



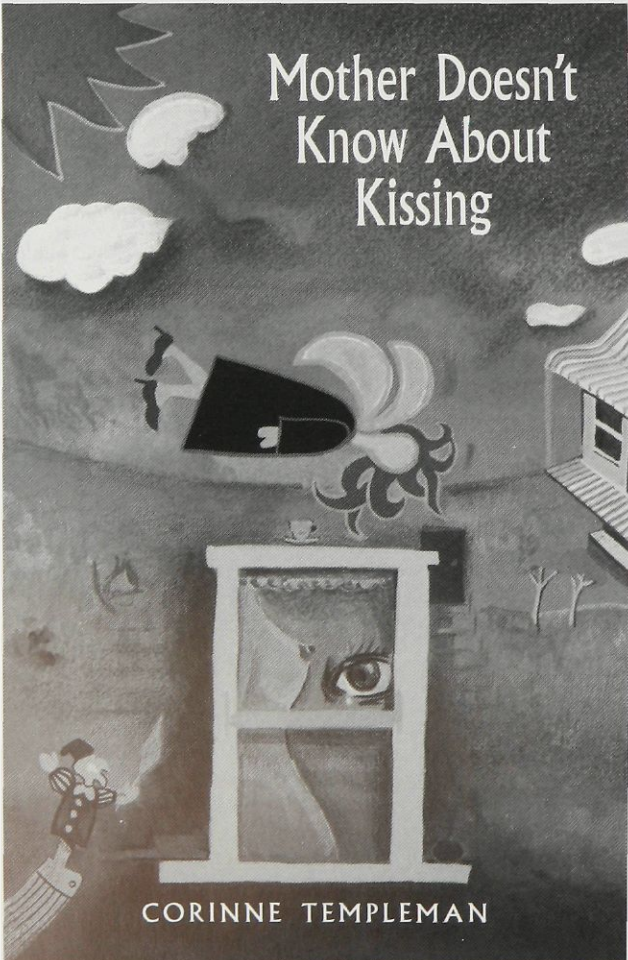
westerly

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no - 1 ▲ autumn 1997 eight dollars

# MOTHER DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT KISSING

*Corinne Templeman*



## Mother Doesn't Know About Kissing

CORINNE TEMPLEMAN

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

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

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## Contributors

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## **Patricia Hackett Prize**

The Editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to *Westerly* in 1996

### **Beth Yahp**

for her article 'Place Perfect and the Other Asia'  
that appeared in the Autumn 1996 edition of *Westerly*.

## ***Westerly* No. 4 Summer 1997**

will be a special issue on literature and art in Western Australia,  
with Jenny de Garis as Guest Editor.

*Westerly* farewells with gratitude Fay Zwicky  
who has served as Poetry Editor over many years,  
and welcomes Tracy Ryan as its new Poetry Editor

# WESTERLY

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## Lemon Delicious

The lemons came from an enchanted garden. They were rough nuggets of gold. *This is how to make the lemon delicious. First catch your lemons, said Adelaide. You must climb for the ripe ones, but don't forget how to come down.*

We stood in the garden and admired the lemon tree. A breeze made its dark leaves click together.

I helped to pick them, climbing the ladder to the very top while the other two stayed on the ground. Adelaide warned me to watch out for thorns.

Up high, I was in a jungle and the lemons were wild. They were pointed and mobile, like the ears of an attentive cat. It was my job to hunt them down.

Frances and Adelaide hovered below me. Adelaide buzzed, "Be careful Gil! Don't go so high. Watch where you put your feet!" But I didn't take any notice. I enjoyed feeling the ladder sway under my feet. I wasn't afraid. I knew Frances wouldn't have been. Frances was a hunter too. She would have stared the tiger down.

Climbing back down I pricked my fingers. I wished I could fly out of the tree like an insect or a bird. If I was Tarzan or Frances I could swing down to the earth on a jungle vine.

In the kitchen, I touched a lemon to my lips. It smelt of leaves and oranges. When we grated their skins, I sneezed. It was like going out of a dark house into the sun.

\* \* \*

Adelaide was my father's second cousin. The enchanted garden was hers. Adelaide had the face of a fox with exhausted eyes. She wore thick makeup-coloured stockings and seersucker aprons over her dress.

When she kissed me I shrank from her prickly chin. At twelve I was too old to be kissed.

Her garden was the best thing about her, an orderly wilderness of pansies and banksias, hydrangeas and roses, eucalypts, lemons and plums. Cats from the neighbourhood stalked through the ferns, delicate and ruthless, padding between carnations, tails curling around clematis vines. I lured them with kisses, until Adelaide shooed them away.

My favourite place was the pin oak tree. From the second branch I could watch over the garden. Adelaide didn't like me to climb. She was afraid I would fall. But, worst, I was careless. In my hurry I trampled on violets or bruised azaleas. Once I swung so heavily on a bottle brush bush that it snapped.

*Next, gather the eggs. Are they warm still? Snatch them up. Don't let the chickens peck your fingers.*

My parents had to go away for a weekend and arranged for me to stay at Adelaide's house. I was a little bit wary of her, but Frances would be there. Frances wasn't like anyone else I had ever met. Every year she spent six months in Melbourne with Adelaide. For the rest of the time she disappeared.

They were not alike. Adelaide was domestic. Frances spoke like a Englishwoman and dressed like Coco Chanel on safari. When she walked she pressed down on a wooden stick carved into a crocodile. She spent part of each year in Africa. At one time, her family grew coffee there. The rest of the time she travelled.

I imagined Frances in exotic places; places where rivers curve through forests, flat places where dust spins up into the sky, edges of continents where the sky reflects the sea.

Frances never helped Adelaide in the kitchen. She read books in the sitting room or smoked a little cigar on the garden bench. Or, she sat in the kitchen and drew

long tales about her adventures out of her dusty imperial throat. In her youth, she had cycled from Athens to Amsterdam. I listened as she talked. Adelaide cooked. Adelaide was always gardening or cooking. Frances was the one I admired. Now, too late, it's Adelaide I want to know.

Frances was infamous in my family because in Africa she hunted wild animals for sport. My parents disapproved. Neither did they like the way she pleased herself, coming and going between Melbourne and the rest of the world. In a few years she'll be really old, they said to each other, and then what would Adelaide do?

There had been a time, before I was born, when Adelaide travelled with Frances. I had trouble imagining Adelaide with her beige stockings and flowered aprons sitting in a Florentine café or riding in a jeep across an African plain.

For the last fifteen years of her life she refused to leave her garden. So, every year, Frances came to Australia. She brought shell bracelets and painted beads. I didn't mind her kiss, even though I was twelve.

In private, Mum complained about Frances.

"She's so exhausting. She puts on such a performance. And, she never listens to anything anybody else says."

Perhaps, Mum was jealous because Frances had stories to tell. Or, perhaps Mum thought Frances could be a bad influence on me. After all, she smoked cigars and went shooting and had no permanent home. She had lived off the labour of poor third world workers. She travelled the world instead of staying quietly at home and she did things on purpose to people she knew they wouldn't like, even to Adelaide.

Once, for example, Frances brought a real leopard skin cloak to Australia. She had to smuggle it in. She gave it to Adelaide, but Adelaide was a member of the RSPCA. Of course, Frances must have known this already.

Adelaide threatened to put the cloak in the rubbish bin, so Frances offered the leopard cloak to Mum, with one of her seamless tales about how she escaped opening her suitcase for the customs officials by showing them an ancient teak wood pipe she'd bought in a market in Penang.

"The thing about leopard," said Frances, "is that it *hangs* so beautifully."

My mother accepted it because unlike Adelaide she couldn't say no to Frances. And, because Frances gave dad the teak wood pipe. Frances always knew the right thing to give my father.

"I wonder if she shot it herself." mused Mum when we were at home. I watched her put on the leopard skin cloak in front of her mirror, twisting her shoulders like a fan. The cloak had golden, mobile sheen. On my mother it almost reached the floor. It was beautiful. Mum said, "I could never wear it anywhere."

She went into our living room to show my father how she looked.

"Hello Tiger" he said, as if he were the tiger.

She put the cloak down over a chair. Dad was filling his new pipe with tobacco. They looked at each other. They weren't taking any notice of me.

I draped the leopard skin over me and crawled around our living room growling like a tiger at my mother and father. Neither of them took much notice. Dad lit his pipe. Mum managed a smiling frown.

I knew she was about to tell me to stop, so I pretended that Frances had shot me and that I was dead. Inside the leopard I lay very still. It was much bigger than me. I wondered what had happened to its head.

I stood up. Now, I was Frances killing the leopard with a gun. I was sorry for the leopard, though. As if to console it for the loss of its life I knelt down and stroked its hair.

"She's an impossible woman." Mum sighed.

"You have to admire her." said Dad.

The leopard was folded in plastic and put away in my mother's wardrobe. I wanted to play with it sometimes, but I was never allowed.

*Measure the flour, the sugar and the milk, carefully. Warm the butter a little in the sun.*

At Adelaide's I missed my parents. In her house I bumped against china cabinets and spilled my cordial on her damask cloth. She snapped, "Will you be still!" I was hurt.

I ran outside and scrambled up the oak. No one could get me there. They were too old to climb after me. Tears grew in the corners of my eyes. The weekend seemed eternal.

The back door swung open. It was Frances. She couldn't see me but she knew I was there. I was on the third branch. I had to peep around the trunk to see her. She was dressed in black with a leopard trim. As she walked she leaned on her stick with its toothy, crocodile head.

Without looking up, Frances sat on the bench under the oak.

"It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" she remarked to no one.

I kept still.

"Shall I tell you something?" she continued.

I bounced on my branch and the leafy end swung up and down, so she would know I was there.

"When I was a girl, my parents sent me to boarding school in England. I was very unhappy so I ran away. I thought I could get on a boat to Africa, but I didn't have the fare."

I climbed down and sat next to Frances under the pin oak tree.

"What happened to you?"

"They sent me back again. It wasn't so bad, once I made friends."

She wore gold earrings and a heavy hold chain which she turned between her fingers, the fingers that had clutched the trigger of a gun.

"Did you shoot the leopard?" I asked her.

"Which leopard?" she seemed startled.

"You know, the one you gave Mum".

"Oh, you mean the cloak she will never wear."

"How did you know that?"

Frances smiled and lit one of her miniature cigars. I thought they smelled better raw.

"Did you? Shoot the leopard I mean."

"You are a persistent child. Those are old stories someone has been telling you. I don't go shooting any more."

"Why? Isn't it exciting?"

"Oh yes. But it can be cruel. Cruel to the humans, I mean."

"I don't understand."

"Let me show you." She put her left foot up carefully on the long seat between us, lifted her hem and rolled her black stocking down her leg. There was a purple mark running over the outside knee from the thigh down to the calf. I stared. The skin was uneven. It was the colour that made it so ugly.

"You see. This is why I walk with a stick."

"What happened?"

"I was attacked by a rhinoceros. I could easily have been killed."

"What about the rhinoceros?"

"He was killed."

I swallowed.

"I am not agile enough to go shooting now. Anyway, these animals are becoming rare."

"Have you ever shot a leopard?"

"Leopards can run very fast," she smiled as if to distract me, but I still felt uncomfortable.

"Come on," said Frances "Adelaide has a job for you. We are going to have lemon delicious pudding for dessert."

\* \* \*

*This is how you separate the eggs. Scoop the yolks from the whites, like this, slip the yolk between two halves of the shell. See how the whites cling, how easy it is to break the yolk. Be firm and gentle. There, now they are separated. It is strange isn't it that you have to part them first.*

My job was to fluff the egg white with a rotary whisk.

"Faster, faster!" she urged me. I turned the handle as fast as I could, but it was never fast enough for Adelaide.

"Out of the way!" she'd cry, snatching the bowl, and in a minute they were as high and soft as fairy snow. She was the magician and I had to learn to work out the trick. Frances prowled into the kitchen on her high-heeled shoes and curled a surreptitious forefinger into the mixing bowl. Adelaide picked up a tea towel and shooed her away as if she were a fly or a Spanish bull. I was surprised because Adelaide was laughing.

Frances stood in the kitchen doorway and smiled at me. She lit a cigar and folded her arms.

“One day, little girl, you will come to Africa.” she said to me.

“Oh Frances. Go away with that awful thing!” said Adelaide, but I knew that she didn’t really want Frances to go away.

*This how to cream the butter and the sugar. Keep the touch light. Don’t stop until it turns soft and pale. Flavour it with the zest of the lemon. Imagine you are turning it into a yellow cloud.*

I tasted the raw mixture with a hooked forefinger, just as Frances had done. In my mouth it was sweet creamy sand. We added the egg yolks, the flour and milk and lemon juice, carefully, then the whipped egg whites which Adelaide turned in soft, gigantic circles. All the white parts turned primrose. Adelaide poured the mixture into a white baking dish. It made a river of pale volcanic gold.

*Stand the pudding in a dish of water inside the oven. The steam will keep it soft. Wait until the surface begins to colour.*

The scent of the lemon delicious began to rise. Frances changed for dinner. Adelaide set the table with candles and a lace table cloth.

“You do the cutlery.” she said.

“Adelaide?”

“Yes.”

“Why doesn’t Frances stay here all the time?”

“We are a bit like the eggs. We go well together, but its better if we are separated first.”

“Who is the yolk and who is the white?” I giggled.

“Which one do you think?”

That night after the rich roast lamb, we ate spoonfuls of sunlit, yellow clouds. Frances came to the table in a pale gown with pearls and a mauve Tibetan shawl. Adelaide gave her a purple hibiscus flower for her silver hair. They drank wine. Frances gave me a sip in water. It was harsh on my tongue, like lemon juice. We clinked glasses and Adelaide touched Frances’ hand. Through the evening they talked. I don’t remember what they said. I fell asleep on the sofa and the next day I went home.

\* \* \*

When I was sixteen Adelaide had a heart attack and died. She was alone in her kitchen. Frances wasn't there. She came over from Africa for the funeral. That time she came with a man. He was tall and dark and he turned out to be her son.

"This is my Francis," she told us at the airport.

He looked like her, but his skin was a different colour. Francis shook hands with all three of us and said,

"Very pleased to meet you" with a nod.

It was the first time I had met someone from Africa. My parents tried not to look surprised.

"Well," my mother remarked, afterwards "she always did like to shock."

At the funeral my father made a speech. He referred to the long-standing friendship between Frances and Adelaide and thanked Frances for coming all the way from Africa. He spoke about Adelaide's sense of independence and her belief in people helping each other. He told of her work as a Red Cross ambulance driver during the war. I realised that I didn't know her at all.

While they were in Melbourne, Frances and Francis stayed at Adelaide's house. I spent hours there with them and my parents, packing books, sorting papers, going through old family things. It was the last time Frances ever came to Melbourne.

Before she left, Frances gave me a brooch made from silver and seed pearls that she said Adelaide wanted me to have. It was very delicate. I carried it out into the garden, Adelaide's enchanted garden. The brooch looked out of place pinned to my T-shirt.

I stared down at the flowers she called heartsease. Leaves clicked in the breeze behind me and I turned around to look at the lemon tree. *First catch the lemons, said Adelaide.* I was tall now and didn't need the ladder. I picked three. In the kitchen was everything else I would need.

## The Black Rocks

In the middle of the night Collier announced that this was the last holiday he would ever go on. It was unbearable, he said, intolerable.

He had said it before, on most previous attempts at holidays. The snoring, the plumbing, the noises of pissing, drinking, singing, talking, fucking, farting, fighting. It was all unendurable, the sounds of human life.

It was Ann's bursting into tears over the pigs that upset him now. He could not disagree with her emotions in this case. He would have felt the same if he had been willing to feel them, but he did not want to feel them. The lady at the chambre d'hôtes had come out when they were sitting in the evening heat drinking from a bottle of côtes du Rhone. She was off to see her little pigs. Did they want to see her little pigs? Of course Ann said yes. Collier, like he generally did these days, declined.

She came back shattered. It was the worst thing she had ever seen in her life. They were all inside the piggery, in their narrow stalls, tied up, eating, shitting, eating, until the time came to take them to the slaughterhouse. They were never let out, never went into the fields, never saw the light, never had the chance to walk.

She scrubbed the pig shit off her shoes in the shower and burst into tears in bed. The acrid smell of pig shit kept them awake all night, hung in the corners of the room, came in on the hot air through the open windows, so that they choked on every breath.

They left after the one night. The lady was disappointed, they had said they would stay for two, maybe three. They left so hurriedly they forgot the wine and lettuce and tomatoes and fruit they had put in the fridge.

The next day they had onion tart and Ann picked out all the bits of ham. Collier did not point out the eggs used were probably from battery hens, the worst thing they had ever seen on a previous holiday, the hens kept in row upon row of boxes,

their beaks pared, no chance to move, never let out, no chance to ever see the light. Nor did Collier remark that the pig had lived and died in vain if the scraps of ham were simply thrown away. He did not want to remark on any of it. He did not want to know it, all this that was already known too well.

Why was it on holidays that these dreadful encounters occurred? Doubtless because in his daily routines he knew where to turn away, where to cross to the other side. They ate no meat, no fish, but that was only for themselves. They knew the slaughter went on, the forced feeding, the factory farming.

Even without factory farming it was bad enough. And again it was on holiday, in a Thai village, visiting his compassionate writer friend, that that made itself inescapable. The sound of the tractor going at funeral pace along the village street. And five minutes later, the awful death cry of the animal as it was slaughtered.

"Every night," said Pira, "every night they kill one cow."

They couldn't bear it. They opened another bottle of wine to obliterate it. They were both compassionate writers. Collier had become so compassionate he could hardly write any more. "What is the greatest injustice in your country?" Frankie asked. Frankie wrote movingly about social injustices in the Philippines.

Collier could not answer. He was spending his life fleeing the horror. Being compassionate to himself. Maybe it had begun with the bad years, the blacklistings and harassment, when he had had to learn situations to avoid, false friends, last suppers, poisoned chalices, sirens, seductresses, bad drugs. Bit by bit he had had to pull himself away to survive. And now it was all avoidance.

Along the Breton coast the tide fell and the black rocks emerged, the terrible black rocks of lament, breaking through the emerald surface of the enchanting waters, the savage black rocks on which ships foundered, the irreducible black rocks.

"Holiday are always difficult," said Ann. "The best ones have always been when we were escaping."

Running away from his sister and family when his mother had her stroke. Running away from the harassments and driving north, not even knowing themselves where they were going.

Nor did they know now. But now, Collier reflected in the middle of the night, I have run away from everything. From life, from art, from death, now everything difficult I have tried to avoid. Now I no longer write about sex or drugs or politics, all too difficult, too unacceptable. And as for writing about writing, fun for once or twice, now that was the final impossibility of all, the full futility and emptiness of

that avoidance emptier even than the emptiest sea.

And when the tide went down and the black rocks were exposed, there were still further depths to go, as the water receded from the massive bay of mud. and the oyster leases were exposed.

That was why everywhere sold oysters and mussels. The little fishing port they ran away to from the pig farm lived on the production of oysters and mussels. Every restaurant, every bar, every café had *huitres et moules as nos specialités*. Great trailers of mussels in wire sacks were towed by tractor along the quay. The smell of emptied oyster shells greeted them in odd corners of the fields back from the coast.

It is not just the killing, it is the mass slaughter. Until refrigeration was developed there was no huge commercial meat trade. And even then the cattle roamed free until they were slaughtered. Before refrigeration not much meat could be eaten since it would not keep. The rich lived on slaughter as they ever do. But the rest of us ate beans and once a week, maybe, maybe once a month, there was meat.

And then they developed intensive food production, the brutality of capital's next stage, piggeries, battery hens, fish farms. The fish are grey with sickness and despair and have to be fed red dye. The hens are fed yellow die to colour the pallid yokes of their eggs.

The hawk hovering at the cliff's edge told them there was always slaughter. But this cultivated slaughter, the farms of geese force fed to produce *pâté de foie gras*, was something else again.

He felt better after indicting capitalism. Probably it would have been sensible to have fled in avoidance of doing that. But once the tide began to turn it was not long before the black rocks revealed themselves

They drank a lot of wine and ate tomatoes and bread and cheese for lunch and tried not to think of the rennet used to curdle it. Even that was not necessary, it could be done with herbs. Then they walked round the shops and Ann persuaded him to buy a fisherman's hat.

When they had first moved to the island he used to meet this old sea captain on the ferry who had a grizzled sea-dog's beard and wore a fisherman's hat. They began talking one day and it turned out he wasn't an old sea captain but an old actor. He played the part to perfection. Another part, that of teaching drama, he hadn't played so happily.

"I found there came a point one day when I had nothing more to tell them," he said.

It struck a chord with Collier.

One morning there was a notice on the ferry wharf giving the time of old Tom's funeral. It shook him, Collier. No more sardonic exchanges about the destructive effect of the arts council, the futility of cultural festivals, the collapse of art and literature, the domination of the entertainment industry and the destruction of value.

"It was a bit of a horror at the end," said Joey from the bottle shop. "He had this heart attack and he managed to phone someone up, but the tide was out and the water police couldn't get to the jetty, so we had to carry him on a stretcher all along the tide line to the ferry wharf. It must have been pretty painful. He was semi-conscious and groaning every so often. There was some big-time heart surgeon at the hospital and they operated for hours, but it was no good."

That bit Collier couldn't bring himself to tell Ann, that was something else too painful, something else he would have preferred to flee from.

He put on his hat, le capitain, and drove down to buy a notebook and write it down, sitting overlooking the bay, Mont St Michel massive on the horizon. The tide was full, the black rocks hidden beneath the emerald sea. But it would turn.

the NSW

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## Mythic demon

When she was nine,  
my cousin declared  
that she would marry a white man  
for sure.  
“Those half-breed children  
are the cleverest, the most beautiful....  
I want a baby just like that.”  
Appalled, my aunt sent her  
straight to her room,  
to ponder the error of her ways.  
My cousin is married now  
and doesn't speak of childhood dreams  
with adolescent themes.  
The tufts of hair  
on her baby's head are  
coarse and black as bottle-brushes,  
and he gathers rolls of fat about his chin  
with the voracious greed  
of an opium merchant;  
he is neither beautiful or a half-breed,  
but his grandmother  
can throw him up into the air  
without fearing that what returns  
will be accompanied by the terrifying shade  
of that mythic demon:  
white son-in-law.

## Over here

It eludes me;  
this difference  
between come and go—  
being asked:

“Wheree’d ya come from?”  
by an old man,  
back propped against  
a bush shelter wall  
tatoood with posters

telling those with lives  
coloured as mine  
where to go.  
My reply  
is wet and indistinct

as tarmac hazed with steam  
in the afterglow of rain.  
Sun usurps an empire of cloud  
to turn everything gold again  
and the road now glistens

like opportunity—  
the mirage that lures  
countless boats each year  
with the urgency  
of expectations seeking asylum.

Is that where  
this underlying discomfort  
comes from, the same homeland  
this feeling should return to,  
to which is should go?

## The hand in the tale

If I told the poem of his life  
my grandfather would  
unravel before me like  
a coiled spring, pulled up and  
out from below—  
I remember only  
a corpulent man biting  
into a ripe watermelon,  
red juice dribbling down his hands—  
dead at the age of fifty.  
The image is  
anchored by a whetstone  
he bequeathed his sons;  
an ancestral name  
to sharpen the dull  
knife of their lives.

When my father places  
the choicest piece  
of roast pig on my plate  
—from the nape of the neck—  
I watch the chopsticks  
disappearing into the folds of his fingers;  
thumb and forefinger knotting  
to pick  
and deposit,  
the same motion  
that conjures notes  
from his battered old wallet.  
Yet his charity never  
extended to his words,  
hoarded in the pantry  
of his smile-encrusted mouth.

I think of all this  
leaning forward into  
the morning sun; this paper  
in front of me  
receiving the curves and angles  
of my writing,  
fashioned by hands  
capable of holding a melon  
large as a man's belly  
or grasping the elusive thread of life  
between chopsticks.

*Faithful Pictures and Fine Fiction*  
*Peter Cowan's Westralian*  
*Preoccupations*

— A tribute to Peter Cowan —  
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## Aunty was a Victorian

She'd stroke the sole  
of an old boot  
ponder the history  
of layered leather,  
give new life with earth  
and geranium cutting.

Her old English tea set  
(that Uncle cracked)  
tipped onto the front verandah.  
Royal Doulton sprouted soursobs,  
Wedgewood supported snails  
and seashells swam in every pot.

Inside her house, a lifetime  
of saved cards, button collections,  
oddments in old Arnotts tins.  
The weight of ornaments  
on her kitchen shelves  
challenged the laws of gravity.

I warned that her house  
might cave in some day,  
cascading curious claim her life.  
I'll always remember her reply:  
"An old Victorian never dies  
even buried under clutter."

## Pigeons

The squares and railway stations,  
Those vaguely-lonely places in the city  
Put aside for tourists, are also

For congregations of pigeons,  
Cooing and doving, looking for food,  
Always on the go with their fixed

Look of thoughtless determination.  
And don't we all silently laugh  
To see them walk; their heads moving to and fro,

To and fro, the bass-player's strut,  
mechanical as a childhood toy.  
But think how they must smirk at us,

To see our arms swing back and forth  
As if only just attached, back and forth,  
Like toy soldiers, moving statues

Marching towards death,  
While they keep their wings tucked snugly  
In place, until the moment when

They fly away; a great rush of noise.

## The Evening Watch

Locking up at night  
I hear the kitchen clock  
Ticking in the dark.

Our life we have is housed  
Amid these things we call  
Belongings — signs of love —

Though the clock ticks off  
The hours and days as if  
It knew our dealings.

But on the bedside table  
I place my watch by yours;  
I notice how they are

Completely different but  
Keep the selfsame time.  
And in the half-lit room

I hear your rhythmic breathing.

## The Pursuit of Happiness

Not late, but mother and  
Child are both in bed, leaving  
Me with what? A false Persian rug,  
Two sofas, too many

Books, a wooden chair,  
Some pictures on the wall, the gas  
Heater's attempt at cheerfulness.  
Why then this nagging at

My throat? Are some people  
Never happy? Johnson knew the  
Business of the wise man, though could  
Not purr when quite alone.

Of all the transitory  
Pleasures, music seems the most lasting.  
When nights like this are filled with the  
Heart's mathematics I think

Upon my school-book in  
Music theory, pages opened  
On 'Cadences'. No. 2: the  
Plagal (IV-I), think

'Amen', and the kind of  
Heroic melancholy  
About the figures which implies  
All prayers could end so fitly.

But too many amens  
Linger on upon the air  
To shame their unrequested prayers.  
Perhaps this one good-night

Could come with no list sent  
To Father Christmas; let it ring  
Upon this undistinguished night.  
Say for once: 'so be it'.

**Beyond photography**  
*for Diane*

Over cæsar salad  
she makes her matches;  
me my mother  
my cousin our grandmother  
one daughter her  
another him  
my uncle (her husband) my grandfather (his father),  
the last the only one  
I know myself with any certainty  
he now as my grandfather was  
when I looked to him as no other.  
Leave the photo albums shelved  
& dusted, she makes her own connections  
draws lines, colours descriptions  
into something solid above the place  
beneath her feet — carpet floorboards  
woodpile junk dirt earth.

## Joshua Tree National Monument, fall

At the edge of the Mojave  
we rest on slabs of rock  
& watch the sky  
scroll into dusk.

The valley floor slips  
its rattlesnake skin

& cool shadow coyotes  
edge closer to our coffee,  
the clanking kiss of enamel mugs.

~

We seek space  
as an absolute,  
an air so clean it would roll  
off the tongue  
like mercury.

~

Lay back,  
listen to the moon rising.

~

We awake to dawn  
bleeding light  
over the desert

& again  
recognise the scene;

we know this place

we know it  
as well as we know  
anywhere.

We are worshippers  
believing that what we may be  
resides in what we may  
or may not see,

only that

& our few words  
of description.

*California 1993*

Graeme Hetherington

**Horse**  
**(West Coast, Tasmania)**

A paid-up member of The Craft,  
My mason-father's yarns unnerved,  
Expertly timed his remarks  
That mates lopped feet off felling trees,  
And bludgeoned seals or tiger snakes

Thrown broken-backed on bullant nests  
Barked like a child with croup to fall  
As you young daughter wildly rose  
My left until the shoe came off  
Despite her whooping cough, my hiss,

Snap, shout that cudgelled love to death  
While cut and strung I faced the thought  
Of getting wood in with his axe  
His steel-sharp cunning eyes implied  
The headless horseman had once used.

## Still There

They are there, all those close-webbed places,  
all those spidery connections you contain  
that centred on the kitchen and verandah—  
not that you lived there, or were known there,

but your forgetfulness is opening into patterns  
you are pleased to endorse. For are you not free,  
there, in the place you call past, that dark hall  
stretching into light, in warm arms

uplifted from the floor? You think you existed  
in a pristine pre-time, before you knew what you know.  
Those tall chairs surround you, the shapes of legs,  
an apron on a hanger. And cold water

from the hose, spending itself outwards  
as your life has seemed to do. You walk back,  
insisting that it's there, all you imagine,  
that no-one except you could now believe.

## Fabricating Otherness: Demidenko and Exoticism

"It is perhaps the most shameful literary deception of recent times, a shameful use of the tragedy of lived history for self-advancement."

Guy Rundle<sup>1</sup>

"This is a very curious event, but it doesn't substantially affect the nature of the book . . . . It's happened before, that people have pretended to be someone they're not."

Thomas Keneally<sup>2</sup>

SO much has been written and spoken about Helen Demidenko during the past year — in the media, in books, in academic articles, on email and in private gossip all around Australia — that it is with some hesitation that I add to the already excessive pool of words. I do it nevertheless because as a Ukrainian-Australian academic who has for some years, been gathering my parents' oral histories of wartime Ukraine and Germany, I am more directly affected than most by the tangle of ethical issues that the Demidenko 'case' has thrown up, and also because I feel an obligation to take the opportunity to unravel some of those issues before they fade from view as interest in the incident wanes. In order to distance myself from the personal and incidental, I have chosen an indirect approach. I use as a frame for reading the Demidenko affair the concept of the exotic because this helps to draw together some of the most important social and literary questions that the incident raised and made a matter of heated public debate.

1. Guy Rundle, *The Age*, August 23, 1995, 17.

2. Thomas Keneally, interviewed by Christine Kinnimont on Channel 7's *Eleven AM* programme, August 22, 1995.

At the heart of this debate, and central also to the more recent debate about the Aboriginality of Mudrooroo is the question of ethnic authenticity as it relates to fictional writing, particularly writing which claims a high level of 'insider's' cultural knowledge and authority.<sup>3</sup> In a recent issue of *Australian Feminist Studies*, articles by Sneja Gunew and Kylie O'Connell both deal directly with this question and, in different ways, expose the ways in which the current Australian enthusiasm for 'authentic' representations of cultural otherness actually works against multicultural understanding of differences within Australian identity.<sup>4</sup> Gunew identifies Anglo-Australian desire for the "spectacle" and "theatrical display" of ethnicity as part of the tradition of idealising the ethnic. In the process of idealisation ethnic experience is distanced and aestheticised and thereby removed from the Australian mainstream social sphere, becoming instead, "a cheap cultural tourism event".<sup>5</sup> Central to the success of that event, to its ability to win over a wide audience, is the persuasive performance of otherness. This process will be explored here in the context of orientalism and, more specifically, the exotic. Both in relation to Aboriginality and to multicultural identity the dangers of celebrating ethnic authenticity in fictional writing have been widely discussed<sup>6</sup> and I share with critics such as Gunew and Griffiths the concern that this trend is closely aligned with, and serves to camouflage, racism and xenophobia. Just how easy it is for popular opinion to make the transition between celebration and hatred is clear from the racial debate which has flared up in recent months in Australia<sup>7</sup> in the wake of a Queensland politician's much publicised promulgation of views which are tantamount to a return to the 'white Australia' policy of the Menzies era. However, by reading the Demidenko case in terms of the performance of the exotic, I want to suggest that authenticity can be understood in multiple ways. The important question is how it is played, for what purposes, and with what social repercussions. In other words authenticity is always

3. Mudrooroo, Australia's most influential Aboriginal writer, is now thought to have no Aboriginal ancestry. This issue is discussed in the article by Graeme Dixon et. al. listed in footnote 6 below and also in the *Weekend Australian Magazine*, July 20 - 21, 1996, 32.
4. See Sneja Gunew, "Performing Ethnicity: The Demidenko Show and its Gratifying Pathologies" and Kylie O'Connell, "(Mis)taken Identity: Helen Demidenko and the Performance of Difference" in *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 23, 1996, 53 - 63 and 39 - 52.
5. Gunew, 59.
6. See, for example, Gareth Griffiths, "The Myth of Authenticity" in Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (eds.), *De-Scribing Empire* (London: Routledge, 1994), 70-85, "The Question of Authenticity" in Sneja Gunew, *Framing Marginality* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1994), 53 - 67 and Graeme Dixon, Tom Little and Lorna Little, "The Mudrooroo Dilemma", *Westerly* No. 3, Spring, 1996, 5 - 8.
7. The debate is still active as the Editorial, "Three Decades of Progress on Race" of the *Australian*, 2 January, 1997, demonstrates.

contextual and always partial. Its values or dangers are equally contextual and partial, tangled in webs of everchanging circumstances and readings of identity. Nevertheless there is an obvious danger in the tendency of the word to suggest the possibility of discovering the 'real' and 'genuine' other, which then, like the oriental or the exotic, confirms the centrality and normality of the one who defines that which constitutes the other. It is here that the terms authenticity, orientalism and exoticism meet and can be used to analyse the wider social implications of the Demidenko story in Australia.

Historically, exoticism signals a special form, a politically and sexually charged form, of *othering*, one that has come to be associated with European colonialism through its close relationship with orientalism. Dictionary definitions<sup>8</sup> of the exotic are bland and not particularly helpful when it comes to recent usages which have given the notion of the exotic a peculiarly alluring flavour, with suggestions of strange beauty, enticing difference and most of all, the potential to be conquered and claimed. Driving current popular notions of the exotic are fascination and desire: the desire to enter forbidden territory, whether in the imagination or physically, to partake of otherness and to stake a claim. Because the exotic is always an attribute given to someone else or somewhere else, exoticism, like orientalism, is a way of seeing which sustains the myth of the cultural centrality, and therefore the superiority, of the viewer. In other words, the construction of the exotic is a mechanism for reinforcing a strong sense of identity for the individual or the community which is doing the viewing.

There is, however, as I shall try to demonstrate, an important difference between the terms orientalism and exoticism: orientalism is mono-directional because it is geographically tied, at least to some degree, to colonial concepts of Asia and the Orient while exoticism is less specific, more open-ended, and therefore, reversible. This mobility makes it possible for exoticism to turn the tables and become, potentially, a strategic interpretative tool for readings of cultural interaction. Because of its ability to change positions the exotic has the capacity for parody and the carnivalesque and it is therefore not unusual to associate the exotic with costumery and fake self-presentation, with over-the-top 'glamour' and with the explicitly erotic or pornographic body.<sup>9</sup>

8. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary, for example, gives as the primary meaning: Alien: introduced from abroad, not indigenous.

9. See Annette Khun, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), especially 11-14 for a discussion of glamour.

My aim here is first to suggest a way of understanding the exotic in terms of its capacity for changing positions and therefore destabilising power relations and second, to use the idea of the exotic to explore aspects of the notorious literary masquerade of the pseudo-Ukrainian writer Helen Darville-Demidenko<sup>10</sup> whose book on the Holocaust, *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, won Australia's most prestigious literary awards. After living in the public eye for more than a year as a Ukrainian who had based her book on the first-hand reports of her family and friends, Demidenko was discovered to be the daughter of British immigrants with no Ukrainian connections whatsoever. In particular, the focus will be on her self-styled exotic and multiple persona and the extraordinarily powerful effect it has had upon the Australian media and public. One of the most fascinating by-products of the controversy which her pretence triggered, was the excitement with which public attention was suddenly gripped, not only by the personal fraud, but by philosophical and ethical questions relating to the nature of the relationship between fiction and 'real life', fabrication and representation, foreignness and Australianness.

## Face to Face

KL: "I have never known a Ukrainian to have your spectacularly fair colouring. Your white hair is most unusual."

HD: "There is a small region of north-west Ukraine where nearly everyone is as blonde as I am. The people there tend to inter-marry and so the gene remains strong."<sup>11</sup>

When Helen Demidenko and I had this conversation in Adelaide at the conference at which she was presented with one of Australia's most prestigious literary awards, I believed that she was Ukrainian and that she had sought me out (a number of times by telephone across the 3600 km that separate Brisbane from Perth) and again at the Adelaide conference because she liked to make contact with

10. Helen Demidenko, *The Hand That Signed the Paper* (St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 1994). I will refer to the writer as Demidenko throughout for the sake of simplicity.

11. These words approximately represent part of a conversation I had with Helen Demidenko at the conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature held in Adelaide in July, 1995. When I reported it to my Ukrainian parents they were surprised that they had never heard of this region but otherwise accepted the information as true.

fellow Ukrainians. (I also believed that she had naturally white-blonde hair.) I was staying with my elderly Ukrainian parents at the time and although she declined their invitation to come to their home with me to meet them, Demidenko was happy to inscribe my father's copy of her book with a message and her signature (all in accurate Ukrainian) and to greet my father warmly with some Ukrainian words at her public reading where she shared the platform with Thomas Keneally. Further, while shopping with me in Adelaide, (for a few items for my parents and for a chain for her gold medal) she was keen to throw Ukrainian words into our conversation and did so in such a natural way that I found myself responding now and again in Ukrainian. My parents, who are very well-educated and knowledgeable about Ukraine, were surprised and intrigued, as I also was, that they had never heard of the special part of Ukraine she had come from.<sup>12</sup>

It was only after her public reading that night that I first began to feel uneasy about the role that Demidenko was so flamboyantly playing. Exactly why I felt uncomfortable wasn't clear to me then but it was something to do with the way she was parading Ukrainianness, getting personal mileage out of its exoticism by putting the national dress and folk dancing on display at every opportunity. Because Ukraine had only recently begun to be registered in Australian thinking as a separate nation and culture rather than as a region in Russia, it was something of an enigma, a blank sheet ready to be filled in, and I was disappointed, to say the least, that it was being filled in, by all accounts, extremely negatively. Even while I believed that she was Ukrainian and before I knew the full extent of the book's brutal portrayal of Ukrainians, I felt some resentment that Demidenko was ruthlessly exploiting her authenticity as a Ukrainian to make herself and her work especially interesting, in the spirit of a marketing exercise. Looking back, perhaps my reaction also had to do with the way she showed up my own underplaying of ethnicity, an unthinking extension of an early habit of concealing it, under the pressure of Australian assimilationist policies and attitudes in the 1950s and 1960s. I even remember wondering why I hadn't thought to wear my Ukrainian blouse, given to me by my mother, to the presentation dinner at the conference. In the context of these reactions to Demidenko, I started to read, with mounting discomfort, my father's copy of Demidenko's book, which had already sold out across the country and was being reprinted a very short time after its original publication.

12. In a similar vein Demidenko, who is six feet tall, told an interviewer, "In the Ukrainian community I'm just average. Ukrainians are really tall". The interview is reproduced in John Jost, Giana Totaro and Christine Tishing, *The Demidenko File* (Ringwood: Penguin Books Australia, 1996), 50.

I refer to my personal contact with Demidenko because I want to declare my special interest and to put into context my negative reactions to her book and to her elaborate deception. In doing so I also make the obvious general point, missed or denied by many commentators on the Demidenko affair, that no reading can avoid being coloured by personal contexts and therefore that the notion of reading a work 'purely' for its 'literary' quality, still widely accepted it seems, is incomprehensible to me. Because, for many years, I have been listening to and translating my parent's spoken stories of their wartime and pre-war experiences in Germany and Ukraine, my reactions to Demidenko and to the book are driven by a range of non-literary factors including: my knowledge of other, quite different ways of seeing Ukrainian history and culture, derived from the many years of close contact with my parents, extended family and immigrant friends; my own and my brothers' experiences in German war-time and post-war camps; my visits to Ukraine to see other relatives, especially a recent visit, soon after it had raised its own national flag after three centuries of colonisation; years of letters from Ukrainian relatives to my parents; my pride in being Ukrainian; my annoyance at being sought out as a Ukrainian prop for the performance and at being successfully duped; and most of all, my protectiveness towards my parents' memories, beliefs and vision of their ethnicity in the Australian multicultural community. The protectiveness, which I recognise to be at the same time *self*-protectiveness, is in response to the fact that *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, is, as one commentator has put it, "[Demidenko's] pitiless exposure of [Ukrainians'] barbarism, their blind hatred, their drunkenness and violence".<sup>13</sup> It also represents Ukrainians as deeply anti-Semitic and, by the nature of its presentation amounts to a literary justification of the Holocaust and of alleged Ukrainian complicity with Nazi genocide.<sup>14</sup>

A small incident which occurred during my stay with my parents at that time will serve to illustrate the way in which escalating publicity touched Ukrainian households in a menacing way, and thereby to show why I believe the fabrication of an authoritative identity as a Ukrainian gatherer of first-hand personal histories

13. This comment was made by Andrew Reimer in the Introduction to his book, *The Demidenko Debate* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 3. Later, he also refers to the book's anti-Semitism which he did not, however, see as dangerous, 111.

14. See, for example: The Editorial of *The Weekend Australian*, August 26-27, 1995 where the comment is made that "Darville has been accused of writing an anti-Semitic tract that justifies the holocaust insofar as it relates to Ukrainian Jews by claiming the Jews brought it on themselves"; and Jacques Adler, "The hand that hides an ugly history" in *The Age*, June 22, 1995, 13 who writes that "The travesty of history at this work's core is that it is an apologia for genocide. Adler's article is reproduced in part in Jost, Totaro and Tyshing, *The Demidenko File*, 57-59.

cannot be explained away either in terms of harmless 'postmodern' textual play, nor equated (as it repeatedly has been) with the taking of a *nom-de-plume* in the manner of Miles Franklin or George Eliot. An Australian neighbour who had always taken a friendly interest in my father's stories of the past, particularly his personal experiences as a prisoner of war in Nazi Germany and his analysis of second world war history, dropped in to see him while I was at home. Excited by all that he had seen and heard about the book and its 'revelations' about Ukrainians, he asked my father pointedly, "What were you *really* doing in Germany during the war?"

At about that time Demidenko went into hiding as a result of death threats she had apparently received and then, during the following month, with the controversy about the quality and historical authenticity of the book still raging, her parents publicly confirmed that she had no Ukrainian ancestry or family connections at all.

The confession and apology that followed, with accompanying commentary, swamped media prime time and headlines across Australia, commanding more attention than any other literary event in Australia's history. The opening statement on the front page of the national newspaper read:

Helen Demidenko last night admitted to one of Australia's greatest literary hoaxes, saying her name, ancestry and education were faked and apologising for any anti-Semitic sentiment in her book.<sup>15</sup>

## Orientalism and exoticism

The question has been asked repeatedly: Why would anyone go to such lengths to create a false identity for literary purposes? In particular, why choose to cast oneself in the role of an exotic outsider in relation to Australian 'mainstream' society at the same moment as applying for mainstream Australian literary awards, with the most prestigious specifying Australianness as an essential criterion?<sup>16</sup>

While I do not propose to try to speculate upon likely answers to these questions (they have received more than enough attention already in psycho-biographical terms), I do want to suggest that the notion of the exotic can provide a

15. Michelle Gunn, *The Weekend Australian*, August 26-7, 1995, 1.

16. The Miles Franklin award has as one of its terms of reference that novels "show Australian life in any of its phases". See *The Australian*, Tuesday August 22, 1995, 11.

useful framework for reading the puzzling story of Demidenko's borrowed identity and that this story in turn can then be used as an illustration of my broader argument that the exotic is by no means a docile category relating to something safely 'out there'. It is a dangerous double-edged sword in the politics of othering.

In *Orientalism* Edward Said identifies and explores a vast number of aspects of the discourses and belief-systems which he gathers under the heading of the term "orientalism".<sup>17</sup> Particularly relevant in this context are his theories of the orient as an elaborate European imaginative creation which sustained a myth of western superiority. "The Orient", he writes, "was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences." (1) Further, he argues, "Orientalism depends for its strategy on ... flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand." (7) In this discourse the oriental is also associated with barbarism. It is my contention that a useful way of distinguishing exotic from the oriental (used in Said's broad sense) is to see the exotic as elusive and ungraspable, more slippery and less stably positioned than the "oriental" and more capable of sliding away or striking back. The exotic is the sting in the tail of orientalism because it is the alluring and potentially entrapping aspect of otherness. While orientalism is a useful point of departure for understanding the exotic, exoticism operates much more diversely and widely than orientalism and, in fact, it usefully highlights some of the problems of that theory. In particular it brings into focus the tendency of the theory of orientalism to consolidate the structure it describes and its inability to suggest any way out of its one-way system of power relations whose dynamics are usefully outlined in the following passage from the chapter entitled 'The Scope of Orientalism':

Knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense creates the Orient, the Oriental, and his world.... The Oriental is depicted as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual). The point is that in each of these cases the Oriental is *contained* and *represented* by dominating frameworks. (40)

17. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978).

But what happens if something slips out from under the heavy apparatus of the dominating knowledge machine, defying representation and refusing to be contained? This question reaches far beyond issues of relating to representations of the Orient. It is the central question of contemporary ethnography,<sup>18</sup> of all representation of the other and, indeed, of all representation. Language and discourse always invent as much as 'record' their 'object' and the idea of 'containment' is a fiction. It is in this context of the limits of representation that the idea of the exotic can be put to use to suggest that which cannot be captured or tamed by the dominating structure. It is therefore also the element which has the capacity to pop up unexpectedly and puncture the whole picture, showing it to be just another picture. One of the most evocative models for the attempt at containment and its failure, is Donna Haraway's account of the rise of the art of western taxidermy in the nineteenth century to preserve the trophies of the colonial safari. The 'contained' and captured exotic object of the gorilla stuffed perfectly into its skin becomes a larger-than-life parody which turns its unsettling gaze upon its captors and fashioners from the flickering stage-set of the diorama.<sup>19</sup>

This capacity of the exotic element to disrupt the straight orientalist line of vision is not given much direct attention in Said's theory but it is certainly suggested, as James Clifford explains in his essay 'On Orientalism':

At times ... Said permits us to see the functioning of a more complex dialectic by means of which a modern culture continuously constitutes itself through its ideological constructs of the exotic. Seen in this way 'the West' itself becomes a play of projections, doublings, idealizations, and rejections of a shifting, complex otherness. (272)

It is my argument that the exotic, understood as the unknowable, potentially entrapping aspect of otherness, plays an important role in the achievement of such a dialectic because by its existence outside of the culture, its refusal to be absorbed, it not only marks the culture's limits but points to the endless spaces beyond its boundaries from which the culture is viewed by others.

18. For a detailed critique of Said's theory see "On Orientalism" in James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1988).

19. See Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), particularly Chapter 3 which is entitled 'Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden', New York City, 1908-1936.

## Domesticating otherness

Demidenko's false identity has clearly been designed to exploit our culture's overweening need to be seen to be promoting its obscure or exotic minorities.

Rosemary Neill<sup>20</sup>

Various commentators have drawn attention to the exotic appeal of Demidenko's writing and her world, usually linking the exoticism with multiculturalism. Demidenko's friend Natalie Jane Prior who later published *The Demidenko Diaries*, subtitled *Who is she really?* saw this as central to the early excited public reception of her book.<sup>21</sup> "Helen was Australia's first professional Ukrainian," Prior writes, "She looked and was exotic, and she told fantastic stories so far removed from most people's boring everyday lives that it was small wonder the newspapers fell over each other to cover her." (63)

This exoticism took many twists and turns but I will focus here on those which seem most relevant to my argument on the power of the exotic to hit back. First, the awarding of medals and prizes by eminent judges from Australia's literary and academic establishment can be seen as a move which simultaneously celebrated this exotic otherness (discovered in our very midst), absorbed it into the cultural establishment, and domesticated it by branding it clearly as 'our own'. When I sat beside Demidenko at the dinner at which she was presented with the highly prized Gold Medal awarded by the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, it was clear to me from Demidenko's private comments and from the speech she made that she saw this honour triumphantly as a sign of acceptance into the established Australian academic community whose members she described that night as her future 'peers'. The Ukrainian traditional embroidered blouse which she wore for the occasion accentuated her difference, her exoticism, and provided a powerful metaphor for the drama of cultural inclusion performed that evening.

She was aware that they, the academics, had 'let her in' and that she was, to use the terminology of the carnivalesque, given the privilege of centre-stage, to play the role of queen for a day. It was not the role-playing but the exceeding of limits, which eventually made the performance disturbing and even shocking to the public. For even in carnival, the most licentious of parodic forms, the rule applies that the

20. Rosemary Neill, *The Australian*, 24 August, 1995, 13.

21. Natalie Jane Prior, *The Demidenko Diaries* (Port Melbourne: Mandarin, 1996).

costume must be recognisable as costume. Demidenko's double dissembling, first as Ukrainian and then as compliant exotic, was for the press and the public unforgivable, not because of the fraud itself but because it exposed, by means of this double twist, Australian mainstream culture's complicity in her act by way of its fascination with the exotic.

What does this tell us about what happens to the exotic when it is drawn welcomingly into the fold of mainstream culture by its gate-keepers? Demidenko's story is useful in that it plays out an answer with melodramatic extravagance and vividness. Since the exotic is defined in terms of its alienness, Demidenko's assumption of fake alienness can be read as simply an extreme instance of the parading of exotic costumery that is accepted as 'natural' to the other, particularly the ethnic or multicultural other. Her ethnic masquerade is another twist in the drama but it does not annul the exoticism of her performance. A 'real' Ukrainian could equally have exploited the situation to a point of uncomfortable parody directed at the cultural mainstream. The unexpected cultural benefit of Demidenko's decision to push parody to its limits lies in the fact that her pretence, setting aside its other ethical implications, had the effect of exposing the structure of the 'normal' process by which the exotic is domesticated. At the same time it exposed the potential for the exotic in any arena to perform the required circus tricks and to play tame for strategic purposes with the possibility of gaining a political advantage. Ironically the exotic gains access by vamping up its enticing difference, which is also its stigma, the mark of its alienness. Two separate newspaper headlines nicely catch the force of the irony: 'Helen Marked for Life' (*Sunday Times*, March 3 1996) and, with reference to the impact of Demidenko's revelations upon the literary judges who had honoured her, 'Biting the Hand that Signed the Paper'.<sup>22</sup>

## The exotic within

KL: How does your family feel about the negative representations of them and other Ukrainians in your book?

HD: They are illiterate and can't read what I have written.

22. The first headline appeared in *The Sunday Times*, 3 March, 1996 but the only record I have of the second is in my personal notes.

Many early interviews and articles were interested in this question not only in relation to her family but also in relation to the wider community because there was plenty of evidence that Demidenko's book was insulting to Ukrainians as well as being offensive to Jewish people. Briefly in this section I want to consider Demidenko's exotic masquerade as a passport to the territory of Ukrainian history and, by virtue of that privileged access, a licence to depict evil, racism and horrors usually considered to be unspeakable. Using the same metaphor in its heading 'Passport to criminal pasts', a very early review justifies the horrific content of the novel in this way:

"The past is another country except when you are forced to visit it. Demidenko gives us all visitors' passes....With the other members of her Ukrainian family, we too, experience the privations of the famine, the brutality of the Russians and the propaganda of the Nazis. We also enter the lives of those who we now call war criminals. Demidenko avoids the pitfalls of sentimentality and partisanship by keeping her prose direct and honest."<sup>23</sup>

There were many similar positive reactions which sustained the notion of a courageous guided tour led by an authentic cultural guide into nightmare worlds otherwise inaccessible to the average Australian reader. In the *Sydney Morning Herald* for example, Miriam Cosic wrote, "Demidenko... has crafted a dense, horrifying novel. It is made remarkable by her youth and the unflinching gaze she turns on the perpetrators of evil in her narrative, people who are part of her own ethnic ancestry."<sup>24</sup> Her review carried the heading, pertinent to this section of my paper, 'The Evil Within: Blind Revenge of the Victims'. On the back cover of the book one of the novel's literary judges refers to it as "a searingly truthful account of terrible wartime deeds" and elsewhere in terms of "first-hand experience of the major historical events of the century."<sup>25</sup>

These comments represent the tip of the iceberg of a widely held view, echoed repeatedly in the press, and they indicate a disturbing further function of the exotic, again one with a sting in its tail. Exoticism as ethnicity is shown here to be the special passport, providing diplomatic immunity not only to the writer /guide who

23. Review by Susan Mitchell, "Passport to a Criminal Past" in *The Adelaide Advertiser*, November 11 1994.

24. Miriam Cosic, "The Evil Within: Blind Revenge of the Victims", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 September, 1994, 9.

25. These are comments quoted and discussed by Ivor Indyk in the "Focus" section of the *Weekend Australian*, 26-27 August, 21.

“courageously” determines to claim her right to enter ‘forbidden territory’ (a phrase frequently used in relation to her topic), but immunity also for the readers she takes with her. Displaying a fascination for brutality and evil, the novel, by virtue of its authentic and honest voice, its first-hand knowledge (and, of course, the official stamps of approval it has received from the highest place), gives cultural legitimacy to an act which, looked at from another angle, could be read as an unconscionable act of cultural trespass and violation. And the vehicle for this legitimacy is nothing other than the exotic, the exotic discovered within our midst and eagerly pursued because it allows entry into places which confirm ‘our’ civilisation as superior and allow ‘us’ to be voyeurs of other people’s atrocities without getting our hands or our consciences dirty. Whatever Demidenko’s novel represents it does it under the cover of exoticism, even now when the myth of her enabling ethnicity has been exploded. This is the chameleon aspect of the exotic which can be much more dangerous in confirming cultural complacency than can any work of historical fiction however first-hand its sources.

## The allure of the mask

Although weirdly out of context the words of W B Yeats, the poet of the mask, come to mind and seem to fit the occasion. Perhaps this is because he, too, was something of an imposter or, or at least a cultural cross-dresser and appropriator. This short poem has the title ‘The Coat’:

I made my song a coat  
 Covered it with embroideries  
 Out of old mythologies  
 From heel to throat  
 But the fools caught it,  
 Wore it in the world’s eyes  
 As though they’d wrought it.  
 Song, let them take it,  
 For there’s more enterprise  
 In walking naked.<sup>26</sup>

26. W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1969 (second edition)), 142.

Repeatedly Demidenko commentators have reminded us that creative writing is all a matter of masks and disguises and that therefore judgement should not be too harsh on one who went a little further than most. But my interest in this final section is not only in the ethics but also in the erotics of masking/unmasking and how this relates to exoticism.

The moment of unmasking is the moment at which the other is robbed of the allure of mystery and the desire which feeds upon the play of the imagination is stopped in its tracks by the exposed 'reality'. But is exoticism extinguished at the moment of conquest? Demidenko's case suggests that it is not. This is because the exotic can simply change its form. Demidenko caught the public imagination with a layered mask, a multiple disguise, which she played for all that it was worth, peeling off one layer at a time. Not surprisingly with each shedding of a layer of disguise excitement grew rather than being satisfied.

Here are just a few of the masks that were progressively shed or stripped from her persona by an increasingly mesmerised and prurient public: daughter of an illiterate Ukrainian taxi-driver living in Brisbane, member of a Ukrainian family many of whose members had been murdered by Jewish communists serving in the death camps, victim of a deprived working-class childhood, fully trained practising lawyer. As an example of the openness to manipulation of the exotic, Demidenko's story is stunningly revealing. With each progressive unmasking of one exotic element a new one would be constructed either by Demidenko or by a public which seemed as eager as herself to find ever new reasons to see her now as alien, as definitely not 'one of us'. In fact, the reporting took on the frenzied flavour of a witch-hunt at this stage.

There is no doubt that it was not the *fact* of her masquerade which absorbed people's attention so much as her refusal to be defined and pinned down. Ironically her public confession, far from being the final unmasking which satisfied the desire to know 'the truth', generated fascination with the new mystery not of her ethnic difference and exoticism, but of her personal difference, her alien psyche. Instead of being disappointed that Demidenko was not really Ukrainian, the press found the fake even more alluring. Hence the appropriateness of the sub-title of Natalie Jane Prior's book, *Who is she really?* and of its striking cover displaying a picture of Demidenko's head with smiling mouth and no other features at all just a blank skin-coloured space to be filled.

To illustrate my point that it was the multiple layering and the strip-tease of

exoticism rather than the fact of the fake identity which gripped public attention I want to draw a comparison with another literary hoax which only came to light in the wake of Demidenko's confession. Paul Radley, who won the inaugural Vogel Australian prize for literature in 1980 and was named the 1981 Young Australian of the Year, finally came clean last year and confessed that he had not written a word of the book for which he won these honours, nor of any book. His uncle was apparently the author. So successful was his fraud that he received a lucrative fellowship from the Australian Literature Board at the time and took up a post as Writer in Residence at the University of Stirling in Scotland. Far from generating public excitement or even curiosity the story seems to have sunk without trace after causing barely a ripple in the press. The 'writer', an Australian now in his thirties, has confessed and is prepared to tell all. The rest is just a routine matter of unravelling facts and legal issues which are not particularly interesting in the shadow of the Demidenko affair. The allure of exotic springs from the recognition that the other cannot be fully known, that there is something withheld or ungraspable which escapes and beckons and *looks back*, putting the viewer on guard, and *questioning* the superiority of the viewing position.

It is this characteristic of the exotic which the Demidenko story exemplifies and helps to define. The acknowledgment of the existence of the ungraspable element enables the recognition of the spaces beyond, the other viewing positions from which one's own culture is glimpsed and where change can begin to be imagined and negotiated. In the arena of cultural representation this is the role of the carnivalesque and it is also the role of the exotic, its more subtle and more mobile ally.

To use a final illustration from the Demidenko case, in practical terms, the ultimate revenge of the exotic which was so eagerly embraced and rewarded by the Australian community, was to turn the critical gaze upon the culture itself, its values, its politics, its aesthetics and its systems of judging, rewarding and punishing art and, most importantly its attitudes to otherness.

Why then, when the cultural usefulness of this story is well understood, is there still a sense of something unsatisfactory, something not accounted for, something which has escaped and got away with it?

It is something which can be encapsulated in one word and which in the process undermines the rationality of my entire argument. The word is *betrayal*. Trinh T. Minh-Ha, writing about the oral tradition of story telling, points to the

reasons when she writes, in her book about women's story-telling,

Today, planned authenticity is rife; as a product of hegemony and a remarkable counterpart of universal standardization, it constitutes an efficacious means of silencing the cry of racial oppression. We no longer wish to erase your difference. We demand, on the contrary, that you remember and assert it.<sup>27</sup>

Literary awards and public adulation constitute one way of rewarding a display of difference which poses no threat to the culture. On the contrary, this display is self-congratulatory and self-sustaining because it confirms and legitimises a culture's prejudices, makes respectable its secret hatreds and fears under cover of the exotic and in the name of high quality art. The guardians of the culture say, "We need you, we reward you, we absorb you and you can be one of us so that we can be seen to be tolerant. You can then say the things we dare not say, cannot say, however much we secretly believe them." The value of Demidenko's charade lies in, and to my mind only in, its ability to embarrass that ubiquitous cultural voice.

But to return to and try to explain the sense of betrayal that still remains in relation to Demidenko's pretence: it has to do with my faith in the ongoing oral tradition which lives on within my family and the community I live in and in every culture regardless of its level of technological development, particularly the stories heard in the intimacy of the family, between lovers or amongst friends and then passed on, always differently, but with fidelity to the stories and the people whose worlds they most closely touch. These are the terms in which I read Trinh's remark, "There must not be any lies" (143). No amount of explanation in terms of postmodernist play can abolish this imperative. Indeed, there is no necessary contradiction between postmodernism and this kind of fidelity.

My sense of betrayal also has to do with Demidenko's double abuse, as I see it, of the principle of the mother tongue, the language which Benedict Anderson in his essay, "Patriotism and Racism", celebrates when he writes,

Through that language, encountered at mother's knee and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed.<sup>28</sup>

27. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 89.

28. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 154.

This is not to say that I believe that the 'mother tongue' has any special permanent privileges, nor that stories told in trust and intimacy have any sacred rights in their retelling. There can be no eternal ethical rules for the creation of literary and historical texts and, in fact, there is no doubt that mother tongue and intimate knowledge are concepts which, even when genuinely attributed, are as open to power-seeking manipulation as are any other pieties. The point I am making is that to hide under the cover of these deeply (too deeply) trusted and emotionally charged categories is to claim illegitimate immunity from the usual public tests, not of authenticity, so much as of competence and authority to speak. Claiming mother tongue and family as the brands of authenticity allows the writer to escape from the normal obligation to identify a specific speaking position, or at least it appears to do so. Once again it needs to be acknowledged that the Demidenko case has been useful in that it has highlighted the dangers of accepting that kind of 'cover', regardless of whether it is 'authentic' or not.

Finally there remains another reason to offer for the sense of betrayal that I feel. It has to do with Demidenko's apparently unfeeling portrayal of brutality and misery. Maurice Blanchot captures the reasons underlying my recoil when he says, in the context of a reference to Auschwitz, in a book called *Writing of the Disaster*,

There is a limit at which the practice of art becomes an affront to affliction.  
Let us not forget that.<sup>29</sup>

This article has been developed from a paper presented at a conference, 'The New Exoticisms', at the University of Zaragoza, Spain, in March 1996.

29. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 83.

## Lydia

IN the kitchen, preparing a meal for your brothers, my mind travels with the breeze, out through the window and the lavender bloom of jacaranda and hovers, out of my sight. You will be coming home on Friday, although the doctors say you will still have to be fed through a tube. Somewhere inside myself I sense that they are wrong. Somewhere, inside the smallest room within my heart, I sense that here, in this half-way house, you will finally consent to being fed.

I picture you, your soft resolute body and chocolate sloping eyes. I wonder if you will miss the shades of white and steel, the smell of plastic and flowers, which have surrounded you these past eight weeks. I picture you, your silent hunger-strike, and tears spill out of my eyes and wash down my face. The rock of my life has been struck and falls away from itself. I am caught in a long moment of seeing the mosaic of things, things which were in the corner of my eye, whispering, erupting in dreams.

Your brothers are thoroughly carnivorous. They run down the hall after school calling — What's for dinner mum? Is it a meat day? and more and more often it is. They come to the stove and look through the glass or lift a lid to see what they can smell. They are as delighted as if it were Christmas morning to confirm that there is meat sizzling in the oven or simmering in a pan.

I still do not eat meat. It has a smell I can feel collecting in the back of my throat, fastening it down. On meat days I summon all my strength as if I am Moses, about to part the waves. I stand at arms length from the meat on the chopping board on

the bench. I do not watch what I am doing as I slice or chop through the flesh. Sometimes I misjudge its texture and slice off slivers of finger-nail or make my finger-tip bleed. It is a labour of love.

This is for you, Lydia. I am your mother and you are my daughter and on Friday I will count each one of your stubby fingers and toes and blow raspberries in your belly-button.

I do not know where the beginning of our story really lies. The map is full of nameless places, sudden chasms, mirages. I might as well stick a pin in somewhere and start from there.

I was born in Germany. I feel a cling of shame whenever anyone asks me where I am from. I am afraid that Australians do not like Germans, because of the war. I do not know why my parents journeyed so far. I used to imagine that they were fleeing from something inside Germany. Now I wonder if they sought escape from something within themselves, and it clung to them, a shadow. Perhaps it was all of this and something else besides, a dream that would not leave sleep. Something drove my father to the very edges of his humanity and he staggered around there, a chimera. Perhaps the war did that.

My mother speaks to me, still only in German. She telephones me from Perth to tell me that I should go back to your father. She uses the same tone of voice she once used to tell me that I am German, when I protested at the age of nine that we are in Australia now and Australians don't eat tripe.

I did not know if this was true, but I knew she had no way of knowing if it was true or not.

Sometimes I dream in German. Often after a telephone call from my mother, after she has reminded me that she stood by my father and I have asked her, in English — Why? Why? she hangs up on me. A few days later, she writes to me and my mother-tongue comes sliding under the door like a serpent. We are as insistent as one another about what language should be spoken. She does not answer my question.

Sometimes I dream I crawl back inside my mother and gestate all over again. I am reborn into an ocean, fragrant and resonant with life. Sometimes I dream that I am

seven years old, small and stiff inside my yellow summer dress with its white collar and cuffs. My mother speaks to me in English, inside this dream, intimating plans of imminent rescue or escape. She croons to me.

I had a letter from your father last week. He cannot write to me directly. No man is admitted to the shelter or its grounds. The sound of men speaking is not heard here. He sends the letters to the social worker at the hospital who always passes them to me saying I do not have to read them. I always do.

His jagged hand-writing tears across the lined paper that I am a bitch and a slut and he wants me to go home because he is missing me and your brothers. He says that you should be adopted. He says he knows you are not his, no child of his could be a mongol. He says everything should be forgiven, and forgotten, and everything can be the same as before. You have his hair, the colour of wattle trees in flower.

Trying to describe my life with him feels like trying to measure the sea with a ruler.

After you were born, a stray cat gave birth to kittens in our yard. He made a shelter for her, out of an upside-down crate in which he cut a gap so that she could pass in and out, her kittens in her mouth. He fed her with food cut into tiny pieces on his own dinner-plate and spoke to her in a voice I barely recognized. A voice of lullabies. He picked her up and held her between his neck and his shoulder. He stroked her with his golden calloused hands.

With his hands he brushed my hair until, he said, it shone like sun-light on water; with his hands he wielded a strap or made fists; with his hands he lifted up your brothers so that they could see; with his hands he covered his face as he wept out promises he did not mean to break.

My father was a carpenter. Nothing ever seemed to leak from him. A sentence of cruelty without punctuation or parentheses. I swore at him once, under my breath but with enough force to send the sound of the words out into the air. He continued to eat, methodically cutting and chewing. My brothers giggled in exhilaration. In bed that night we were triumphant.

The next day he made us kneel on wooden poles which he had cut nicks in, all along the length of. He made us kneel until we could not stand when he told us to. By

such means, he taught us the penalty for disrespect. He became more and more inventive.

Sometimes, in bed at night, we would hear the sound of our mother crying and our father's voice demanding that she stop, that we must learn. Sometimes, at the door in the morning, she would wipe at her forehead with the back of her hand or push our hair out of our eyes and ask us to, please, do as he says.

My father said I was not to leave the table until I had eaten everything that was on my plate, if he had to sit there with me all night. I told my father that I did not like meat. I could not eat it. My father said that meat was part of a balanced diet. He said that my mother and he travelled all the way to Australia to put decent food on our plates. He said if I did not eat decent food, I would never grow big enough to marry, I would be stunted and no-one would want me. He said my mother hadn't taken the time and the trouble to cook food for me to leave it. He said I would eat it. The day turned its back on me.

Long after my brothers had been excused from the table, I was marooned there. My father gripped me round the throat with one hand and prized open my mouth by pressing down on my chin with the other. He told my mother to feed me. She pushed at my teeth with a lump of cooked pig on the end of a silver fork. I tried to keep my teeth clamped but she held my nose. I tried to hold the meat on my tongue so that it did not touch the roof of my mouth. Swallow — my father instructed. I would swallow and gag and regurgitate and the ritual would begin again. I tried to out-will him. It was impossible. I swallowed meat until I thought I would die. Once I thought I had. I looked in the mirror and saw the swollen discoloured face of a dead girl who must be me.

When I was a child I collected pebbles and gave them names; I kept them in my pockets and curled my hands around them as tightly as I could.

When I was a child I imagined that I could talk my spirit into the wings of pelicans, so that it would glide with them underneath the clouds or settle on the soft rush of river.

My brothers and I were taken from our parents when I was twelve. We had to go to

court. I remember the smell of wood and sweat. Two social workers sat like book-ends, one on my right, one on the left of my youngest brother, bracketing us off from our parents. When the judge said we were not to go home, my father laughed.

In the children's home the cook made me omelettes with cheese or tomatoes inside them and no-one made me eat meat. The ceiling lifted beyond my reach and I moved in open time and space, running sometimes, because I could.

My parents visited me once a year for the next three years, always on the first Saturday after Christmas. The last time I saw them my mother said I had grown big and caught her breath in a sudden rasping sob. My father brought me an egg he had carved and polished until it was as smooth as your skin.

I watched them leave together, my mother walking half a pace behind my father, his back bowed under a weight he could not set down, the egg warming in my hand, my life hyphenated. Tears rolled out of me. I felt them reach my jaw-line, and nothing else.

Your brothers have been drawing landscapes full of shooting stars and rainbows and horizons that gleam. They stick them all over your bedroom wall and ask me — When is Lydia coming home? We visit you every day and when you see us coming into the ward you smile at us with your whole face open.

In my mind I spin the atlas of the world and stick a pin in it. It centres in the middle of a half-way house. The inhabitants are multi-lingual and the sky overhead is blue.

## Minestrone

Onions, ginger, garlic, bay leaf, potatoes, carrots, sweet potato, tinned tomatoes, vegetable stock, borlotti beans, penne.

I'm ovulating. I'm horny, nearly always get this way this time of month; blue giggles to myself, odd eats.

Minestrone is not usually my ovulation food. More often, I cook up something hotter like a puttanesca sauce, or something a bit snazzier, salad nicoise, perhaps.

It's one of those typical, Blue Mountain, winter days; an estimated top of seven degrees, and the mist is a constant cage. I think the weather has brought on the minestrone more so than my own humble cycle.

Through the kitchen window I can see nothing but the nearest outer-branches of the giant pine tree reaching from the fog.

Where do the birds hide on days like this? The conceited currawongs, the sulphur-crested, and the black and gold cockatoos, and the bantamweight belligerent rosellas? Is there a rainy-day club somewhere, where they can sit and read the paper and wait for the sun to reappear?

I wouldn't mind a place like that myself; somewhere to go and sit and read the...

No. Somewhere to go for sex and then come home again.

There are escort agencies, of course. I had a friend who used one once when her husband had been gone for about two months. She'd finally got the kids to bed, she'd tried staying with them, cuddling them, trying to fill herself with their innocent warmth, then she made the call.

The guy at the door was so ordinary, she said. Just an average, thirty-year-old bloke in his average trousers and short-sleeved shirt. I suppose she'd expected a Chippendale.

They said their shy g'days and then she burst, weeping uncontrollably while the

average man mumbled stupid comfort. She led him shamefully to her bed, and lay with her eyes closed.

I don't want to think too much more about that just now. The onions are beginning to go transparent, sweating in the extra-virgin oil. A hissing sacrifice.

Apparently, the actual intercourse was not that sensational, but she more than got her money's worth out of the foreplay. Sounds good to me, I'd take what I could get right now.

There's an old bloke who lives two doors up. He flirts. He's sixty-something. He'd probably be in it. What am I thinking? The ginger and the garlic need to go in. I'll cover the pot and turn down the heat while I cut up the other vegies.

What am I going to do? Dig my way through the fog in my beanie and my ugg boots, knock on his door and ask the old bugger for a root?

Where is that knife?

I've heard that older men take longer to get it up, but that once it's up they can maintain it for a long, long time. Well, I've got nothing planned for the day. Just Donahue and Oprah. And the soup, of course.

The big house is empty. David's in Sydney for the week, and my little garden flat is like a fort, and I a sentry. That's why I'm here. He thinks my smoking chimney will prevent a burglary of his precious castle. That's why the rent is cheap. Who'd steal all that kitsch junk anyway?

I love this part, before the stock goes in. The potatoes try to stick to the bottom, they brown just a little. I stir the chunks roughly.

The program guide tells me that Phil has 'Sexy Sisters-in-Law', and Oprah boasts, 'Eat, Drink and Be Merry'. I don't know if I'll last the distance.

The exciting sizzle of the stock hitting the pot. I add the tomatoes, the beans and a little salt. I hope my parsley hasn't died in the frost. Now what? God, it's cold. Why did I ever move here? Why do I lie to all my friends in the city about how much I love it? Well, I do love it, mostly. It's just today...

David has a gardener. I don't know if he's gay. He's quite beautiful, so probably. He's David's, so very probably. Today's his day to come, Tuesday, and I usually enjoy watching him from this window while he works. He sweeps the leaves from the tennis court, then weeds all along the border garden, throwing carrot grass and knots of couch behind him as he edges toward my flat, squatting and waddling like a sexy little duck. A sexy duck? I am definitely in a bad way.

He won't come today. No-one weeds in this weather.

The soup boils, I turn it down and add a spoonful of French mustard. It simmers.

When Jacques and I first got together, we lay in bed for two whole days, getting up just to go to the toilet, cook, make tea and coffee. We had a real 'bed-in'. It was at his place in Lawson. He took me through a stack of old photo albums, introducing me to all his relatives, alive and dead.

We made love nervously and whispered polite thankyou's to each other after every orgasm. This constituted trust, symbolised respect. Now I'm a cynic, with nothing to keep me company except my lonely irony.

I could brave a walk into the Mall. Landseer's is warm, they have newspapers, and Joy might even squeeze a capp out for me on the house. She is kind, she feels sorry for me. Or I could get the bus into Katoomba, hang out in Clint's, toying with all the marvellous, plastic junk.

Jacques said I was egocentric because I didn't always agree with him. He said I was narrow-minded because I didn't like The Beatles.

I am egocentric. And argumentative. Pedantic, intolerant, impatient, Scorpio. But not disloyal.

I'm ovulating.

Where's the gardener? I want to watch the gardener. I love men who wear shorts when it's freezing. My Dad was a milko.

I open a bottle of Galway Hermitage. It was on special at K-Mart for \$6.49. I'm not going to drink any, it's only eleven o'clock in the morning. I pour some into the minestrone. I might have a glass with lunch.

Seventy dollars it cost my friend for her pre-coital orgasm. I could just about buy a case of this stuff for that. Not that the Hermitage is so terribly exciting. Hermitage. That's appropriate. This flat's a bloody hermitage. More pathetic irony.

Maybe the gardener is out there, and I just can't see him through the fog. The pine needles wave at me through the glass. If he is out there, he'll have to come and sweep up the thick carpet of needles that have fallen through the week. He'll have to come very close to me.

Amy says she can actually feel her eggs moving inside her, down the tube. I don't know if I can or not. I suffer from indigestion quite a lot.

Have you ever listened to "Help!"? It's a misogynist manifesto. How can anyone question the validity of hating something because of its meaning? He actually called me a philistine for making this assessment, crapped on about historical perspective. Jacques was so full of shit, and so arrogant, but beautiful. Shoulders, ribs, ahh... If

he were to walk through that door right now with 'A Hard Day's Night' under his arm, I'd gladly hide his love away for him.

That's the trouble; being what they want you to be has so many attractions.

I grate some parmesan, fearing for my knuckles.

I could go to the door and call through the mist.

Hey! Gardener! (I don't even know his name) You want a cup of tea?

Is that the best I have to offer?

If you're out there, get your arse in here. Throw me down and fill me up.

I have a feeling I'll be masturbating before the day is out.

The beans are perfect now. They soaked all through the night. The soup smells great. I can turn it off for an hour or so.

He really might be out there. He really might be heterosexual. They do still exist. I bet he is straight. He's not muscly enough to be gay, his head's not square enough, his hair's too long.

I knew he had his ex-wife on his mind, but we'd been sleeping together for three months! That's a whole Season! And he called me Greer. In my bed, deep in my body, he whispered 'Greer'.

Maybe I could go and borrow something; salt or sugar. He's only two doors up. I could just go and invite him down for lunch, to try my soup, and by the time we'd finished I'd know whether I wanted to make a proposal to him or not.

He might be a Christian. There are a lot of those up here. The rich, the retired, the retarded and the religious. That's what Les says.

Ian calls us Yuppies with Altitude. We mountain folk smile tolerantly, shiver, and move closer to the fire.

The CES call. How would I like to go for a casual waiting job?

Oo, yes, sir. How exciting. There's nothing I'd love more.

God.

I relight the burner on the stove and add the pasta. I accidentally pour a bit too much of it in. Oh, well, the stodge factor will be up just a little.

What made it worse was his denial. 'Greer' does not sound like 'Great'. Not at all. Especially when it's whispered right into your ear.

This is a huge amount of soup. How much can a girl eat?

There's a noise outside, a chopping noise. The gardener chops wood for David. He's out there. I race to the window and try to burn my vision through the haze. The soup bubbles again, steam rises, and still I can see nothing.

"Where are you?" I whisper, and steam comes out of me too. I puff more steam

out, like I did when I was a kid pretending to smoke.

I open up the door of the combustion heater, and see that I need more wood for the fire. I have to crank it up a bit. It's still on its night setting. More ingress is required.

Sweet ingress.

I move to the front door and open it. I can barely see the grass, though it's only three steps down. I edge toward the woodpile, and hear the door swing shut.

Shit. The deadlock. I'm locked out. A spare key? Bloody Jacques. I had a spare key under a pot plant and I gave it to him. He lost it and then he called me Greer. Bastard.

I can feel the wet through the holes in my uggies.

Both my little windows are shut tight and locked to define the hot and the cold, the safe and the unsafe. My nose and ears begin to sting in the frosty air, and I curse loudly.

The gardener appears from the mist, in jeans and a jumper with a Rabbitoes guernsey over the top, and a black and gold beanie. He laughs with me but there's nothing he can do to help. He doesn't have a car. He's not gay.

I don't feel so horny in the cold.

Dad would take me on The Run sometimes. I'd ride in the back of the van, clinging to the side as we whizzed around corners, my legs dangling through the home town streets. Even in the rain.

I'm standing in the rain that doesn't fall, the rain that just hangs about.

I knew the houses of every kid in my class. I delivered to them. I felt like a spy.

I rub at the glass panel in the door, and try to look through it, and through the lace curtains. I am a spy again. The gardener is a spy too, he looks into my little home.

The door of the heater is open. I worry about fire.

The pasta's in the pot. *Al dente* means "just right", I think. I wonder what's the Italian word for, "cooked to oblivion."

Greer this, Greer that, he shamelessly showed me all the wedding photos. I thought that I could tough it out, hearing about love.

He said *thankyou* so closely, whispered right into my brain.

I remember my Real Estate agent. They have a key. I'll have to walk into the Mall in my pyjamas and dressing gown, a mad woman. Oh, well, the rich, the retired, the retarded, etcetera...

The gardener hasn't shaved this morning. There's just the faintest shadow.

Maybe he's a night shaver. He again looks through my window.

"I think the fire will be OK."

There's a pimple on his cheek. If I were in love with him, I'd squeeze it for him. I do that for men that I'm in love with. It's part of the package.

He agrees to wait and watch, and I begin trudging up Gladstone Road, puffing the steam out like a train.

Only sometimes would Dad take me on The Run on school mornings, but these were the best times to do it. Arriving at school a little dizzy with tiredness and boasting about my nocturnal trade.

A car engine complains loudly as it edges out of its driveway. I stop to let it pass. It's him. Inside the car. The old flirter. He winds down his window, says good morning, and asks what's up.

It's an old Valiant. There are heaps of sliding knobs and colour-coded controls that boast of air con., but they're lies. I rub my legs in the icy cabin. Henry waits while I duck into the agency, then I wait in the idling car while he does his own quick ducking.

He hands me his shopping and complains briefly about the shopkeeper. It's never been the same since Roy died.

I nurse his milk in my lap.

The key fits, and I invite the men inside.

Henry boosts up the fire as I ladle minestrone into three bowls.

The gardener talks about his wife, his Masters thesis, and rail track-work delays.

Jacques said 'Greer' only a few days after I'd introduced him to my parents. Maybe it was this timing that pissed me off as much as anything else. I'd kept him a wonderful, naughty secret for months, and as soon as I introduced him to my parents, he went and said 'Greer'. The argument that started with Greer soon spread, like a flood, into many neighbouring areas. It was the only fight we ever had, and we pulled so many strange things out of the cupboard to argue about. We argued about manners, children, dishes, even Vegemite. It was a sour, salty, sure end.

Henry and the gardener both slurp their soup like blokes, and compliment the chef.

The gardener goes home to study, and Henry and I share a pot of tea, and talk.

He is sixty-two.

My Dad is only fifty-two. He's no longer a milko.

The fog will not lift today. On this we agree. We watch the sexy sisters-in-law

on TV, and make all the usual, easy cracks about Americans.

We talk about believing. Henry says he only trusts half the things that he believes in, that half of what he believes (no matter how firmly he believes it) must be total bullshit.

I agree.

It doesn't take him long at all to get it up, and once it's up he maintains it for a long, long time.

Elizabeth Smither

## Hearing the approach of rain

Waking as it begins: the light  
rush of rain through a little grove  
not deep but with substantial trees  
and spaces, a real undergrowth  
in which, nearer dawn, wild cries  
of something fleeing from pursuit

rise up. Just sufficient trees to make  
the passage of rain  
through them a  
unique exercise. Premonition  
sound, movement, actuality, all one  
and to hear it, suddenly, out of  
dark silence, an unwrapped gift.

## A poem for Roseanne

Roseanne who cuts my hair  
every six weeks and asks  
how's your hair been  
as if hair was my life

belongs to a rowing club  
goes rowing in an eight  
all pretty girls with hair  
in the latest cuts and shades.

While Roseanne cuts my hair  
I imagine her on a lake  
in the middle of a rowing eight  
keeping a perfect stroke.

The starter lies down on the dock  
and holds the prow in place  
the cox is so encased  
she could be a confined dwarf

and then Roseanne and the rest  
put all their strength to their stroke  
Roseanne puts my hair in place  
and the boat shoots through the water.

## Sepulchre

My house and garden  
stands in the old quarry  
where a siren once sent you to work.  
Last night I found your mark  
the initials carved in stone  
high up on the mossy wall  
your single act of defiance  
hewn in lunchtime folly  
the larrikin's calligraphy.  
In the torchlight  
I ran my hands across the grain  
of your braille graffito.  
You left behind those honeycomb walls  
a punctured side  
of perfect holes  
when the last siren sounded  
and you rode home  
with your Gladstone bag full of tools  
hitting against the boils on your legs.  
I thought I saw you again this morning  
walking in my garden  
you were bending down to look at the roses I'd planted  
tickling their petals  
with your warm white breath.

## Home Run

The No Smoking sign ignored and lager  
foam everywhere dying on the armrests;  
girls laugh like breaking glass, while John  
makes the love bite, next to the tattoo  
on his belly, expand and contract. Dad's got

a face like a squashed dildo, protect me, god  
from his ranting and ma nodding with her hearing  
aid turned off, and big fat brother foaming  
on the porto-phone cause he can't take  
his rotweiler, as if fucking rabies was just

dogs high on lager! Christ, Chrissie — stop it,  
but doesn't say it, cause his mates are sucking  
another fucking can; and, there, she draws  
a lipstick circle around it; eyes blackrimmed,  
round like beer mats, looking as if

butter wouldn't — but it's him that's creaming  
his boxer's, thinking: it's only when fucking  
that I don't feel like smashing face.  
The mates crunch their empties, the train's  
got the shakes. Suddenly, they're both made

of glass, seethrough and fucking break-  
able. He glares at his mates, but doesn't  
dare them cause they're sucking another  
can and she lies asleep on his belly where  
her glowing love bite expands and contracts.

## The Piano Lesson

I had my fifth piano lesson today. The sound of rain falling heavily on the roof not able to drown out my longing. My fingers turned soft and useless and she would say to me, "Play confidently, Peter, make your fingers strong", and I would follow the earnestness of her eyes, the eyes in my head never leaving her face. I would try again, try to feel the music as she told me. I could hear it in my head, rising and falling in an enormous cascade, but my fingers wouldn't respond. Out of the corner of my eye I would catch sight of her fingers, long and slender, white-boned, able to keep perfect time on the piano frame. Her wrist bones catching at me. They are like falling stars.

All the time I am aware of her, of the little intakes of breath, the way she sways in her chair, her sudden movement forward to interrupt and start me off again. All the time my voice sticks in my throat and I cannot answer her questions. All the while, the rain spatters and jumps on the roof in an erratic dance that my heart races to keep up with, but my fingers lag behind.

When I left the sky was lunging at the streets, letting water run like a cadenza of notes, like the rising in the left hand of the Granados. I looked back at the window and saw the yellow light and imagined her playing. Those slender hands on the keys. The bones poised like darting birds. Her rings catching the light. How they would keep time with the rain, unlike mine.

My mother asks me, "What did you learn today?" as she manoeuvres the car through the Friday traffic. I know she wants me to talk and talk, to let the words spill out like music. I just want to lean back against the seat, watch the glow of the lights reflected in the wet road, and see *her* face in the dark pools of rain. I don't want to

answer, but I say, telling a deliberate lie, “We concentrated on the Bach, the new one”, trying to make it sound conversational, yet final. I don’t want to talk about the Granados with my mother. It’s for Alice and me alone. I try to shut my mother out and let the dark, wet night, and her, in.

We drive through the city, past department stores closing their doors for the evening, past last-minute shoppers waiting for buses or hailing taxis. Their faces are all empty, they don’t reflect in the rain-soaked road, and I think how there can’t be any music playing in their heads. I hear the notes of the Granados piece, hear the chords of the right hand becoming louder to match the building up, the running notes of the left hand, until that overpowering sense of notes taking flight: a black swan leaving the water and rising straight-necked, supple-boned to take shape against the sky. My hands clench as I hear the music, the melody plucking at my brain. My body feels strained and tight. I want to play it like that for her.

We follow the winding road out through the suburbs — North Hobart, New Town — slowing down for buses that pull out, and the pedestrians who walk out in the path of traffic. They are heedless, their minds full of other things. My mother talks about the distance we have to travel for my piano lessons. The long drive home every Friday night, through town to Granton. She asks me if I mind. I tell her I enjoy the dawdle into town from school, the bus ride to Sandy Bay, the walk up the hill and the waiting. She seems concerned, uncertain whether we have made a good choice, even though Alice Gregory was recommended by the Head of Music at school.

I don’t think of her as Miss Gregory. Alice is her name. She told me to call her that at my first lesson, a month ago now. She’d asked me about my previous lessons, knew from Mr Jamieson that I’d been studying piano since I was six. I’d arrive from school, hot and restless from the walk up the hill and she’d greet me with her smile, offer cool drinks in the kitchen, let me choose a chair to read in until it was time for my lesson. I’d pretend to read, but listen instead to her voice as she taught the student before me.

My mother seems worried that Alice is too young to be a good teacher. She’d prefer me to be taught by someone older, “Someone a little more experienced, more mature.” I tell her quietly what she already knows. “Mr Jamieson recommended her

to you and he should know. He wouldn't suggest someone he didn't think could teach. He told you he thought she was a brilliant teacher. You know she has her Licentiate, Mum. She's sat for her Fellowship, and she's doing a Masters at the Con." I don't tell her that I have seen Alice perform at the University, that I cut school to get there for one of the free lunchtime concerts. Her hair was out, her hands and arms were bare. Her elbows were as pale and moonlike as her wrists. She played Liszt.

Our piano is in the lounge room just behind the window that faces onto the river. From where I sit I can see the tall reeds and the way the water ruffles up to look like steel wool when the wind takes hold. I can see the black swans floating calmly, their heads bobbing ever so slowly as they ride the tiny waves. When I play well I think of the swans parting the water in smooth arcs, their necks stretching like dancers' bodies. But it is Alice I think of most.

When I play for her she leans close to listen, to nod, to keep time. She places her hand on my wrist telling me to relax it and keep it loose, to let my arms play, not just my fingers. I want her to keep touching my hands.

Alice doesn't know how I feel, or at least I don't think she does. Sometimes, though, she seems concerned. She'll ask, "Is everything all right, Peter? You seem tired, unable to concentrate. Had a long week at school?" And I just smile at her, and try to tell her I'm fine. She told me today that I matched the music. "Andante melancolico", she said and smiled back. She's right, though. I am melancholy. The youth in love of the epigraph of the whole 'Goyescas' — 'Los majos enamorados'. I want her to be the love-sick girl and me the nightingale. The singing bird with my music. Only I can't play it the way I want, can't make her hear the music. Juliet thought the lark was the nightingale — prolonging the moment, the love. I like the title best in French: 'Plaintes ou la Maja et le Rossignol'. Plaintes. Plaintive. Lament. That fits best.

The black swans outside are somehow plaintive in their dark colours. They lament into the night in their inky domain. I like it when they rise like arrows against the silver of the sky. Peeling back the edges, soaring like the semi-quavers and octave chords, 'subito rit. il tempo e molto espressivo', of Granados's music. All weekend I pour over the score in my bedroom, humming the opening and then

losing myself in the development. My heart accelerates *appassionato* just as Granados directs. I don't want Mum to hear it and so I play it on the bedside table. In bed, I close my eyes and my head beats with the notes. I use the school pianos in the lunch hours. "Peter, how would you describe the tone of the poem?" Silence. And then I waken to the fact that the whole class is staring curiously. I shrug as if I don't care, the word 'lament' on my lips.

At my next lesson I ask Alice if we can leave the Granados for a while. "Too melancholy for you?" she asks with a laugh. "That's fine. Let's concentrate on the Bach and the Pulenc." I don't have to lie to my mother in the car on the journeys home now, and she seems pleased with the contrapuntal harmonies of the prelude and fugue being banged out into the lounge room. Every night though, I pour over the music. I run over the left hand on the table, I sing the right hand chords. Every day at school I practise on the old pianos, despairing of it ever sounding as it should. Mr Jamieson gave me a recording of the complete 'Goyescas' by a Spanish pianist, Alicia de Larrocha. I listen to it every night on my walkman, and in my head it is not Alicia playing, but my Alice. I ask Mr Jamieson to arrange for me to use the Bosendorfer in the University theatre one lunch hour, and with some surprise he eventually agrees. He even offers to drive me there, and afraid of missing too many classes, I accept.

Sitting at the Bosendorfer my mind fills with memories of Alice playing Liszt. Touching the keys is like an act of love, like sinking into her bath water or lying on the gentle impress of her body on still-warm sheets. I can hardly bring myself to play the notes. I stare around the empty auditorium and imagine Alice there and that's when I can begin to play. It begins piano and all the notes are joined. Minor key. Subdued, almost strained. I think of the love-sick girl. And then suddenly, a little softer but accelerating into the development; expressive. Repeated, but *pianissimo*. And over the page, accelerating again, playing with passion, getting louder and louder, until it *has* to draw back. Then on the second last page the opening notes with only a slight variation sing slowly again, and it's all reined in, quieter, coming to an end. I play the cadenza and there is the nightingale and I think of Juliet. Before I am aware of it I have played the last chord, moving from the vivace of the demi-semi-quavers into the *lento* of the final two bars.

I sit there not wanting to move. Feeling drained, emotionless.

At Alice's on Friday afternoon, I refuse the drink and sit patiently in my chair, while she finishes the lesson she is giving. I feel the music inside me; know that I can play it for her.

When we start I tell her I have a surprise and that she is not to say anything. I ask her to sit next to me, on a chair drawn up close to the piano stool. She looks bemused, but does as I ask. I begin softly, just as in the auditorium. I think of touching those keys, imagine they are a part of her. The music pours out into the room. I use my fingers and wrists and arms just as she had instructed me in that far-off lesson. Imagine her hands on mine, and they play as if with a life of their own. There is the melancholy beginning, and there the build up and acceleration. My right hand strains at the chords and I can hear the melody like it is breaking glass. There is the fortissimo and the appassionato, the drawing in, the falling off to the pianissimo, and lastly there is the calm, the catharsis of the very last chord.

Alice sits absolutely still. I don't dare move. But I steal a glance at her — firstly at the fingers and wrists and then finally at her face. She is looking at me and her eyes are wet like the rain-soaked road. She takes my hand and holding it whispers, 'Los maos enamorados'. And suddenly I know that nothing else matters now. It doesn't matter that I'm fifteen and Alice is at least ten years older than me, that her long fingers and white bones keep circling like birds in my head. It doesn't matter that she doesn't love me. It doesn't matter because I can play for her. My music is my lament.

## Silk

COLD outside, he thinks. The woman's scarf catches on the door frame as she enters. She stands for a moment and tugs, and the winter wind skids in, under his counter, through his shoes. He waits for the apology, but she's moved to the coat racks, and he can see her unwinding the scarf, flaying hands around and around her head.

He looks down and studies the invoice book. The little shop is quiet, the soft voice of a radio announcer whispers from the shelf behind him, the woman's scarf noiselessly whirls and settles finally — a cat, relaxed — hanging around her neck. He watches the invoice book and imagines this. The customary two minutes will pass before he thinks: O.K., and goes across the carpet in deliberately pounding footsteps to ask if he can be of assistance.

The invoice book is perfect, he shuts it, and smooths its fine blue cover. Suddenly he thinks of Rosie, tries not to, but the feel of the cardboard — its ninety-degree corners, its smoothness — and the order within it reminds him of the crusted dishes on his sink the day she faded, and her hand on the kitchen bench tapping a rounded nail. He shakes his head, looks up at the customer preparing to break the two minute wait.

The woman dismisses the coats and walks around the end rack without looking at him. It seems she has her scarf caught about her face, it's rosella-colored, with splashes of green and pink: but, no, her scarf is blue. He hesitates at the counter, his weight on the balls of his feet, his shoes, leather, slipping. She has the blue woollen scarf around her neck, and soft silk tied like a cowboy's bandana across her

face. He can see when she breathes, it flutters, nervous heart, flutters and ripples. Around them are racks and stands and shelves of women's clothing. They are mainly winter colors — forlorn, solid, warm. He has chosen, from the glossy catalogues in his buyer's briefcase, other things as well. Items of little use in this gusty city, bright parkas with immense sheepskin lining, snappy berets that blow off in the wind, short-legged boots — rubber, fluorescent — for trips to the mailbox in freezing rain. He has this sense of the extraordinary, and likes it. He doesn't see the woman's feathery silk as bad taste, not at all out of place. In this room, it fits. They stand with winter pushing in. He thinks of congratulating her, saying "Ah!" and raising his hand slightly, nodding. The opportunity isn't there, though; she turns away from him, angles herself to the shirts, and he see her profile and the silk quite flat against her cheek.

He goes back to the invoice book, opens it to a blank page, picks up a pen, broods. The woman didn't see his hesitation, surely. She riffles through the tweeds. He almost draws her face in the book — has he got it right? — the woman's face, the eyes down, a slight frown above them, the cheeks flat, the woman's face with no nose.

Has he got it right? He has. He looks again and his body shudders, a fine concealed tremor, disgust. How could she be in his shop, this woman, this Gorgan?

So the silk is nylon, probably bought in a variety store in the outer suburbs. The colors are fixed, you can throw it in the wash. She would every night, the colors fading, tomato sauce stains. She has twenty of them, but only wears one, wears it until it breaks, tears, leaves other holes. She moves past the skirts, stops at cream blouses. He notices this while thinking, notices also that he has drawn nothing and is pretending badly.

He moves his thoughts to Rosie, allows himself the whoosh of happiness he used to feel in remembering her, conjures it up against the woman in the shop. Rosie wears jade, well-cut suits with soft suede shoes. She has necklaces and bracelets of the gem, rings. She wears them in layers. Her neck is fine and streaming. Her hair is kept in intricate braids, pulled back into one. When down, her hair travels to her buttocks in the softest honey flow. He has this image of her and he re-thinks it.

Some of the jade he gave her as presents. Presents out of nowhere, just for her, for no other reason. He remembers choosing for her, stealing from her hairbrush fragments of moult, winding it around glossy stones and comparing the contrast. He once spend four hours, just himself and a compartment of earrings, laying her hair on the black velvet and touching the smooth jewellery with tips of well-washed fingers. It was as sensual as stroking her marvellous eyelids, those cheekbones, the corners of her smile. The shop assistant was correct in leaving him alone. They connected as two sales professionals, the other bowed and left.

Rosie is the most beautiful woman he has ever seen. The woman with no nose moves onto another rack and holds a jacket up to herself in the mirror. Light reflects off and he can see her, the colored scarf breathing, the deformity of her face grotesque behind the shabby colors. She doesn't look at him, he knows why, and he makes no effort to pretend anymore, just watches her as she moves around the shop, wondering how this woman could be the same species as Rosie, as glorious Rosie.

Rain gushes against the window. Its noise drenches him, and he starts as if waking up. Rosie? He hasn't seen Rosie for many days. He fiddles with a catalogue, tidies the wrapping paper, squares the plastic bags on the shelf near his thighs. His dishes are done now, and his kitchen gleams. They've been done for weeks, he never again let them build up. The plastic bags slip and cascade in soft arcs over his legs. He jostles them as they fall and they slide like honey over the floor. Slide like silk.

Rosie hung her suits behind the wardrobe door and kept perfumed handkerchieves in their pockets. She brushed her hair one hundred strokes a night. He lay on the bed on his stomach to watch her. Blue electricity sparked at the end of each stroke. He watched it. His eyes burned. She lay the brush back down on his dressing table and turned to him. Her eyes were jade as well. Always he watched her brush her hair. One day she turned and he was asleep with his nose buried in the doona.

The woman in the shop spends a long time in front of the jackets. She is going to choose one, he thinks. He should move over to her, smile, encourage a try-on, say: It's a lovely color. For you. She is so still, her back to him now, the knots of the scarf hidden by her black curls, he doesn't move, starts watching her again,

wonders: What am I doing? Her fingers are on the sleeve and they smooth it over and over, a long caring caress. They feel the lining, turn the collar up, then down, count the buttons, try the pocket. There isn't anything sadder, he thinks, than an empty unused jacket.

If she tried it on, would the scarf be knocked unexpectedly and slip down, slide off her face, over her cheeks with nothing to stop it, exposing, with its diagonal displacement, startled eyes and horror? It's the reason he doesn't join her at the coat stand. The wind is furious. She may have to stay in the shop for ages.

She slips the jacket on. Nothing happens. In all the time she has been in the shop she hasn't looked at him, and she doesn't now, parades in front of the mirror alone. The blue woollen scarf is tucked casually under the collar of the jacket. She buttons up, walks a few steps towards her multi-colored image, unbuttons it. Puts a hand on her hip. She's smiling, he sees that. She takes a clean, folded hanky from her trouser pocket and puts it in the jacket, a corner showing, elegant. The jacket beams.

He is sharpening his pencil, shavings all over the desk, and feels at once the exclusion the handkerchief has created. The lead breaks and he has to sharpen again. Rosie's jackets are gone from the wardrobe door, and he wonders what perfume it was that she used. The last trace has gone. He could smell nothing after his nose went into the doona and he shut his eyes on beautiful Rosie, saturated by her glory. Was it so long ago? He thinks honestly, were her eyes jade?

The woman with no nose still has the jacket on, the cerise jacket, and it is good on her, looks wonderful. He should be pointing this out, his sales-talk twitches in his mouth. But she doesn't need him to say it. She hasn't looked at him and is smiling behind her rosella scarf. She moves back and forth in front of the mirror, and, really, if you were standing behind her you'd think she was gorgeous. Even if you glimpsed the scarf — silk, of course — you could think: Ah, unusual, she is unusually lovely.

With this he remembers the day Rosie left, how she closed his door behind her, and how he felt no pain. She hadn't done the dishes before she went, he was annoyed. But no pain. She had been fading for a long time, her honey hair tangling and

knotting in his eyes when he was trying to sleep. Poor Rosie, she had nothing but her beauty and it wasn't enough, no, the perfection was too much, he'd grown bored with the symmetry. In a catalogue of beautiful women, she was another dressed in winter clothing.

Poor Rosie. The woman has taken the jacket off and carefully placed it on the hanger. She nips it here and there until it stands correctly, and whips her hanky out of its pocket. The jacket slips back on the rack with the other jackets and from the counter he can't distinguish which one was hers. There are shavings all over the desk and she will not look at him.

By the door, she winds her woollen scarf over her head again, piles it up, over her face, curling. The silk scarf, gorgeous hand-printed rosella colors, is hidden. He sees her adjust it discretely under the wool, pats her face in its middle like she would a friend (does it matter that she has no nose so long as she can breathe?) and shuts his door behind her. The wind skids in and scalds him.

**David Foster's *Moonlite*:  
Re-viewing history as satirical fable—  
towards a post-colonial past**

Westward the course of empire takes its way;  
The four first acts already past,  
A fifth shall close the drama with the day;  
Time's noblest offspring is the last.

George Berkeley,  
"Verses on the Prospect of Planting  
Arts and Learning in America" (1853).<sup>1</sup>

In *Moonlite*, David Foster marshals his militant satirical forces against the ideological and historicist excesses of 'official' history, his farcical reconstruction of colonial history becoming a subversive *deconstruction* of the story of the past — a 'mythistorical', anti-imperial critique that demands a reviewing of history. Significantly, it is Foster's satirical treatment of history which makes *Moonlite* such a forceful critique; and to assess the novel as a satire involves the consideration of certain formal characteristics so far overlooked in the appraisal of Foster's most impressive achievement to date.

The Enlightenment vision George Berkeley propounds, in which the empire is envisioned, in theatrically teleological terms, as embodying the apotheosis of History, typifies the imperial myths that concern post-colonial critics. Indeed, the post-colonial critical enterprise is engaged in interrogating prevailing ideas and representations of history in the interests of seeking to "establish or rehabilitate self against either European appropriation or rejection".<sup>2</sup> Berkeley's verse articulates the classic imperial myth — the heliotropic myth or myth of *translatio imperii et studii*,

1. George Berkeley, *Works*, Vol. 2, London, 1853, 294.

2. Helen Tiffin, 'Post-Colonialism, Postmodernism and the Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 23, 1, 1988, 169-81 at 172.

which envisages history as a single progressive movement reaching around the globe to eschatological fulfillment in 'civilisation'. As a myth, it works to contain through imaginative projection; and this pre-visionary reaching to Ultima Thule becomes the ideological underpinning of the imperial enterprise and its subsequent self-justifying historical accounts.

Literary fiction provides imaginative 'counter-visions' that work as effective and principal 'weapons' in this contest against the imperial (mis)appropriation of the story of the past. In undermining "the imperial perspectives", such fiction "[creates] from the tensions of their colonial legacy new fictions that generate new ways of perceiving".<sup>3</sup> However, where (for example) Peter Carey (*Illywhacker* and *Oscar and Lucinda*) and David Malouf (*Harland's Half-Acre* and *The Great World*) offer, respectively, metafictional 'revisions'<sup>4</sup> and poetic 're-mythologizations' of the past, Foster's *Moonlite* achieves a heightened impact as a 'counter-discursive'<sup>5</sup> post-colonial myth through Foster's use of the inherently political and oppositional mode of satire. Recasting history as a satirical fable, incorporating high farce, mock-heroics and parodic allegorical-mythological structures, *Moonlite* stands as a landmark critique of imperial history, a 'mythical' fiction subverting the received versions of the past. And yet, befitting satire's *modus operandi*, any such imaginative 're-vision' is, paradoxically, achieved through Foster's rancorously anti-imperial demolition, a violent negation achieved through an absurdist, often grotesque fantasy which stands in contrast to (for example) Malouf's poetic and projective re-imagining of history.

By way of prefatory comment, the critical valuation of fiction as both an interrogative and re-visioning 'myth' that can both de- and re-mythologise history (the recurrent use of the prefix 're' connotes recuperation *from* imperial history rather than a return *to* an essentialist pre-imperial history) prompts a number of

3. Diana Brydon, 'The Myths That Write Us: Decolonising the Mind', *Commonwealth*, Vol. 10, No. 1, (Autumn, 1987), 1-14 at 7.
4. Stephen Slemon, 'Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse', *Caribbean Literature*, No. 116 (Spring, 1988), 9-24, acknowledges the use of this term in the work of both J. Michael Dash and Wilson Harris (14-16). See also Slemon's 'Modernism's Last Post', in Adam, I and Tiffin, H. (eds.) *Past The Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism* (Hertfordshire: Harvester/Wheatseaf, 1991), 5, and 'Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History' in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 23, 1, 157-168.
5. Helen Tiffin uses this term ('Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse' (*Kunapipi*, Vol. 9, No. 3, (1987), 17-34)), after Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/ Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth Century France* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985). See also Tiffin's articles 'Recuperative Strategies in the Post-Colonial Novel' (*Span*, April, Vol. 24 (1987), 27-45), and 'Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism and the Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History' (*The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 23, No. 1, (1988), 169-81).

questions concerning the use of the term 'myth'.<sup>6</sup> In turn, foregrounding the narrativity and ideology of history, as much contemporary criticism is concerned with doing, provokes epistemological and metahistorical questions in relation to historical discourse. Regarding this latter point, the post-colonial theoretical position (broadly speaking) does not see history as *ultimately* fictional; that is, the extreme (and fashionable) claim denying historical discourse any extra-textual referent.<sup>7</sup>

Instead, post-colonialism resists what Slemon and Tiffin see as "the wholesale retreat from geography and history into a domain of pure 'textuality' in which the principle of indeterminacy smothers the possibility of social or political 'significance' for literature".<sup>8</sup> In effect, this is to insist on some ultimate historical materiality, however irreducibly mediated any representation of the past is, and however inextricable the forms of political, economic and discursive oppression are. It follows that the "significance" of literature inheres in both the notion of political agency (implying identity<sup>9</sup> and intentionality), and in the imaginative power of counter-narratives. Literary fictions thus become emancipatory narratives, "enabling myths" that work to "decolonise the mind". Such 'myths' are positive, because liberating, 're-cognitions' of history, and thus (hybridised) identity —

6. One quickly notes the contradictory emphasis in the contemporary debate: on the one hand there is that deemed dangerously ideological — the deceptive, falsifying myth — and the aforementioned 'positive' myth — that which is reconstitutive of cultural identity. Of the many and varying accounts see R. Kellogg & R. Scholes, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 219, Richard Chase, 'Notes on the Study of Myth', in W.J. Handy and M. Westbrook (eds.) *Twentieth Century Criticism: The Major Statements* (New York: The Free Press, 1976), 224-54, and J. Weiland, *The Ensphering Mind: History, Myth and Fiction in the Poetry of Allen Curnow, Nissim Ezekiel, and A. D. Hope*, (Three Continents Press, 1988).
7. Roland Barthes voices the post-structuralist argument, describing historical discourse as the ultimate 'realist' narrative, it being "doubtless the only type in which the referent is aimed for as something external to the discourse, without it ever being possible to attain it outside this discourse" ('The Discourse of History,' in E.S. Shaffer (ed.) *Comparative Criticisms: A Yearbook*, Cambridge UP, 1981,16). See also (eds.) Attridge, D, Bennington, G, and Young, R, *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 7-9.
8. Slemon, S. and Tiffin, H. (eds.), *After Europe: Critical Theory and Post-Colonial Writing* (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1989), p. x-xi. Slemon has of late envisaged, in somewhat essentialist and paranoid terms, the "terrain of post-colonial studies ... [as being] in danger of becoming colonised by competing academic methodologies ... methodologies [i.e. postmodernism] which are seeking forms of absolute control over the terrain" (Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson(eds.),*De-scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 25/29).
9. Identity here is understood as the hybridised, subaltern subject, who, as Gareth Griffiths argues, resists discursive containment through the "powerful weapons ... of displacement, disruption, ambivalence, or mimicry — discursive positions founded ... in endless and excessive transformation of the subject positions possible within the hybridized" ('The Myth of Authenticity: Representation, Discourse and Social Practice', in *De-scribing Empire*, (eds.) Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, 76).

imaginative 're-versions' that encourage the "revising, reappropriating or reinterpreting of history as a concept ... new ways of seeing and reading history".<sup>10</sup>

*Moonlite* is as 'significant' as it is avowedly political in its attack on the historical antics of imperial Britain. And whilst it has been conceded that, despite his purported "literary heterodoxy", Foster is "[equally] obsessed with the fact of being Australian, with its disadvantages and, possibly, even with its benefits",<sup>11</sup> it is Foster's calculated offensiveness that grants *Moonlite* its considerable force. Foster's perceived transgression of the popular literary style is as much a matter of his choice of literary mode as of authorial idiosyncrasy. For satire is a fundamentally transgressive genre, acquiring added trenchancy in Foster's hands. We might see Foster's satire as personified both in the exiled and misunderstood Finbar, "the *outré* islander, who combines surliness and freakish appearance with a complete contempt for occasion", and in Hiphoray's courtly commentators of old — the "bladiers ... who leapt from the retinue of piper and bard, henchman and gillie to spew invective" at those causing affront.<sup>12</sup>

Certainly, definitions of satire vary; indeed, Foster has thrown down the critical gauntlet, accusing "contemporary Australian literary critics" of not being able to "recognize the form of satire", and therefore misunderstanding his work.<sup>13</sup> Evidence can be found in Helen Daniel's anaphorical use of the term 'parody' when describing *Moonlite*<sup>14</sup> — satire and parody are not substitutable: one can have satirical parody but not all parody is satirical. Additionally, Narelle Shaw's detailed reading of *Moonlite* involves a conspicuous act of critical elision: when noting Foster's transformation of "his source materials", she sees Foster writing "neither myth nor history, but something that necessarily combines both". This "something" is a "satirical saga of shame", yet the observation remains descriptive as no consideration of satire *per se* is forthcoming.<sup>15</sup>

10. Stephen Slemon, 'Monuments of Empire: Allegory/Counter-Discourse/Post-Colonial Writing', *Kunapipi*, Vol. 9, 3 (1987), 1-17 at 12.
11. Andrew Reimer, 'Bare-Breech's Brethren: The Novels of David Foster', *Southerly*, 2, (June, 1987) 126-144. Narelle Shaw, in *A.L.S.*, Vol. 16, No.1, May, (1993), offers a laudatory overview of Foster's work.
12. David Foster, *Moonlite*, (Ringwood: Penguin, 1981), 143/21. All further references appear in brackets within the text.
13. David Foster, 'Satire', *The Phoenix Review*, 2 (Summer, 1987), 63-79 at 65; Foster in Candida Baker, *Yacker* (Sydney: Pan, 1986), 119. For satire, see for example Northrop Frye's description of an essentially militant literary mode relying on a "technique of disintegration" (*Anatomy of Criticism*, 1957, 224-235), George Test's view of a multifarious, multi-media mode that constantly mutates and frustrates definition (*Satire: Spirit and Art*, 1991), and Peter Elkin's summation (*The Augustan Defence of Satire*, 1973, 201).
14. Helen Daniel, *Liars: Australian New Novelists*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) 82/86/90.
15. Narelle Shaw, 'The Fellowship of Light and Darkness: David Foster's *Moonlite*', *Westerly*, 3 (Spring: 1992), 55-71, 56-7.

Satire is characteristically disruptive; it tends towards irresolution and chaos; and while occupying many forms is often itself formless. Hence it is best understood as a mode rather than a specific form; a mode at once characterized by “monstrosity, doubleness and self-bifurcation”, a transgressive capacity which lends it a “deconstructive” effect, and, importantly, a political militancy which identifies it as “a site of resistance to cultural and political hegemony”.<sup>16</sup> As well, we cannot ignore Foster’s self-definition, firstly as a Juvenalian satirist — a reference to the Roman tradition of satire which tends towards the violent and obscene, with writing becoming a literary vent for aggression as opposed to the conventionally ascribed moral instruction motivating (and ‘civilizing’) the violent impulse — and secondly, his working reference to ambiguous form of “Sufic satire”, a form that *affects* a unity through the formal coupling of contrary structural elements, yet whose *effect* is one of disjunction and disunity.<sup>17</sup> This accounts for *Moonlite*’s confrontationist tone and unsettling sense of tension — a violent mood of conflict at a formal level that urgently provokes a ‘re-viewing’ of history.

Foster’s mock-historical narrative of the founding of the New World proceeds in four increasingly farcical (Berkeleyan) ‘acts’, a drama featuring the pre-historical protagonist Finbar MacDuffie, later to be re-christened ‘Moonlite’. Retracing the steps of Australia’s white European beginnings, his picaresque quest for truth takes him through human history, from Aboriginal ‘barbarism’ to crude colonial capitalism. The aggressive satire deflates the imperial enterprise, ridiculing colonial pretensions, whilst the narrative structure inverts the Whig notion of history-as-progress, seeing ironic repetition where (for example) Berkeley sees triumphant progress. The novel concludes with Australia swinging in the cultural balance, the fifth, decisive ‘act’ still to be played; however, what is certain is that Australia must embrace its post-coloniality — must break colonial ties and seek true independence. Such is the force of Foster’s anti-imperial critique, that any other course would, at the very least, incur the satirist’s undying wrath.

Foster’s novel incorporates two levels of critique, both structural and more immediately textual. Regarding the latter, we note that the satirical voice openly

16. Connery, B. A., and Combe, K. (eds.), *Theorizing Satire: Essays in Literary Criticism*, (London: Macmillan, 1995), 2/8-11.

17. Foster (1987), *op. cit.*, 66. Foster employs Joseph Hall’s distinction between “toothless” and “biting” satire, the former referring to the softer Horatian style, characterised by its use of “wordplay, parody, humour and many other rhetorical devices ... [but steering] well clear of philosophy and obscenity” (64-8). There is, as he insists, “no sense of parody in Juvenal”. For Sufic satire, see the introduction to *The Adventures of Christian Rosy Cross* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1986), x.

identifies its target — imperial Britain — mercilessly ridiculing the Empire's activities. At several points, the authorial voice intrudes into the narrative, in one instance sardonically informing the reader that "Britain claims the discovery of the New West Highlands in much the same way as a schoolboy claims the discovery of a dead cat in a busy street; and for much the same reasons, no one who knows this claim to be false would think of disputing it" (108). This is a direct critical attack, explicitly naming its target and bluntly ridiculing the historical pretensions of the once-great imperial power. Elsewhere, this imperial power is portrayed as a metaphorical merchant, hoarding the rejects and enemies of society like so much detritus, and in effect creating what is described as "an excellent imperial rubbish tip" in the Dominions (107). In this way the colony doubles as both a redoubt and a resource: the assembled detritus becomes an offensive fortification and also a ready supply of "Caucasian cannon fodder and chief defender of the pound sterling". This, it is mordantly claimed, is an historically predictable arrangement: "If the history of past empires is any guide, the New West Highlands will not only accede to this honour, but demand it with enthusiasm and boast of it with relish" (ibid.).

Again, the writing is openly hostile; indeed, the attack is both aggressive and sweeping, condemning imperial power and colonial subjects in the one vitriolic breath. Whilst overall the novel works in more sophisticated ways, the satire in this instance is pointedly anti-imperial. This is not urbane and witty raillery, but undisguised rancour; not allusive conceits but blunt and belittling metaphors. Yet there is humour in the savagery; a satisfying sense of justice is evoked as the satire comically condemns its targets. The following description of English gentlemen as Yahooish degenerates at once amuses in its baleful irreverence and resolutely condemns the imperial emissaries of 'civilisation':

... seventy years after colonization it is rare to find a man who can name a single indigenous plant or bird. The English gentleman in new surroundings will always replace them as quickly as he can with a facsimile of his own ancestral seat, complete to the very vermin, and far from deriving any benefit from his love of nature, foreign species are forced to contend with a ruthless policy of depredatory rape, that must be seen to be believed. But then, not every man will leave a toilet seat as he would wish to find it, and the ideal society would contain no English gentleman. (140-1)

The parodic Johnsonian language accentuates the ridicule, the 'low' mode of obscenity blending with a 'higher' stylistic facility to maximise the effect. Yet there

is also an overtone of topicality, the account of past events (colonial incursion) being given a 'here-and-nowness'. However 'historical' the facts may be, a sense of immediacy is conveyed by the critical attack. This is characteristically satirical: the express purpose or intention (critically "outré" terms) is to attack and demolish, an aggressive impulse concerned in turn with contemporary particularities, an insistence upon historical specificity. In this instance the immediacy of tone reminds us that the colonial past is very much an on-going fact of the present. Expressing then a violent Juvenalian urge to deflate any residual imperial self-delusions, the authorial voice offers an historical summary, in which the injustices of the colonial past are not left to speak for themselves but instead are *spoken of* in openly derisive and accusatory tones: "On close examination the voices claiming on Britain's behalf the discovery of the New West Highlands, prove to be those of prison governors and army officers, anxious for promotion" (108).

The exalted idea of 'the empire' is at heart a self-serving mission for bureaucratic arrivistes and opportunists. The satire operates to correct our reliance on the 'givenness' of historical accounts — those narratives that stand as cultural touchstones, telling us how we came to be, and thus who we are. Such explicit criticism, in so clearly identifying its target, may suggest a certain crudity of technique (which in itself is not entirely inconsistent with Foster's own definition<sup>18</sup>); however, this is but one dimension of the novel. Upon further analysis, we can see that the novel betrays considerable complexity, both structurally and technically, compounding the force of this 'counter-discursive' critique of history.

Reading as a farce on the imperial seizure of the New World, the central theme of this picaresque novel is the crisis of colonization and emigration. In effect, Foster is 're-covering' the story of white Australia's origins — the story of the past is mockingly re-told and so reclaimed. Such an appropriative reclamation, in being consistent with the tactic of mockery intrinsic to satire, involves a corrupting of the official narrative on a structural level. Structurally then, *Moonlite* pairs both mythical ('pre-historical') and historical narratives and draws correspondences between fictional and historical characters. As Narelle Shaw argues, the Highland and Island Clearances between 1780 and 1854, conducted euphemistically in the name of Improvement, are paralleled with Israel's liberation from Egypt in the Old

18. Foster likens the 'true satirist' to "a street fighter who will happily kick you in the balls and gouge you in the eyes" (Foster 1987: 65). Michael Coffey (*Roman Satire*, London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1976) refers to Juvenal as being impelled by "*indignantio*, a clamorous anger", resulting in rhetorical "exercises of declamation ... [at once] impressive and shocking" (123-24).

Testament; similarly, “the mooted federation of the Australian colonies, at the dawn of a new century, is imbued with the apocalyptic potential of Christ’s Resurrection”.<sup>19</sup> We can take this notion of allegorical parallels a step further, observing that these two narrative worlds are strategically confused, thereby begetting an *ironic* allegory of colonial history and a travesty of European mythology.

The irony works to undermine historicist ‘readings’ of the past not through a superimposition but rather a *collision* of narrative forms. Where two levels of meaning are signalled, neither in fact can be sustained. Thus a fundamental conflict and consequent destabilising tension is created: the forcing of these two narratives into or against each other denies any allegorical or rational ‘reading’ of history. For D. R. Burns and Kenneth Gelder, this gestures towards a condition of self-contradiction at a very fundamental level.<sup>20</sup> Yet Gelder’s idea (after Paul De Man) of a “paradoxical logic” in which there is a “simultaneous movement” of contrary tendencies (whilst overlooking the fact that paradox and contradiction are not synonymous) suggests a self-negating stasis, whereas appreciating this enveloping irony as an aspect of the novel’s satirical nature alerts us to Foster’s prompting towards an imaginative ‘re-vision’ of Australian history.

Considering the text as such directs us to what Narelle Shaw hints at by way of conclusion to her argument: “whether it be pagan or Christian mythology at issue, the underlying format is circular ... on a large scale, a central antagonism between mythology and history would appear to have dissolved, with history abandoning its linear progression in favour of a system of recurrent phases — cause for critical concern in the novel” (61). Shaw leaves this as a recommendation; however, in taking the active critical step, we can see that such circularity does not so much mark a dissolution of the “antagonism” between two contrasting narratives, but instead heightens the sense of tension in order to provoke a critical understanding, which in turn gestures towards potentially new ideas about the past. This is consistent with Foster’s stated idealism:

19. Shaw, (1992), op. cit. 55-6. Shaw sees *Moonlite* “rehearsing a creation myth — an inevitably flawed one” (56). Gelder and Salzman (*The New Diversity: Australian Fiction, 1970-88* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble Pub., 1989) have also noted that the historical level of the text relates to the Highland and Island Clearances (149), and while Shaw refers to John Prebble’s *The Highland Clearances*, Gelder and Salzman recommend reading Don Watson’s *Caledonia Australis* in tandem with *Moonlite*.

20. D. R. Burns, ‘The Coming of the “Contained Account” *Moonlite*, David Foster’s Landmark Novel’, *Overland*, No. 129, (1992), 62-67, and Kenneth Gelder, ‘The ‘Self-Contradictory’ Fiction of David Foster’ in *Aspects of Australian Fiction*, (ed.) Alan Brissenden, (Nedlands: University of WA Press, 1994), 149-59.

If one could do anything productive at this point as a Western person or as a citizen of a dying world, which I have no doubt that we are, we can prepare the way ... for a new philosophy with a new system of ethics ... [a] new ethics that will have ... to be so revolutionary they may have to discount the value of human life ... I have some intimations of what kind of changes would be necessary, but it is a fictional task for me.<sup>21</sup>

The (con)fusing of the narratives of myth and history creates then, in the first instance, a different temporality. History is of course synonymous with the modern secular sense of linear chronological time — the measurable ‘progressive’ time of epochs, eras, and centuries — whereas myth gestures towards an ahistoricity, an appealing ‘timelessness’. This creates a fictional blend corresponding with what Paul Ricoeur sees as a “third, historical time” being evoked in fiction, “a mixed temporality” that combines “cosmological time and phenomenological time”. If the calendar connects these two temporalities (the “date” marking both “a cosmological instant and a phenomenological present”), and consequently “all truth-claims of historical knowledge are then related to the constraints imposed by the calendar on the notion of documentary evidence”, it is fiction that can defy these “constraints”, opening up all kinds of “imaginative variations” and “exploring innumerable qualitative properties of time”.<sup>22</sup>

In *Moonlite*, the fictive order of time appears contradictory. On the one hand, ‘Time’ would seem to be running out, or running *toward* apocalyptic denouement. This impending sense of apocalypse alludes not only to the Judeo-Christian notion of history running linearly from Creation to Apocalypse, but also to the onward-rushing sense of modern time — the impulsion towards some technologically revolutionised future rather than entropic expiration. In the long first ‘half’ of the novel, the very length of narrative time spent in the ‘primitive’ world of the indigenous MacEsuas’ evokes the ‘timelessness’ of pre-modern, pre-industrial civilisation (the atemporality of mythic consciousness). This evocation tempts our desires for escape from time (to Edenic repose); yet this is the ‘real’ historical world, as the arrival of Donald Destruction, father of Flora and emissary of change, reminds us. Donald’s presence marks the historically decisive moment of transition.<sup>23</sup> When asked by a native spokesman to leave them alone “for two weeks, while they finish the killing” as they “do not wish to catch the strangler’s cough now!”, the interloper

21. Foster in E. A. Travers, ‘On The Philosophical: An Interview with David Foster’, *Westerly*, 1 (Autumn, 1992), 71-78, at 74-5.

22. Paul Ricoeur, *History And Truth*, trans. C. A. Kelby (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 98.

Donald offers only a mugwumpish silence: "Donald grunts but he feels at home already, and does not wish to side with the present against the past" (32).

The historical moment of colonial invasion is given further dramatic emphasis through the caricature of the pioneering missionary, The Reverend Stewart Campbell, depicted, with exaggerated symbolism, enacting the discovery of the lost civilisation. It is significant that at the approach of this stranger, who wears "a big smile on his face" and is seen "consulting his timepiece, a fobwatch of immense dimensions" (62), the sea "recoils" — an instinctive flinching at this violating presence. Indeed, Flora, watching from on high, loses the sound of the music of the spirits at precisely the moment that the intruder's whaleboat is lowered, "jerking and tossing from a creaking davit" (62). Harmony gives way to this new graceless, tuneless presence: the music is, as the novel says, "gone for all time".

It is not hard to see this as a metaphor for the imposition of the Western temporality, the characteristic linear 'time' of History. More tellingly, the ship, the visiting party and the gallant leader form a stock image in what has been called imperial history, the "kind of history, which reduces space to a stage ... [and] ... that pays attention to events unfolding in time alone ..." <sup>24</sup> It is a burlesque depiction of the foundational event, of the historic moment of discovery by the intrepid explorer. The ridicule gains added poignancy when we note the dramatic irony of the situation, for the blustering, self-important missionary, contrary to his own aggrandising belief, is not the first to discover the untouched primitive world, nor will he be the last. From this moment, as 'Act Three' commences, the temporal rush into the modern 'present' is more 'realistically' evoked, with the narrative gaining in momentum as it careens farcically towards the 'apocalyptic' finale.

And yet, against this sense of accelerated change through time there is counterpointed the notion of temporal repetition. For as much as the End looms, there is the possibility that nothing *can* change. Time in a sense, goes nowhere; or to put it another way, history, both sacred and secular, would seem to be absurdly recurrent. Thus 'progress' — be it the notion of Destiny or the belief in meliorative change *through* time — is seen as nothing but a 'myth'. And so, if the novel

23. The theme of transition, and accompanying inversion, is central to *Moonlite*: consider the parodically rationalistic argument about the dangers of conversion-as-transition (the once pious and intellectually ardent Finbar will shortly become inebriate Mungo McCallum's drinking partner (156-7)), and the overturning of the brig *John Barleycorn*, marking the transition from the 'upper' to the 'lower' hemisphere with the image of inversion ("Finbar hangs from the floor by his thumbs" (170)).

24. Paul Carter, *The Road To Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), xvi.

commences 'in the beginning ...', as it were, amongst the 'primitive' indigenes of edenic Hiphoray ("still known as the island on the edge of the world"; a place which "has a reputation for distracting sailors ... "There is something here that exceeds the imagination" (24-5)), it ends in the equally barbarous 'New World'. Rather than rising up from his so-called 'savagery', Finbar falls (or is pushed as it happens) into the crudely avaricious present of modern history. Finbar's free-falling from the 'timelessness' of his primitive world into the apocalyptic time of modern history, corresponding with his rapid descent from primitive mysticism into a debasing secular materialism, intensifies the sense of contradiction, for we have both the notion of revolutionary change and ironic repetition.

However, to make the critical distinction, we 'have' neither in any complete sense, but instead behold a paradox, the 'truth' behind which is not so much a matter of logic but of imaginative potential. In other words, this sense of contradiction is only apparent, a satirical strategy producing a narrative tension, a point of 'crisis' which will (ideally) induce in the reader a preparedness for conceptual transition — for an imaginative 're-viewing' of history as a meaning-conferring narrative form. In a dramatically immediate sense, Finbar views a scene that bespeaks the 'true' meaning of imperial history — the barbarism that underlies the exulted sense of imperial purpose. Having arrived at the abyssal 'ends of the earth' — the bepitted antipodean goldfields — and soon to sacrifice his "imaginary component" to facilitate his resurrection as monomaniacal 'messiah' — a modern politician — Finbar observes the spectre of end-game capitalism, the spiritual destiny of modern society depicted in this "prodigious scene":

To Finbar ... the whole scene has about it an epic futility ... the men, blithely scrutinizing each and every stone, before transferring it to a huge pile while a dray stands by with more; the horse, plodding around in the small circles — actually, if driving of horses in small circles were outlawed, then not only pug mills, but the reef mines as well would have to close, for the kebble is hauled up the shaft by a whim that operates in the same way.(182)

The modern quest for wealth despoliates, bespeaking a spiritual desolation at the teleological 'end' of the process — the 'reality' of modern history. The animals, in mechanically describing "small circles", literally embody the "epic futility" of the enterprise: "[here] man has no goal but to drive out the animals, uproot the trees,

remove the soil and plunder the bedrock" (ibid.).<sup>25</sup> Emphasis is added, to what must be seen as a kind of cultural *reductio ad absurdum*, by the reborn Finbar, who astutely observes that "sheer cupidity is this lot's LCD — why else would they be here?" (218). In this final 'act', many a verbal exchange finishes with the statement, "That's all right: I've been through that", or similarly, "It's only a stage you go through" (177-85), suggesting that experience has become historically exhausted, or rather unceasingly recurrent. There is a downward move towards a predictable end; indeed, in accordance with the novel's controlling metaphor, the narrative moves metaphorically and literally from 'up' in the northern hemisphere to 'down' in the antipodes. And if Finbar's epiphany at the foot of the 'Sink to Rise' mine enacts a complementary upward movement, his rebirth as cynical politician ('saviour') cancels the 'hope' of redemption.

In fact, Finbar comes to embody the true end of civilisation — the 'meaninglessness' of a collective creed of greed-for-gain. A refugee from the 'stoneage', once gifted with vision, whose name euphonically suggests the mythical hero Sinbad, sailor of the Seven Seas, and who might be of a higher order — a "man of the Sidhe!" as Mungo MacCallum realizes (159) — Finbar's apotheosis, subsequent assassination and swift removal from "Boomtown" represent the failure of the 'old' myths, both Christian and pre-historical. For Finbar mockingly personifies both the classical Orphean mythical figure who must enter the underworld in his quest for truth, and a Christ figure whose sacrificial death offers meaning in redemption. That he arrives not at revelation or profound knowledge but epistemological doubt, alcoholism and spiritual dereliction questions the relevance of such traditional forms.

Compounding this irony is the sense of circularity, reinforced in several ways within the novel. Rhetorically, we note the journey commences in the 'linguistic beginning', the inhabitants of the mythical Eden that is Finbar's Island home speaking an archaic quasi-biblical dialect. Arriving at the (mock) apocalyptic End, the final admonitory words, redolent of Christian 'Old Testament' mythology, warn us of imminent catastrophe. And as suggested in the above passage ("If the history of past empires is any guide ..."), history might be 'read' as repetitive. We also note

25. Henry Handel Richardson describes the same "scene" with equal force: "The whole scene had that strange, repellent ugliness that goes with breaking up and throwing into disorder what has been sanctified as final, and belongs, in particular, to the wanton disturbing of earth's gracious, green-spread crust ... From this scene rose a ... a wholly mechanical din" (*The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1982, 10-12).

that the novel opens and closes with a funeral scene; we learn that the hero's quest takes him from one form of primitivism to another 'modern' version (and from supposed savagery to the equally base condition of an utterly cynical politician); and ultimately, we see that identical historical actions frame the novel: the first 'Act' captures emigration as an "historical moment of crisis, beginning around the time (post-Waverley) of the Highland and island clearances",<sup>26</sup> the last, frenzied 'Act' concluding with a later emigratory crisis — the gold rushes in New South Wales. Here, the victims of colonisation ironically go on to become the perpetrators of the very same act, a point corresponding with Foster's statement that "the basic idea of *Moonlite* [was] to show the ironic parallels of the dispossessed Scots in their turn dispossessing the Aborigines, and anything else was subsidiary to that".<sup>27</sup>

This idea of circularity works against the sense of security a cyclical ('seasonal') concept of history provided for 'pre-historical' and medieval societies, and against any reassuring notion of progress. Instead, much like Finbar abandoning his search for the mystery of the rainbow and ultimately forsaking his "imaginative component", the reader begins to feel deprived of any hope, of imaginative possibility. What such mocking negation implies is a nihilism consistent with a sense of *contemptus mundi*. The inherently critical (because sceptical) irony, intrinsic to paradox, may impart feelings of despair and hopelessness, unleavened by the absurdist humour. Certainly, this ironic view corresponds with what can be called, in narratological terms, a satirical mode of history. As Hayden White observes, the ironic view, characterised by a "debilitating double vision", is allied to the mode of emplotment known as satire, a form conscious of its own inadequacy and therefore of the "ultimate inadequacy" of all other visions of the world. White himself extrapolates from Northrop Frye's assertion that "the archetypal theme of irony and satire is *sparagmos* ... the sense that heroism and effective action are absent ... and that confusion and anarchy reign over the world".<sup>28</sup>

And yet, ultimately, while Foster's novel appears to reach a paralysing state of self-contradiction on so many levels, the novel, as a satire, is focussed determinedly on possibilities. Deploying what Helen Daniel calls (after M. C. Esher) the "loop" of paradox, or the "[L]ie of fiction ... containing the doubleness of truth and falsity",<sup>29</sup>

26. Gelder, K. and Salzman, P. *The New Diversity: Australian Fiction, 1970-88*, op. cit., 149.

27. Foster in Travers (1992), op. cit. 78.

28. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins's University Press, 1972). 231-33; Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 192.

29. Daniel (1988), op. cit., 4.

the novel militantly excites epistemological conflict in order to beckon more relevant and enriching conceptions of history and cultural identity. In this we can clearly discern *Moonlite*'s political 'purpose', for the anti-imperial hostility evident in the text gives the novel not so much the traditional sense of moral purpose as an orientating focus — a critical 'centre' or argument from which to pivot.

To posit such a 'centre' does not deny *Moonlite*'s complexity. As suggested, the counterposing of Whig (and Judeo-Christian) historicist concepts of history and the schematic patterns of mythological narrative produces a sense of tension-inducing paradox. On this intratextual level, the effect is to deny, through this counterposition, the possibility of traditional or expected meanings, an effect compounded by *Moonlite*'s increasing farcicality. And yet a further level of conflict arises through the metafictional play between the intra- and extratextual levels; between the text and its referent — the historical events pertaining to colonisation. And so, whilst the absurdist manner of the text signals its fictionality, and by extension the textuality of history, the novel is simultaneously evoking 'real' historical events, both past and (by implication) present. Finally, there is no postmodern sense of 'playful' self-negation, but rather satire's characteristic doubleness which plays aggression and rationality together so as to prompt, through the realization of a state of crisis, a reaching beyond the agonism or stasis of the apparent 'self-contradictory' condition.

The obvious example of this gesture towards 'transcendence' is found in the philosophical argument entertained in the novel. Referring to *Moonlite*'s spiritually debilitating condition of being in "the two mind state", Ar Wat counsels the questing (anti) hero in certain philosophical truths:

"Ah the Tlute the Tlute — who knows what the tlute really is my son?  
Gotta holda two views at once. The Tlute is ... a combination ...  
"So there's hope, Ar Wat. May I quote you on that?"  
"I think not much hope mate. The Secler Art is not for saint of sinner, gotta  
be past all that." (198-99)

The necessary action is to transcend the traditional dualities; what is required is not (passive) hope but a more active imaginative exertion, a capacity born of the realisation of the limitations of the received epistemological and ontological traditions — of, in *Moonlite*'s case, a realisation of the "incapacity of language to deal with the complexity of life, when categories become fluid" (207).

This philosophical dimension finds an 'earthly' correspondent in Finbar's historical analysis. Flushed with scholarly ardour during his comically absurd journey into the 'darkness' of British academia in search of the mysteries of the rainbow, Finbar speculates on his own historical destiny. He concocts a sophisticated, if not sophistical argument, turning on the notion of the 'oracle' of probability. Using the statistician's analysis of the tossed coin and the likelihood of an even ratio of heads-to-tails, this oracle (it is said) informs the consulting believers that "what has been must be". Satirizing academic historicist theories, Finbar offers the appropriate metaphor to illustrate the weighty concept of 'probability';

[It] is like a learned professor, whose vast, imposing historical theses become, in transit from the past, increasingly suspect and threadbare, and smaller and smaller, till after a final wild senescence, during which their teeth fall out and their limbs fly off in every direction, they collapse and expire at the feet of that unfortunate presently sitting in class, in respect of whom they are both utterly meaningless and totally irrelevant, like a runaway velocipede careering down a hill, or a dead planet hurtling into a star. The past stops here (161).

In philosophical and historical terms, Finbar ultimately sees that the control of information about possible outcomes encourages submission and resignation in people who have come to believe that they have *no choice*. And what is more pertinent, the present is shown to be the ultimate arbiter: not only is any representation of the past made only in the eyes of the present, but the present is the 'zero ground' or final horizon of any historicist system. The present is the pragmatist's reference point. Continuing the argument, and with historical accuracy, Finbar links the lie of scientific probability with the myth of spiritual predestination, consequently enlightening his teacher; "You see Professor, we are those coins, free and unconstrained by nature, but because o' the curse of indoctrination, never free to exercise a choice. If you had seen what the Christian religion did to my poor homeland! "(162)

If, by his own admission, this explanation is formulated from "a combination of statistics and specious logic", he nonetheless arrives (paradoxically) at an historical truth, for the taking of the New World by the forces of civilisation is effected through the imposition of a Western mythology. Which is to say capitalism and Christianity are firm allies, as demonstrated by the proselytising Thomas Lobster, who exhorts the 'savages' to "Cast off the shackles of the past ... [and] leap into the

present, in the confidence that those whose industry and diligence suit them to their task, need never perish, but have everlasting life!"(16-17). That this mythology is wholly incongruous in the New World is argued by the miraculously reformed Mungo McCallum, who forces Moonlite to concede that a "church that celebrates Christmas at the summer solstice" is demonic, given that this is an inversion of the logic justifying such a celebration (208-9). As Foster insists, the Judeo-Christian religion is inappropriate because in "celebrating the birth of the sun god at the summer solstice you are celebrating absolutely nothing".<sup>30</sup>

Foster makes much of the fundamental illogicality undermining the insistent attempts to impose traditional European myths upon a geographically antipodeal country. Finbar descends into the underworld both figuratively and literally — he has gone *down* to the antipodes and *down into* the ground by way of a mine called the 'Sink to Rise' — and yet, his journey ends absurdly and surreally. The quest as traditional narrative *leitmotif* becomes a saturnalian inversion of order and progress, underlining the fact that the culture brought by the colonists, from its very foundational beliefs upward, is unsuited to the 'New World'.<sup>31</sup>

What Foster notes also is a further comical historical irony, for the discovery of gold in the colony actually undermines imperial design. Suddenly the penal-colony-cum-rubbish-tip becomes "a treasure trove and cynosure for every rogue in the west", a place where "it's possible to envisage a total collapse of order and the eventual emergence of a culture that signs its name back to front and upside down, a veritable thief's kitchen where virtue is mocked, breeding is reviled, discipline flouted and work eschewed" (108). Here Foster exaggeratedly plays on the idea of the antipodean anti-world, a negative and mocking mirror-image of the empire that travesties notions of civilisation; a place where, as Finbar learns, the local currency is rum — you don't pay to drink but pay *with* drink — and where social order is inverted, as demonstrated in a baffling show he views in which "the thief appeared to be the hero and the policeman the villain" (173). Earlier, in what is his first step in rustication, Finbar is sent to the island of Conmore to receive the guidance of The Reverend Clarke MacCain. This island has been a victim of "the great colonisation" (116), a sarcastic reference to the unintended ironies of imperialism: "On Conmore, as elsewhere in the isles, the wicked prosper, the virtuous die in pain, the

30. Travers (1992); *op. cit.*, 77.

31. In Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1988), Oscar Hopkins, bearing a distinct similarity to Finbar as a pious picaro destined for the antipodes, embodies the same blindness to the existence of stories pre-dating his own 'myth' (492).

industrious gain nothing by their industry, and now it seems those transported for evil deeds are to enjoy a head start over those left behind" (110-11).

Of course, Foster's satire caricatures romanticised notions of national character as well as ridiculing imperial activities. In a similar 'double movement', the 'philosophical truths' that Finbar arrives at during his tenure in the 'darkness' of Enlightenment academia, quickly become redundant as he proceeds on his farcical way, dispensing with 'answers' and 'reason' in his descent towards depravity. A further instance of radical and apparently self-negating 'transitions', the novel's 'doubleness' works to maximise the structural and textual tension. And, as argued, the resulting condition of epistemological crisis is a re-visionary strategy; in this case, the effect is one of forcing us to both look at our present cultural position *within* history — to see that there is a cultural incongruity in evidence *at present* — and to dispute the logic of official history. Such history is, in many instances, linear and teleological, constructing events according to cause-and-effect logic; indeed, Donald's habit of "letting one thing exlude another, equally likely" (53) represents the 'exclusive' imperial/Western form of thinking as opposed to the inclusive indigenous approach. Such mono-'logic' absolves the powers that be of any responsibility, as events can be said to have occurred ineluctably. Yet, the point is not to refuse historical knowledge, but rather to approach it critically and sceptically.

This prompting towards a critical perspective is borne out when "the history of past empires" is referred to as the informative guide on matters of colonial self-sacrifice (107). The historical record is looked to as a verifying reference point, thus challenging readers to draw on their own historical knowledge and confront the satirist's mordant accusations concerning unquestioning colonial fealty to the Mother Country. It provokes argument, and foregrounds the act of interpretation in relation to history. What stirs the argument further is Foster's derisory portrayal of the fundamental pragmatism of human beings. In sardonically portraying the natives as being complicit in their own decline, any overly simple victor/victim scenario is disallowed. Equated metaphorically with scavenging gulls who have promptly forsaken their proud heritage of intrepid hunting, we learn that the natives repel the visitors with ardent displays of commercial instinct: "... by the end of the week, the cynics and connoisseurs know its time to leave [as] the natives are already demanding a fee to be shown over the ship's engine room, and are vending weeds and stones taken from the shoreline ... "(80). This caricaturing of the 'savages' is part of Foster's mock-anthropological account (his "expert bullshitting" as Burns has it

(66)); and yet, the mockery not only elicits wry laughter, but also works *satirically* — *Moonlite's* confrontationalist criticism provokes in turn the critical sensibilities of the reader.

And so, the novel's strategy of paradox, its ironic view of history and all-inclusive farce, rather than confusing or even cancelling the critical capacity, actually induce a state of crisis — a disturbing disunity and tension. It is a satirical shock tactic, employed, in this case, to alert us to our cultural predicament. As the novel's last words exhort Australians, in portentously mock-Biblical language, to assert cultural independence, they are also, in effect, urging Australia to break the historical cycle of imitation and cultural fealty — to recommence history, so to speak, and so become truly post-colonial:

“... yet clingest Thou, terrified, to the Old Way, worshipping The Travesty at two removes ... Thou hast had Time Enough, and the patience of Thy Father is exhausted.” (223).

The satirist, mockingly playing God, passes judgement on both Empire and subjects alike, morally condemning the very historical act of imperialism. And whereas it can be argued that “the impatience of the final utterance ... [is] directed, not only at the hesitant socio-political entity (of now as well), but also at the dominant form of the local novel (1960-circa 1980), with its obsessive, increasingly static focus on ‘Australia’, that word which opens up onto limitless spiritual and verbal extravagance”,<sup>32</sup> the protest goes further, insisting on the re-conceiving of history and the need to reclaim history *now*. By rendering history as a satirical ‘mythistory’, *Moonlite* succeeds as a post-colonial critique which will, *ideally*, prompt a collective ‘re-viewing’ of the past.

For Foster, Australia must recognise its historical potential and avail itself of cultural opportunities, for having been divested of “Christianity long before the rest of the West” through an unsuccessful cultural transposition, Australians have “an opportunity here of formulating a different system unencumbered, perhaps, by some of the chains that still shackle Europeans and Americans to the old world”.<sup>33</sup> *Moonlite* impatiently pushes us to the awareness that we have reached our point of historical transition. Fittingly the final satirical exhortation does not urge us to return to a conservative morality, but rather impels us to imaginatively seize the cultural initiative, to re-start history through the reclaiming of our cultural selves.

32. Burns, (1992), op. cit., 65-6.

33. Foster in Travers (1992), op. cit., 77.

## Summer Holidays

As a late afternoon seabreeze  
rattled the sleepout's louvres,  
Father sang—  
    *"It's illegal, it's immoral,  
    Or it makes you fat ..."*

The air smelt of sundried seaweed.

Our long shadows did  
crude tableaux on the grass.  
'Go on, dare ya!'  
but the girls didn't bite.

Overpainted for daylight,  
Mother sulked in her sundress,  
swivelling ice  
with a red-nailed finger.

Like a blowfish,  
our host sucked air  
to fire-up the barbecue.  
Father sang on, oblivious.

We shared our fourth jug  
of ice-cubed raspberry cordial,  
clinking our glasses together.

'The future,' I toasted.  
The other kids just  
looked at me.

## mending the dingo fence

You see him coming  
with your hungry eyes  
so you slink away  
watch from a distance

the boundary rider mutters  
pulls to the roadside  
in a storm of dust  
climbs from the shade  
of his four wheel drive  
to scratch his bum  
and scrape the sweat  
from the twin grottos  
that are his eyes checking  
the tensility of lines  
the bloodied words falling  
between syllables of wood  
sagging submissively  
in red raw knee pose  
of unanswered prayer

he walks the lonely soil  
and from his footprints  
white bones grow like wildflowers

he tries to make sense  
out of fence-post calligraphy  
then looks to the sky for release

he does not hurry

his commas  
are the bent backs  
of farmers  
the stiff fingers  
of ploughs  
scratching dry surface

he does not see  
the outstretched wings  
of a rosella  
perching on the rusty rooftop  
of his Range Rover

words bleed from his palms  
as he casts off the rotting poems  
throws them one by one  
to the ground  
exposing a crown of thorns  
thin wire lines  
rich in jagged serif

his departure  
is marked by a plume of red dust  
which settles like dirt  
on an open grave

then you come  
with long drooling  
tongue of desire  
stand in corrugated pose  
eyeing the bloodied mesh  
before retreating tiredly  
back into your bush asylum

the boundary rider  
has left gaps in places  
where loose ideas might  
breakthrough  
like a dingo  
wandering through thick scrub  
in his timeless search  
for the food  
of open spaces

## **mending the dingo fence 2**

they come in hordes  
large red roos  
in their hundreds  
their tails beating  
spinifex and clouds  
as they cross  
a waterless plain

they come in zigs  
and zags  
moving up  
and down  
through a maze  
of shallow gullies  
and rough cracks  
like needles  
stitching the open scars  
of a treeless plain

when they hit the wall  
in full flight  
their bodies  
in sudden desperate leaps  
criss-cross  
like wires on a fence  
and rusty barbed stars  
scrape the soft fur  
leave flesh hanging  
like crimson underwear  
from a clothes-line

sometimes  
the red horde leaves  
the bodies of martyrs  
impaled on star-stakes  
the legacy of those  
who did not make it

the crush  
of their desire  
for primal space  
makes a dent  
which lifts the fence  
from the soil  
like an unwanted weed

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## No More Cat Poems

A neighbour had found you under their Fiat  
and passed you across in a sort of body bag  
heavy with your thirteen years.  
Your clamped mouth was bearded  
with blood.  
Your spongy paws tucked beneath you  
as if asleep before the fire.  
Your black Batman mask lolled against the plastic  
giving everything away.  
No more nipping at my ankles.  
No more bodily gifts left in the bathtub.  
All your chances gone.  
Only night held you back.  
The next morning I slid you from the bag  
settling you in the warm earth.  
Death had stiffened its resolve.  
Your eyes had glassed over.  
And beneath your soft black fur  
the deep chill of space.

## Walls

Briefly the walls part: her voice races  
like a racing commentator's at the same  
pitch of urgency but in an altogether  
different key; a crazed syntax over  
a stammering male voice that tries  
to ease her down but only winds her up: there  
are hints of betrayal, something about  
a lost key, hot shrapnel of accusations that  
find their mark — then silence ... till it  
begins again crescendoing in clichés of crashing  
dishes & slamming doors but then  
a banshee wail that has no place in suburbia;  
finally the background hum of traffic, the rustling  
of wattlebirds in the boughs, a neighbour's  
urbane conversation, reassert themselves &  
the walls close around her.

## On the Beach

It was beached-up,  
the whale, the thing I'd thought  
to put down a hook for.

It was huge,  
but not too huge to pity:  
I stared, watching its bulk

settle down into sand,  
seeing its eyes stare unfeeling  
at people who tried (two

dying: bad hearts I suppose)  
to get it back deathless  
into the sea.

It was huge,  
& it died there, on the beach,  
when I was young and growing,

just beginning to see.

## A Hamlet Story

THE school marked the beginning of the hamlet of railway cottages. It stood within the red brick perimeter fence. Classes of fifty or sixty children comforted those trying to keep warm. Few overcoats were seen on the playground. The bulk of the navy blue overcoat belied Josephine's small frame beneath it. Her parents had bought it two sizes too big so that she could grow into it or hand it down to one of her younger sisters. Jo led her siblings in through the gate, like a mother duck whose brood had outgrown her. The hand held bell was rung from the top of the stairs and the trickle of children grouped in a teardrop to the centre of the playground.

The smell from the boys toilets warned anyone off from looking behind them. Jo's brothers urinated over the toilet seat at home. Jo thought it had something to do with not sitting down to pee. The monotonous morning prayers echoed as she climbed over the red brick fence to look for Billy.

The men shunted carriages snaking them up to the diesel. All were padded to keep out the cold, their breath magnified in the sunlight. Jo crouched in the shadows behind the signal shed till she could make her way along the track to the back of her house. Her own heavy breath warmed her face as she waited to run. As the carriage shunted she pounced, an arm caught her leg, her torso fell and she was pinned by a flimsily clad youth.

"Bloody hell!" she hit the ground. "What are you doing here?" Josephine quickly kicked the freckled faced boy and wrestled him to the ground, just as she had seen on the television in the shop window in the main street. The crowd around the shop loved the midgets.

"Where's our coal?" Jo kept her voice down in case one of the men from the yard had heard them.

"What coal?" he kept her at arm's length.

“Billy Conway, don’t lie your Protestant head off to me. We need that coal, my mum’s sick.” Jo ballooned the coat to make her look fatter than she was.

Billy had heard that Jo’s mum was ill. It was a small neighbourhood, even if the Catholics didn’t mix socially with the Protestants, news travelled fast.

“I didn’t take your bloody coal, but I might know who did.” Billy stood his ground.

“Liar, take me to the coal and I won’t say anything to anyone OK?” They were a matched pair of orange haired children.

Blood had covered the kitchen floor the day before. It had scared Jo to see her mother frightened. Her father ran to the scream. Her brothers and sisters disappeared into the cavernous little houses, taken by well meaning neighbours. In the silent house Josephine mopped the floor and listened to the muffled voices of the doctor and her father. Her mother was sick, she didn’t know what kind of sick, just sick was the explanation given. Father O’Brien had stayed for over an hour and never once mentioned that the whole family had missed Sunday Mass. His usually rotund face elongated to melancholia.

The clothes hung like stalagmites frozen to the clothes line that stretched across the narrow yard. The sun blinked on the far horizon. The smell of burning coal assaulted the noses of anyone who braved the early morning trip to the outhouse at the end of the vegetable patch. The park at the end of the street was covered in a blanket of ice.

The coal mines in Lithgow supplied the burgeoning Japanese steel mills. The railway workers always managed to send some coal up the mountains to Bathurst to keep their cottages’ pot-bellied stoves warm in the white winters. Post-war diesel engines now replaced most of the steam trains, once a common sight on the tracks at the back of their houses.

Josephine dropped the coal bucket by the shed before she closed the outhouse door. As the eldest, her job was to replenish the diminished coal supply and to poke and prod the kitchen stove till life sparked in the embers. Jo’s father had built a shed next to the outhouse for the purpose of keeping the precious coal dry, and out of temptation of the Conways. Their reputation for borrowing and never repaying was well known by all in the precinct. Mr Conway was often found asleep in the bandstand covered in beer stains while his wife tried to feed and clothe five wild children. Billy Conway always teased Jo. The week before they had spat insults ferociously.

Staring at the empty shed, Jo’s heart beat fiercely. She thought of the retribution

she would mete out to Billy Conway.

As the shunted carriage moved towards the end of the yards the children hid in its shadow until they reached the dilapidated old sheds. They ferreted inside one enormous shed which stood apart, the tracks leading to the barn-like doors intact. The smudged light outlined the monolith and Jo stood in silent awe of the now cold steam engine.

"How did you know about this?" Jo whispered reverently.

"I hang around and explore the sheds. This old bloke has been repairing and cleaning it. I don't think he has family so he spends a lot of time on it." Billy explained, not sharing her reverence.

"But what's this got to do with my coal?" Jo became suspicious.

"He needs it to run her. He has a pile of it out the back." Billy moved towards the hole that they had come through.

A black mountain of coal stood behind the shed. "How did he get so much?" Jo smiled.

"The railway gave him their left overs but it still wasn't enough. I guess he got desperate and started stealing." Billy handed her a shovel. "Just take what you need and let's get out of here."

Billy and Jo dragged old rags over to the pile and shovelled the honeycombed coal onto them and tied them into sacks. The awkward coal bags had to be dragged, leaving snail trails parallel to the railway tracks.

Jo climbed the old paling fence dividing her back yard and the railway track, hoping none of the neighbours were hanging washing. The soot from the funnels of steam engines no longer turned white sheets grey. Billy threw the bags of coal over the fence after her.

"Are you happy now?" Billy squeezed his gaze through the hole in the fence.

"I suppose it would be ungrateful of me not to say thank you. I just hope I don't get caught for truanting."

Jo tried to sound haughty. It irked her to be beholding to a rock throwing Conway.

Billy shuffled off down the track towards the signal shed. Joe hid inside the outhouse to wait for the afternoon school bell.

The man jumped the fence and stood in her yard. He lifted the coal shed door, grunted and started to shovel the coal into his barrow over the fence.

"Stop that. It's our coal and you're stealing." Jo lowered her voice hoping that the man would think she was her mother.

"Stealing, whose accusing who of stealing, missus?" replied the man turning to answer the accusation.

"I followed them tracks all the way from my pile behind the shed. I know it's mine." He kept shovelling.

Jo opened the door and grabbed the shovel. "It's our coal, you stole it in the night". She held tight, thinking that he couldn't hit her if she held it.

"I did no such thing." He held the handle of the shovel so that they looked as if they played some new variation of tug-o-war. "I bought it early this morning from a boy not unlike yourself. Could be your twin. Paid him a shilling for it."

The man pulled the handle from her clutch and kept shovelling. "You can't take that coal it's ours. Billy Conway stole from us to sell to you. You can't take that coal!" Jo was frightened and angry when she bit the man's hand. He screamed and tried to cuff her ear. She ducked.

The scream brought heads over fences. The man saw the woman look menacingly at him, a strange old man with a young girl, and decided to retreat rather than explain.

Josephine's father came into the yard. The stress lines around his eyes made her feel guilty.

"Jo, what are you doing home? And why are you squeezing that rock?" Her father was not angry.

"The rock's got Billy Conway's name on it," said Jo quietly calm.

"That's odd, Billy just came to the front door and gave me a shilling. Said you'd know what to do." Her father walked back into the house.

## My Father's Plans

My father's plans  
paper the inclined surface of his drawing-board.

On occasions I would enter this room  
that nightly reduced him to a slit of light  
seeping under the door like the contents  
of an upturned receptacle.

I would perch on the strict inertia of his stool  
& invent games for pencils,  
conduct races, contrive collisions,  
let them roll from top to bottom  
like the frenetic bodies of children.

Once,  
in reaching for a jar of these favoured utensils,  
I dislodged an unsecured bottle of ink,  
its blackening secret like lava-flow,  
obliterating walls & rooms,  
whole structures annihilated  
across the twin planes of paper & scale.

I waited in fear for his return home,  
hoping for punishment enough  
to somehow unblemish these designs.

But my father's face offered none;  
the familiar features remained impassive  
as they sank beneath that pall.

## Gregor

retained his accent but reckoned  
he was a real Aussie, proffering  
the marsupial gut above the shorts  
and the sweat-clouded singlet as

blue as the number fading inside  
his forearm. Took quiet care  
not to eat certain foods, but  
consumed everything else heartily,

sociably. Played cricket with gusto  
but not much skill, and didn't care  
that he was the only man in town  
to follow soccer. Finally retired

to raise chooks, since all the *kinder*  
had left town. Played the violin  
on New Year's Eve. Had no birthday.  
Always said *goodnight* to his Miriam

in a tongue he never otherwise  
spoke, but could not forget.

## View from near the Cart Corral

Harry rides the night's  
last shopping trolley  
down from the top car park  
after all the customers  
have gone; the whooping  
in his skull louder even  
than the clattering of  
digit-wheels as he rides  
the adrenal bitumen down,  
surfs the long dark swell  
flickering under neon

before he has to pedal home  
to Milo and a kiss goodnight.

He's named for his Grandad  
who rode the bay stallion  
Saltbush to a standstill  
one night in the north paddock

after a full day of branding.

## Skid Marks and Rubber Wheels

WITH each knock of your bony knuckle on the door, your forward, friendly expression sags a little more into one of retreat and refrain.  
Bang! Bang!

“Models” Adam had said. “Models in Rushcutter’s bay.” He said the place would be easy. They wouldn’t disturb you. With a smile pulling his lips, it sounded chic even.

Bang! Bang!

But it’s more the Cross than Rushcutters’ Bay isn’t it? And it doesn’t look so wildly different from your concession card student life, the land agent paints and dirty doorways you know so well. Not from the outside anyhow.

Bang! Bang! No one’s home.

Inside it is dark, very dark. A white line beneath the door makes your boots look almost respectable as a sweet and sticky smell rolls in like a fog. It’s midnight in the garden of granny wax lipstick, hand creams and nail polish remover. You are in a hall with a long wooden floor. It stretches down the entire side of the house. Doorways veer to the right and at the far end, the black and white chequers of the kitchen floor bathe in a pool of sunlight.

Everything’s asleep.

Toe heel, toe heel, the floor groans like old bones. Gaps between the boards mark the way ahead like a runway and you are on automatic pilot. Not too fast, not too slow. Pace yourself. You peer into rooms, leaning just far enough. With all the grace your long legs can muster, you pass the clock, the money on the table and enter the kitchen. And there you light up your cigarette and open the window. There you look back, back up the hall and know for certain that you are alone.

It’s nothing glam — this place — you think. It’s nothing big time. It’s all hair curlers, coffee plungers and cotton buds. It’s all cane and plastic, Paddington

candlesticks and nineties nostalgia. The bathroom is tiny, the bedrooms are white and the main room is just a main room with all the usual stuff.

You stub the butt out in the sink and open the fridge. Inside it is lonely. There are two beers besides a large bottle of mineral water, ready takeaways in a pile of plastic containers, and some miracle margarine. Apart from grainy mustard and an old crust in a plastic bag, the rest is empty.

The top of the fridge is thick and greasy. There are paw marks round the door handles and the enamel top of the stove has spotty grease lacquered on with food and hair. A cockroach lies belly up on the floor and the rubbish bin has a pool of brown liquid at its base. You open up the kitchen cupboard and it's just as you think. Why everything is here; if only they could be bothered.

Fabric Shield, Multi Purpose and Fabulon. Spray and Wipes. Ajax Liquid Lightning, Concentrate Jiff and Down to Earth in recycled plastic. Grime Fighter, Mr Mould, Bleach, Domestos and Exit Stain. Bright whites, sheeny greens, and neon blues. Proven strength, phosphate free formulas. It's a family pack with cut, polish and penetration

Oh god! Yeah, yeah, you take off your jacket and roll up your sleeves. You fill up the sink with hot soapy water and scrub brown stains inside mugs. You stick dirty pots in there to soak and stack plates, knives and forks to drain. Under spicy sauces and round frilly lidded jams your fingers are fast and nimble. Ants and cockroach eggs. Rotting scraps and chiselled in grime. Squirt, squirt; It's high noon. Rub, rub in this one horse town.

You flush the toilet and squeeze a white line of Jiff down the bath's green belly. The plug hole is hair free you notice scrubbing, and there's no ring round the edge. Same too on the toilet; good enough to drink. They keep the bathroom cleaner than the kitchen and you like that. Right priorities; body first, food later. Still, some germs are invisible aren't they? You've seen them on the tellie — the dirty little dervishes — so you poke the long neck of the toilet duck right up under the porcelain lip and scrub good and hard. Mm Mmmm! 'Cleans and shines without harsh scratching.'

Standing up the blood rushes from your head and you brace yourself on the plastic shelf with a nasty sharp corner. It's piled high with flashy glass bottles and jazzy plastics. With brand names you've never heard of, you hook in and try some out.

Paris is raining Almond oil, Fango Mud, soothing creams and tender tonics. Escape, Obsession and Eternity. There's Unforgettable for the morning. She for late at night. Rind Soak for before the bath. Hydrating Massage for after. Protein mousse, eye balm, trusted serums and lavender foot soaks. Big lady face canvas. Sure proven protection. Paint me by numbers.

With a face like Venus in a snow storm you put some music on. Lenny Kravitz yeah! He'd know what products were in and what were out you think wiping your hands on your trousers. So much chest to soften, so much skin to rub. He'd spot the real from the imitation, the classy from the trash. You pull him in his tight trousers out of the CD cover, slip him on, and turn the volume up loud.

Oh yeah baby, you sink into the pulse of the bass, the croon of his big boy voice. There's no one else on this dance floor as sexy as you, you animal, and you run your fingers from your moist mouth, down your wet neck, all the way to the folds of your crutch. You hang your bum way out, roll your tongue around your big, full lips. You dance and dance with all the beautiful people next to you, with you, against you; pressing tighter and tighter. Then you catch yourself in the mirror. Ha! you — skinny boy with the wrinkly neck and goggle eyes — turn the music down, the neighbours might wonder.

At the stereo you notice a grey rash of dust beneath the cane stand. Not wanting to leave any dirt unchecked, you pull it out, right out, when suddenly a whole pile of magazines spew out like fish; over your feet and onto the floor.

Women. So many women; glistening and fresh; a man could drown here. Shivers dance from your throat to the bottom of your belly and back again. Every page. Young and daring, pouting and innocent. *Vogue* and a punky girl with a yellowy plastic strip wrapped around her waist. *Arena* and an amazon babe about to fire an arrow right your way. *Elle* and the Parisian couple supping coffee; and an African temptress, a Spanish horse, and an idle whip on *Mademoiselle*. All the women of the world, all the choices for a girl. Split ends and nipples. Belly buttons, succulent mango slices and succulent bodies. Skin, skin, inviting smiles, mobile phones, proven tips on oral sex and love in the nineties.

And there's more. There's the recipes and horoscopes, the garnished chillie chicken and turquoise snaps of holiday destinations. Hmmpff! You stuff them back, all back into one big lump of shiny covers, and go off in search of the vacuum cleaner.

It's called Mite Catcher. It got a non crushable handle and 100 Watts of pure

power. Let's see, you think, and vroom! sure enough, it fires up with an iron lung ferocity. You career around the bedroom, across the polished boards, trying not to leave rubber marks from its little wheels when you take the corners too fast. You eliminate anything loose, anything that's limp and forgotten. It licks up dead petals, rubber bands and scrunched up wrappers. Coins shoot up like bullets and the covers leer waywardly: Take me! take me! There's no tomorrow. Every house should have the mightily Mite Catcher, you think, and you veer off into the bedroom, pulling the cord out of the wall as you go.

Silence drops like a bricks on a doll's house. Lenny Kravitz has finished, your ears are ringing, and your fingers smell of Jiff. The room is dark, and on the dresser, there is a photo of a couple on a beach in a loveheart frame. Cute. He is brown, bare chested, and a towel is wrapped round him. In a bikini, she is hugging him with her arms around his big shoulders.

Maybe it is her bed, you think pulling back the covers. Maybe he's her boyfriend, her man and they slept in it just like that last night. You slip your hands into the talcum white of sheets and search way down the bottom. This way and that, you pan for any hot spots. But no! There's only the tickle of laundry powder up your nose and the brush of cold flanalettes to warm the chill of your lonely heart. You bend down and swipe a line of small shoes with the back of your hand. Desultory, needle heels, wafer thin arches, and saggy knee high boots watch on while you slip your head and shoulders under the bed. The further you go the dirtier it gets and you scoot forward sweeping the cloth in front of you like a messenger. There are pain killer packets and hair pins that bite your knees. There are ear plugs and lipstick smeared tissues. There's no end to it all and before you know, you've popped out the other side.

You pause; wheezy breath and belly like a snake. Then you see it. Not a foot from your nose; a piece of brown lace. It is stuck, jammed, bruised by the wooden drawer that pushed up against it. It's all alone and with blood crashing like surf in your temples, you reach forward and pull at the brass handles. At first it won't budge, but then it gives, easing smooth as a feather until the drawer is fully open. You lift your hand and pick the lace up with the tips of your fingers. It gives itself willingly to your finger. A frightened animal, silken and fine, it belongs to boxer shorts. A mother of pearl button is sewn onto the waist, and they weigh like water, deep enough to swim, cool enough to drink.

You let go. Simply, gorgeously, they float that short distance to land on your head like new snow, and you leave them there and your hand goes back for more.

This time, like creatures from a rock pool, you lift out bridal elastics, doiled nylons, tissue thin cottons; pinks and whites. You drape your wrists with gossamer hose and frosty, crenated straps. They call to you. They sing your name and promise moments of pure spread, pure fit, and sheer elation.

Footsteps. Hitting the pavement on the street not far from the window. Adam's words from this morning come to you and you repeat them like a prayer. "Don't worry. They work all day. Don't worry. They won't bother you. They won't bother you. They won't bother you." But the footsteps get louder. You hear the clip clip of heavy shoes, thick heels, right outside the blinds. Then they stop.

Fuck. Mother of Mary, you want out of here. Fast! You want to be up and out, cleaning windows, at the far end of the house. You want to be anywhere but here; half under **her** bed, with **her** bras down your arms and **her** panties on your face. But you can't. You are nailed, petrified and guilty. Blood runs, drip by drip over your eyeballs and into your mouth where the vomit taste of excuses is congealing in your throat. The footsteps start up again. Loud, staccato strikes. Bolts of ruination in your fly blown world. They go right to the foot of the door, stab your skin, jabb, jabb like rusty needles, and then they pass by and up the street.

\* \* \*

You push the cigarette butt through the grate of the plug hole, then chase it down with water. You reline the bin, turn off the stereo, and jump back across the kitchen lino without leaving a foot mark on the wet floor.

Picking up the two ten dollars notes and a pile of change on the table, you wonder if it was worth it. Thirty dollars, it took longer than you thought, and you've still got to get home.

'Dear Adam' the note beneath the money reads. 'Please give the bathroom a good going over. Sorry about the change. Thanx Beccie.'

You make sure everything is back in its right place, the covers are tucked in, the drawers are closed and then slip out the door.

Outside the street is hot and filthy. Inside the place is spotless.

## Susanne Braun-Bau and David Foster

### Susanne Braun-Bau in conversation with David Foster

**D**AVID Foster grew up in the Blue Mountains where he lives. During this conversation we were interrupted several times by his cackling chickens. The Fosters are small farmers who grow their own vegetables, make their own honey and have their own cow. They live in an old stone house. Right next to it David Foster has built his study from where he has a perfect view of the scenery of the Blue Mountains. He graduated as a doctor of chemistry from the Universities of Sydney and Canberra. Later he worked as a research scientist before becoming a full-time writer. He has published poetry, radio plays, short stories, and nine novels, one of which is *Mates of Mars* (1991), concerning six martial artists who set up a training camp in the Northern Territory. He has just published a new novel, *The Blade within the Grove* (Random House/Vintage, 1996). A leading satiric writer, he won the Age Book of the Year Award with his first novel *The Pure Land* (1974) and a National Book Council Award with *Moonlite* (1981).

*After being a scientist, what compelled you to write fiction?*

It's not all that much different in many ways for me. I was a chemist basically. I trained as a chemist and I suppose I see chemistry as a language and there've been quite a few chemist-novelists. It seems to be a not uncommon combination. And I think to be a good chemist you have to be a master of language first. It requires a certain linguistic flair to become a chemist. So I'd say there is a correlation there.

*Do you think that your scientific background still influences your work in a way?*

Yes. I rely heavily on my rational mind when I'm writing.

*Is science relevant as far as your topics are concerned? Or is it rather relevant for your style?*

Are you familiar with my more recent novels?

*Well I've just read *Mates of Mars* actually. I liked it. It's probably another reason why I am here today and wanted to talk to you. I really appreciated it.*

I'm not familiar with any other novel with that theme in contemporary writing. It couldn't sell in America, or Britain, or Europe. My agent and even my publisher have not been able to place it anywhere else in the world.

*Do you have an explanation for that?*

I don't know. You tell me. Now that disappoints me. But it's very much of a recession problem in the world at the moment. Everyone wants to sell their books and reach the overseas markets, but there they won't take anything from anywhere else. If you think it's a book that can measure up, well I'd be glad. But there you might say that you have a scientific approach to a subject, right? It might be an art form — martial art, but it's a fairly scientific analysis of it. I give you an example if I may: I picked up a book in a bookshop the other day, which had a woman in a black belt on the front jacket. It said on the blurb: Katie has a black belt in karate, and I looked at it, and I skimmed through it and there was no mention of karate in it, except to say that she had a black belt in karate. This the author used to justify how tough she was. I thought that is the antithetical approach to the subject. In *Mates* I tried to give a fairly intensive disposition on martial arts. That is a part of writing a book to me, to try and to create that sort of explication of something.

*Do you do a lot of research to write a novel on a certain topic?*

I find when I walk in the bush, I like to know what plants I'm looking at. If I don't recognize one, I cut it off and have it sent to the herbarium and have it properly analyzed. If you like, that is a scientific approach to the bush. I'm not content just to walk in the bush and think, 'oh far out, it's wonderful, it's beautiful. I don't need to know what the name of anything is, that would only spoil it for me'. I'm still enough of a scientist to think my enjoyment of it would be enhanced if I know what they are. So I have a somewhat scientific attitude and it's a harder attitude, I suppose you could say. I like intellectual and physical rigour. Unapologetically, I know it's not fashionable. Men for a long time have become very soft intellectually and

physically and I don't think that's a good thing. That's probably not entirely what you meant, but that's the sort of thing my novels often elucidate. *Testostero* has a very scientific theme. Again, a book I feel indignant about not having succeeded overseas. You would assume that most intelligent people educated in the humanities would be able to read it and understand it.

*Do you think that living in Sydney for example would be negative for your work? Would there be too much to distract you — that is what Malouf told me — or would you find it stimulating?*

Well, Malouf and I are opposite poles, really. His approach to fiction is very different to my own.

*So would you appreciate the city if you had the choice to live there?*

No, not if I want my marriage to last. Not if I wanted to stay off my face all day and every day, you know. I tend to abuse the cities. I think cities are places of great temptation, too.

*So you wouldn't find it stimulating, but distracting?*

Oh I would, I'd find it very stimulating.

*But not for your work?*

No, you have to be bored to write. To get into a novel for years at a time to the point where you're sparking off little things that people say, or you read anything and you'll think, this will fit in there. That sort of concentration is hard to find in a city. I like my work to be very dense, full of detail, full of colour.

*Were your parents influential for your choice of career in any way?*

My father biologically — I didn't have much to do with him — but he was a sort of a popular comedian in Australian society. He was still around when television came, and he had his quiz show on television. But prior to that, as a younger man, he worked in the old vaudeville circus as a comedian and as a dancer. I only ever met him once. So really in that sense his influence on me would have been genetic. So he was a comedian. I am a comedian, I suppose. I'm like a rodeo clown. They have to pick the riders up from the bullrides. It's a hard dangerous job, but they clown around while they do it. And I suppose I thought 'ah, that touches my heart, I like that.'

*So you just lived with your mother while you grew up?*

Yes, my mother raised me and female relatives. If you're interested in why I became a writer, I think in a sense my mother loved me very much and instilled a lot of self-confidence in me. I think you have to have that as a writer, haven't you? You've got to feel that your point of view is worth expounding to others, which is a kind of arrogance — I think it is important that some parent or other has given an artist or a scientist or any creative person a lot of confidence in themselves and a feeling that they are worth paying attention to. But they were not intellectuals, neither of them.

*So they didn't read a lot of literature themselves?*

Oh no, there was no literature in my house.

*Did you grow up in Katoomba?*

Yes, I spent a lot of my youth in hospital in Katoomba. I had polio when I was a kid and I was paralysed for a long time. So I spent a lot of time sort of being wheeled around in wheelchairs and lying in a bed looking out of the window at the view. There was no television then. So I read a bit and had a lot of spare time on my hands. I think that was probably the most important fact, because at that time I lost contact with other boys of my age.

*How long did you have to stay under medical treatment?*

Well, it was only a couple of years. But by the time I came back into the mainstream, I didn't fit in there anymore. And I never really became one of the boys there. I think that's a factor.

*Do you think a sense of place — the setting — is important to your novels?*

Yeah, I think it is. Do you want me to confine myself to one novel, or can I speak about all of them?

*Well, I'm really interested in *The Pure Land*, but of course you can talk about —*

The problem for me is that that was the first novel I wrote and I hate it. I don't think it's a very good novel, not as good as my others.

*Well, I thought you might. But — to be honest, it really appealed to me a lot and it's undeniably an outstanding 'first novel'.*

Well, I'm glad you liked it. I won't bother to attack you over that. It's difficult for me — I'm not a people person really — I suppose that's a scientific sort of thing too. I'm more comfortable with landscapes, events, farcical characters. I'm not the person to get into someone's heart and explain their innermost motivations. I don't really work at that level as a writer. I think Malouf tries to, whether he succeeds or not, I leave that to you and your fellow academics to decide. Perhaps there's room for us both, I think there probably is. But that sort of intimate, somewhat homosexual approach to literature, full of sensitivity and sensibility — that doesn't appeal to me except as something to send up. I much prefer details of landscapes, details of events—

*Still in your work you present all these outsiders, even in your most recent novel you really go into the characters. It's not as if you just have a sort of — superficial character presentation from the outside.*

Well, I'm learning as I get more practiced.

*But I think you really succeeded with that in *The Pure Land* already. There might have been even more of that.*

Well that was probably coming more from inside me than I wanted to appear it then, when it didn't work for me. I'm not saying it's not right, ideally you would have that as well. I suppose, I've taken a more satirical view of fiction and I like humour, quite frankly. I try to write humorously.

*In your article on satire (*The Phoenix Rev.* 2, 1987-8, 63-79) you defined it as "joking in earnest". Satire must be crude, humorous and philosophical. You also wrote that it's a modernistic form to describe the complexity of civilisation in decline.*

I looked at classical literature, at Juvenal, for my models. I'm not too much interested in what else is going on around me. I see an affinity between myself and other writers but that hasn't influenced me with the way I write. I was fully formed as a writer by the time I said 'oh yes I must be a satirist', because I saw correspondences. I liked, say, William Burroughs as a writer very much. I admire him technically enormously and I think he's a fine satirist at his best. And I'm attracted to the Irish writers like Beckett and Nolan. Because again, I see a certain reflection of my own interests. I became a satirist without setting out to become one.

I was thinking about saying to you today some things along — you must put due

weight to the fact that my answers to your questions are really only those of an intelligent well motivated reader. I can't claim any specific insight into my own work.

*Well that's certainly true. However, it's still interesting to know about your purpose; what you try to do in your work and then compare it to other evaluations and my own response, you see? I also think that your opinion is a very important one, because you are a bit of an authority in so far as you are the creator of your fictive world.*

Sure, yes. We talked about science too, and scientists have a way of writing up their results in papers that make it look as if everything was a product of logical thought. They even convince themselves of it. That's not often what happened. A favourite example that was amusing to chemists was about the number of reactions in organic chemistry which are catalyzed by mercury: These are written up in the early papers as 'when we added so much mercury to the solution, we got an increase in the reaction' and you thought: 'What a wonderful genius, who would ever have prompted that man to have added mercury of all things to this reaction mixture.' Of course you realize what happened. He broke his thermometer in the reaction mixture and found it went faster. But that's not the way he wrote it up. What is beautiful about creativity is that you are really never in full understanding with your logical mind of where things are coming from or what you're doing them for.

*You've mentioned in another interview that revising is a fairly intuitive thing and that your inventiveness with language is rather instinctive. Would you agree that aspects of the subconscious and intuition are very important to your work?*

Well, a good editor works intuitively too. You go through it and something sticks in your mind. You don't ask why, how, where, but you just underline it and then you go back.

*So you think writing is rather an intuitive process than an intellectual one? One where emotions are of major importance?*

Oh, intellect has a part to play but not a guiding part. I mean, the old thing. You've got to have something to pull your carriage along but the impulse comes from who knows — God — wherever. I can write authentic Australian dialogue because I still live with the people. I don't live in an ivory tower, you know? I drive trucks, I work

on fishing boats. I hear it and I've got a good ear for it and I write it down. So I know it's right. Where does Malouf get it from? That's my objection and the question I put to you. That's just one of the points to justify the remarks I made previously. What is actually being said still has to go in with my conception of the plot it has to evolve. And there you get a touch of satire. Sure I say things that people wouldn't normally say. But I mean you're not just striving to reproduce the world, you got to create something else. That's what art should be: Art has to take that and then create something a little bit different with it.

*Do you think that something like the presentation of consciousness is important to your fiction, or would you say that it's rather the outside world that is relevant?*

I think if you are presenting consciousness, you usually wouldn't be aware of it. Take a writer like Faulkner who was always thought of along with Joyce and Proust as an expounder of the stream of consciousness. I think any writer does that, who is worth two bob. I don't think Faulkner was conscious of specifically doing that for a reason. If you're sitting down at a desk alone and you're thinking about a story, it's always your own consciousness to a large extent that you're working on. Modern writers often work from within, no matter how external they may be seen.

*Do you know that one of the reviewers of *The Pure Land* compared you with Faulkner?*

I like the sound of him as a man. He lived in a small town. He wasn't a particularly nice individual. A fairly tough ordinary little character. Very prolific, hard working. He had something of his own and stuck to it. In those senses I think we could be related. He also was a family man, not a very scrupulous citizen in many ways.

*He experimented with the stream of consciousness technique, especially in his earlier work. Would you use something like that yourself?*

No I don't think so. I've got enough problems doing what I'm doing. I haven't got that right yet. I'm trying to do things in my prose in the book I'm working on at the moment. It's going to be a fairly long book. It's only just beginning.

*Do you have a title for it already?*

I'll probably call it *Metamorphosis* but it's only a working title at this stage. (Foster is referring to *The Blade within the Grove*). In this novel I'm doing things that strike me

as ambitious. But stream of consciousness would not be one of them.

*You once called Joyce a farce writer. Are you familiar with his novel Ulysses?*

Oh yes, I read *Ulysses* and I can relate to that. You know, as far as I know, I am an Australian of Irish and Jewish extraction. We have a hard time here because we don't get on well with the English. I think there is this eternal conflict between the Irish literature and the English literature. And I'm convinced and persuaded that a lot of the best writing is of that Celtic strain. It's more lyrical and imaginative. It's less reliant on reality and it's less sensitive. It's probably got a fair amount of cruelty within it. It's a hard man's type of literature if you like. It's tough and cynical and witty. It's a generalisation, but English writing is to my mind more sensitive, more straight. I like to have a bit of fun with literature. I think that may be one of the reasons why I do write. I mean you asked why I did do science. There are other things I could do. I was a better musician than I was a scientist.

*How far would you say that nature imagery is important for you as a writer?*

It's becoming more and more important for me. I see your interest as a German in the Australian landscape is essentially the response of any sensitive European soul to what man is doing to the world. Living in a place which is still relatively unpolluted, I'm conscious of how lucky I am and of how important it is that some kind of transition in consciousness should come about, whereby man learns to respect — particularly trees. Both Australia and Germany are full of people who have some green regional sensitivity. And you could say that the modern green movement originated there.

*At the beginning of *The Pure Land* Manwaring is in the Blue Mountains and he has an experience with nature, where he is almost diving into it. That's something I enjoyed very much and could really relate to. I think you used landscape in *The Pure Land* in order to depict what he was feeling. Did you intend to do this, or do you think I just found something important that was of no importance at all to you?*

It was the first novel I wrote. I wrote it under condition of some stress, physically. It was a terrible thing to have abandoned a scientific career without ever having published a book. I was working as a swimming pool manager then.

*Can you still tell me a bit about this novel — about writing it, getting it published, problems you had while writing it?*

My first marriage wasn't in a particularly healthy state. It didn't survive much longer. The loss of my marriage and my family and my career left me pretty well bereft. And I had also been living on the east coast of America. I didn't find that a particularly pleasant experience. If you don't like cities, don't go there. *The Pure Land* is a semi-autobiographical novel in certain of its components, in its landscapes certainly. I think most first novels are. The landscapes were things I had seen.

*It's certainly semi-autobiographical because you also went from Australia to America—*

Exactly. I wrote it just trying to get something written. I think it just came out of me in the way it did. I don't think it's very well written in many ways that would please me now. And this is an obstacle for me to discuss it dispassionately.

*I think this is often the case with a writer's first work.*

I have a policy that if I finish a book, I forget about it. I might go back and just pick up one of those books and have a bit of a browse in it. I'm often quite pleasantly surprised by what I find. But I think you can't afford to be. Not when you are in the state that I'm in. I mean, I'm not going nowhere in terms of commercial sales or anything like this (laughs).

*Well, but it is important that you stick to your own work and like what you do and support it, stand behind it, you know?*

I've got to keep going. I've got to earn a lot of money to keep this all afloat. So how much longer it can keep going in an economy that is collapsing around my ears I don't know. So I really haven't got the time to look back. I've got to make what I'm working on the best I can.

*The way you depicted intuitive as opposed to intellectual understanding in *The Pure Land* reminded me of Henri Bergson's philosophy. Are you familiar with his work?*

Yes, I'm familiar with some aspects of Bergson. Mostly what I've read is from Toynsbee's *The Study of History* who quotes from him extensively. So any Bergson I've come across would be largely through that. I haven't read much philosophy.

*Did you consciously make use of his theories?*

No, it was long after I'd finished *The Pure Land* that I started reading this. See, most of my education was in the physical sciences.

*In The Pure Land the missing mother is really important for Jean. Her problems develop because of that. So childhood experiences are depicted in a somewhat Freudian position as really important for a person's life.*

Looking at a writer rather than at a psychologist, take someone like Proust, who — if I understand him — would appear to be taking the position that to remember all is to forgive all. If you only could remember it all, you would understand it. Your own life would make sense. And perhaps what childhood experiences do to you, is force you to blot out certain aspects of your memory. I mean, I have a very poor memory of my own childhood. In a sense it wasn't a very happy one and I just know that I never think of it. A lot of people seem to live in their childhood in their minds. With me it's not a factor consciously. Perhaps it feeds subconsciously into all I write, I don't know. One thing I'm trying to do here is to satisfy myself that my children have grown up in this environment for fifteen, sixteen years and I'm sure that they will never be able to shake this off anymore than I could. It is so strong, so dramatic. I think Hess lived in a very beautiful village, didn't he?

*Hermann Hesse, yes. That's what I mean. One can't help thinking that living in this surrounding with such a unique landscape definitely shapes your work.*

Yes, it does. I would hope so. If any beauty is to feed into my work, it will come through that. It takes fifteen years for a landscape to seep into your consciousness. I think people are too impatient, you know? — That's why perhaps Faulkner had a strength because he knew that Oxford country. And I'm trying to do the same thing here. I won't go anywhere anymore. You know, I've dug in. Not because necessarily I'm immune to the charms of Bonn or the charms of Philadelphia. And they would have charms, it would be very appealing to me. But this is my life, this my portion, I must make use of that, you know? — This is another thing I object to with Malouf. The way he divides himself and becomes sort of rootless — I think that's passé, I really do. I think that increasingly, if you respect the landscape, if you agree with it all, you know that one of the most important things is that people must stay put. Stay at home and grow their own vegetables and do all these little things. And what more can you do — and that's a part of my life. You struggle against the storm.

*Danny doesn't find his 'Pure Land', does he?*

No, no.

Well, I thought so. But to be honest I think it's hard for a reader to interpret this ending. Would you like to comment on why you made it so open, so ambiguous?

Well, I suppose I didn't know how to end the book.

*So your searching characters had the wrong approach?*

I set myself a project in that book that I was incapable as a man or as a writer of resolving. I think it's a very unsatisfactory ending. That's one of the reasons, I don't like the book much. Today if I was writing that book, I would be harder on myself and would resolve things a little bit and I'd like to think that I can now. I was trying to solve problems that I was incapable of even seeing let alone resolving in that book. I mean certainly it's a big task resolving the intuition and — I don't think anyone has ever succeeded in doing it. But a work of art should come to some synthesis or other.

I justified the ending to myself at the time with the attempt to let the last sentence in the book draw back to the beginning, and to see the novel, on a fresh reading, as Danny's fictionalised account of events. The book is now seen to begin, not at the beginning, but towards the middle, and the beginning follows upon the end. This plan leaves the middle fuzzy, and the end and the beginning clear. The inspiration would be Escher's graphic work. I'm not saying I succeeded in this, it may have been a rationalisation after the act.

*It all sounds really pessimistic finally, so the reader is made to think that something like the search for the 'Pure Land' cannot be found anymore these days or that it just always ends in a sort of vicious circle.*

It's an unenlightened aspect and attitude certainly, I agree with you.

*Although during the book it's really different. There are pages when your description of Australia is affirmed as a positive alternative. It's more at the end that the reader becomes very unsure about how to feel towards this continent.*

What is Australia? Is Australia the Europeans that live here, or is Australia that park out there? (Points to his study window) Now, which one is Australia. If it's that park out there, sure it's a Pure Land. But if it's this culture, then it's in a lot of trouble.

*So these days you think it's all a lot more complex—*

Well, I have six grandchildren. I'm very concerned about whether the rest of us have a future here. I can quite conceive this country as being under Asian domination within a hundred years. I don't know how the Japanese will treat their colonial people. They haven't got a very distinguished record as colonial overlords. The British, whatever you might say about them, and the Irish loath them, they were probably among the most humane of all imperial peoples. The Dutch, the Italians, and the Japanese would have about the worst record. Some peoples have a neck for administering, others don't. I'm just saying, sure is it a 'Pure Land', you come back down to it, you look at Australia's attitudes certain of which you can't escape from as a writer. I mean, in many ways I put down — books that I have written or attitudes that I find myself expounding with a sense of despair as a man. Because I think this is not where I want to be at. I don't want to be that perpetual swaggering punk teenager at my age. You know, it's not really appropriate in many ways. But that's all I seem to be able to do. I am constantly trying to transcend it, if you like with big themes and that, which I am probably not quite capable of carrying off. But it gives me an incentive at least to try and do it. See, the strength of this country as I see it, is a certain sneering toughness of a deprived people. You might say it is very hard being a German and I can understand it, it must be very hard having to breathe that air, having to put up with those cities.

But it's also very hard living at the cultural end of the line. It's very hard to be an Australian in that sense.

*In another interview (with Candida Baker, in Yacker, Sydney, London: Pan Books, 1986) you confessed a feeling of deep theological despair which I find reflected in your work; metaphysical aspects, something that is no longer strictly 'down to earth'.*

Theological is probably the way I put it, in so far as you can be theologian without being a believer. You can be interested in religion without necessarily being a Christian. That's certainly a big part of my worries.

*Are you interested in mysticism as well?*

Science can't resolve it, and literature can't resolve it either. I find the older I get, the more it bothers me rather than the less. I think — I do think that there will be a change, a big change, I'm sufficiently convinced of that.

*In how far a change?*

Maybe a new higher religion will need to emerge if the landscape is to survive quite frankly—

*You depict people within a landscape who really seem to be in contact with nature in a special almost transcendent way. They have visions while in contact with it.*

Well the Australian landscape is a big worry. How do you find the Australian landscape?

*Overwhelming. So I mean I can understand that someone wants to convey that feeling.*

It's certainly different. You have here in these eucalypt forests a different landscape. It's very affronting to Europeans. There are still remnants of the rainforest in patches around here. And they're surrounded with this sclerophyll Eucalypt forest. And right from the time when Europeans first came here, they've never really come to terms with it. It's so unlike Europe. And I — as a scientist — I know that Darwin just says that it doesn't matter. I'm convinced that Darwin is not right. I'm convinced that there is an archetypal inherited landscape vision. And I think for me it's still oaks and elms and perhaps olives and it's not gum trees yet. A lot of people maintain that Lawrence's view in his novel *Kangaroo* is a pretty perceptive expression and I can believe that. I think to comment meaningfully on foreign landscapes you should do it after a few weeks or after twenty or thirty years. And that those are the acute impressions: the immediate impact of a landscape is always interesting. You know, I wouldn't discount your views on Perth because you've only been there two weeks. I'd say that's interesting, if you could accurately describe it. First impressions are really important. But below these first impressions there are deeper ancestral impression where the landscape has become rooted in your consciousness. These might be themes that occur in *The Pure Land*. You could say, what is it culturally. Is it because I've had to watch British films and I had to read book about Hänsel und Gretel. Is this why this stuff is in my mind? That's the thing with *Testostero*: was it nature was it nurture, what is it. I'm convinced more and more as I get older that there is an element within that you really can't fully account for by modern biology. It would imply that certain impressions are retained and transmitted at an archetypal human level. I think that's true. I think the impact of this bush comes in that there is nothing in our stock that is reserved for it. 200 years has not been long enough to really build up some kind of relationship with it. And basically it has to be a religious one. Australia is the last colonised continent. In the twentieth century

it's becoming too late because there is a constant input from other nations.

*So you would agree with Jung's theory about the archetypal memory of a people?*

But it's more important than that. Because — the eucalypt is the tree of the future in a warming earth. The eucalypt was spread from Australia and has conquered the world. It is ideally suited for a warming climate. Wherever eucalyptus are planted outside of Australia, they thrive and flourish to an extent they're weeds now. Everywhere. You ask an Indian farmer what he thinks of them or an American in California. Portugal — full of eucalyptus. They are very very formidable trees and not to be underrated. As important a tree as the oak or the olive but what they haven't got is an Apollo and that's why they can never impinge on our consciousness in the same way. Those are the lines along which my thoughts go in a theological sense.

The Aboriginals had an understanding with them. The Aboriginals — this is a thing of *Mates* of course — their consciousness and ours intersect very poorly. Certain traditions seem to intersect well. Negro music and Irish music blended beautifully. Some things don't mix so well. We look to the Aboriginals for inspiration in vain in literature and in music. In visual arts — brilliant. Dance — yes, there are possibilities, real possibilities for genuine Australian novel art approaches.

*In your article on satire you wrote that in order to avoid what Susan Sontag called "failed seriousness" in literature today one has to make a moral point. Could you tell me what this point would be in your work?*

I see my work as intrinsically satire in the classical definition of satire. I think it's satire before it's even fiction. I don't think that Juvenal considered himself a fiction writer. He's supposed to be a poet, but he was a satirist. And I would argue that satire deserves to be looked at as a form quite distinct from poetry and prose fiction. That it is a specific form. It's a real mess, a mixture of lots of different things but I intend to be introducing more elements of poetry into my satire. I don't see myself as constrained by the demands of fiction. I think I'm just a writer and I'll write whatever way suits. There's a lot of essay writing in satire. Probably a lot more exposition of that type in my work than is perhaps fashionable in a novelist. The satirist is in a very awkward moral position. In a sense he's sending something up, but in a sense he has to be intimately related with what he is sending up in so far as

it has a tendency to overwhelm him in throwing. It's a contest. You can't have too strong a moral position to be a writer at all or else you write theologies. If you're interested in human drama then you're interested in different points of view, aren't you?

*Yes, I certainly agree.*

So that is the problem that comes over from a moral perspective.

*But to make it a bit more concrete. What is the moral point for instance in Mates of Mars then? Can it be a real message?*

I'm not unhappy with the ending of that. It's interesting that when you're writing a book you don't ever know when it's quite going to end. But when you find something and think 'oh it could end there', you put it down with such relief. I mean one often intends to go further, but to find a good ending is very difficult.

*So you don't have a synopsis in your head before you start writing?*

No.

*What do you start with then, is it an idea?*

Yes, usually an idea that I want to expound. It'd probably be different for other writers. See that's why I wouldn't like to write for television, Susanne. I wouldn't like to write filmscripts or television scripts, because you're asked for a synopsis before they'll pay you the money. That takes all the fun out of it for me. The pleasure of writing a work that is unconstrained is that you can go where it wants to take you. And that way you can learn something. And it gives you an interest. I mean this is my life in a fairly isolated place. I've got to keep some intellectual interest alive. Unless I'm getting some sort of fun out of my work along those lines, — playing with it, having it lead me to places I didn't know it was going — it would be very boring.

*You also wrote in one novel that 'the mind is the body'. I found that an interesting idea. Would you like to comment on this?*

Well that goes back to Spenser, doesn't it?

*So you agree with this concept that the body is the mind and vice versa. I think the normal*

*perception is that you distinguish between body and mind, don't you think?*

Well I'm a martial artist.

*You have a black belt yourself, haven't you?*

Yes, and I don't discount the physical arts. I think they're very important. I think we live for our bodies. The mind is so dependent on the body. Chemicals teach us that we can alter our mind by altering things physically and I was a chemist.

*So you wouldn't really disconnect the two?*

Are you speaking of mind or soul? Or mind as soul rather than brain?

*Soul rather than brain, definitely; something like consciousness.*

Yes, consciousness. I'd like to believe in it. I don't even know if a soul exists. I mean intellectually I'm attracted to the thought. I suppose I'm very sceptical. Again, it's something you learn as a scientist and as a martial artist, to try and keep your feet on the ground; try and be sure of what you know and there's no question that there are such things as spiritual experiences, but what they mean, whether they can be reduced to physical or intellectual experiences, I'm not convinced. It's possible to me. That's my brain talking but if I was about to die, I'd say something different probably. (Laughs). I know that. I'm not about to die now, I don't perceive myself as being that way and so one fights out of moments of enlightenment back into that more comfortable space.

*You certainly convey something like this to your reader, I can assure you. Because I personally, when reading one of your novels, sometimes just have to put it down, because it's getting a bit too dark.*

Oh sorry.

*No, it's mostly something positive. Because it's amazing how you can touch the reader. But sometimes one just feels that there could be a bit more of this edenic, ideal world at least somewhere at the horizon, that can be regained. But I know you want to stick to satire.*

Well, I agree with you. I think this is a circumscription of a clown's form of art. As long as you want to clown there are certain things that are forbidden to you, off-

limits to you. And the more you go on with it the more you want to play hammer. A clown in the late middle ages would be a very dark and unhappy person, because they were conscious of these other worlds, but they can't penetrate them through their art, you see?

*Yes, that's exactly what you convey. There is still a positive world somewhere affirmed and imaginable. But especially because this is the case, all the rest seems so much darker.*

You see, you're looking at it there from a moral perspective.

*Well, I think one can't help it.*

No, one can't help it but I've always defended myself with technique. I'm interested in technical accomplishment. The dreadful things that William Burroughs is saying don't bother me as long as he says them with such panache and flair. I believe in that form of genius. You forgive anything of linguistic virtuosity.

*So do you still intend to try more experimenting with technique?*

Oh yes absolutely. And I want to try to break into a space that would resolve the question that you're posing about all my work. And I would like to think it possible. But it's a tall order, you see. I must say that for many books it's — I think with *The Pure Land* it was there as an objective and didn't even get off the ground. I fiddled with it in others and must make another effort. It certainly won't be possible within the constraints of satire. I can say that with authority. That's not the nature of the beast. It looks at the negative side of things. And in fact most literature does. Tragedy, comedy -both look at the dark side. It's very hard to interest people in the bright side. They don't want to know about it. Look at the news on television sometimes. People are just not interested in good news. What does this say about the human race, I don't know. But if you set out to write a new age novel, I mean, I wouldn't be able to start that sort of sentimental approach. I could never do it that way. It's refreshing for me that you take that position and that moral overview because I can only say that I have not yet written a novel that satisfies me as having achieved those requirements that you posit. I haven't done it as simple as that. I'm still alive and still going, that's the good news. I might get there in the end.

*What interested you in the family saga in *The Pure Land*? You never used that form again*

I don't think I'm particularly attracted to it really. It didn't really get off for me. I

haven't had enough contact with family life as a child, more as an ancestor now, I suppose. But I have other themes that have always demanded attention first and I haven't got round to it. I think Thomas Mann or someone like that is the ideal writer for that kind of thing. Someone with a real sense of belonging. We haven't been here long enough. We haven't got a sense of national tradition. The family saga really only means something to an aristocrat. The democrat has no interest in family sagas.

*I wonder whether one can say that—*

Well, democratic families don't exist beyond their immediate children. They're gone when they're aged twenty. The grandparents are gone. Where do you come from? Where are you going? It doesn't matter. People don't care.

*In this other interview, I've referred to before, you stated that the only other Australian writer with whom you have something in common is Joseph Furphy. I was wondering what that would be, because I myself would have never thought of this comparison. I'm familiar with *Such is Life* and I was quite surprised.*

Without having read *Such is Life* right through — (Laugh). Now you're getting an admission.

*So why did you say this. Was this just the spirit of the moment?*

Well, because he's an Irishman, because he lives in a country town, because he has — I've got the novel there, but I haven't read it through. Picking it up here now, and looking at it, I can — I admire his cheek, it's just his language use I suppose, I'm talking of there, not the way he writes, not the way he constructs the book. I wouldn't know about that. But just his attitude I can relate to. I was confining myself to what we got in the way of classics with that remark. I'm not well enough read in my contemporaries to have any idea what they are doing. I think there are a number of younger writers that have the same sort of style as myself.

*Are you friends with any of the major writers?*

No, I'd rather not be friends with writers. I'd rather be friends with musicians, or fisherman, or people like that. Because then I can use what feeds into my work. Most writers are only friends with other writers and that's why they write about writing all the time, which is boring, you know. I want to read about the world. I see my task as an intermediary between the literary world and the other world.

*If you have a real problem with something in your writing, it sometimes might help just to see what other people are doing, to talk shop.*

It probably would, but it's even better if I work it out with myself through my work. People seem to think that I'm a reasonably original kind of a writer. That's only a fact of my having stuck by myself and having pursued my own part. And that is the way I will proceed.

*Just in general — what do you think of the future of Australian fiction?*

Oh reasonably strong in the short term. I think a lot of the writers of my generation and by that I would include people from about say — sixty to about thirty — that got on anyway when there was a bit of funding around. We've got a fair bit of work under our belts now. We should be starting to produce some more mature books. I feel in my own case, I've still got enough energy to do it. And I've had a lot of practice now and that should count for something. I can't see why Australian writing isn't as good as anywhere at the moment in the English language. Yes, I think it's not inconceivable that some of the more interesting writing is going on here. It's a disadvantage in some ways having that huge tradition hanging over your head that Europeans and Americans have got. All those titans—

*Do you think that the Australian writer really influences Australian life?*

No. I don't feel in a literary space. Talking to you is quite a novelty for me, talking about books, talking about writing. I never do it. I read out what I've written to Gerda (his wife) and we'll talk about things in general. You don't live in that sort of consciousness of an intellectual tradition.

*So there must be some kind of an influence, don't you think?*

I mean we still get some support and are funded to do it. I think they recognize that it's necessary. Australians are very good cartoonists. Probably some of the best in the world. Now that type of humour they do very well. Not bad painters. I think they're good writers, I think they can draw from a strong vernacular. But at the same time I don't see it as a very large or important or influential culture. I would be in the same position if I was a Scottish writer. I'd find it very difficult to write in a vernacular Scots. People would say 'ah, I can't be bothered with this stuff, I can't understand it. He won't explain what he's talking about.' You know, it's difficult.

*But I mean your vernacular is not impenetrable—*

Not to you, well, that's comforting. I don't know, Susanne. I don't feel that Australians rate intellectuals or writers anywhere like as high as they would rate a sportsman. I mean if I had just won a gold medal I'd be a lot better — a lot higher regarded. But that'd be the same in Germany.

Australia isn't a bad place to write fiction and poetry. In other countries a lot of that literary drive would be going into filming and television. Here it is still lodged way back in the novel and the poem. And that's why, I think, a lot of young — or youngish — European or American writers might be more inclined to go into these other forms. I think the novel is perhaps an old-fashioned form. It requires a tremendous discipline to make a career as a novelist. You've got to have a lot of capacity for solitude and self-motivation. These are not factors that are found in modern cities. This is another thing. The form requires a certain life of you. It's not hard to live in the country, but to keep at a book year in year out, and then to keep going, you need a certain resourcefulness. And perhaps we've got that still. It's an old-fashioned virtue in a literary sense. Plus we have a point to prove to the rest of the world. We get very hardly done by the English literary — publishers in particular treat us like dirt. Nothing has changed. They will not take *Mates of Mars*. I mean Penguin UK will not take it. They would not take *Testostero*. They will not take most of my work. My own publisher will not distribute my work in Britain.

*Why? Do they think there's no interest for it?*

That's what they'd say. They just will not reprint my books, even when a book like *Moonlite* is doing well. I think they find me very offensive and aggressively anti-colonial. You know Australians serve the role to the English that the Irish used to serve. They've got to have someone to kick them. That's all.

## REVIEWS

Laurie Hergenhan, *No Casual Traveller: Hartley Grattan and Australia*, University of Queensland Press, 306pp \$34.95.

Australia had something of a flow of visitors during the 1920s and 30s who left brief records of their opinions in books and newspapers. Most of them found nothing to bring them back. It could hardly be said, unless they had Royal connections, they were much welcomed. Some found it a difficult place to penetrate. Egon Kisch almost gave up his attempt, but was persistent enough to make his famous leap. The country guarded itself, often in ways quite simple, at other times quite devious, sometimes with a contemptuous disregard.

Hartley Grattan was persistent. He overcame difficulties to make three visits between 1927 and 1940, and others later. They were visits concerned with a view of Australian culture — its existence in some dispute at the time — and a view of Australia and its literature — also something in dispute. Laurie Hergenhan's biography of Grattan opens not only Grattan's life but a view of these conflicts in a difficult, vital

and formative period for Australia's view of itself and for Australian writing.

Economic depression and war, the frame of those years, tended to lessen the impact Grattan might have had, and indeed saw him later largely forgotten. His first three visits showed an unusual determination, whether from a real interest in Australia or in mapping out a career. He was in effect turning his back on the new writing and writers of his own country, on the America that offered Malcolm Cowley *The Dream of the Golden Mountains* for some very flat landscape indeed. His decision to make his first visit to Australia in 1926 drew the comment from one of his associates "why in the world are you going so far as Australia?" As this biography shows, it was a very fair question.

Grattan's first visit, in 1927, held an element of chance. He came as the husband of Beatrice Kay, an American singer and actress, and remarked that he came incognito, requested to keep in the background. He discovered quickly enough the request was not needed. To Australians he was unknown; he found no encouragement to write of Australian — or American — authors. He decided "The newspapers are stupid and there literally are no magazines". He made contact with some Australian writers,

though this was evidently not easy. Through his visits and his growing interest in Australian writing, the established writers gave him public and outward support, but with reservations. He was blunt in his comments, and his criticism, unaware, perhaps uncaring, of the hurt to carefully nurtured local reputations.

If Australians knew little about Grattan, he knew little about them. This biography indicates the difference in that he was prepared to learn. From that first unlikely visit Grattan began a lasting association with Australia. It is not hard to see him as some early nineteenth century explorer of a new world, drawn endlessly back to some strange place that must yield understanding, and perhaps fortune.

One result of his early visit was his small book, *Australian Literature* (1929), one of the University of Washington Chapbooks series. It was valued for its survey, if not for its particular comments. Grattan concluded: "As I remarked in the beginning, literature is not an intimate concern of the Australian. The whole tenor of society is hostile to it. The labor unions, whose views color all Australian life, give it no attention, and the leisure they win for their members is taken up with sport and gambling ... Australia is getting what it

demands — only a tiny trickle of worth-while literature."

Yet he was back in 1936, his visit this time carefully planned; involved considerable difficulty and disappointment in gaining assistance. He came via England, giving him what was still necessary, some British connections. Again, he met writers and spoke in different States. To some what he said, and said with force and clarity, had long been necessary. To others it seemed too strong. To some it seemed anathema.

Grattan looked for Australian books and found them hard to obtain. He decided there was not much interest in them, and that some booksellers would not sell them to non-Australians. This ignored some noted bookshops of the time, where Australian books lay untouched until after a war that brought a different kind of interest. Grattan was interested in the fiction writers who considered the Australian Aborigines, and realised how few there were. It seems true that Grattan and other writers had no knowledge of the remarkable non-fiction writing that dealt with the Aborigines, books that were pioneers in their field — the work of Spencer, Gillen, Basedow. Aneas Gunn was not the only writer on the Aborigines, nor the American W.L. Warner's *A Black Civilization* "the

best account of a tribe of aborigines [sic] ever written". Nor was it true there were not histories. Professor Shann's *Economic History of Australia*, while it may not have covered some of the ground Grattan was interested in, was an essential history, published in 1930. Grattan did not appear to have first hand knowledge of the many original accounts, and histories, of the early settlement of New South Wales and Victoria. These last were, perhaps, among those items booksellers would not sell him. He had come to know Evatt and wrote a forward to his *Rum Rebellion*. Grattan did manage to build from his interests and his visits an Australian library of two thousand items. His desire for information was wide ranging and could be disconcerting to those who may have approved of him but did not wish to upset the conventions. His splendid self-assurance in relegating important figures of the Australian literary scene to what he saw as their rightful places could be resented.

By the end of the 30s, a new interest in Australian publishing, and in Australian writers cut across an estimate of what Grattan's book of 1942, *Introducing Australia*, may have achieved. The book found distribution problems, and was in any case never seen by many whose lives had been forced in other directions. It was

perhaps little seen in its real perspective. And by the time of its publication the need for general descriptive books had become clear. Paul McGuire's *Australian Journey* of 1942, reprinted in the next year was similar. *Introducing Australia* contained a reading list that is interesting in retrospect, and Grattan commented that "The writer owns what is considered to be the largest collection of Australiana in private hands in America." He was not optimistic about the prospect for Americans interested in research and wide reading of Australian books, commenting "It is when he wishes to go beyond the limits imposed by the resources of American public libraries and publishers that he will find himself handicapped. If he plans to go deeply into any one phase of Australian life, he will soon encounter insuperable obstacles to satisfactory progress."

Grattan visited Australia in 1945, and made other brief visits. By sheer perseverance he made himself known in literary and academic circles, and among politicians, determined in his whole contact to appear a kind of 'elder statesman'. It may be ironic that this role made him less aware of new directions and emerging writers. At least this fourth visit of 1945 should have shown him a new kind of energy in writing and painting that had

emerged from the late 30s and was evident at least until the end of the war. There were new magazines, some ironically not to survive the period of the early post-war years. The kind of direction Grattan had been speaking for was evident. He did make new contacts, he corresponded with numbers of writers, he knew some politicians of influence, but the writers magazines and publications which had emerged in the first half of the 1940s seemed to elude his notice. It was a short enough period of promise, but in painting at least there was a clear new direction that was not lost, though its recognition had to be struggled for.

From a time like the present when writers are imported for a variety of festivals, seminars, book launchings, to speak at some length, it may not be possible to reckon the effect, the power, the sheer unlikeliness of what Grattan, in his meetings held in such places as could be found, said to his small audiences, and how much it seemed an affirmation. No Casual Traveller brings an understanding of what lay behind so much of the early period of those unlikely visits.

**Peter Cowan**

**John Scott, *Before I Wake*, Penguin Books, 433 pp, \$19.95.**

In *Before I Wake*, John Scott completes a transition from poet to novelist. His previous novel *What I Have Written* could equally be described as a prose poem, but this ambitious book embraces the full narrative scope of fiction. Perhaps emblematic of this shifting direction, the poet John A Scott now becomes the more prosaic John Scott. Yet the new medium has not led to a fundamentally different direction; there is a strong continuity in Scott's concerns and the character of his language.

The central image of *Before I Wake* is that of the damaged "child who is destroyed. Of the child who might lead others to destruction". (398). This is represented at a literal level by the real life murder of James Bulger, the two year old boy led to his death by two ten year old children in Liverpool. Scott explores the deeper meanings of this trope.

Every character in this novel is damaged, and is living through repeated patterns of abuse and betrayal. *Before I Wake* maps the consequences of this damage and how it is self perpetuating within the family, between the genders, and across generations.

The central character is Jonathan

Ford, "childless at 43", whose life has been a "series of ill-fated attachments with the vulnerable, the insecure, the recently abandoned." (399). His relationships are motivated by "The terrible urgency to gain their love. The desperate need to escape it. Over and over." (400). We gradually learn that the damage Ford inflicts is a direct consequence of the damage he suffered as a child, victim to a possessive alcoholic mother, sexual abuse and the witness of a suicide.

Ford's story intersects with that of the poet Danielle, whom he seduces and then abandons. Danielle is herself the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of her father, the painter Malcolm Richardson, whose actions are "less an act of passion than of spite" (184). Danielle is beyond repair, "already lost" at the outset of the novel.

Another of Ford's relationships is with Donna, whose Vietnam-scarred brother dies suspiciously in a bushfire; whose mother died in childbirth; whose father gradually decays from motor neurone disease; and whose sister Rachel has an unfulfilled life "tending" her father and betraying her lover. Rachel's story abuts that of the French vintner Tardieu, whose dreams of a Tasmanian viticulture are destroyed by a parochial and racist rural community.

Each of these stories exposes

almost ritual cycles of damage. The narrative scope over 433 pages allows Scott expansive detail, so much so that each story has its own internal structure, and could easily stand alone. In fact, the book can be seen as a sequence of novellas as much as a novel. The success or failure of the book as a novel lies in how these disparate stories are worked into a whole. Even Scott hints in his author's acknowledgment that they were originally conceived with separate lives.

The imbricating novella structure is both the strength and the weakness of *Before I Wake*. It clearly widens the scope of the book, but at the risk of losing sight of the whole. Several factors work against integration of the stories. There are too many sub-plots, and too much pedestrian exposition of plot points, the only purpose of which is to link characters who have no natural connection. This slows the narrative of the individual stories unnecessarily, and reduces their intensity. The shifting narrative perspectives, and the lengthy breaks between the segments of each story, also work against continuity.

Most notably, the scale of the book limits Scott's best strength, his use of language. The success of Scott's second novel, *What I Have Written*, rests on a tight narrative structure

which provides a platform for concise and crafted language. This in turn generates eroticism, mystery and a strong sense of place. Place is likewise effectively rendered in *Before I Wake*, in Paris, Thirroul, Tasmania and Littlehampton. Scott layers almost mundane detail with lyricism, such as in this rendering of an Australian bushfire:

Each day of the preceding week the paddocks had seemed gasolined. A fuming. A shimmering above ground. Oil-air from mid-morning. At night every paddock shrill with crickets — the land screaming with heat. (111)

More important than place, Scott's characters gain their depth through his use of language. He renders their interior and exterior world in some remarkable passages. Few novelists could write Danielle's suicide as well as it is achieved in this book, tracing her steps towards the Butes-Chaumont in parallel with her interior steps to oblivion. But by trying to work his novellas into a single narrative, Scott expends valuable space and energy that distracts from the individual power of each story. The history of Tardieu, for example, is one of the strongest portrayals of small town suspicion and violence written

in Australia. But is it fundamental to Rachel's inheritance of the vineyard? Do we really need to digress into Malcolm Richardson's second wife's family background? Sections such as these could have been excised, thereby focussing the intensity of the main narrative.

The final test of this book is whether Scott succeeds in bringing the separate stories together. After a register of damage breeding damage, he attempts to break a cycle in the lives of Ford, Rachel and Donna, bringing them to the Tasmanian vineyard. They struggle to "awaken", as the book's title suggests, to a life governed by regeneration and growth. Consequentially, the conception of a child signifies their success.

In the final result however, this wakefulness tends to be more stated than created by the language. The lyrical power of the recovered adult cannot match that of the damaged child:

"It could so easily have ended differently," he said.

By this, I take it that he meant without a modicum of peace. Without the resolutions of forgiveness and forgiving. Without a certain sense of the knowledge of the amends which should be made, even given they might not all be possible.

"Yes," I said. For us all.  
(428)

The ending becomes more perfunctory than profound. The scope of the catalogue of damage outweighs mere assertion of awareness.

John Scott has made a transition from poet to novelist similar to that made by David Malouf, Rodney Hall and Roger McDonald. He has taken with him a command of language not widely matched in Australian fiction. When his intense lyric prose is matched with an appropriate narrative structure, he will close on the front rank of contemporary Australian fiction.

### Neil James

Sara Dowse, *Digging*. Victoria: Penguin, 1996, 194 pp \$16.95.

In *Digging*, the latest novel by Sara Dowse, the narrator writes; 'we live in a time of forgetting'. *Digging* seeks to reinstate memory as the means, however precarious, through which the past must be negotiated, rewritten and told, and in this respect, it has many common thematic concerns with Dowse's penultimate novel

*Sapphires* (1994). Both texts engage with traditions of storytelling and myth-making to shape narratives that reconstruct the past in ways which primarily emphasise the experiences and imaginings of their female characters. Whereas the stories told in *Sapphires* spiral between generations of Jewish women, the narratives of *Digging* enfold sedimented layers of meaning and emotion which can never be fully uncovered or understood by the unnamed protagonist who attempts to trace her complex and often troubled relations with her estranged lover, her baby and an English setter. Indeed it is a glimpse of this dog's 'ghost' which prompts the narrator to foreground her personal histories against a backdrop of the political disquiet of 1975 that resulted in the dismissal of the Whitlam government and which informed Dowse's first novel *West Block* (1983).

*West Block* focuses on various characters working in Canberra during the 1970s. In particular the text outlines the experiences of Cassie Armstrong who heads the Women's Branch of the Prime Minister's Office which is symbolically situated in the decaying wing of a building marked for demolition. Many of the stories told in *Digging* by contrast, are centred on the movements and thoughts of the protagonist who has taken leave from

her public service position to care for her ill baby at home, but who is kept informed of the office tensions by a friend working in the department who implores her to return, and whose pleas she resists. Her house is located on the edge of a park and together with the suburban surrounds (which the narrative implicitly suggests are those of Canberra), these environs serve as spaces through which the untrammelled narratives weave and ramble as the protagonist attempts to recollect and explore her past. Unlike her archaeologist lover however who uses a trowel to dig and sift through layers of sediment to determine historical 'evidence' for the temporal inhabitancy of indigenous peoples in Australia, the protagonist's tools are stories through which histories are constructed each time the tales are told. The need to excavate these histories is a pressing task, the narrator realises, if it is acknowledged that various experiences have often been swept aside as rubble in the process of historical exhumation. She writes:

How different a picture we might have of a town, or a country, or even a period of history, if more attention were paid to these things ... And I often wondered, as I stood in the

kitchen pushing mounds of steamed vegetables through a sieve or bits of meat through my newly acquired baby mouli, how such pictures might ever be retrieved, whether in order to do so it would be necessary to rummage through auction rooms and op shops and construct some outdated object, a meatgrinder or eyedropper or a wicker pram, the complex business of nurturing.

In the kitchen as she cooks and cares for her baby, and in the park as she pushes his pram over the rickety bridges and through the tall, overhanging trees while the dog runs ahead, these ideas mesh in the mind of the protagonist with meditations on parenthood, maternal responsibilities, and emotional relationships. Listed like this, these concerns may appear seemingly simple yet it is the way in which the narrative smoothly bounds across the pages to double back and twist, signalling the every-shifting perspectives of the protagonist, that their complexities are attested.

The relations between the protagonist and the archaeologist for instance are fraught with tensions that are never resolved in so much as they can never be completely extracted from the narratives, experiences and emotions in which they are embedded. The birth of their son and

his subsequent illness heightens the pressures of this relationship which is further strained by the archaeologist's concurrent, and obsessive, quest to extract artefacts from the limestone walls of a remote cave to support his theory of indigenous occupation, and gain the respect and approval of his mentor, an elderly university professor. As part of his preparation, he sleeps on a camp bed in the spare room while the protagonist prevents the baby from breaking his father's collection bottles. It is assumed that she will accede to these arrangements, just as she accepted the family framework they adopted almost unthinkingly with their son's birth. It is not until after their separation that the protagonist begins to critically reflect on their relationship and undertakes her own unearthing of the past which leads to its rewriting.

Throughout the text these two characters tell each other stories of, rather than from, their pasts which circulate endlessly as the protagonist recalls them at moments criss-crossed with her own slipping recollections and interpretations. What is important about these stories is not so much their 'truth-value' but the ways in which they are continually re-interpreted and retold in an act of myth-making, just as the protagonist tells her baby fairy-tales and fables that

enable the park through which they walk each day to be transformed into a dark forest filled with secrets and stories, and the Japanese legend of ghost-dog Shiro links the ghostly appearance of the protagonist's setter with wider textual interests in both the ephemeral and the universal.

Dowse's poised narrative holds the possibility for these concerns through its sensitive and skilful considerations of emotional and intellectual constellations whose overlapping and often conflicting complexities are traced but never fully grasped by the equivocation of memory.

Tanya Dalziell

Tracy Ryan, *Bluebeard in Drag*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1996, \$14.95.

Someone is writing a poem. Words are being set down in a force field. It's as if the words themselves have magnetic charges; they veer together or in polarity, they swerve against each other. Part of the force field, the charge, is the working history of the words themselves, how someone has known them, used them, doubted and relied on them in a life. Part of the

movement among the words belongs to sound — the guttural, the liquid, the choppy, the drawn-out, the breathy, the visceral, the down-light. The theatre of any poem is a collection of decisions about space and time — how are these words to lie on the page, with what pauses, what headlong motion, what phrasing, how can they meet the breath of the someone who comes along to read them? And in part the field is charged by the way images swim into the brain through written language: swan, kettle, icicle, ashes, scab, tamarack, tractor, veil, slime, teeth, freckle.

Adrienne Rich from *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York: WW Norton, 1993)

Tracy Ryan's second volume of poems *Bluebeard in Drag* lays out a force field, of human relations, of kith and kin. It rises to the challenge of the quotation used as an epigraph, a sentence from Alice Miller, the psychoanalyst and writer of books about how our society treats children:

*The victimisation of children is nowhere forbidden; what is forbidden is to write about it.*

Tracy Ryan plays with this double standard in her project of poems,

defies and actively resists it, does so without ever dishonouring the material, without setting up a mawkish site that considers victims as such and leaves it at that. She challenges, resists. In her project she extends her poetic vision and puts all of her craft to work: words and ideas and the memory store that is lodged in our body.

In my reading experience with this book, the boundaries of poetry were stretched, and it became one of those times when politics — lived, incorporated in our blood and bones — and poetic expression come together with ease and with deep consequence. This is a transgressive book, mixing politics and poetry, writing the personal and letting it span out to a big picture of human life. Finding a location of the self within the poem, the poet's own identity, stressing this personal voice, which is also a political entity by the virtue of it being a human subject.

What strikes me most powerfully as I read these poems is the love that propels them into existence — the astonishing engagement with living, even in the extreme times of adversity and cruelty represented here.

The poetic voice in this volume is mature, and it offers a mature handling of the material, difficult material that seems to me to rarely be

presented well. These are not, never, therapeutic poems, as poems about family dynamics and dysfunctions can easily become: they are extraordinary constructions of language through words and ideas, and offer to us a palpable sense of loss and recovery. Recovery not in the sense of getting over, or getting better, but of incorporating all the experiences turned into memories and moving on from them with a stronger sense of what is possible, what a life might be made of, what might be carried as lessons and insights.

Which isn't to say that this volume is just about suffering: there is suffering, but there is also love and joy and wryness. The perceptiveness, the sharp and the unexpected observations ensure that. And the deft tone of an adult incorporating all of the different relationships that happen in the one life, and how they change. This shifting around between the roles of daughter and then mother and daughter, between both good and bad memories and experiences and all that sits between, a range that spans out from the positive and loving through to the damaging.

I want to follow the advice of Geoffrey Hartman, who is quoted in this book. In the same article "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies", he writes:

There is a well-known saying: it is art when it hides the art. Critics, of course, in their role as official readers, uncover the art once more; but if this is done for the purpose of exposure, or in a purely demystifying way, we become too conscious of the design — of plotting, somewhere — and the balance of knowing and not knowing, necessary to psychic development, is disturbed.

I want to celebrate the transformative power of these poems: the voices that are returned to the children at the end — they speak for themselves, and Tracy Ryan achieves all of the gravity and integrity of what she set out to do, shows us what a sophisticated and *good* poet she is. Resistances are everywhere in this book — resisting easy language and description, resisting being sunk by the material, resistances evident in the lives and actions of children who tell the stories, even when the telling is one of the last taboos in our horror-filled society. Bodies are everywhere: in play, described with surgical violence, with abuse and with their strengths of resistance. In the poem "Pride", *dancing with fists raised at enemy lines*.

Tracy Ryan's first published volume, *Killing Delilah*, has been followed not much more than two

years later with this fine book: a remarkable concentration of good mature work.

The Joy Hester painting used on the cover, *Love III*, from the series of brush and ink works made between 1949 and 1950, catches all the ambivalence of love relationships expressed in the book — of connections between two people — an intense closeness, a loving space and an overshadowing of one partner by another. The closeness there, all the same, and powerful, but compromised by that masking, that moulding of one face into another. The lack of autonomy, and being caught by it. It seems to me to be an incredibly articulate image of what love can be.

Reading *Bluebeard in Drag* allows an experience of how Tracy Ryan loves language and its power and its playfulness, and how she writes her poetry out of her passion.

**Terri-ann White**

**Chao, *Fate of a Grasshopper***, Edith Cowan Arts Enterprises, \$16.95. (copies can be ordered from Edith Cowan University, Claremont Campus, Goldsworthy Road, Claremont 6010).

*Fate of a Grasshopper* is Chao's second book published this year in Australia. Most, if not all, of the poems contained in both volumes were written during his residency at Edith Cowan University. Anyone who has heard him read is struck by his unusual articulation and his dramatic intensity. As the bulk of his work in the three books of his that I have seen are in English, it would seem that he is in the awkward position of writing in a second language. An additional disadvantage is that the sounds and expressions which are so captivating and popular at his readings are the effects of his highly artificial and oddly stressed, often over-stressed pronunciation.

It would be unhelpful to presume that 'appropriate' or 'correct' articulations are necessary for poetic communication but few reviewers of his previous book *Paper Boat* remarked on the discomfort and occasionally clumsy turn of some of his language. Clearly there is a tension in his work — between his book learnt written English and his vernacular

Australian-Chinese song voice — and when this tension combines with subjects to which it can do justice the resulting poems are very interesting. One example of this from *Paper Boat* is the remarkable poem 'Siblings', which I consider to be one of Chao's major achievements, was not highly regarded by the Australian poets he had canvassed for opinions of his work.

In *Fate of a Grasshopper* Chao's English has become more flexible, allowing him to better engage with Australian realities, albeit with the strange detachment that is the visitor's psychological state. The poem 'Untitled Australia', with its allusion to Ouyang Yu's poetry, is perhaps the best example of this. It dramatises a meeting between a Chinese man and an Australian single mother. Not only does it allow the reader to encounter Chao's particular play of language but it also gives us an insight into his misconceptions and prejudices. As a recently converted Chinese Christian, his views of Australia are fairly unfamiliar to readers of Australian poetry. In 'Untitled Australia' his coyness, evidenced in his terming sex 'freely [making] fun with their bodies', would strike most readers as twee (particularly if they know any of the poems in Yu's *Moon Over Melbourne*), and his describing the woman as

'broad-and-open-minded as Australia' is sufficiently weird and un-postmodern to slip through the Australian critical sensibility in the guise of a highly ironic gibe, yet the ending, after the man is surprised, then angered by the woman's lax morality, enacts a misplaced sense of outrage — 'and then/my heart was stricken/I turned around/saw crows/blackening/the lawn ...' The woman, having explained to the visitor that 'our government is always humane and kind' (?) and that they will pay a single parent's pension to raise a child, is rendered through a complex layering of emotion that is ironic and, maybe even humorously, self-effacing: 'She looked at me/as if I was too old/rather than too Chinese/to understand'.

In contradistinction, there are other poems, like 'A Chinese Christian and an Australian Buddhist', where Chao's Occidentalism combines with unconscious archaisms ('springy with glee'), resulting in a poem which lacks the emotional sensitivity and intellectual caution of which he is evidently capable. Here Chao's Christianity brings him into confrontation with the prevailing Anglo-American aesthetic of Australian poetry. It is true that there are several notable Australian Christian poets, but how many of

them have written their best poems in a religious mood? And would their religious poems sit well in the contemporary tradition?

While Chao's religion gives his work a philosophically problematic edge, his language usage places him at odds with the idiom within which he is working (though he is very successful here considering what he's facing), and his culture, one would have thought, would have immediately caused difficulties and would have been the first issue with which readers and listeners would have had to grapple.

The fact of his being Chinese is dealt with in the section of this book titled 'Chinese Soul' and it is the poems in this section that focus the issues of his work most precisely. On the one hand, there is a successful poem questioning the nature of the past and the participation of individuals in History, 'Xi'an', and, on the other, there's a poem like 'To a Prurient' which may usefully be cited in full:

his mouth was full of women  
 expanded  
 contracted  
 by sizes of breasts  
 hips

his teeth shone like blades  
 ready to chop  
 whatever  
 into pieces.

As with many of his poems whose success is questionable, 'To a Prurient' sounds overblown *unless* one considers it in relation to a Chinese context. How can this be done in a literary culture where even Chinese poets are significant and internationally renowned as Bei Dao and Duo Duo are largely unknown? Judging by the reviews of his previous book and by my discussions with several academics and poets, this is exactly the difficulty Chao's readership has tended to avoid. This is unfortunate.

The reality that Chao has been, almost without exception, rejected by editors of Australian journals would indicate that there is an underlying resistance that is not being made public. If that is the case, it may be said that Chao's instance of 'multicultural' writing is being defined in a climate of hypocrisy. Only when the difficulties of background, language and reception are brought out into the open and discussed can this kind of work be fairly and insightfully assessed.

**John Mateer**

## CONTRIBUTORS

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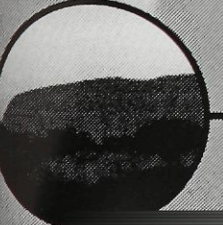
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