskell draws a similar conclusion from different premises. See Haskell p. 263.
13. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (ed. H.W. Gabler, W. Steppe, C. Melchior; Garland, New York, 1985) p.75.
14. Haskell, p.267.
15. Haskell, p.268.
16. Robert Gray, "Some comments on my poetry", p.32.
17. "Curriculum Vitae", Pt.9.
18. Haskell, p.270.

As Good as a Feast

She didn't eat much, really.
Indeed was barely hungry.
And when she had gone, taking
her small noontime shadow
with her, the apple lay
on the upright grass; both,
of course, perfect, but the apple
as red as arterial blood.
There was dew, of course,
even at noon: the entire garden
like the produce section of
a fancy grocer's — the world was good
enough to eat — and the blades
of grass upright as spears
held the apple on a hundred
sharp points. (The grass, unbent,
stood up like thorns.) No apple
had ever fallen before
and the perfect grass pricked
small wounds, like the elegant circle
left by her teeth, where the flesh,
now poisoned by the perfect air,
turned brown. That, of course,
was death. And that wavy
dark line, leading nowhere
in the dew, was the serpent.

The Crematorium Gardens

The sense of place is
in the sense of other places:
leaf-fall in the tropics,
the palm tree in the snow;
no jungle without its rose
or cradle without its grave.

By the crematorium at Mt. Vernon
where the flowered trees
hug the mourners, an autumn
comes upon them in an instant:
a hard lateral slap of wind,
a sluicing of grey water: fall.

Now the dropping yellow leaves
are a phantom winter, steaming
in the sun. The sun can keep
his January heat, but in the tropics
even trees must imagine winters
and spread them in our paths:
a golden shiver in the heat.

ARTHUR LINDLEY

The Trouble with Immortality

You didn't even leave a name
in the book I could curse you by,
you miscreant previous owner;
but you filled every margin
in the Songs and Sonnets with your
round print, like an idiot's face
smiling, to remind yourself
that a love poem was ABOUT LOVE
even if it displayed CYNICISM.
You knew, because it contained
not only BED IMAGE but
BED IMAGE AGAIN, indeed
WHOLE WORLD CONTAINED IN BED!
Add PRAISE OF LADY and GEMS
and *that* was 'The Sun Rising'.
Donne. Once and for all.

The Choices

Under the sky's sentence
The different-pointing streets, they find, all rush to one place.
For all its colours,
Look, it never moves,

While they are clowns in a silent film,
Their actions fast forward.
Their mouths like sirens bend in the slipstream.
Extinction like an unplugged bath

Sucks them to its centre.
O they would live forever. But to halt the midnight chimes
Which lop their sojourn in tomorrow's city
They must slip between them, telling no time,

Replace their windburnt look
With that image fresh but bloodless behind glass,
And watch the selves they'd have themselves remain
Lour above them like a sky.

A Place For Everything

A long time ago when we used to live in Pomona Avenue, at number eleven, my mother committed suicide. I have wondered about telling you first thing like that. I have thought of beginning by describing the street, the house, the garden, and then the things that happened. I have imagined how it would be if I gradually led up to the fact of my mother's death, led you up to the fact and then eased you away from it so you would feel first interested, then shocked, then comforted.

Here is how it would be:

The Street

My mother and father and I lived in a very nice street. It was a respectable street in a small town and in the street lived an accountant, a builder, a radio announcer, a shoe shop manager, a piano teacher and so forth and the wives and children of those people. My father was a plumber. But I have already shifted from the street and its houses to the people. I didn't mean to do that. The street was on a slope and although the road was sealed with bitumen, the footpaths were covered with orange gravel. Small children would stumble on the gravel slope and graze their knees. Once when a girl called Geraldine was walking along the top of one of the fences she slipped and fell onto the gravel path. First she cut her leg on the sharp fence and then she grazed her face and arm on the ground. She had to go to the doctor and have stitches. The blood from her leg went all over the gravel and Mrs Hamilton who was the wife of the builder came out later to hose it away but it left a stain on the footpath that stayed there for ages. Many of the houses had high cypress hedges which the men kept in shape with hedge clippers. I liked the smell of cut cypress. Some places had picket fences, some had brick, and others had fences made from fancy wire trellis that you don't see around any more. Ours was this wire kind of fence and we had a cypress hedge as well that grew behind the wire and went up about five feet above it. I used to burrow into the hedge and sit, and I kept some toys in there. Bandicoots lived in the hedges. Our hedge used to grow into our letter box which was a big wooden one made by my father and painted green. The wire fence and gate were also painted green. My mother used to complain about the dust that got into the letter box because of the hedge. And spiders and snails. Sometimes a snail would eat part of an envelope. The front gardens had flowers which the women looked after and vegetables were grown in the back gardens by the men. Most of the houses were brick, not grand but pretty and romantic and very neat. They looked like houses in picture books illustrating nursery rhymes or fairy tales, with little pointy gables and criss cross leadlights and chimneys with smoke coming out. The knocker on our door was made from brass and shaped like a goblin. The radio announcer and his wife and two children lived in a wooden house that was older and bigger than all the other houses and had an orchard out the back. Nobody ever pruned the trees. That house had more dogs and books than the other

houses in the street and people said the radio announcer's wife had been married before. Once the children and I took a wardrobe from the house and used it as part of a fort in the orchard and the radio announcer and his wife didn't seem to mind.

I suppose all that gives you an idea of what the street was like.

The House

Our house at number eleven Pomona Avenue was extremely clean. My mother was in charge of this side of things and she had made a lot of rules. Nobody ever thought of breaking my mother's rules. For instance you had to take off your shoes at the gate so as not to dirty the path which was painted pink. You carried your shoes up to the porch and put on slippers which were kept there, leaving your shoes on a rack. My mother would come out and clean the shoes. She had tins of black and brown Nugget and separate brushes for black or brown shoes. She also had a little black velvet pillow for shining the black shoes and a brown one for the brown shoes. When you were going out you carried your shoes to the gate and sat on the green garden seat to put them on. Wet weather was always a problem. I meant to be describing the house but already I am talking about the way we lived. I knew other people who had to take their shoes off at the door, but we were the only family who had to do it at the gate. Starting with the rack for the shoes, we had a place for everything. I was certainly not supposed to be getting in the hedge and leaving things there. My toys had a box in my bedroom next to my dolls' house. You could open the whole front of the house like a big door. Inside was a cross-section of a house with different wallpaper in each room and a father smoking a pipe in the lounge, a mother standing by the sink in the kitchen, a boy and a girl playing in the attic and a baby asleep in the cradle in the nursery. Hanging in the front hallway of our own house at number eleven was a photo of my mother in her wedding dress. This photo was tinted so that the grass beneath the bride's feet was a strange lolly green and the bride's lips were jelly bean red. My mother's lace veil and satin dress were in mothballs and tissue paper in the top of the linen press. I was born exactly nine months after my parents' wedding day. I was the only child. My mother's white kid shoes were in the linen press too. By the time I was ten they were too small for me. By the time I was ten, of course, my mother had killed herself. Or, as I put it in the first place, committed suicide. Getting back to the things in the hallway — we had a camphor chest with Chinese carvings all over it that my father brought back from the war. He brought me a red silk kimono with a dragon and chrysanthemums embroidered on the back. I grew out of that by the time I was ten too. My growth was not abnormal. My mother had very small feet, and the kimono was made for a very young child. In the camphor chest my mother kept lace bedspreads and linen tablecloths that she never used. Most of them were things she had made for her glory box. Because of the camphor, the moths wouldn't get them. Our carpets were floral and we had a vacuum cleaner. This was a Hoover and the action of using it was known as 'hoovering'. It made a very frightening noise. Because of her interest in cleanliness, my mother was often hoovering. There she would be in her apron, her dainty feet in knitted slippers, her hair tied up in a scarf because of the dust, hands in white gloves pushing the nozzle of the Hoover into the corners of the rooms, somehow getting it in behind the pianola, behind the wardrobes, behind the chests of drawers. My mother could get the Hoover in behind the kitchen cabinet where crumbs collected. You should have seen our kitchen cabinet which was designed and built by my father and was full of labour-saving devices including a mincer set into the bench top. The ironing board folded up on one side of it, and it had large bins for flour and sugar and smaller bins for salt and spices. The kitchen and bathroom were shining and spotless and you could always smell Phenol. My mother kept supplies of soaps and cleaning fluids in the laundry. Besides

the Phenol we had Cloudy Ammonia in which we soaked brushes and combs, and White Lily, Old Dutch, Bon Ami, Solvol, Lifebuoy and Velvet. We had a dining room where a big vase of flowers always stood on the table and where we had our evening meal which was called 'tea'. We had our Saturday and Sunday dinners there. These took place in the middle of the day. Relatives came to dinner on Sundays and my mother was well-known for her generous roasts and also for her puddings such as her Queen Pudding, Upside-down Pudding, and King Edward Pudding with golden syrup. I used to clean the silver every Saturday. People who hadn't seen me for a while would come to dinner and say hasn't she grown, Irene. My mother would say she's going to be a big girl, and people would say she's the spitting image of Fran's eldest. I would play the piano and go into the back garden with my cousins. Before going on to describe the garden I should mention the bedrooms. My mother and father had a room that was decorated in festoons of silk in a colour called old rose. The room had a muffled feeling and above the bed was a picture of a sunrise set into the leadlight window. One of my aunts said why did you have all those silk festoons, Irene, if the dusting was going to get you down? My bedroom was also pink but brighter. I had two white beds with pink candlewick covers. On the wall were two pictures of Russian girls in fur hats. My curtains were white organdy, washed once a week.

The Garden

I had a swing at the end of the back garden. My cousins and I used to fight over it and they were always making remarks about the way we had to take our shoes off at the gate. In the back garden we had a shed where my father kept the garden tools and poisonous sprays and fertilisers. We used to play shops in the shed. Once the others started smoking cigarettes in there but I was too frightened. Except for two apple trees that my father pruned and sprayed, and a small fish pond, the back garden was all rows of vegetables. The front garden was beds of flowers with some very neat rose bushes and a lawn. We had a statue of a frog. The laundry which we really called the wash house was in the back garden. It contained a wood copper. I think my mother boiled the copper every day. The clothes were hung on a line that went from one end of the back garden to the other. Behind the wash house were two stacks of wood, one for the copper and one for the fireplaces in the house. My mother was always ironing and she was very good at it. The dress-maker up the street used to bring bridal gowns and all the bridesmaids' dresses down to our place for my mother to press.

The Things That Happened

One of the things was lice.

Because she was afraid I would get head lice, my mother used to wash my hair every day. I had long black hair that I wore in two plaits with ribbons tied on the ends. After I got the head lice somebody explained to my mother that if my hair hadn't been so clean in the first place I probably wouldn't have got them. She washed my hair in kerosene.

Another thing was when I got ink on my tartan skirt and I tried to get if off with soap and I ruined the skirt so that my mother said she would have to burn it.

The other thing was when my mother committed suicide.

I was at school. We were doing composition in the English lesson one afternoon, writing about autumn, and each girl had an autumn leaf on her desk next to the ink well. Our exercise books were ruled in red. The date was in the top right hand corner of the page. The headmistress came to the door of the classroom and looked in through the glass. She had white hair and a blue suit and a cameo brooch. She tapped on the glass and said I had to go with her to her office. People had decided

the headmistress was the best one to break the news. I do not remember her exact words. I was staring at an ornamental clock on her desk. The clock part sat on the back of an ebony elephant. Dust was caked in the creases of the elephant's skin. The headmistress told me my mother had been taken to hospital and had died there. She was very kind to me and drove me in her car to my aunt's house. Later I found out that my mother had made a King Edward Pudding with golden syrup and then had swallowed the best part of a bottle of Phenol and rushed into the front garden in her slippers and collapsed on the path next to the green garden seat.

I spoke before of easing you away from this shocking fact, of comforting you after telling you this thing. But I think now I have no way of doing that. We lived at eleven Pomona Avenue a long time ago and before I was ten years old my mother took her own life. That is the third way I have expressed the fact. But no matter how I put it into words, there's just no getting away from it.

It's The Least She Can Do

She thinks she hears the baby cry. But he's only been back in his bassinet for a few minutes. Bathed. Fed. Changed. She sits still, body hunching over thoughts, staring at the table in the middle of the room. Her mind does this. Fixes on an object and then will not move forward. The screaming gets louder. She doesn't move. Cannot move.

All day it will go on. Then all night. It stops only when she feeds him. She wears her nightie all day.

Wearing the nightie all day doesn't matter, though. She doesn't answer the doorbell. Or the phone for that matter. Has not spoken to anyone except Tony and the baby for weeks. When her parents have come to visit on Sunday afternoons, once or twice, they didn't notice her inattention — or pretended not to notice. She does go to the clinic once a week to make sure the baby's O.K. And he always is. *Thriving* smiles the sister, *absolutely thriving.*

Nappies are in a bucket in the laundry. There's also a pile of his clothes: white nighties, white jump-suits, white bonnets and bootees. Her mother preferred to dress all her babies in white. So does she. It's just the stains. Clothes, all white with yellow stains. She must wash them, must wash them, must wash.

She thinks the crying has stopped. But she's not sure. She's been thinking about the nappies. They are soaking in NapiSan. They must be washed and hung on the line so the stains can be bleached by the sun. All white again.

In hospital a lady in the nursery said *You feed him too much. That's why he's always sick and pooing his pants.* They tried to make him wait their scheduled four hours. He wouldn't be in that. They came and got her after only three. She was ecstatic. She *was* right. It was the first time since she'd been admitted that she'd been right. She wrote in her diary:

GRIPES:
They insisted I have a pube shave
They insisted I have an enema
They insisted I lie on the bed in the delivery room instead of standing beside it doing a crossword puzzle
They insisted I push when I had no sensation to push and when the urge did come and I pushed bloody hard they looked blank, as if there *Come on, dear* (terse, motherly) were a figment of *my* imagination
They insisted I have gas and pain-killing injections
They insist I wear slippers when walking down to the bathroom — instead of bare feet. Tony will bring in my blue thongs
They insist I sleep during rest time instead of listening to the cricket on my earphones

They tried to persuade her to give him the bottle. *It's much easier* they said, *and you know* exactly *how much they get.* She wondered how you could measure vomit. She looked at all the other baby trolleys in the nursery. Only his and one other (she'd never seen the mother because that baby slept, endlessly) had signs in big letters:

BREAST-FED

After a while they added:

ON DEMAND

Whenever she saw the sign she felt somehow pleased. As if the decision freed her, enabled her to create, redefine mothering for herself. That didn't fit in with what *they* thought. She was puzzled.

After more vomiting and more crying they said *You've got too much milk and he's a little pig. You'll have to lie on your back to reduce the flow.* The first two statements she ignored. *Shit, haven't they heard of supply and demand.* The third, she tried. But he was a very big baby (like a three month old, matron said) and like a rag doll. She couldn't manage.

About the fourth day after he was born she'd suddenly begun to cry. She was just lying on the bed, watching sunlight speckle the path under the leafy trellis. And she'd started. She couldn't understand it. Couldn't explain it. Tony was worried. Mentioned it to her parents. Her mother said *It never happened with any of mine.* There wasn't anything anyone could do. They said it would go away in a few days.

It didn't. And it hasn't. But now it's not so bad. She doesn't cry. It's just that she doesn't see the shoots on the willow have sprouted. Or that they've run out of sugar. That the mail needs answering. Tony reminds her almost daily about the mail. She says *Tomorrow.*

She sits with her back to the window. Doesn't notice the watery sun on her arm or the shadowy carpet. There is a memory of pleasure. She's not aware of the memory now. Her eyes are still, unseeing.

She still stares at the table. It's not because the table has a strip of light on the leg where it curves; or that the rough texture of the wood arouses her sense of touch; or even that the shape of the table is pleasing. It is for none of these reasons.

The table is merely there, in the centre of the room. The table is unavoidable.

Yet there are moments that stir her. When, in the middle of screaming he feels her nipple against his cheek and turns his mouth to suck; and sometimes after he is fed and briefly content, he stares at her face and she whispers *Hello, little one.* Or when he is wrapped in his blue (she thought she'd try something different) bunny blanket and goes to sleep on her shoulder. She feels his vulnerable, powerful, tiny body; smells his milky smell.

He frightens her too. The way he needs her; somebody. Sometimes she's repelled by him. By his desperation.

She sits all day in the chair. Unable to move. As if she is mentally paralysed. She plans in her mind the most simple chores.

1. Wash nappies and clothes
2. Wash dishes
3. Make bed

By late afternoon she is still sitting, still staring at the table. She's fed him many times. But she can't remember what she's done for the rest of the day, or what she'd planned to do.

She recalls a distant noise. The telephone? She's not sure.

All the books she'd bought for her Anthropology course sit in the book-case opposite. One day she'd picked up an anthology of short stories, but she didn't open it. She has to feel alive to read fiction. She withdrew from the course without attending a lecture.

Her job as a part-time newsreader in television is still waiting for her. Tony said they'd phoned him at work again yesterday to find out when she was coming back. They'd tried to get her at home several times but nobody answered. They said they hadn't received a reply to their letter. Or the telegram. She hadn't mentioned the telegram to Tony. He was cross. Said she was rude. She had cried, briefly, after he'd gone to bed and while she was feeding the baby. But she didn't contact them.

She'd told Tony last time to tell them to give the job to somebody else but they said they wanted her. The public wanted to know why she hadn't come back. She knows they'll forget about her eventually. People don't care. She doesn't care. She wishes she or someone cared. It seems somehow like abrogation of responsibility but its just nobody cares. She doesn't see the point in holding the job open.

She waits for Tony. She waited for the baby too, after he'd been delivered by forceps and then taken from her. She had wanted to look at him, to touch him. They kept coming in and shining a torch to check her. Then they'd said *You must try and sleep, dear, you've had a very long day.* And she'd said *But I haven't seen him yet. I want to see him.* A long time later they brought him in. He was beautiful. But it was different then. She'd waited all night.

He'll be home about 7 p.m. She must cook a meal, must cook, must cook. She's not hungry. Before the baby was born she always had a hot meal on the table for Tony, even when she was working until late and got home *after* him. Even if she was angry (like when he objected to her going back to study) and thinking *Up yours, Tony, baby.* Tony still pours her a glass of wine for dinner. She tips it down the sink, later.

She hopes Tony won't be angry. Sometimes he says *Can't you snap out of it?* She is vaguely perturbed by his tone. Mildly angry. She thinks *I should object to that.* But she doesn't bother. So she just sits, staring. Tony turns on the T.V. and watches *Family at War.*

The crying must have stopped. She thought she could remember hearing it, start or stop, she's not sure now. But it has, it has started again. It was quiet at first but now it is getting louder. Louder and louder. She grips the arm-rests to steady herself. Now she holds her temples with her forefingers, her jaw with her thumbs, thinking *It's him. I* must *do something.* She feels her breasts tingle. Milk begins to flow, seeping through her nightie and drips coldly into her lap.

She gets up, slowly, from the chair. It's the least she can do.

ANTHONY LAWRENCE

Pelican at Wiradjuri Reserve

On their stilts, the Spur-Winged Plovers
up-end the tidewood like children
looking for shells.

Up river, the dam is witholding
its reservoir of rain.
Yesterday, keeping its secret of branches and bones
under fast, snagged water, the river was deep and full.
Today, the surface is cut through with willow roots,
the rusted frame of a shopping trolley,
the legs of rotting cattle.

It's a lonely place to be in winter.
No one arrives to take the sun,
and only the man who comes to exercise
his horse in shifting sand
knows how shadow brings the evening on
before the evening comes.
Here, silence is the crack of a widowmaker
freeing a tired arm, or the grinding-stone call
of a Scissors Bird in the pines.

Between two islands, where dark water
ferries the dross from picnics
and boats moored to dreams of Murray Cod,
something white catches the sun.
It moves against the current, gliding
as if toward some quiet bay;
as if it were fishing the estuaries
that vein the Hawkesbury River.

Out of place perhaps, and strange
among small dark birds and overhanging trees,
it fills its great transparent beak with water,
spilling what it does not need
and swallowing the rest.
And when it stretches and lifts itself slowly
from the water, it seems to fight the air
until the air upholds its need for distance
and destinations impossible to define.

And now I understand what I had heard
about a pelican in flight; how its wings keep time
with the cycle of the sun; how its eyes cloud over
as it follows the waterline then folds away
like memory, like smoke into the trees.

ANTHONY LAWRENCE

The Flight Sonnets

I Swifts

All day in the mad North England wind
they come, spiralling away from China.
They come with the sun at their backs.
They hawk for the high blown swirling
insects over the Mill Country. Caught
in thermal currents, the silver flies
are picked from the air and swallowed
amid a silent gliding of angled wings.

All day they come, and at dusk, their
sharp bright weaving becomes a sleepy
brood of bodies, draped along the wet
bark of creaking elms. Their feet are
gnarled, and cannot grip the branches,
so they put in their spikes, and hang.

II Falcon Fledgelings

Peregrine Falcon fledgelings,
before they tackle their own
living prey, fire themselves
at pinecones, stones, skulls:
anything that won't turn and
run. With their knowledge of
death a metaphor of snapping
bone, the sprinting hare and
the Skylark's piteous crying
will refine the Falcon's eye
until accuracy and speed are
the weapons of air-to-ground
survival, and all deaths can
be savage, explosive, & true.

Mist of my Mist

Sometimes . . . only the mist
Seems real. The watercolours
Of the now, the then
Are awash — and I recall
Your face, recedingly translucent.

I don't know where you've gone
Small God, Son of Suns
— My keeper. You could have become
Reeded to the river
Where once we cast our wishes.

Most afternoons when the banks
Appear to swell,
And all boundaries are eclipsed
By the fluid blackened silver
— Your form takes shape.

Islanded to the ebb and flow,
Beyond hearing and touch
You stand
        Bleakly naked
Against the sky;
Across my lost horizon . . .

I step aside from myself, let
This elegy transform
The mist of my mist.
A dying afterglow brushes
My lips — and

The ice of my being casts tall shadows
That reach half way: No further.

STEFANIE BENNETT

The Contemporary

This contemporary. This whatever
You want to call it.
This small capital 'i' prefers
Things that don't have
A stamp of grandness upon them.

I'm an embosser, by habit.
Antiquated antique thoughts arouse
All that's grounded in me.
Someone once said, 'There's too much
Earth in your mouth.' I agree.

I choose to dig my way
Beneath sunsets.
Never would I suggest the tide
Change its course: Real grandeur
Need not shout a reason to be.

So! There's mud on my boot-soles
And aquatic sap in my eye.
My birthmark is mammalia
And I'm moon-struck
— Not by cosmonauts
But winged common courtiers of sky.

Exotic inquisitors damn the inheritances,
Cut the throats of flowers;
Speak the machine's monologue
And programme what's known as
An inspirational hour.

To play second-fiddle — I submit,
Is as fine as the wood
Weathered to time. I breathe
Through its resonance
My own elemental sound.

Meantime . . . this contemporary belongs
To no man. No man.

... and it sounds like the real thing

Homma realised that he had passed the house, driven too far. At the end of the cul-de-sac, he turned the car around, grunting through three reversals to do this: his wife and daughter remained silent.

At Number 43, the tyres scraped against a concrete kerbstone, painted in white flashes to mark a driveway entrance. His wife pushed down the door lockbuttons as their daughter stood on the pathway, one of her feet turned inwards; Kimiko seemed already petulant, her face screwed up from the midday sun.

— *Kim'chan!* said her mother, closing the car door,

— *Keep your shoes clean, ne?*

The girl stared at her feet. She did not respond, except to slightly twist her head to one side. Homma walked to the rear of the car, dabbing with a tissue at the sheen of sweat on his cheeks; his sports shirt, already dark with moisture, clinging to his back. Casual, Olsen had said — *Do* make sure that you bring your swimming things — and dress for comfort: only a barbecue, some friends — no other business people, he had said. Homma leaned into the shadow of the car trunk, lifting out a red-wrapped carton: a gift bottle of whisky.

Dress as if for the beach, Olsen had urged; but without convincing Mrs Homma: she had not visited this house before. She wore a light cotton dress, white shoes, and a straw hat of a pale pink, large-brimmed against the sun's glare. Kimiko was dressed similarly, at fourteen already a thickening replica of her mother; she grasped her sun hat in her fists, walking up the pathway to the house entrance, Homma pressed the doorbell button. They waited.

— *This garden . . . such nice shrubs,* said his wife as she waved at a row of camellia bushes by the driveway. Homma grunted, leaning to push the button again; its soft pealing could be heard from inside. Kimiko twisted at the brim of her hat. Her father rubbed the back of his head, as if puzzled. Then his mouth dropped open.

— *Ah! Now I recall . . . of course. The side gate — he said to enter by the side . . . by the garage, yes.* His wife said nothing, and they walked around to the side, till they reached a stained-timber gate; over it could be heard voices, yells of childish enjoyment. Homma pushed carefully at the gate, moving a little way through it as it opened; a small dog's barking erupted as they entered.

"Homma san! Here at last — we thought you mighta slept in!"

Brad Olsen, his arms stretched wide, beckoned them into the yard. He was about fifty, and his grey hair clung wet down the side of his face; water dripped from all over his reddened body, as he tugged at the brilliantly-coloured shorts sagging beneath the curve of his belly. Behind him, a dozen people stood suspending their drinks and their bodies as the Homma family walked to meet them. Three children stared with open curiosity at Kimiko. An older girl pulled herself from the pool,

wiping water from her eyes as she climbed out. Kimiko leaned into her mother's hips; as if to find some refuge in the light billows of her skirt. Her mother was already conscious of being over-dressed, looking about them; pushing Kimiko lightly away, she nodded thanks for an offered chair. She settled into it, finding it still wet from its donor; but she was grateful for the shade from a large sun-umbrella overhead.

Bradley Olsen settled his latest guests into their seats, providing drinks; for Homma a light beer, orange juice for his wife and daughter. They nodded and smiled at the procession of faces and names, and then Homma found himself drawn into a cluster of men at one corner of the yard; they stood near a metal keg of beer, from which a tap dripped. He enquired as to their organizations, their associations with the host; the talk drifted into business, with that week's fluctuation in the US dollar rate rolled among them for a few minutes. All shook their heads, that Things Were Not Getting Any Better . . .

The women's faction focused on Kimiko and her mother. She knew what they were asking about, but stared at her feet to avoid their friendly interrogation. As she leaned on her mother's shoulder, the girl from the pool was introduced: Lisa, Lisa Olsen — the daughter of this household. Her head now dry, although her dark-blonde hair hung stringlike about her face. Would Kimiko — is Kimmy okay? — like to borrow a costume? The water is beautiful . . .

Kimiko looked down at her shoes, the white shoes:

"Thank you — already I have brought a swimsuit," in a small but clear voice; then she smiled at Lisa, "But . . . your pool looks so wonderful. So large, such clear water." Lisa shrugged, pushing a wooden bowl toward her: "Have some crisps, Kimmy?"

Kimiko began to like this girl.

• • •

Inside the house it was cool. A quiet, dark refuge from the noise of the younger children out by the pool, and the drone of their parents' talk. Kimiko followed Lisa along a hallway, to the bathroom; her swimsuit seemed tighter than the last time she had worn it, its elastic cutting into her chunky flesh. She felt depression rolling over her: the thought of having to go outside, to be seen in this stupid costume.

She rubbed tearful eyes on a tissue, dropping it into a basket. She was trapped.

"C'mon, don't be ALL day, Kimmy . . ." came Lisa's voice from the other side of the door. Kimiko came out of the bathroom, carrying a neatly folded bundle of her dress, singlet, drawers, and the white shoes. Lisa briefly scratched her head in thought, then saying: "Look. Leave those things on my bed, Kimmy — down this way, *come on*! She pulled Kimiko along a corridor, into a small bedroom. The room seemed shrunken by its crowding mass of dolls and soft toys scattered across the floor; and from the giant posters leaning from the walls at them: Matt Dillon, Cyndi Lauper, Madonna. Kimiko placed her shoes down on the carpet, draping her clothes across a chair.

"We'll go back out through the patio — this way!" said Lisa.

Passing back along the corridor, they moved into a living room. Looking around as they crossed it, Kimiko saw a large upright piano; she paused, then walking over to it, she lifted the lid and stared at the keys. In the room's dim light the keys glistened; above the piano, a wall air-conditioner hummed. Kimiko turned to see her young hostess waiting at a sliding door. It was halfway open, but she began to push it closed again. "D'you play, Kimmy?"

"Mmm, a little, I study . . ." mumbled Kimiko.

"Well, well. Me too — lessons, though . . ." Lisa rolled her eyes upward and

shrugged; Kimiko smiled at her. They sat down on the stool: Lisa began to pick out a melody with her right hand, turning to smile at Kimiko: "This one — know it?"

"Ah, yes, Bay-to-ban . . ." she responded, deliberately mocking her own pronunciation. Lisa giggled.

"Please Lisa," asked Kimiko, "Again play that part. Let's play it together . . .?" They played the polonaise, twice through — Lisa tripping through the melody while Kimiko played an improvised bass part. Then they stopped, sensing an audience; behind them, the sliding door was open, and their mothers stood together, beaming.

"Well, *well*! That sounds like fun, girls . . . and just like the real thing too — don't you think?" Mrs Homma nodded, as Mrs Olsen continued, "But listen, girls — we're about to serve some steaks, and the sausages are ready. Oh, and the kebabs *you* made, Lisa. Come out and have something, won't you now?"

Lisa grunted, turning her back and continuing with her playing; "Mum. Do you mind *not* interrupting us. Please!"

Kimiko looked toward her mother, awkward, unsure whether to go on with her playing. But her mother's smile remained frozen on her face, and the two women withdrew. Lisa shuffled some music, asking:

"How about a Japanese number? D'you play anything like that?"

Her head to one side in concentration, Kimiko single-fingered a simple version of Kohjoh no Tsuki; her lips shaping the words, her eyes closed in trying to remember; Lisa clapped, "That *is* pretty. It's in A minor, right? *Do* show me a bass part — let me have a go at it . . ."

They exchanged seats. Lisa spread her fingers to shape the left-hand fifths under the melody, as Kimiko played it again.

"What's the name of that piece, Kimmy? It's neat, really."

"Aah . . ." Kimiko looked toward the ceiling, without breaking the pattern of the melody, " — perhaps in English we may call it Moon on . . . Old Castle. Or maybe Broken Castle? I'm not so sure. But an old song."

"It's neat. Let's play it together again, Kimmy . . ."

• • •

They played Kohjoh no Tsuki once more, with Lisa becoming more confident, the timing more correct as she placed chords beneath the melody rolling from Kimiko's hands. Kimiko began to sing the words, swaying with the music:

— *haru kono hana no-en*
— *meguru sakazuki, kage sashite*
— *chiyo no matsugae wake i-deshi,*
— *mukashi ni hikari ima izuko.*

She stopped. The piano's resonations died, and Kimiko's hands dropped into her lap Lisa sighed, and stretched.

"That's neat. What do the words mean, though . . .?" Kimiko shrugged, "Aah, so. Such old building — castle, I mean. So . . . it has seen much joy, such happy times during old days . . . past days. But all those people now are . . . finished. And the castle also is broken . . . around it only remain the pine trees. Pine trees watching — then and now." She shrugged again. "Wo-o-ow. That is just *so* neat! And I loved that tune — " said Lisa. Kimiko smiled, fingering again the single line of the opening phrase: E E A B C B A, F F E D E. She stopped: outside the sounds still of the younger children, splashing, squealing as they plunged into the pool with an audible whomph!

"Wanta have a swim now, Kimmy?"

"Mmm — it is becoming rather hot, I think. Let's do that."

She closed the piano lid, following Lisa out onto the patio.

• • •

The afternoon heat; leaning onto them. It warmed and flattened the beer; wasps gathered round the soft drinks. Children became pink, bickering with their friends under zinc-daubed noses; steaks curled on paper plates, as the guests juggled them with their cutlery.

Sitting together, their legs in the pool, Kimiko and Lisa explored further into common interests, extending the territory of a potential friendship. They agreed to set a date for the new Matt Dillon film.

Flies became more irritating as the sun slid down the sky and could not be avoided in its glare; the afternoon's advance led neighbours to depart, thanking Brad and Tanya Olsen as they passed out through the gate. Kimiko too, felt tired. Pool chlorine stung at her eyes, and it was a relief to go inside to change, at her parents' murmur of leaving. After changing into her dress and shoes, her skin felt tight from the sun. She sat in the lounge, turning the pages of a magazine as her parents and the Olsens walked in from the patio. Tanya Olsen smiled, "Your playing, earlier. It sounded so nice," and turning to Mrs Homma, "And you must be *so* proud of her — of your daughter . . ."

"Hey," said Brad, "- I didn't get a chance yet, to hear her. What about a repeat per-for-mance. For the gents, now . . ." A beercan waved in his red fist. Kimiko shrank into her chair, avoiding her mother's eyes in a desperately unsaid plea: no. But her mother was talking, "A good student, yes. We may say that. But not yet so good a player?"

Her hands held open, expressing uncaught skills.

Kimiko stared at her own feet, the white shoes;

Lisa caught her eye, winking as if to say, How Can We Stop Them?

"Oh, *do* play for us, Kimiko," cajoled Mrs Olsen.

Above Kimiko her mother leaned, muttering:

"*You must. For these people's kindness . . .*"

— *Mother . . . this situation is . . . not quite suitable.*

Kimiko turned toward her father for help; but he only nodded, smiling.

— *And their daughter's friendship. You have become good friends already, ne? So* . . . Her mother's smile glittered.

Kimiko sat at the piano, opening it with a bang! Lisa stopped halfway across the room, as if uncertain whether to join her; she paused in awkward hesitation, then settled onto a sofa by her father, as Kimiko began to play. Her fingers stabbed at the keys in a controlled, but visible anger; she threw down the opening bars of a Scarlatti sonata, in A minor. Her hands flexed as if undirected, her eyes squeezed shut. The others in the room sat stunned; even her mother, her father had not heard this feeling in her playing before. The music she pulled from the keyboard resounded through the house as if wrenching the instrument's inner life from its rippling keys. Kimiko grew calmer, feeling their awe, at the energy ringing around them; at the shimmering patterns of the sonata, surrounding them, quelling them into silence. All of them.

Finishing, she stood quickly and closed the lid, before walking over to her mother's side, a hand seeking at the hem of Mrs Homma's dress. Brad Olsen broke their silence, "Jee-sus, that's fan-*tas*-tic," he said as he stood and began clapping. "You must be *very* proud," said his wife to Mrs Homma, who squirmed in pleasure;

"But I think . . . our daughter should maybe . . . practise more?" she offered as a modest gesture. Lisa stared at the carpet, silent.

• • •

The car's engine rustling into a soft rhythm, Homma switched on its air-conditioner: the air outside was still, humid, for this hour. His wife ensured that the seat belts were all fastened: Kimiko's, her husband's, her own. Through the partly-open windows came the farewells from the Olsens. As they began to move off, Mrs Homma waved vigorously, also to Lisa, standing in the front doorway.

— *Such a kind family. And their daughter, ne? Perhaps your first . . . ah, your new Australian friend . . .* suggested Mrs Homma. Mr Homma turned the air-conditioner to a higher setting, as the car rolled along the street and both Mr and Mrs Olsen stood at the kerbside, waving. Kimiko stared at the road.

Lisa had not fixed any date for them to see the Matt Dillon movie. Perhaps she had forgotten? Or perhaps she might ring . . .?

Kimiko closed her eyes against her mother's continued chatter, and found herself reminded of the pool:

by the chlorine stinging still, in her eyes.

GEOFF MORRIS

Fille de Joie (Gauguin's 'Ta Matete')

From the Gauguin
blue/orange/yellow/green
on our white wall
she alone of her group
watches our group partying,
would join us. Others
silently swop island gossip.
Goodtime girls. Tahitian
though pose and gesture
suggest ancient Egyptian:
stylised tomb art:
heads (but hers) in profile
on torsos frontal; hands
are birds stopped in flight.
She watches impatient,
would shuck the frame
and loose her juices that dried
with the brushstrokes
too soon.

ROSANNE MUSU

Cacti

There was a huge *Ferocactus Latispinus* in a great terracotta pot in the corner, and Marianna stood and looked at it for a long time. A green 'Not For Sale' sticker hung from a thin string drawn tightly round the pot. The cactus needed potting up — it had outgrown the container, and Marianna imagined how she would tackle the job. The curving, flat, red spines were formidable, those closest to the window gleaming with a metallic rusty glow. It was a magnificent specimen. She wished she could rotate the pot to see the part of the globular trunk that faced the corner of the glasshouse, to see if it were as perfect as the section she saw. The grey-green flesh was unspotted, unblemished and plump. Someone who understood cacti had cared for it for years.

The 'Not For Sale' ticket swung a little as someone came through the glasshouse door and let in a slight draught, but Marianna did not look round. She did the round of the Cacti and Succulents Corner again. She examined each plant in its green plastic or clay pot; straining on tiptoe for the top shelves, or bending breathlessly to see the lower ones. The larger specimens were ranged on the furthest shelf — the last stagger of tiers that ringed the inside of the house, their huge pots stained white in places. Some were chalked Not For Sale and had no string or ticket. Most smaller pots had price tags. There was a magnificent *Oreocereus Celsianus*, its white soft hairs trailing upwards and out, not hiding the gold spines underneath. Marianna would have loved to pick it up and take it home, but the plastic tag stuck like a gravestone into the chipped terracotta gravel round the cactus base was scrawled brightly with a price in purple felt pen. Thirteen dollars. She looked past it at a range of smaller pots, the two year old ones. She could gauge their age easily, even the vigorous growers that towered above the rest. A *Cereus Peruvianis*, lanky and solitary and unbranched, towered over some other pots. Its short barbs were grouped in clumps of seven. Without counting Marianna knew they were seven, and that since her last visit the tall cactus had grown another few centimetres. When it hit the top of the greenhouse, it would be time for action to be taken, and she imagined what she would do to the tall plant, how she would slice gently and dry the wound out carefully for a week until it was time to re-plant the cutting and watch the stump for offsets. All in her mind, she saw how she would count the tiny sprouts as they appeared round the base of the old stump, and repot them in a few months.

The *Ferocactus* caught her eye again. It had flowered three times since she had known it; a huge white bloom almost sexual in its grandeur. Every time it had happened, Marianna visited the nursery every day until the flower wilted and died, its glory over. The *Notocactus Ottonis* bloomed at night, and she could only see the dying trumpet the next morning, knowing the inside of it she could not see was a delicate light green. She hoped her serrepticious, guilty look was not recognized by the nurseryman. She could not be there at night: the nursery was shut and barred

at sundown, and often she was the last to pass the gate, the nurseryman giving her familiar figure a curious look as she sidled past him silently. She imagined it had been his hand that had scrawled the thick purple Not For Sale on the tickets, his hand that turned the pots gently to catch the spring sunlight evenly after the inactivity of the long winter. His hand that removed the withered and blackened flowers when they were dead, or added a fine pebbly top-dressing to the pots.

She thought of his tough, calloused hands gently re-potting the spiny plants without the need of gloves; his thick garden hands that needed no protection against the needles; white, red or golden. She imagined the glochids of the *Opuntia Splendens* glancing his tanned skin, not even clinging for an instant but slipping past — with her they would cling and prick and sting, under her nails and between her fingers if she dared to brush the pads of that cactus with bare skin. She wondered how he would handle the *Mammillaria Perbella* when it was its turn to be placed in a larger pot, how he would cup the little decorative cylinder with its white and pink thorny spines in the inside of his upturned hand, gently cradle it till he coaxed it into the bed of mixture, and then how he would press the earth round its base, covering its roots carefully for another season. Gently.

Ignoring the *Lithops* which she privately detested, she walked past the *Kalanchoes* clustered together, with their pink bells of flowers already opening, and looked for the *Haworthias* which had been moved. She never paused here long, as the clumpy tentacle-like plants were only vaguely interesting to her, and passed on to the *Euphorbias.* Grouped together in an odd assortment of differently sized pots they presented a jumbled vision to Marianna and it was with some effort that she kept her hands tightly clenched. She wanted to move them, sort them out and arrange them: examine the *Horrida* most of all, because it had those long menacing needles that belied the peaceful green of its trunk. Already the red bracts were there, and soon they would open. The year had flown past and she remembered last year's *Euphorbias* and how the nurseryman had ignored them too, pushing them together into a low corner in the house and probably glad to see them sold. Marianna knew there were no *Euphorbias* with Not For Sale signs.

The hanging*Rhipsalidopsis* and *Schlumbergeras* swung above her head, but she did not look up. She knew they were there, but there were too many of them, and they were too popular. Every year the nursery received consignment upon consignment from Victoria and they would all be sold, leaving her favourite old ones behind. The *Cleistocactus Strausii* in the corner was close to twenty years old; she did not dare verify this with the man. He shuffled somewhere behind her, and although she knew he was used to her almost constant presence in the Cacti and Succulents section, he could have been curious about her fixation and dedication. Perhaps he wondered how she found so much time to spend getting in his way. They had never said a word to each other, she had never bought a thing, and she thought he could sense her eyes on his hands as he moved pots, poured diluted fertilizer, stacked trays. She watched him sell the larger cacti, and her eyes would follow the new owner with the pot till they disappeared from sight. She avoided looking at the empty place on the shelf until he came and filled it with another potted cactus, or moved the remaining pots to hide the gap.

Now she was looking at the plump *Gymnocalcium Denudatum* that was perched on the highest shelf in a squat pot. Her back chastised him for placing it so high. The plant was hardly visible; the round and stubby green and red globes clung to the soil they were bedded in. She felt him make a mental note to move the pot below eye level when she had moved out of the way. Marianna stayed there. She peered high, standing on her toes to look again at the *Rebutias* that would flower in a week. These tiny globes were among her favourites. She puzzled him with her resistance. She had never bought a thing, and yet she spent hours in his nursery staring at

the cacti, her fascination apparent. Why he himself had never spoken to her was another mystery; perhaps one he had never addressed.

She moved again to the *Ferocactus*, its size and age never failing to fascinate her. She longed to turn the pot to look at its other side. On either side of it were two identical pots of *Echinocereus Salm-Dyckianus* obviously put there by the nurseryman for effect and contrast. Their spines were deceptively soft-looking and golden, trunks long and slender and a beautiful light green. They crowded and clustered and showed up the spatulate red thorns of the *Ferocactus.*

It was nearly time to leave. He was making obvious noises behind her. A half-formed resolve flitted into her mind, but she shrugged it off in panic. She thought again of his weathered but sensuous hands as they cradled the *Mammillaria* and a pink blush rose to her cheeks, then she quickly brushed past him on her way out, her throat tightening.

"The *Ferocactus* needs rotating," she breathed softly as she went by.

SELWYN PRITCHARD

Imperfect Competition

Annus mirabilis! Mill
honed truth bright as liberty
yet carved himself no privacy;
Marx held mind (save his) society's
thing; simian Darwin opposed
bishops with his thumb; pious
Smiles got blood from the stone
whence Disraeli's angel flew
whilst Marx made revolutions
in the grave.

Irony! Perverse echoes
like crusaders' cauldrons
clanging comfort as reliquaries
to render their bones' beatitude —
or Gladstone peering up from
sinecurists' pisspots
for loosing public school spirit.

It ends. The paradigm's corrupt.

Now democratic newspeak shouts
supplies of sovereign voter
to meet the demand of an Elect
(selected, naturally,
by the Hidden Hand) and taxes
sense from equilibrium till
truth's a scarce resource
and media cowboys are kings.

Snow shines on the volcano
but there's summer enough
for cockies to collect; their kids
to rubbish 'Animal Farm'; me,
chalk in hand, to reflect that today
History's polarities
might fuse in terminal absurdity.

REVIEWS

Rodney Hall, *Kisses of the Enemy*, Penguin Books, 1987, $12.95, and **Gerald Murnane, *Inland***, Heinemann, 1988, $24.95 hardback.

Gerald Murnane and Rodney Hall are two Australian novelists producing works of extended prose writing that defy limiting definitions of what a novel is, or should be. They are capable, at their best, of creating compelling and convincing worlds within their writing that, as John Cage has said of music, we might not understand, but we can nevertheless experience.

Rodney Hall's books is set in the early 1990's as Australia elects its first President, an ex-real estate agent, who then grows fatter with every year in power, until his only constant and trusted friends are the bodyguards who carry him in a specially designed litter. He is the associate of a millionaire drug dealer who manages to addict the President's son. His presidency has the backing of an American corporation that seems to control most of the world and wishes to use Australia as a military base. He has the cheek to talk to the nation as he would to a mate in the back bar of the Provincial Hotel, and he seems to be loved for this. The only effective tactics left for those who oppose such rule in what has become a police state, are ridicule and exposure through graffiti and street theatre.

Inland is about imaginary travel, both in time and place. We begin with a man writing the pages we are reading, and imagining the editor who will receive his manuscript, or who will perhaps not receive his manuscript because she might have enemies at her institute of prairie studies, rivals for the editorship of the journal "Hinterland", the proposed destination of the writer's manuscript. It is also a book about more abstract matters — about homelands that the mind returns to with loving details, or even invents so that it can imagine returning to them, and can imagine the most unlikely details. It is also a more simple tale of a middle aged man recalling his twelve year old yearning for a "girl-woman", and wanting to write about this now as a love story.

Both books are idiosyncratic in the extreme, demanding of the reader some perseverance, some willingness to forego the traditional expectations of a novel. Plot, characters, climax, structure all take a back seat. Digressions and details become the flashpoints for the books. Both books are consciously whimsical. One example of this is the introduction of Dorina Buchanan, wife of the man who will become Australia's first President:

> Dorina Buchanan attracted music. As other people are said to be accident-prone, so she was music-prone. In her company public servants started humming. Minutes after she'd begun watching workmen on a building site they were whistling at the top of their range. Children sang *Sor-ree* when they bumped into her trolley at the supermarket. Of an evening a cicada orchestra chirred for her. And while she tended her beloved garden, choruses of magpies fitfully improvised a new Webern serenade. She need only push her rusty wheelbarrow for its squeals to develop a pure note. Hailstones fell in rhythms around her. Even her moody son, at eleven, banged the table with a regular ratta-tat-tat. Piped muzak in a lift malfunctioned for her benefit.

This willingness to follow up in detail the oddest ideas assumes a reader who likes to follow the images that rise from Rodney Hall's pen. I am one who does enjoy it. And in this book of over six hundred pages there are many instances, and interweavings of such virtuoso writing.

Gerald Murnane also takes time and pains to lead us away into the whimsical, personal details of a mind. The narrator writes about a prize he won for an essay as an eleven year old in a competition run by the Paraclete Society:

> The title *Paraclete* is used for the Holy Ghost, the third person of the Blessed Trinity and traditionally the person of those three most ready to help writers, artists, and all who today would be called *creative*. . . . I was struck then, as I am still struck today, by the likeness of the word *paraclete* to *parakeet*. Almost certainly before I had heard the word *paraclete*, I had heard and learned the meaning of the word *parakeet*. And almost certainly before I had heard of a personage named the Holy Ghost who was one third of the God I was obliged to worship, I had become a worshipper of birds. I was never interested in the flight of birds — I have never watched the soaring of falcons or the gliding of the gulls that writers about birds are so taken by. I had admired birds for as long as I can remember for their furtiveness . . .
> I sometimes chose to see the two birds perched side by side: the dull-coloured, dove-shaped Paraclete and the vivid but furtive parakeet. The Paraclete was no less than the Third Person of the Triune God; the parakeet I recognise now as one of the demigods who live on earth rather than in heaven and who are all I know of divinity.

This passage contains echoes and themes that recur throughout the book and unite it as a single voice articulating the concerns of its own meditation. It is at the same time a 'loose' page that could be inserted anywhere in this book. One has the impression that this passage, like so many others, is presented because it interests the writer to pursue this thought, or memory for a moment. Once again, it assumes a reader who is willing to follow, with interest, the unpredictable connections this writer makes as he 'progresses'. It is more like a contemplation of possible journeys than a progression. Yet the writer reminds the reader that though the journey through the book might be predictable as far as its length is concerned (the reader knows how many pages there are to read to get to the end), for the writer there is the altogether more uncertain situation of not knowing when the end will come, or if the book might in fact go on forever unfinished. Through such reminders, the reader is prepared for a journey that could take them anywhere — but always recognisably a place that this writer would be drawn to.

For Gerald Murnane this book is a return to the places and concerns of his previous works, especially the time of life, pre-adolescence, in *Tamarisk Row*, and the open landscapes of *The Plains*. As in *Landscape with Landscape*, he again plays with the notion of the writer talking about the book that is being written, more or less in front of our eyes. This books seems to be even more explicit in presenting to the reader a picture of how it is being written, and how it is to be read:

> I am not writing by hand on these pages. I am sitting at a typewriter and using the index finger of my right hand to press all keys except the large unlabelled key in the lower left-hand corner for raising the roller to receive upper-case letters or quotation marks, ampersands, and other rare marks . . . I type slowly and carefully. I stare at the keyboard and I try to see in the air between my face and the keys the words I am about to type . . . Two hours ago . . . my finger made its usual long diagonal leap from the first to the second letter of the word *soils*. The pad of the finger landed safely on the second letter, but then, perhaps remembering its soaring leap from the *s* to the o, my index finger travelled exactly twice the distance needed from the *o*. The finger then made one short and one long hop to finish the word so that the sentence when I looked at it was: *I was once a scientist of souls.*
> When I think of a soul I think of a ghostly shape of a body . . .

Such a passage contains within it implied instructions for the reader as much as a description of the process by which this book will 'proceed'. But not only does the book proceed apparently by accident and association, but also by these moments of instruction when the reader learns how best the book can be read.

Even though this book addresses the reader more directly, and more often than any of his previous works, and never strays far from mentioning the desk, the paper, the room, and the writer at the scene of production, the book is still extremely private, obsessive, and almost hermetic. The language is plain, the tone is steady, the sentences repeat their rhythms and their ideas potentially endlessly. It is the book of a writer who has won over his readership, and now wishes to follow and savour his particular vision along with them.

Rodney Hall seems to have reached a similar point in his relationship to readers of *Kisses of the Enemy*. Where *Just Relations* was surreal, but still tightly controlled by an evolving plot, *Kisses of the Enemy* launches into a hallucinatory world where the reader is often left unable to find the boundaries of what is 'real' and what is hallucinated. The plot expands out into a looser and looser structure until the book ends in mid-sentence: "It seems to me we are in the middle of"

Rodney Hall seems to be confident enough of his readers to take them off into flights of imagery and character that aren't tied down by the need for plots or explanations. It is not that these aren't present if we look hard enough, but that these aren't as important as the savouring of a certain vision.

In this book Rodney Hall displays himself as satirist and poet as well as a novelist. He uses the physical imagery of a poet in sentences such as: "Dark rocks lay on the surface while a flat shimmering sea was stitched to the sky by diving gannets". Where the evil of the world was far removed from the mountain community in *Just Relations*, and what did go wrong there had more to do with ignorance and stupidity than evil, in *Kisses of the Enemy* we are almost constantly in the enemy camp, with those ultimately mundane characters who are capable of running a police state. There is a lot of fun to be had for the satirist in describing people such as President Buchanan, the President whose greatest publicity stunt was to

accidentally hit a six at a social game of cricket. The success of this satire can perhaps be gauged by raising the eyes from this invented world to find that in 1988 we have a Prime Minister who brings a winner's smile back to the Labour Party just as things are turning sour by hitting a hole-in-one while playing golf with some mates — his bodyguards.

While the satire is powerful and vicious, and the images are as clear, surprising, and physical as they were in *Just Relations*, this is, like Gerald Murnane's book, a work that takes the great risk of depending on the power of its writing to keep the reader reading.

More relentless than poetic in his style, Murnane uses a confessional tone to, once again, overturn traditional expectations. Despite every step towards confession, he is drawn further away from, or perhaps closer to the impossibility of revealing secrets:

> . . . if it were not by definition impossible for me to tell my reader where I am at this moment, I would write on this page that I am at this moment in another world but that the world where I am is in this one.

Taking a step back from the question of why these books were published, we could wonder why they were written — what readers did the writer have in mind? Gerald Murnane quotes Hemingway at the beginning of his book: "I believe that basically you write for two people; yourself to try to make it absolutely perfect . . . Then you write for who you love whether she can read or write or not and whether she is alive or dead." Rodney Hall lists the friends who supported and guided him through the writing of his novel. Both of these books are, in their different ways, about love, and both of them are obviously lovingly written for the zealous reader.

Kevin Brophy

Kate Grenville, *Joan Makes History*, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1988, 285pp. $22.95.

Joan Makes History, Kate Grenville's new novel, has already made its own publishing history. Widely and glowingly reviewed, it seems set to become a landmark text in Australian writing, in part because it reaches beyond the narrow category "literature", among others to history, to oral literature, to serial writing and to myth. It raises and speaks in its many female voices to the issues that have vexed this Bicentenary year in Australia, exploring them with verve and wit.

Two kinds of history are being made here — or one kind of history is being made, written, in two different narrative modes. One narrative is the fictitious story of Joan, conceived in the first year of the century, on an immigrant ship, "mean and cramped". (p.9) Her conception (which in its narrative position and its description inevitably recalls, and mocks, Tristram Shandy's) is the result of the celebrative lust of her migrant parents. It takes place on a blazing afternoon as, significantly, their ship "passes between the headlands that were the gates to a new life". (p.9)

Another narrative interleaves this Joan's. It's the multiple, shifting dramatisation, in a series of "Scenes", of a number of Joans who together represent Everywoman. Sometimes black and sometimes white, upper or lower class, mistress or maid, this Joan's history is the secret, unrecorded, intimate history of women in Australia. A Joan is always present at the moments that mainstream Australian history has chosen to record and that Australian culture commemorates. Her presence remakes that history.

Joan is Captain Cook's wife as the *Endeavour* sights the continent that will become known as Australia; she's a convict woman on Phillip's fleet who escapes through a hatch of her prison ship so that her "unsavoury toe (is the first to touch) the Great South Land". (p.38) She's an Aboriginal woman, one of a group who meet Flinders and his party when he's forced ashore on his circumnavigation of Australia; she battles to help clear and crop the unfamiliar country, is a washerwoman on the goldfields, a servant of prosperous settlers who laugh as aborigines take and eat their arsenic-laden flour, a Governor's wife during the 1855 gold rushes, and so on.

This many-faceted Joan's history ends when, as the wife of a small-town mayor, she attends the Official Federation celebrations, at about the same time as the other, continuously fictitious Joan is born. What this Joan's friends don't know, the Prologue tells us, is that she, too, is "every woman who has ever drawn breath: there

has been a Joan cooking, washing and sweeping through every event of history, although she has not been mentioned in the books until now". p.5

Transcribing as it does the underside of traditional history, Grenville's novel questions the meaning and construction of that history, as social and feminist historians have. In the last manifestation of the Joans in the dramatic "Scenes", Joan, "the wife of the Mayor of Castleton, a mother of six, and grandmother of three" walks home with her husband from the first Opening of the Australian Parliament. She rehearses what she will tell of this event to her favourite grandchild, Alice. It will be "all the things no book would ever mention . . . peculiar, lopsided, absurd sorts of things that we would tell her". (p.261) Without these things, Joan muses, history is all wrong. And the things she will tell Alice are essential; they comprise "*your inheritance*". (p.262)

All the Joans have a sense of their own unrecognised difference, and yearn to discover a destiny. The twentieth-century Joan wishes "not to marry history, but to make it" (p.49), while the episodic, nineteenth-century Joan, working in one of her lives as a photographer's assistant, feels as such she has "a hand in the machinery of life . . . as I never had as simply the wife of Henry." (p.205) These female desires for autonomy and power are traditionally thwarted by a gendered social structure, which ensures, too, that women are included in history only in secondary roles. Finally, and ironically, *Joan Makes History* undercuts both the notion of power and the nature of the masculine hegemony inscribed in traditional history, as it authenticates and celebrates those areas of life, like love and domestic relationships, that are conventionally assigned to women.

A movement towards this alternative idea of history impels the continous narrative of the twentieth-century Joan. She is born, grows up rebelling against her parents' values, gains a university education, discovers her sexuality, becomes pregnant, marries, miscarries, leaves her husband almost on a whim, and proceeds, as she thinks, to make her history. Joan transforms herself into Jack, but this history soon palls, since no-one recognises its daring.

This is when Joan gains her insight: her escape from a more common female destiny is not only misguided, but it mistakes the true meaning of history. Back with Duncan her husband, pregnant again and happy, Joan considers that she's "looked into the face of destiny and found it cold." (p.224) Her story ends as she says goodbye to her young daughter Madge, whose growing-up has been recorded in a series of snapshots, frozen moments of history only her parents can read, and who seems to her mother independent, confident, capable of making any history she chooses. Yet Madge is Joan too, and as she drives away her mother, Joan, listens "until the roar of Joan's imperfect engine could not longer be heard." (p.279)

This book questions the gaps in history, created by its failure to include women (as well as other minority groups) in its narrative. *Joan Makes History* heals those gaps with its imaginative re-writing of an Australian history. Images of penetration, of expulsion and birth, of growth and development, and of transformation, common to women's lives and to the history of colonisation, link all the Joans' stories and implicitly suggest a different kind of colonising. Elements of the major story are repeated in the fragments that intersperse it. And Joan's physical appearance provides the other major linking device. She is plain of face and small of bust — why, is not entirely clear. Perhaps it is to render her androgynous. It does point up the nature of the representative Joan's function as anti-heroine.

Part fable, part myth, part novel, part history, *Joan Makes History* illuminates the role of women in the history of the Australian continent, in a way that uncovers history's paradoxes. It will allow neither easy questions nor conventional answers of that history. Post-Joan, no Australian history will ever be the same.

Delys Bird

Henry IV — Part 1, ed. E.A.M. Colman, 1987; and ***Hamlet***, ed. G.A. Wilkes, 1984; (The Challis Shakespeare) Sydney University Press.

Sydney University Press continues its publication of the Challis Shakespeare, named after John Henry Challis, the nineteenth benefactor of the University. Recently to hand are *Henry IV Part One* and *Hamlet*. This series is claimed to be the first modern one produced specifically for the Australian reader, especially

the student or the non-specialist reader of Shakespeare. G.A. Wilkes of the University of Sydney is the general editor and has prepared the *Hamlet*. Various other Australian scholars have edited other plays.

E.A.M. Colman of the University of Tasmania has edited *Henry IV, Part 1*. He outlines the editorial policy governing the whole series, which is the use as far as possible the First Quarto printings, that of *Henry IV, 1* dating from 1598. Later Quartos, notably the fragmentary one found in the 1860s, have been referred to, and the First Folio has been used, where possible, to establish act and scene divisions. Although students at secondary and early tertiary levels do not usually have to make a detailed study of the various early printings of Shakespeare, Colman's explanation of his editing is clear and should encourage a reader's interest. He also provides, at the end of the play, a list of his textual collations.

Colman's introduction mentions that, as far as he known, *Henry IV,1*, was the first of Shakespeare's plays to be performed in Australia, in April, 1803, and goes on to comment on its appropriateness in a colony whose free citizens were mostly Anglophiles and of the military class. There are other features of this edition which should be of use to Australian readers. A map of Britain with all of the places mentioned in the play is supplied, something quite rare in editions of the history-plays. This should be helpful in following such things as Falstaff's meandering from London to Shrewsbury and Hotspur's plans to alter the geography of England. The compilation of the footnotes acknowledges a reader living in the southern hemisphere and, without being patronising, occasionally supplies an explanation which a student living in England would not require.

Colman's general introduction to the play is excellent, both as something to be read before reading the actual text and as a later reference for the student wishing to take an overview of the play. Colman effectively outlines the way in which Shakespeare presents the public and private worlds of the play and gives the reader or audience a dramatisation of the ideas behind the story — legitimacy of rule, family loyalty, patriotism, variety, treachery, honour and duty. Colman also gently urges the reader to study what he calls the play's parabolic structures, especially those observable in the lives of Prince Hal and Hotspur.

The Challis Shakespeare is one which can be strongly recommended to reachers. It contains, as its publishers claim, all that is needed for a good understanding of the play, while avoiding irritating plot-summaries, character-analysis and other "cribs" which pander to the idle.

In preparing *Hamlet*, G.A. Wilkes takes the Second Quarto of 1604 and the First Folio of 1623 as the control texts, following John Dover Wilson's arguments for them as being the closest to Shakespeare's own manuscript. The First Quarto is the longest extant text of *Hamlet*, having more than two hundred lines not found in the First Folio, including Hamlet's "How all occasions do inform against me" soliloquy. From the Folio come lines which do not appear in the Quarto, notably the passages in Act II, Scene 2, on Denmark as a prison and on the child actors. Wilkes states that the Quarto and Folio may represent different states of the play, both possibly true to actual performances in the Elizabethan theatre, thus making the present edition one unknown to Shakespeare's contemporaries. A very thorough list of the textual collations has been appended.

A sensible departure from conventional texts is not to conclude Act III with the closet scene, but to end it three scenes later, at the point where Claudius sends Hamlet off to England. The First Quarto has no act and scene divisions and those in the First Folio go no further than Act II Scene 2, so a modern editor may choose for himself. Wilkes has Dr Johnson's and Sir Walter Greg's support for this "continuity of action" (Johnson's phrase) in Act III. Modern productions usually have only one or two intervals, making the act and scene divisions of the text less relevant than they were in, say, the Victorian theatre. However, Wilkes's text could be useful to a director considering where to place a second interval, especially as his Act IV now begins with a fine theatrical flourish, the appearance of the hitherto unseen Fortinbras and his army.

It is refreshing to come across an edition of *Hamlet* which does not set up a barrier to understanding an enjoyment by telling the reader that nobody has ever or will ever comprehend either Hamlet the man of *Hamlet* the play. Wilkes reminds us that this "mystery" aspect of the tragedy dates largely from the Romantic critics' fascination with human

personality and motivation. Wilkes deals briefly but respectfully with these and later, similar critics and reminds us that there are no reports of playgoers leaving the theatre at interval because they don't know what is going on, or of readers being utterly bewildered by the text. It is also pointed out that while much is made by critics of Hamlet's propensity for delay (and they can quote the Prince's own Act IV soliloquy in support), a sense of delay is not a major part of an audience's experience in the theatre.

Instead of seeing Hamlet as an enigmatic figure whom we can never fully understand, Wilkes sees him as a man with a vast capacity for response to experience, one whose sharp sensibilities given him extraordinary powers of observation. Life makes extraordinary demands on Hamlet, demands which are conflicting and agonising. Wilkes presents Hamlet as having the most responsive mind in Shakespeare, and as the most inclusive and the most modern of his characters.

The Challis Shakespeare benefits greatly from a sensible overall editorial policy, not only in the general introduction given to each play, but in the footnotes and the inclusion of such things as chronologies of the plays and of Shakespeare's life. The edition deserves wide success and is particularly recommended for students at upper secondary level.

Niland Stuart

Elizabeth Jolley, *The Sugar Mother*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1988, $19.95.

Elizabeth Jolley's fiction often deals with the exercise of power in a light hearted yet instructive manner. Recently with *The Well*, and her latest novel *The Sugar Mother* Jolley combines deftly funny writing with an intensely disturbing depiction of manipulation.

The central character in *The Sugar Mother* is Edwin Page, a comically self-absorbed middle-aged university lecturer. He is vulnerably isolated. He approaches experience through literary quotations, insulating himself with words. At one point Edwin's wife makes an observation which damns them both — her for her cruel flippancy and him for his ineffectualness: " 'Don't die,' she said to him during one of his illnesses. 'I'd have to rush out and buy a book of quotations if you die." ' He anxiously notes his bodily ailments and sensations in notebooks which he intends to give to his wife. This constitutes the gift of a textual body in the absence of a more spontaneous marital exchange. His conversation is more than usually artificial, approximating instead of conveying feelings. He is not alone in this, he and his friends practice a desolate "simulacrum of enthusiasm." Even his lovemaking is a carefully and consciously acquired technique. He has a child's narrow focus — at times he seems himself as "a disagreeable child." Perhaps his habit of watching local children playing has more to do with affinity than a desire for fatherhood. Jolley manages to make him endearing as well as exasperating.

The book begins with Edwin alone and somewhat at a loss. His wife, Cecilia, is abroad for a year. Cecilia is — ironically — a gynaecologist with a formidable woman travelling companion. Edwin has chosen to remain at home. They have a "sensible" marriage. They are ironically described, in terms which echo the personal ads, as "a broadminded, fun-loving, pleasure-loving couple". In fact marriage among their circle is more accurately described as a kind of evasion. One of Edwin's male acquaintances reveals "the secret of married happiness". It is "the ability . . . to know when and how to slink away". Cecilia is like the Iceberg roses she loves: perfect and tightly closed. No wonder Edwin observes women with anthropological curiosity.

Edwin himself is calculatingly observed by his neighbour, Mrs Bott. She may be an obliging repository for folk-wisdom about men's needs, with a satisfying regard for Edwin and the ability to turn out a good roast. On the other hand, she may be the equivalent of the fairytale witch who fulfils longings at a terrible price. She and her young daughter Leila inveigle themselves into Edwin's house and before long Edwin finds himself at the head of the table, caring a roast and assuming the role of patriarch. Leila and her mother titillate and defer to him. Before long he entertains the predictable fantasy that Leila finds a father-figure attractive. While actually behaving like a malleable child, Edwin satisfies his own need to be protected and desired by women. When Leila's mother, having pointed out the popularity of surrogate motherhood or

"the sugar mother", suggests that Leila "carry" for Edwin, he needs no encouragement. Leila is not actively desirable, rather her youth and silence create a convenient space for Edwin's fantasies. He imagines her "almost pretty with the pleasure of obedience". As her pregnancy progresses, he avoids Cecilia's phone calls, makes financial arrangements which include his new "family" and gives Leila's mother considerable amounts of money. His friend Daphne, a gauche but likeable character, has done her best to disrupt this by staging an extremely funny and unsuccessful seduction of Edwin, designed to drive Leila and her mother from the house. At least the falsity of this seduction is acknowledged. As Cecilia's return approaches Edwin is prepared to entertain his doubts: the baby may not be his, since Leila seemed to have some of the symptoms of pregnancy when he met her; Leila may not ever have cared for him; her mother is, in certain lights, quite sinister; the entire situation painfully exhibits his loneliness and vulnerability. The novel ends, like *The Well*, ambiguously, without the comfort of neat resolution. This is appropriate, since *The Sugar Mother* is far more than a superficial story about the human side of current reproductive possibilities. It is a wise critique of some aspects of contemporary sexual politics.

The Sugar Mother exposes the aridity of Edwins kind of open marriage. While much women's fiction demonstrates the oppression of women within marriage, this novel explores masculine unhappiness, emphasising the need for mutual generosity. Patriarchal social arrangements are also implicitly rejected — Edwin enjoys good food and adulation but this does nothing to calm his deeper anxieties. As far as paternity is concerned, Edwin associates Leila with the Madonna and himself with Joseph, which implies a rejection of the patrilineal endowment of name and property on the biological heir, and an adoration of the baby in its own right. It is not biological fatherhood which concerns Edwin most, it is the need for loving human warmth. The novel also confronts the difficult problem of women's collusion in oppressive socialisation. Leila's mother subverts conventional masculine power by flattering and controlling him, and Leila's acquiescence strengthens and perpetuates this pattern. Leila's conclusive disobedience, when she refuses to be parted from her baby, shocks her mother profoundly. The novel condemns the covert exercise of power. Finally, and most importantly, the novel explore surrogate mother hood. The exchange of babies for money is positively regarded in some circles. But the obvious association between "sugar mother" and sugar daddies — who are sexual and financial dupes — suggests that in Jolley's terms the surrogate mother is profoundly exploited.

Brenda Walker

Brian Matthews, *Louisa*, McPhee Gribble, 1988, $39.95.

It has been argued that biography is the lowest form of writing history. The genre has been in crisis for most of the twentieth century. There are two main criticisms. Firstly, biography is vicariously autobiographical. Readers discover more about the observer than the observed. This is clear self indulgence on the part of the writer. It is an exercise in self delusion. Secondly, biography lies about the nature of historical change. It places too much importance with particular historical actors. The distortions created by biography are quaint, naive and conservative. More importantly, they are ahistorical, an admission rarely made by biographers. Put simply, biography is old fashioned. Yet this relic from the past which once told the stories (usually the same story) of kings, queens and 'great men' in history is also a tenacious beast. In the 1930s, biography became prosopography. This was a way of telling the same biographical story using a number of different characters belonging to the same group or sharing similar world visions. The characters were 'important' people. Prosopography was criticised as an enemy of ideas written by methodological simpletons. In the 1950s a new group of historical reductionists divided the world into good and evil. The cold war gave traditional biography a new lease of life. Biography confidently restated the delusion that history could be understood in terms of the actions of selected historical actors. In the 1960s and 1970s new social historians attacked biography as nothing more than a genre which mythologised power. The attack was largely

successful. Biography became the preserve of antiquarians. It died as a branch of history. In the 1980s a very different group of scholars revived the corpse. Literary critics became interested in biography. The movement towards literary analysis was perhaps inevitable. The study of aesthetics and great men has a similar epistemological root. But in the 1980s context of a vigorous debate between post-structuralism, deconstruction and semiotics, biography could also become a study in the absurd. Brian Matthews' *Louisa* is a story written with an eye to the absurd. It is also an exercise in necromancy. Matthews' admission in the introduction — "Biography is an unnatural act" — is a clue to his reasons for writing the book.

Matthews has spent a good deal of his academic and writing life attempting to understand the enigmatic figure Henry Lawson both in terms of Lawson's psychological makeup and his place in Australian cultural life. In writing *Louisa*, a story featuring Henry's mother, Louisa Lawson, Matthews continues to ponder. More than this, he has written a good story about Henry Lawson. *Louisa* is a sophisticated and sensitive attempt to avoid many of the platitudes which shroud the image of Henry Lawson. It would be too simple to suggest, however, that the biography has attempted to get to the son through the mother, though there is an element of truth here. In his introduction, Matthews complains that early drafts of the manuscript were returned by readers with the comment that he had failed to convincingly portray this woman's world. The cheap shot at feminist theory and practice is further evidence of the biographer's intention. Matthews' is not a book about Louisa. Nor is it an insider's tale. It is a story of the outsider as Henry Lawson might have seen. Brian Matthews' *Louisa* is an instalment on the making of Henry Lawson the writer. The self indulgence, the embarrassingly idiosyncratic structure and purple prose are deliberately maintained by the biographer as a means, at one remove, of explaining the psychological and social world of Henry Lawson. The close relationship between son and mother is a pretext for writing the book. This relationship is structurally interpreted in the creation of an alternative text and the narrator's invention of an alter ego, 'Owen Stevens'. In the third person, Matthews explains the creation:

> He decides for the sake of convenience, euphony and clarity, to assign himself, a name. The name he chooses is deliberately without significance or impact: the name 'Owen Stevens', his father's first name combined with his former wife's grandmother's (obscurely influenced as well, perhaps, by thinking of R.L. Stephenson). All satisfyingly random.

Clearly anything so satisfying and deliberate is not at all random. The reference to R.L. Stephenson is a false trail. Brian Matthews knows his cultural history. The creation of Owen Stevens is a conscious reference to A.G. Stephens, the *Bulletin*'s 'Red Pagan' and, arguably, one of the best early critics of Australian writing. Matthews sees it as part of his assignment to be a good literary analyst but he also sees the absurdity of reaching too far into the ego.

The intention goes deeper into Australia's cultural history. The translation from Stevens to Stephenson in the text is a translation from A.G. Stephens to P.R. Stephensen in Australian literature. Like Stephens a generation before him, P.R. Stephensen was an advocate of Australian writing. "The name Stephens has long been the most prominent in Australian literature", the old Pagan had written to the younger Stephensen in 1931, "I hope with your Nordic patronymic, that you will raise it from prominence to eminence". It is very likely that Matthews knew of this letter which appears in Craig Munro's *Wild Man of Letters* (1984). It is also very likely that a play was intended on the change name by Henry's father from Peter Larsen to Peter Lawson.

While the connections between Matthews' invention and the relationship suggested by the name Stevens may be ironic, it is also a good foil for telling the story. "Only Owen Stevens", the narrator tells us, "has confronted Henry as a significant element in Louisa's life". Clearly, this is one of the purposes of the book and it is Matthews, rather than the invented Stevens, who presumes to understand the relationship. In a chapter entitled "Henry", the connection between author and protagonist is stated plainly: "Henry can't let go of his fantasy of self-renewal . . . the fantasy is resurrected to give strong suggestion that his terrible decline into drunkenness stood as a potent cause of his contact with his mother". By writing *Louisa* as an unselfconscious voyage Brian Matthews has

continued his fine work in Australian literature. But he has also cast himself in the role as a custodian of memory. Here he remains unapologetic. But neither should he apologise. After all, it was Henry Lawson's own son, Jim, who struck the president of the Henry Lawson Society and yelled "My father seems to have plenty of friends now that he is dead. He did not have many when he was alive". The occasion was the annual commemoration at Lawson's statue at Sydney's domain in 1940.

Many people will dislike *Louisa*. Specialists will damn the self indulgence, the idiosyncracies and the purple prose, but this book is evidence of a growing confidence in Australian studies.

Unlike the dreadful procession of 1988 books in search of Australian culture, *Louisa* takes its milieu for granted and tells a compelling story of one writer's relationship with his family, the people he knew and the places about which he wrote. This is one of the important books to appear in 1988 and is essential reading for students of Australian culture.

Richard Nile

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

CAROLYN BELL — has completed a Graduate Diploma in English at Curtin University, majoring in Creative Writing. She works as a marriage counsellor and writes part-time.

STEFANIE BENNETT — is a published poet who lives in Rockhampton.

CARMEL BIRD — has written two collections of short stories, *Births, Deaths and Marriages* and *The Woodpecker Toy Fact*. She has also written a novel, *Cherry Ripe*, and a text book for writers, *Dear Writer*.

DELYS BIRD — co-ordinates the MPhil programme in Australian Studies and Women's Studies at the University of Western Australia. Her particular research interests are Australian women's writing and feminist theory.

LAWRENCE BOURKE — is a PhD student at the University of Queensland who has published poems in a number of journals as well as articles on the work of Les A. Murray.

ROBERT BOWIE — is an American poet who has not been previously published in *Westerly*.

BARBARA BRANDT — studies Comparative Literature at Murdoch University, Perth and is involved with the Katharine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre.

KEVIN BROPHY — is author of a novel *Getting Away With It*, and editor of the small press literary magazine *Going Down Swinging*. His second novel, *Visions* will soon be published by Angus & Robertson.

STEPHEN EDGAR — was born in Sydney and now lives in Hobart. His book *Queuing for the Mudd Club* was published by Twelvetrees Press.

DIANE FAHEY — is a South Australian writer who has had two collections of poetry published, *Journeys* and *Voices from the Honeycomb*.

MICHAEL HEALD — came to Australia from England in 1972. He holds an Arts degree from the University of Western Australia and works part-time as a teacher.

GRAEME HETHERINGTON — teaches in the Classics Department at the University of Tasmania. He has published poems in Australian and English literary magazines.

JAN KEMP — is a New Zealander and teaches English at the National University of Singapore. She is presently writing a novel.

ANTHONY LAWRENCE — has had his work published widely in Australia. His first book *The Transit Camp of the Gypsy* is to be published soon by Angus & Robertson.

ARTHUR LINDLEY — is an American who teaches in the English Department of the National University of Singapore. He has published poetry, film and literary criticism in a number of journals, including *Westerly*.

NOEL MACAINSH — poet and critic, has contributed widely to journals and anthologies in Australia and overseas, and is at present Reader in English at James Cook University.

ELLY McDONALD — recently completed an Honours degree in Fine Arts and is now a management consultant in Sydney.

DONALD MOORE — lives in New South Wales and has not previously published in *Westerly*.

GEOFF MORRIS — is a journalist who lives in Perth and has had poems published in various literary reviews.

ROSANNE MUSU — was awarded a Commendation for this story by the Tasmanian Fellowship of Writers' Henry Savery Award for 1987.

RICHARD NILE — is a lecturer in history at the UWA. His specialist area is Australian cultural history. His PhD thesis, "The Rise of the Australian Novel" will appear in book form in 1989.

VINCENT O'SULLIVAN — is one of New Zealand's best known writers and critics. He is Professor of English at the Victoria University of Wellington and his most recent book is *The Unsparing Scourge*.

SELWYN PRITCHARD — is an Oxford graduate who now lives and teaches in Melbourne. His work has been published in various Australian and international magazines.

MARGARET SCOTT — teaches English at the University of Tasmania. Her third collection of poems, *The Black Swans*, will be published by Angus & Robertson in September.

RORY STEELE — was born in Western Australia but lives in Baghdad where he is Australian Ambassador to Iran.

NILAND STEWART — is the *nom-de-plume* of an Arts graduate of UWA, formerly active in University drama, especially as a stage designer.

ALAN URQUHART — currently teaches at East Sydney College of TAFE, taking an interest in Modernist and Post-Modernist literature and theory.

KAREN VAN ULZEN — is a Melbourne writer. She is currently working on a collection of short stories with the assistance of the Literature Board of the Australia Council.

BRENDA WALKER — teaches at the University of Western Australia. She is particularly interested in contemporary Australian women's fiction and poetry.

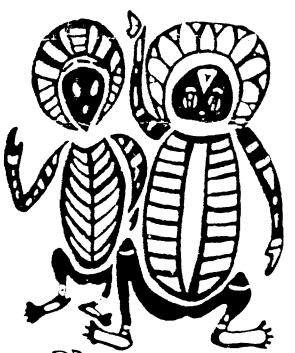
Mayi - Some Bush Fruits of Dampierland
by Merrilee Lands.

The Nyangumarta people made their jinapuka -footwear- with small hanks of this plant, moulding a pad like a sandal. A pad was also used as a cushion when carrying firewood. It was even useful as a head covering, protecting the wearer from either sun or rain.

Wandering Girl
by Glenyse Ward.

Soon as I opened the door all the chatter and laughter stopped. You could hear a pin drop as all eyes were on me... "Tracey dear, is this your little dark servant?

I just stood there smiling. I thought it was wonderful that at last people were taking notice of me... I turned to the lady who did all the talking and said, "My name is Glenyse." she was quite startled; she said, "Oh dear, I didn't think you had a name."

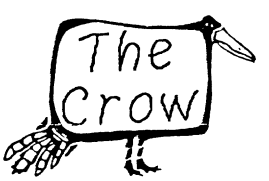


Jalygurr - Aussie Animal Rhymes
by Pat Torres.

Ganada, the painted lizard
He's so smart and so brave,
He races around madly
Then gives a little wave.

Ruga minbi Jarrb.
Ranyga ingaran jina.
Ladaladagura inabaran jandu jina.
Bagu juyu wiliny nganamanyjiya.

The Story of Crow
by Pat Torres &
Mackie Williams.



His feathers once were white,
Not black and charcoal bright.

Wangkid jinijirr moongkan boolgarr,
Arri mangka ngaliyirr.

Magabala Books

First Aboriginal Publishing House
P.O. Box 668
Broome 6725 Western Australia

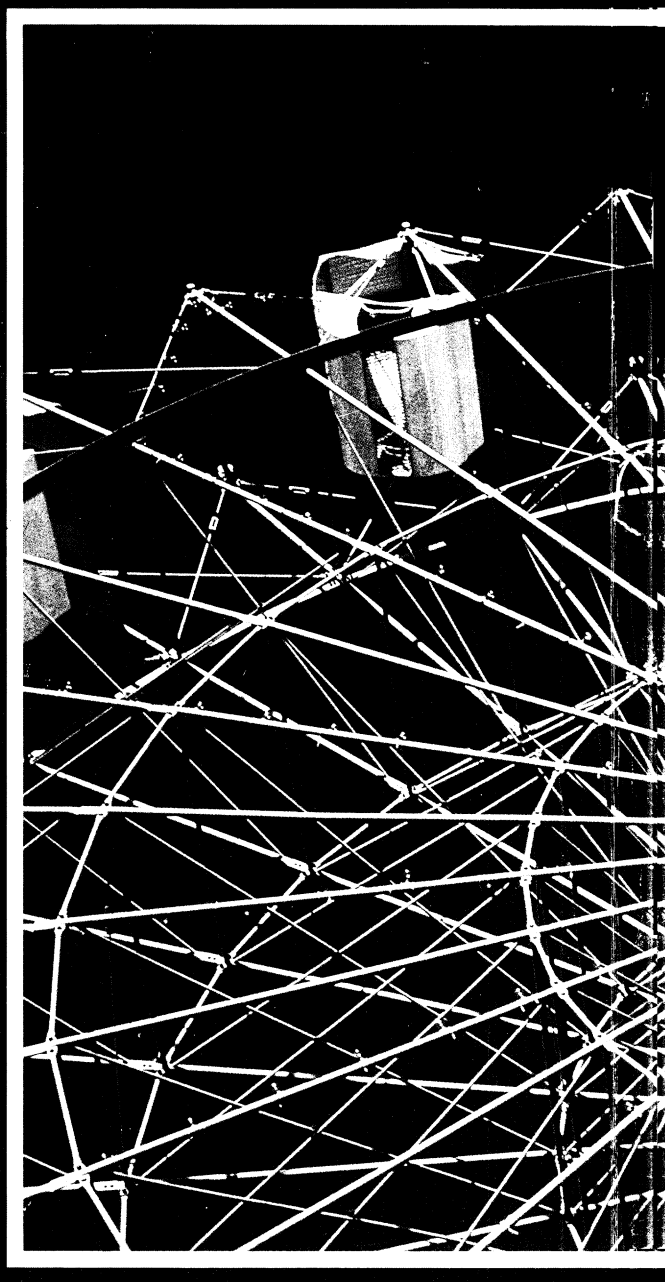
Poems by Robert Gray, Arthur Lindley, Margaret Scott, Lawrence Bourke, Diane Fahey

Noel Macainsh on "Images of Womanhood in Early Australian Poetry"

Alan Urquhart discusses the Poetry of Robert Gray

Stories by Carmel Bird, Vincent O'Sullivan and Jan Kemp

Reviews of books by Brian Matthews, Kate Grenville, Elizabeth Jolley, Rodney Hall, Gerald Murnane and William Shakespeare



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