WESTERLY

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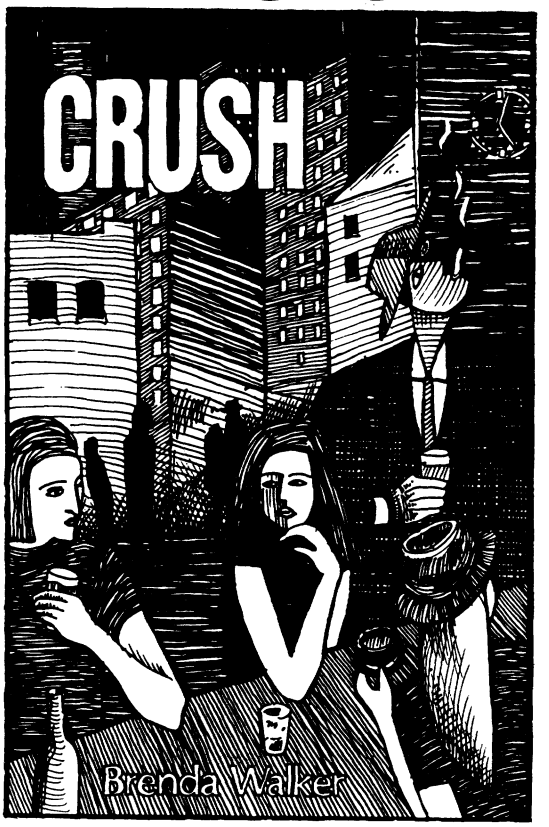
a novel by Brenda Walker

CRUSH



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PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE

The editors of *Westerly* have pleasure in announcing joint winners of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution(s) to Westerly in 1990.

The prize has been awarded jointly to:

Marion Campbell for her music theatre piece, 'Dr Memory in the Dream House' (*Westerly* no. 4 December 1990).

Jean Kent for her story 'Settling' (Westerly no. 2 June, 1990), and the poems 'Practising' (*Westerly* no. 3 September 1990), 'A Commuter's Song' and 'Listening for Lorikeets in Birkley Road' (*Westerly* no. 4 December 1990).

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DOROTHY HEWETT

Lines to the Dark Tower

"Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came"
Robert Browning

I.

Across the water meadows
on the grey sky
the dark tower stood alone
my father said
you can't live in a wheat silo
stinking of mouldy straw
and blood and bone
but he couldn't see
the plumes nodding above the hedges
or hear the clash of steel
I pulled open the door
and crept inside
mice rushed along the rafters
overhead through the broken thatch
the waterfalls of light poured in
the dust motes danced and spun
in rainbows down the walls
I knelt my heart stopped
stars burst behind my eyes.

I climbed the metal ladder
to the top giddy with longing
felt my body rise
to meet the blowing grass
the creek the river flowing
into the iron-roofed town
the granite rocks
clanged in the sun
above the soaks the windmills whirled
in the bright air
all the mysteries of the countryside
caught in that web
and woven to a snare

now it seems I sleep too much
and I have savage dreams.

II.

I was always ready to be inveigled
out of the tower
by some talker
whistling by his helmet
hanging on the back of his head
or one of the silent watchers
ill-met by moonlight
his eyes flaming underneath his visor
there was no shortage of them
they were always hanging around
poking prying hoping to pick up
an easy fuck it was just my luck
to be the one who was left crying
in the rushes with the boat
floating away down the dazzling river
reaches but there was always
the tower to go back to
wounded like a bird
with one wing dragging
smelling the trampled cow parsley
all those nights and days
seeing the light change
the drip of rain down the glass
the figures passing
ghosts through the glaze
weaving them all
into the great web of being
formal and stern
under the gaze of the sun
on the peaked cathedral
nave transcept apse
and soon the voice of God
naked in the afternoon.

III.

Childe Roland loved the tower
wagging it from school
he'd hammer hammer on the wooden door
till I threw down the key
then up the stairs and into everything
with his rat's face aglow
he'd pluck the threads with calloused thumbs
until I thought he'd snap them one by one
but when they floated free he'd only say
taking my hands in his *this is the way*
and laugh exultantly to see them whirl
he stole my thunder wove his mysteries
drawing them into himself like a private prayer

he was Bill Ridley's son the dunny man
who worked his gummy jaws in summer heat
a ring of blowies thrumming round his hat
he tipped his cans arse over in the street
the whole town stank for days
from aromatic nightsoil poets come.

IV.

He was the last of all my visitors
I welcomed him for a brief time
he was my lover
against his breast all night
he clutched me
babbled dreamed and wept
over old sores he seldom slept
sometimes I woke to see him
bathed in light
the white bright body
and the lantern jaw
dropped in a snarl

so we lived all summer
shared the tower traded mysteries
bluebottles rose up buzzing fat
with carrion above the clover
like a wild animal behind the bars
Childe Roland paced and muttered
luminous with light
behind his head the web was humming

when winter came
the gnats sang in the grasses
I heard his father's cart
creak down the lanes
the huddled body in the overcoat
passing beneath the stars
for the last time
he called my name crying
Childe Roland to the dark tower came
he leapt and rose
across the stinging marshes.

V.

So I closed up the tower
and made it fast
against a plethora of whistling boys
I needn't have taken the trouble
he was really the last
no riders down the tow path

road river stream empty of traffic
the dunny man redundant
my father dead and buried in the town
nobody to call my name
outside a band of cutthroats
thieves and rapists roam the land

sometimes I see a frieze
of wild boys on the margin of the bay
dancing in rags like dervishes
they dive head first into the green swell
and disappear
I wonder if Childe Roland is amongst them
one kiss could bring my lips alive
one tear redeem my life

only the tower stands
dark as a spell
in the cold fields
in the black well of the night
it circles squat as nightmares
absolute for death
draws into itself the squeal
of frog and fox
marsupial mouse and hare
inside the web
has covered half the walls
like phosphorescent dew
where the light falls
I sit there blindly spinning
almost out of breath.

VI.

I grasp the threads
and climb
knee-deep in dreams
I rise above the shrouded town
choirs of gnats are singing
by the stream

I look below
her finger bones rot
into the weave
her spine bent in a bow
to the shape of the chair
she sits in

around the spokes
like winnowed straw
the spectral crowd is blown
my father with the cowdung on his boots

spurs on his bloody nag
through the water meadows
Bill Ridley's ghost
clatters the dunny cans
the defrocked priest of excrement
                he goes
among the hollyhocks in
                nodding rows
incurable necromancer
                in his rags
Childe Roland prances
gambolling balls and buttocks
glancing off the walls
each day he sets the tasks
like breath on glass
he is the Rumplestiltskin
                who torments me

far off in a porthole
in the womb of the world
I see the moon paling through clouds
                the stars turn
around the mound of the tower
where all lines intercept
stillness and movement together
the axis mundi - there the soul
climbing the threads
from darkness into light
in the great bowl of the night
                is lifted up
                is made whole.

Rendezvous

At the beginning of lawlessness is night,
the moon low over black inlets,
and chopped roots of mangrove-swamps.
Roads lead to roads less wide,
the crunch of gravel,
dim-lit houses between rows
of apple-trees old and woody,
twisted and sour-aged.

Beside the third house
a figure is unloading crates
from a plum-dark Bedford
snub-nosed, anonymous.
In the dark he is building a wall;
the engine ticks as it cools.

A boat on the bay,
six nautical miles south,
heads black for a thumping tanker,
that could be a township
drifting down the channel,
while the quick black darting boat
dips and bobs in the silver-dripping wick
of its wake.

DAVID P. REITER

Akha Night Market

The air inside the hut is still smoky but by evening you hardly cough any more because you've learned to keep low, crouching on the cool mats, so the smoke has enough space to seep out through the thatching. Only a few sticks feed the fire after the cooking is over: the trick is to keep it warm enough to keep off the frost without burning the shelter down.

The men drift outside as the women pad around, cleaning up after the meal, dumping vegetable peels and other scraps through gaps in the floor to the snuffling pigs sheltering at ground level underneath. You can't believe that you're really here, so far from home. In the dimming light, you imagine that the smoke is the breath of spirits, pressing down on those who forget their place and walk too tall in daylight.

We could have hired elephants, but we decided to strike out on foot. In the lush lowlands, the track through the trees was fine, but it quickly narrowed as we climbed up from the Sai River into the hills. Here the bracken and stones were winning out. After a while we dropped down into a slight depression, and, for what seemed like an hour, stumbled through a sea of grass well over our heads. The grass blades were wider than a finger and smelled faintly of lemon. As we passed through them, they immediately began to reassert themselves and close in behind us. I thought we were lost, but our guide Ting just laughed.

"No worries, mate," he said, putting on an American accent.

I guess he was covering all bases: aside from the two porters he had hired to mule our provisions who smiled at each other when we spoke to them, two of us were Aussies, the other three Yanks. I suspected his name was a compromise, a handle more easily pronounced by *farangs*. He had high cheek bones, fair skin, and was stocky as a football player, which might explain why he sweated so profusely. He'd led treks through the hills for years, although exactly how many he didn't say. And he'd carved out a network of tracks that were "his" - other guides weren't allowed - but that was good, he said, because we would meet hill tribesmen for whom foreigners were still a novelty.

Lemon grass claims five trekkers the headline might read. **Whereabouts of guide still unknown.**

We'd paid our money and left our passports in his safe back in Chiang Mai. What choice did we have but to keep the faith?

From a couple of hills away, the thatched huts of the village blended in so well they look as though they had always been there, but Ting assured us they had not.

"The Akha are nomads," he said. "When the forest around them wears out they

pull it all down and burn what they can't carry."

"Sounds just like me!" giggled one of the Americans.

For just a moment, Ting was confused.

As night comes on, more and more women slip into the hut, edging in, their backs to the fire, to gaze at you. Their eyes are dark, almost invisible in the pooling shadows. They wear beaded headdresses, heavy with coins and jangling flakes of cheap metal. Ting has told you that they never take the headdresses off, even to sleep, because their naked hair would anger the spirits.

The Yanks have slipped away from the hut in search of opium, though Ting has said that the Akha keep their crop all to themselves. "It would be like sharing their gods with strangers," he says. "Unthinkable." Still the Yanks go looking.

Soon the hut overflows with chattering women. You don't know why they have come - out of curiosity of respect. The must of their bodies makes you feel faint and you have to get up from the fire to make the effort to snake your way out into the air but there are too many of them and you wonder if someone's sold tickets maybe even double-booked.

You're the only show in town.

The spirit-gate stood at the base of the path just before the final climb into the village. It was not a gate at all, but a thick tree limb lashed horizontally to two upright posts on either side of the path, something like what people back home nail a plate to when they want to name a property. There was a faint scent of animals in the air. Grotesque totems carved from timber hung from the horizontal beam, shifting slowly in the breeze. In the low evening light I could almost hear them twisting in pain.

"Ancestors?" I asked.

"Helping spirits," Ting said, "They absorb the evil and chase the bad spirits away."

"Kind of like preachers, I suppose," smirked a Yank.

"No preachers here," Ting said. "The gods touch everything and everyone."

The most dangerous spirits inhabit the valleys, coming out at night to terrify people who stray from the high ground, which explains why the spirit-gate is always at the lowest point of the village. Ting told us to walk around it, not out of fear but because the Akha would think us tainted if we passed under it. "Many people find it hard to respect something before they understand it," he said. "But you are among the Akha now, and here faith is everything."

As the others went on into the village, I watched the timber spirits coolly burn against the setting sun then gradually char into silhouettes. They were all different, each a special study in anxiety, maybe to provide a repository and answer for every imagined Akha fear. The longer I stared at them, the more they seemed to smoulder with personality, their hollow eyes squinting. The animal scent grew stronger. I came as close as I dared without walking underneath. On impulse I reached out and touched the lowest one, expecting a texture weathered rough, but it was smooth as a rock face under a waterfall. The breeze faded away and suddenly the air felt heavy with anticipation, as if I were in a crowded auditorium at the instant when the crowd hushes before the first note of a symphony.

There *was* something there, urging me to pass under. But I wasn't sure if the voice came from the cracked lips of one of the totems or from some unexplored place inside me.

The women push sacks at your chest, in your face. The younger ones hang back a bit, losing their places to the older ones who have done this before, know their

lines by heart. But you do not know what they want, what all the words mean. Are you a god who will offer them wafers of protection if they discover how to please you? Or some demon to be browbeaten, kept in check until daylight deflates your power?

They push the sacks at you, nudging you further away from the fire. You are backed into a corner, made to squat, then kneel, then sit on the cool bamboo mats. Their bodies smudge the light as they crowd in, elbowing each other to get the best angle on you, the snapshot that will win.

Someone clicks on a torch, shines it all around, and you can see the eagerness and desperation in their faces as they begin to empty the sacks.

The old woman wanted the baby lemur for eating, but when Ting found out he took it away from her and would not give it back. He held it tightly against his chest as they argued. She stood on the steps of her hut shaking her fists down at him, her black skirt dusty and torn, the skin on her neck and arms hanging down in loose folds. She had bought the lemur from a boy who'd found it earlier that day clinging to a young fern just beyond the clearing. There was no sign of its mother, who had likely been taken by a snake the previous night. The woman said the lemur was a gift from the gods. They knew she was alone now and did not want her to be hungry. So she had bought the lemur from the boy with her last baht and now had no more money for food.

Ting told her the lemur was too rare to be eaten. They were a dying breed in the district and had to be protected. So he would buy it back from her for double what she had paid and give her three scoops of rice besides. The woman said no. The gods wanted her to have the lemur. That was why they had sent the snake to eat its mother. There was no other way. If she gave up the lemur the snake would come back, this time for her. She knew it to be so. She had had snake dreams for many nights now, and though her husband was already dead she was afraid to die.

We watched Ting give her the money, five scoops of rice, and a small cabbage as an after thought. She sobbed as she turned the cabbage over and over, looking for grubs. Then she took the ack of rice and the cabbage inside her hut and shut the door.

Ting comes from nowhere to squat down beside you. He speaks sharply at the women until they shrink back just enough to give you air. Everyone but you has been here before. As the torch light plays off their faces and the bits of metal you imagine a seance - a smell of decay, dead souls watching. The women hold out beaded headbands, belts, embroidered purses to you and when you reach out for one a dozen more are draped over your arm, dropped in your lap. A thin girl darts in to offer what must be her first piece of yarn work, holds her breath as you look at it then vanishes when you hand it back. There are so many choices that you find hard to focus on just one at a time. But you are interested in the purse. The beadwork is intricate and beautiful but even in the dim light you can see the black cotton is thin, certain to tear with use, and there is no lining. The others are no better.

"Isn't there anything...thicker?" you ask Ting.

He shakes his head. "Because the Akha keep their opium, they have no money for fabric. Everything here has had another life."

You think of the Americans wandering from hut to hut in the dark, coming back frustrated. You feel the women's eyes on you. If they knew your language what

would they be saying now, how would they entreat you to buy? You examine the beadwork again. It might be all right hung on a wall somewhere.

"How much?" you ask the woman.

After Ting translates she holds up five fingers.

"Five hundred baht," Ting says. "You'll have to bargain very hard with her. So many people buy from her that she knows she's the best."

"What if I just give her the price she asks?"

Ting life his fingers to his lips. "That would not be good. No one has ever refused to bargain."

"Would she think me a bad spirit, then?"

"Did you find any opium last night?" I asked the Americans as we packed up.

"We struck out," one of them said. "The stuff was all around. I swear I could smell it, but we couldn't track it down. Slippery folk, these Akha. How did you make out?

I was tempted to tell them about the Akha night market, about the sense I had of spirits closing in, but I knew they would think me silly. The longer you're away from home, the more superstitious you get. It was just from exhaustion, they would say, maybe even a lack of red meat.

So I had stuffed the purse deep inside my pack and wasn't game to take it out in the light; it would certainly need a dark wall at home.

JUSTIN D'ATH

Freshwater Crocodiles

I can't tell you much about the layout of the place. There was the pub, of course. And next to it, a shop of some kind (I remember we bought provisions there next morning). In my mind I've got this picture of a tiny general store with a petrol bowser out front, but that might have been somewhere else - those little places are all a bit jumbled in my memory now.

What I *can* see is trees. There were lots of trees. The river passed right behind the pub. Up north you always know when there's a river from the band of tall trees that follows it. They're called river-gums. I think there was a pepper tree too, right outside the pub. At any rate, it was a tree of some kind. We parked the bikes under it in the shade.

Houses? I honestly can't remember. There must have been houses, of course, but I don't remember them. Perhaps they were further away from the road, back somewhere in the trees. All I remember is the pub and the store, and I'm not even sure about the store.

We arrived there in the middle of the afternoon. It must have been January or early February, about forty degrees in the shade. We stopped outside the pub. A group of Abos was sitting under some trees across the road and Julian didn't want to leave the bikes in case they touched our gear.

"It's broad daylight," I said. "Our stuff'll be okay."

"I don't like the look of them," Julian said.

"They probably don't like the look of you."

"Very funny," he said. He didn't laugh though.

In the end he followed me over to the pub.

Inside it seemed dark after being out in the sun all day. The bar was quite small; it had been divided in two by a sort of trellis that went all the way from the floor to the ceiling. You passed through a little door in the trellis and you were in what I suppose was the lounge bar. Anyway, it's where the white people were. The only people in the first bar were Abos.

We put our jackets and helmets on two chairs at one of the empty tables in the second bar. There was a fan right above the table; it wasn't cool but it was nice to feel the air moving.

"Get a load of that!" Julian whispered out of one side of his mouth.

He meant the barmaid. She wasn't anything special - and she was too old for us - but Julian liked to make out he was a bit of a ladies' man.

"Two pots please, love," he said, in a voice like you'd hear on *The Eastenders*.

"You're out of luck, boys," she told us. "We ran out of draught yesterday. All we've got is stubbies."

That's what sort of place it was - whoever heard of a pub running out of beer

except in that song?

"Have you got Carlton?" Julian asked.

"Sorry. Only Emu." She pushed two stubbies across the counter. "That's two dollars, thanks."

It was a lot for those days, but we didn't argue. We'd been riding all day in forty degrees heat - we probably would have paid five dollars and not kicked up about it.

I don't know how long we were there. All I know is it was dark by the time we got kicked out the second time.

I suppose I should explain. When we got kicked out the first time it was just out of the whites' bar. Later on, they kicked us out of the blacks' bar, too (that was when we found out about it being dark outside). Altogether, we were kicked out three times that night. It was our all-time record.

I'd hate to know how many stubbies we drank. No-one was clearing the tables and in the end there were so many empties on ours that we had to start stacking them one on top of the other. That's what started Julian off singing *Ten Green Bottles*. I must have been really far gone, because next think I knew I'd joined in, too. At the end of the song one of us bumped the table and stubbies crashed everywhere. We nearly wet ourselves laughing.

"I think you'd better leave."

We stopped laughing. There was a man standing right next to our table. He was a big man, fiftyish, wearing a singlet and shorts.

"Who're you?"

"I own this place."

Well, we didn't want any trouble, so we got our things and stood up. The publican showed us to the door that lead into the blacks' bar. It was full in there now. The Abos all watched us through the trellis like it was a sort of cage. Julian and me went through to their side.

"Get kicked out?" one of them asked.

"Yeah," I said.

They were all around us. There were no chairs or tables like on the whites' side; everyone was standing. They made a gap for us so we could get to the outside door.

"Are you a singer?" someone said as I went past.

I stopped and turned around. He was a chunky little Abo, a bit older than us, wearing cowboy gear. The first thing you noticed was the bright red stetson on his head.

"Not me!" I told him, laughing. "But see him" - I pointed at Julian who was heading for the outside door - "he was in the Welsh Boys' Choir."

"True, eh?" The Abo looked impressed.

"Cross my heart," I said.

"My name's Birdy Jack," he introduced himself. He seemed to make himself taller. "One time I saw Slim Dusty live."

Julian came back and caught hold of my arm. "Let's get out of here, for chrissake!"

"Birdy Jack here was just telling me how he saw Slim Dusty live."

"He'd hardly have seen him dead," Julian quipped.

"It was at Mount Isa," put in Birdy Jack.

"Sure is a small world," said Julian. He tugged on my arm. "Let's go."

Birdy Jack had produced a mouth-organ. "Do you want me to do a song?" he asked shyly.

"I told him you were a chorister," I explained to Julian.

He looked exasperated. "All right. Give us *Du bist wie eine Blume*."

Bloody Julian! "Play anything," I told Birdy.

The Abo raised his mouth-organ and played a verse of *Ten Green Bottles*. He must have heard us carrying-on in the other bar.

"Hey" - I had an idea - "can you do *Pub With No Beer*?"

Birdy tapped the mouth-organ on the leg of his jeans. He grinned and started to play. I winked at Julian and he nodded back. Together we began singing at the tops of our voices. I guess we were pretty drunk. Someone linked his black arm through mine, then someone else did it on the other side. Soon there were about a dozen of us singing our heads off and lurching about the room in a sort of sideways Congo Line. Even Julian was caught up in the dance.

When the song was over everyone clapped us and we clapped them. An old man was wearing my crash helmet; someone else had my jacket on. Birdy Jack came over and shook hands with me and then with Julian. After that, another man shook my hand. Soon we'd shaken hands with everyone in the room. Their black faces shone. It was hot in there - there were no fans to keep the air moving like on the whites' side. Someone bought us two stubbies. Julian sculled his but when I tried to do it with mine I nearly choked. The Abos all clapped and hooted; half a dozen hands thumped me on the back to stop me choking.

"Play it again, Birdy!" Julian called.

Birdy Jack started into the song again. Led by Julian, we all pressed up to the trellis and loudly serenaded the whites in the next room. *Pub With No Beer*: it was exactly the right song for that place.

It didn't take long for our friend the publican to reappear. As he approached the trellis I heard myself say: "I'm afraid you'll have to ask us to leave."

Julian and I roared with laughter but nobody else laughed. I looked around. The Abos had all gone quiet. Birdy had stopped playing. I saw him slipping the mouth-organ into the pocket of his jeans. From out of the crush a black hand gave me back my helmet. Julian and I were the only ones still at the trellis.

"On your way, fellas," the publican said softly. "You've had your fun."

"Is there a law against having fun?"

"Off you go before I call the police."

"What'll they do? Chuck us in the lock-up?" I was rattling the bars and giggling at my own joke.

"You better go," someone whispered in my ear. I looked around and recognized the red hat.

"We're not causing any trouble Birdy."

"Come on," he said. "Get some fresh air, eh."

It was dark outside. Stars filled the sky like saw-dust; they seemed so low you almost thought you could touch them.

"Let's do another song."

That was Julian. About a dozen of Birdy's mates had come outside with us. We all linked arms and began waltzing around right there in front of the pub. Birdy played his mouth-organ and Julian sang. At one stage a bottle was pressed into my hands. I don't know what it was - it tasted sweet and sickly, like cordial that's got no water in it. I took one gulp and passed it straight on. God knows, I was drunk enough already!

"I shook his hand," Birdy told me when we'd all stopped to have a breather. "After the show I shook Slim Dusty's hand. He said, 'Nice to meet you Birdy.' Like that. I shook Slim Dusty's hand and he said 'Nice to meet you Birdy.'"

When Julian let go Birdy's hand I took it. "I'm going to tell my grandchildren that I met the famous Birdy Jack who saw Slim Dusty live."

We put our arms round each other; it was an emotional moment.

After that, Julian and I had to shake hands with the whole tribe. We'd just begun another song when the police truck pulled in.

"All right, break it up, fellas. Time to go home."

We only saw one cop but there might have been another one in the truck. The truck was parked so that its lights shone full on us.

"You'd better go," the cop said quietly.

He meant Julian and me. The Abos were already moving away in a small bunch towards the road.

"See you later!" I called after them. "See you, Birdy!"

There were several soft See you's as they disappeared into the darkness.

The cop stood watching us as we collected our helmets and jackets from the pub verandah where we'd left them. We made our way over to the bikes.

"There's a cleared spot just this side of the bridge," the cop said. "You'll see a track leading off to the left; yous can camp there." He obviously wasn't worried about drunk-driving, and fair enough - the only traffic you run into out that way after dark is 'roos.

I don't remember too much about the ride, only that we ended up at the place the cop told us about. We weren't in any state to worry about setting up the tent, so we just dossed down on the ground beside our bikes. The mosquitoes had a good feed that night.

It was quite late next morning when I rode back to the little store beside the pub to pick up a few supplies. I was a bit worried about running into that cop again, but I don't suppose he'd have said anything.

When I came out of the store with the things I'd bought I noticed a bunch of Abos walking along the road towards me. There were six or seven of them. I wouldn't have recognized Birdy Jack if it wasn't for the red hat. He looked at me for just a second, then lowered his eyes quickly like a little kid that's done something wrong. I knew I should say something, or call out hullo, but for some reason I didn't. Instead, I pretended to be busy stacking the stuff on my bike.

Birdy Jack and the others passed less than ten feet from me. When they'd gone I felt a bit guilty for not saying anything, but I felt relieved, too, in a funny sort of way. Last night in the dark I hadn't noticed how filthy Birdy's clothes were. Even his red stetson looked cheap and crappy in the daylight. He wasn't wearing any shoes. I was right near the pub and some people - white people - were sitting on the verandah watching me load my bike.

I rode back to our camp beside the river. Julian had a small fire going and was heating up some water to shave with. He didn't look too well.

"The thieving bastards!" he said when I came up.

"What's wrong?"

"I told you we shouldn't have left our bikes there," he growled. "One of those thieving bastards stole our tent poles."

When I heard this I felt a bit better about what had just happened back there outside the pub. Okay, so Birdy probably wasn't the one who stole the poles - but he'd have known who did it. No wonder he hadn't been game to look me in the eye.

That was a nice spot beside the river. We'd planned to stop there for a couple of nights - that's why I'd gone in to buy supplies - but now we decided to move on straight after breakfast. It seemed a pity to leave so quickly, but we knew we couldn't spend another night out in the open on account of all the mosquitoes. Halls Creek was the next town marked on our map; maybe we'd be able to buy new tent poles there.

There were crocodiles in the river - did I mention that? Not saltwater crocodiles, but the freshwater kind. All along the bank you could see the skid-marks that they

made sliding down into the water.

Later that morning some Abo kids came down to the river for a swim. Freshwater crocodiles are meant to be harmless, but you wouldn't have got me into that water for a thousand dollars.

The kids were very young, hardly more than toddlers; they could have been Birdy Jack's kids for all I knew.

We watched them for quite a while, half-expecting a croc to take one of them. But none did.

JOHN KINSELLA

Batak House and Mushroom Girl

She is looking for a way out,
and her Batak house seems
the only hope. She lures
Westeners with the promise
of animist dreams, a kaleidoscope
of ancestral loves and fears.
Sleep tonight in my Batak house,
you are beautiful and I am beautiful too.
Sleep in my Batak house and you shall
be safe from the spirits wandering the fields,
rising from the depths of the lake.

mondrian/laboratory/mounting pedestals

the fume cupboards
that must accompany
stacks on the roof
of a laboratory
infuse the notion
that ibises
were manufactured
as prototype
Concorde airliners /
that Mondrian's *Starry*
Sky above the Sea
is the fracture
of luminosity's eloquence:
when stacks strive
for an art that becomes
the random discharge
of particles mounted
on a pedestal
in a room composed
of form's colourful
building blocks

JOHN KINSELLA

The Millenarian's Dream

i

On the Glad Day the sheep
penned themselves and offered
their wool willingly.
An old shearer was seen standing
on an outcrop of quartz down
by the "thousand acre" paddock.
At the pub that night somebody
said he'd been on fire. The old
shearer denied it, saying
it must have been the sunset.

ii

The sky's props popped and crackled
as they struggled to hold their burden,
even ghosts moved en-masse out of the mulga
to witness what promised to be a holocaust.

iii

The five pointed flower
struggling to outgrow
outshine
the darkest polypus: the spent tin mine
they'd blocked with a few sticks
of gelignite after a couple of kids
had fallen in and perished

the crows spreading
as the heat peeled
the layers of sight.

iv

These are only a few of the many images
that came to mind as cosmonauts 999 Days

and 1000 Days watched Mother Earth shade
itself like a child's etcho-sketch.

v

Those on the surface
confused rapture and tribulation
as space junk ended the day's ploughing,
or cut short the queues at petrol stations,
or made a visit to the lavatory
unnecessary at Wyalkatchem, north-east
of Perth, Western Australia, an electric storm
disrupted the town's television reception
of the day/night cricket match
being broadcast direct via satellite
from Sydney.

JOHN KINSELLA

Incident of Honeyeaters

The dampening
attracts honeyeaters
which dance amongst
the pirated leaves

the house slips
slowly into the fold
between caprock and hill,
the soil

at the base
of the tree
refusing to be
quenched.

JOHN KINSELLA

the insulation of the new york sonnet

for Noel Sheridan

I don't know if there's such a thing
as the new york sonnet, and I can't find
out until I get my copy of Denby back
from a guy who shot through to Carnarvon
at short notice. It's not likely that
tracking stations, bananas, racism, and
the Gascoyne River, are going to yield
a response, but Denby, to whom you handed
a cup of tears some years ago in a film
that was rumoured to be a sonnet in itself,
holds the answer, not so much in the dance
of language, but in his collecting insulators
from the tops of power pylons and giving them
as tokens of gratitude to his closest friends.

MARGARET BARBALET

The Grandfather's House

You speak
And I am reminded of that house,
The almonds, the dust and the sun.
The layered newspapers piled on mildewed chairs
Watched us come and go; during the slow conversation
We flitted away to explore the dead grandmother's treasure,
Trinket-boxes for pillage.
In the sun on the western verandah,
Sun-drenched, rain-bent tomes;
Lindsay nudes to ponder in the pages of *Lone Hand.*
Beyond the lavender bushes along white gravel paths,
The toolsheds leant among forgotten vines,
Almond shells, cowrie beads and fifty useful keys
Strung on a rusted chain and hung up on the wall.
Above the sheds the charred trunks of the almond trees
litter their leaves.

Far-off, through the heat,
The parents in the house talk to the grandfather.

IAN ADAM

The Referentiality of the Deconstructed: Gerald Murnane's "The Plains"

> "The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary."
> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*
> "Good writing exactly reproduces what we should call the contour of our thought." Herbert Read, *English Prose Style*. Cited in Gerald Murnane, "Why I Write What I Write."[1]

Much literary criticism today, and most literary theory, suffers from signifier fixation. Behind this phenomenon lies the phrase from Saussure, cited as my first epigraph above, which is treated as foundational and axiomatic, and often specifically referred to in an obligatory, not to say deferential way. Thus in Catherine Belsey's widely disseminated *Critical Practice* "the individual sigh is arbitrary....",[2] in Rosalind Coward and John Ellis's *Language and Materialism* "the link between the signifier and signified is an arbitrary convention...",[3] or in Jacques Derrida's *Margins of Philosophy* "Saussure ... is the thinker who put the *arbitrary character of the sign* and the *differential character* of the sign at the very foundation of general semiology...."[4] It is thus extremely interesting that Gerald Murnane, a writer for whom post-Saussurean status has been persuasively claimed,[5] should cite with considerable approval the phrase from Herbert Read given as my second epigraph, for that phrase advances a view of language exactly opposite to the Saussurean principle. That is, the citation from Herbert Read uses the metaphors and terms of referentiality ("exactly reproduces"), while the citation from Saussure absolutely denies the possibility of referentiality ("[t]he bond ... is arbitrary").[6] In this paper I am going to pursue the implications of this contradiction (or, perhaps, dilemma) with particular reference to Murnane's *The Plains*.

Let me initially consider the Saussurean principle, for *The Plains* obviously deals with its problematics of language. First of all the novel systematically challenges our notion of "Australia". In its opening, in a post-modern, post-colonial rerun through such explorations as those of Leichardt, Sturt, Burke and Wills, and others, that could be described, in Graeme Turner's phrase, as major "National Fictions",[7] a film-maker journeys to the interior from an area called Australia until he reaches a region which is no longer Australia. The boundary dividing the two units is not known; it is defined by gradation rather than point; it seems, he says, "more and more a place that only I could interpret".[8]

Behind this opening (which tends to stop uninitiated readers in their tracks, so to speak) lies an analytic process which perhaps goes something like this. The term "Australia" represents a convergence of many elements whose disparateness and even incompatibility are occluded by the comforting unity of its grammatically nominal status. Australia is a place, but the place, on examination, is extraordinarily varied

and must be given sub-classifications to account for that variety: the interior, rain-forest, barrier-reef and so on. Further, its nominal distinction from other Pacific places (for example) is equally arbitrary: it includes an island to it south but not two to its east. Australia is a political unit, but it contains within it subdivisions of state, municipality, parish and the like, equally arbitrary, equally capable of re-definition as autonomous. Australia is a concept in the minds of the people inhabiting it, and they are largely urban, near the coast: for them Australia at times is a city with relations with other cities, all looking outward to oceans: Australia is a fringe. Murnane begins his novel by creating an Australia from these Australias, actualizing one of many possibilities with a large division between what is to be known at "Outer Australia" and "The Plains".

But even this division destabilizes almost as soon as it is made. The confident possibility of interpreting the plains disintegrates. The plainsmen are themselves divided between the Haremen and the Horizonites, the one convinced authenticity lies in the subtleties of the dull-gold plains hare flattening itself in the dull-gold grass (28), the other that is it to be found in the blue-green "scant layer of haze where land and sky merged in the farthest distance" (26). These two groups themselves break down into geographical, artistic, political, heraldic, philosophical and other subdivisions. And while the film-maker toys with the problems of interpretation of that which collapses prior to the beginning of his project, his means of interpretation also themselves collapse, whether as notes, script, novel, film, photograph, or speculations in philosophy found in the work or conversation of others. All of these means of interpretation are, of course, metaphors for language. Not only is the Empire of Australia undermined, but also the Empire or Language. Australia is arbitrary and so is signification; both deconstruct as *différance* emerges from unit to unit, creating identities which de-stabilize in turn through the same process.

What then of Herbert Read, with his assertion of the mimetic power of language, at least in the hands of the artist? And what are his bearings on Murnane? I think we can see his relevance if we pause to consider a linguistic model other than the Saussurean. The model I will use is based on the writings of C.S. Peirce (1839-1914),[9]

For Peirce language is much more varied and subtle in its functions than for Saussure. For one thing Peirce sees more than one kind of relation of signified. There is the arbitrary, Saussure's "signifier", which he calls the "symbol", but there are two others, both of which have a large referential component: Pierce's "iconic" and "indexial" relations. The iconic is a representation of aspects of the signified, as in the sibilants of "whisper" or "chuchotement", or, indeed, "sibilant", and the index *indicates* an originating source, as does a weather vane the wind, or all proper names those who bear them. Peirce seems to be aware of the referential aspects of language in large part because he conceives his system not merely from single words - nouns, verbs and the like - as Saussure tends to do, but also from *structures*. Roman Jakobson supports this view in demonstrating how Peirce is more conscious of the syntagmatic than Saussure, whose paradigm is lexical.[10] Consider one of Jacobson's examples: "Veni, vidi, vici" whose sequence is an icon of Caesar's martial progress.[11] Lexically, "I came, I saw, I conquered" confirms Saussure's principle of arbitrariness, but syntactically it is disconfirmed: in two languages the same progress is iconicized in the same way. Every writer, of course, knows of such devices; all metaphor, for example, is iconic, and most of us as teachers tell our students to put their most important points in an essay last, knowing, as did Caesar, that this is the usual icon of ultimate significance, parallelled in the apparently translinguistically invariable grammatical sequence of positive, comparative and superlative.

What seems to be arbitrary is less the lexical "sign" than the Saussurean choice of it as the privileged unit definitive of the basic principle of language. Why not

the phoneme? Why not the sentence, the unit through which most meaningful communication takes place? Dwight Bolinger speaks of the "quantum leap" in referentiality as we move from lexis through sentence to larger units: "The smaller the unit, the greater the arbitrariness, as a rule". He goes on to suggest that if we consider the larger units we find that languages tend not to articulate the world in different ways (the Saussurean view), but in the same way. "It seems that the closer we get to the organization of thought - in paragraphs and discourses - the more alike we all are".[12]

Let us consider the referentiality of larger units in connection with *The Plains*. The fundamental pattern of syntax can be described in several ways, impressionistically as a hesitancy, a tentativeness, a stammer, or rhetorically as a strategy of perpetual deferral. Utterances are blocked at the moment of utterance, sentences change directions, their subjects become something else. Thus we hear that the wife of the film-maker's patron reads books of philosophy though these "would perhaps be called novels in another Australia" (93). Or the tentativeness may apply not to an object but to an action: the narrator is to write a novel for the patron's wife but "she would not read a word or mine, although she should know that I had written something she might have read" (98-99). (Readers know how one could go on with the deferred fate of that novel.) Or what begins as a vague entity changes into something particular: the narrator is "poised between two enormities," which turn out to be the library in which he works and the hills he sometimes may perceive outside, where (or is it when?) the curtains are not closed (109). The rhetorical force of words like "might have", "perhaps", "would not" "could" and "possibly" is dominant in this work. It is a subjunctive world whose negations and alterities *revel* in their persistently deferring structures, and *reveal* in them a parallel to deferred meaning, and, of course, a striking referentiality to concept.

The imagery of the work is similarly iconic. Dominating it is the image of the mirror, or, more precisely, the mirror image. This is, of course, a particularly potent instance of iconicity, for it resembles its source in far more particulars than a normal metaphor. It is not that a nose is like a red red rose but that a rose is a rose is a rose.

As with the Gertrude Stein example, the mirror icon in Murnane resembles an infinite regression, whereby an image duplicates an image duplicating an image duplicating... and so on to dwindle beyond vision but not beyond imagining. Most know of the ending of the novel, where the narrator's patron is posed to photograph him poised to photograph the plains. This pattern is echoed in many other places: in references to the tentative paragraph which might be found in a book in the library describing a man like the author "speculating endlessly about the plains but never setting foot on them" (101), to a young woman in a library staring at a picture of another young woman who sits over a book (63), or to the patron studying his decorated tiles knowing their meaning lies with another man running his fingers over them who is aware of another man interpreting a conjunction of sunlight and colours who suspects the truth of this moment lies with a man beyond him (87-88).

Most salient among these mirror images or near mirror images is the figure of a woman, at first the daughter and later the wife of the film-maker's patron.[13] Out of several possible choices I take a striking series at the end of part 1 where the daughter is perceived through the narrator's library window, looking at the same window from which she is observed. She is then imagined in a script, walking towards a homestead, moving indecisively, as though in quest of something elusive; it is uncertain whether she is playing a role, or genuinely searching, or, as she looks at the camera, merely an actress "unsure of what was expected of her." When the woman leaves, the narrator builds a dummy of himself in a chair in his former position in front of the window, and then goes down to look at his image from where she stood. But what he sees is another image, the reflection of the sky in the glass,

and he is now uncertain whether she has seen him at all. He returns to his room, and removes the blank sheets of paper that had made up his face, stares at them "as though they were anything but blank," writes "a few hesitant sentences" on them, and then discards them (73-77).

The sequence suggests endlessly alternating attraction and alienation, potential oneness and ultimate apartness. In Lacanian terms it can be seen as the embodiment of tensions between the imaginary and symbolic, in Sartrean terms of that between self and other, with the ghost of Oedipal conflict in the absent but powerful figure of the father in the landowner patron. We move from the baffling familiarity of the figure in the mirror (window, lens) to the inscription of the symbolic thorough language (the paper face). But it can also be fruitfully seen as embodying the relations between language and the world, the relations of the narrator to Australia and Australia to the narrator, and the difficulty of mediating the boundary between them. Australia is a figuration of desire; language embraces her, then she vanishes, having her own script, which is not coincident. Nothing is resolved; there is no end to the image replication; exhaustion, not closure, concludes the book. Structure mimes concept.

The endless deferral seen in syntax and image is duplicated at a diegetic level. To trace the action of the novel is to follow a "plot" frustrated, balked, turned back at its outset. It cannot even define its initial means of procedure. The project of the narrator is endlessly deferred - mirrored - in a succession of plans (or should I say plains?). We move from the central figure as explorer, as film maker, as script-writer, as researcher, as photographer, as novelist, in settings which move from the plains in their various guises and schools of thought, through the plains as subject of conversation by the landowners, as coded in heraldic motifs, tapestries and rituals, as subjects of discourse in thousands of library volumes, as something yet to be realized - or, rather, unrealized - at the end, in the dark chamber of a camera.

At the levels of syntactical practice, trope and diegesis, then, Murnane represents reality as he understands it. His language mimes, enacts, and iconicizes notions of Saussurean and post-Saussurean skepticism, represents the fluid, anarchic nature of that reality. But his work embodies a paradox: a post-structuralist style confirms its opposite: a mimetic principle. What it does is to highlight, through contrast with its post-modern, post-structuralist mode, its embodiment of that which the mode, at its articulated level, denies. Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight* has become a *locus classicus* for that denial.

> For the statement about language, that sign and meaning can never coincide, is what is precisely taken for granted in the kind of language we call literary.... It is always against the explicit assertion of the writer that readers degrade the fiction by confusing it with a reality from which it has forever taken leave.[14]

Too much is "taken for granted" (including Murnane's "explicit" admiring reference to Herbert Read). A consideration of language under Peircean rather than Saussurean principles leads to precisely an opposite conclusion. Literary linguistic practices are virtually by definition characterized by a *higher* degree of conceptual mimesis than ordinary ones. Dorothy Richardson's style, one might understate, has some connection with the concept of stream-of-consciousness. A foundational assumption of post-structuralist criticism and post-modern writing, so dominant in today's literary discourses, would appear to be wrong. It has arbitrarily selected the lexis as the definitive language unit, ignoring the nature of larger units, including those produced by writers (novels, poems and so on). It has prematurely synechdochized. Of course post-modernists and post-structuralists differ from the "realist" writers and critics against whom they set themselves, but the differences are superficial. What they oppose is not realism but a concept of reality. The writing the one performs and the other endorses simply mimes their alternative concept. Like Murnane and Herbert

Read they seek a mode in which writers exactly reproduce the contours of their thoughts.

NOTES

1. Gerald Murnane, "Why I Write What I Write", *Meanjin* 45.4 (1986): p.516; and Ferdinand de Saussure, from *Course in General Linguistics*, in Richard T. de George and Fernande M. de George, *The Structuralists: from Marx to Levi-Strauss* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p.72.
2. Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980), p.42.
3. Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject* (London: Routledge, 1977), p.13.
4. Jacques Derrida, "Différance" from *Margins of Philosophy* , trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), extracted in Mark Taylor, *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 396-420. The citation is from page 403.
5. Two excellent post-Saussurean, Derridean studies of Murnane have been authored by Imre Salusinszky, "On Gerald Murnane," *Meanjin* 45.4 (1986): pp. 518-29, and "Murnane, Husserl, Derrida: The Scene of Writing" *ALS* 14.2 (1989) pp. 188-198.
6. It is perhaps worth noting that Saussure not only speaks of the arbitrary nature of the relation between the signifier (the word) to the signified (the concept), but also at least implies a second arbitrary relation, that of the signified (or concept) to the referent (or reality it is a concept of). Most post-Saussurean thought derives from the fundamental signifier-signified relation, and this is also my concern in this paper. To argue that our concepts have or do not have an arbitrary relation to reality would entail a separate set of considerations, probably beginning with the observation that it does not follow from the arbitrariness of any particular word that the concept it embodies is arbitrary.
7. Graeme Turner, *National Fictions: Literature, Film, and the Construction of Australian Narrative* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1986).
8. Gerald Murnane, *The Plains* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books Australia, 1984), p.9. All subsequent references will be to this edition and incorporated parenthetically into the text.
9. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers* (8 vol.), ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss and Arthur W. Burks (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), *passim.* A library search will reveal several excellent guides to Peirce's thought, including those of Feibleman, Gallie, Buchler and Goudge. A recent and important study of Peirce's semiotic in relation to literary practice, criticism and theory is *The Fate of Meaning: Charles Peirce, Structuralism and Literature* by John K. Sheriff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
10. Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p.422.
11. Jakobson, p.418.
12. Dwight Bolinger, *Language - The Loaded Weapon: The Use and Abuse of Language Today* (London: Longman, 1980), pp. 19 and 20.
13. This distinction seems reasonably precise, but there is (of course) further deferral: Linda Mayhew, a sharp-eyed student in my graduate class in 1988-89 pointed out that the daughter is described as both the "eldest" (105) and the "only" (68) daughter; that both wife and daughter are described as near the narrator's age (68; 90), yet the daughter is also "little more than a child" (105), and that at one point the figure becomes the landowner's "eldest grand-daughter" (117).

FAYE DAVIS

Ghost Town

To the Memory of May Maria Marshall 1888-1962

In the flattest part of the flattest continent
she heard crow, always crow.

Saw dust in billowing blankets
blowing blowing.

She remembered greens of Yarra gardens,
the softness of childhood

before it went wrong in death.
She remembered how she rose on stage

from a basket of flowers,
applause,

her father lifting her shoulder-high
to carry her home.

She remembered, oh, yes, she remembered
her infant dying

(when she saw only once her husband weep)
in this hard-earth goldfields' town

where red dust blankets a tiny grave.

FAYE DAVIS

Sugar Loaf Rock

Perhaps a poem is only an attempt to find
parity in opposites, a congruence,

or prove the human mind can pit itself against
universal scale (if momentarily).

Architects have tried as much, despite the fact
cathedrals took three hundred years to build to prove it.

At Sugar Loaf I recall cape bays like Bunker
where people swim in calmer Arcady-waters (I'm

on the lookout no doubt for disparates) or it's
the pastoral habit that takes me back or forward, or

somewhere else in search of balance, to a time
when men believed the world was flat - much easier

than coping with this vastness: sea sky horizon.
Obdurate inedible rock. I could

slip over the edge at the sheer awesomeness
of scale. Undaunted, a school of porpoise ride the waves,

an estimated ten feet high, that pound this whitened
rind of coast. Spume rises geyser-like. My son

insists there is a lizard crossing on this tiny
sand-track at my feet, and a type of fly

(it's striped) pollenates this sand-dune brush. I
listen. There must be scale in finite things as well.

BILL SCHAFFER

White Imagination

It saw itself and only itself
and seeing other than itself,
saw less

than nothing.

Even at the heart, this White Imagination
saw only the reflection
of some unspoken, unspeakable
vacuum, and giving a name to this

hole

between Heaven and Earth,
chose the only name it could
imagine -

the Dead Centre.

One thing it did not
imagine -
that at its true centre
(which would be everywhere)
this Earth might conceal an eye

watching
and remembering.

Still watching
and still remembering.

* * *

The White Imagination saw
the Red Earth, and said
to itself -
yes, this is good, but it could be better.

It could be redder.

And so the White Imagination
thought (to itself) that these

empty

black

people

might be persuaded,
with the help of a little

iron

to give their lives
so that the Red Earth might
become Redder. And the White Imagination
looked into the

empty

dead

centre

of their black eyes, saw the song and the history,
were absent, that the cycle described

a zero

and knew what had to be done.
The White Imagination stood tall
in the blood, and thought
to itself -
afterall, their colour was the colour

of nothing.

In its own way, the body
of the White Imagination now became
black - like a crow. And seeing the Red Earth
reddened further

by Black Blood

At the Dead Centre,

The White Imagination said - yes, this is good,
now I really feel

at home.

BILL SCHAFFER

Marriage

He was carnal and carnivorous.
A genius of animal threat, animal song,
with a taste for assassination.
Seducer and prey to the black absolute.
He had a mouth for the whole world, for everything
Black or broken, untamed and untamable.
Unafraid of the evil bird, the evil eye,
He would borrow its bony mask and holler
Through its beak, he would stare through its absent
Eye, to burn whatever he saw

Utterly Black.

She was an arrow - set straight and true,
Soon to splinter from the bow's unbearable
Tension. She was afraid of eating,
Afraid of being eaten - but her eyes were
Bigger than his mouth, and she kept
On eating and eating all the same. It was no
Good appealing to moderation - when the last
Edibles were fully consumed, she took
Pen and paper, in place of knife and fork,
And she slowly began

To eat herself.

His was the easygoing brutality enjoyed only
By peasants and criminals - he looked straight
At the world, saw nothing unfurled and nothing
Returned, he laughed and laughed, rolled and
Rolled, till he felt sick with all the nothing. She
Looked *into* the world and felt the world looking
Into her - like she'd swallowed an eye, forced it

To crack inside.

He would be a fox one moment, a crow the next, then
Who knows what.

She spent a lifetime becoming a jew, and then
She stayed that way.

He opened his mouth and found a future.
She reached down her gullet and formed

Another self.

DIANE BECKINGHAM

To an Odalisque

in a painting by Matisse

woman of the harem
Moroccan odalisque
though I dare not sport
half-naked in Red Trousers
or Striped Pantaloons
lend me your languor
instruct me in indolence
school my senses
to the baroque

show me pleasure can be
patterned like
a Persian carpet
and parting can be
as graceful
as an arabesque

NICOLETTE STASKO

98.6

Leaving the bed
for the first time in
days
like Lazarus
carrying my pallet
of stiff joints
and responsibilities
I look back
and see
the sheets
twisted and valleyed
like a landscape
books strewn
piles of notes
ideas
a world
to be lost in -
to regret
the loss of
This then
is health

KATHY PROKHOVNIK

The Extra Delicacy of Freshness

So what do you think? What stage are they up to by now? Are they up to him wanting a farmhouse? A house in the country, surrounded by hills? A pond in the front with two ducks. White ducks. A house with a verandah.

It was the ducks that made me think, even then. The two white ducks. Made me think. Should have made me think again.

But I tossed aside the two white ducks, heads in an eternal bob, like flocked dogs on the ledges of those cars with venetians and tasselled cushions.

Maybe they're still at the,
- I love you
- I love you
- I love you
- I love you

stage. With varying emphases on the various words.

Did they spend all night, the first night, kissing? Too excited to make it up the stairs, kissing, mouths locked for eternity in a passion which ignores the fluorescent kitchen, the greasy walls, the stove with only one working hotplate. What other people will think.

But wait! They wouldn't have to go upstairs at his new house.

Maybe experience has accelerated the whole process. They've already had the ceremonial drive into the country. At least the axle didn't break for us. Did they, before the axle broke, drive off the road and onto a track? Out, out till she wondered how they'd ever get back. Then get out, and walk a way into the bush. Stand on a rock amidst tall trees and think, this is what all of Sydney must have looked like once. Did they go back, passing a goanna on the way? Was it her birthday?

They've done the trip to the nursery, buying a plant each and one for the kids. They've been to the fish markets. I'm sure she agreed that hands that smell of fish are a small price to pay for the extra delicacy of freshness.

So let me see. Let me count this out on my sweet-smelling fingers. House in the country. Two ducks on the pond. I love you etc. Kissing. (Maybe not, under the circumstances.) Drive into the country. Nursery. Fish market. What's next.

No, surely not that. Not the seamy side. Not the bugs. Not the nasty side of a new co-mingling of bodies. For us it was genital warts - his and hers - then monilia - for the lady of the house. Then - no, no. Not for them. She wants more babies now. No. Not the abortion. Not for her the stony silences, the abrupt 'yes' at the clinic, the wooden, 'It's your body you decide'. Nor the mad drive home from the clinic. She won't clutch her seat and wonder why he's going through every red light.

So. Let me think. Not the abortion. It's too soon for that anyway. What comes

between the kissing (all night, time passing, too engrossing to go upstairs) and the abortion (it's your body you decide)? They must be at the fucking all night stage. At lease he can't say to her - well not with any sincerity - that he's never done it five times before. Surely they couldn't already be up to, 'No more, I've got to be up at six in the morning'?

Oh the little darlings. They've got so much in front of them. I wonder if he still keeps all his cheque butts and bank statements in a shoebox, that he can pick up when he threatens to leave? I wonder if she'll ever pick up that box and throw it down the stairs? I'm forgetting - no stairs!

And will she, one night in the far-distant future, go with him to a party? A party in a house with newly-polished floors, where the tables are covered with what looks like plaster dolls-house food. A night when she has the flu and drinks coffee. A party where a woman dances on the newly-polished floors and watches her drink coffee. Where the dancing woman comes and sits next to her and says, 'Dance with me?' Will she shake her aching head and say, 'No, I have the flu?' Will the woman return to the floor, and dance with him instead? Will she, drinking coffee, watch until she feels too sick? Will she take the car and go home? Will the lights blur in front of her eyes? Will she hear him return at 5am, going straight through the house to have a shower? Will he get in her bed, his hair dripping cold on the pillow? Will he have thought of anything, anything more substantial to say than, 'Sorry'?

CAROL MARA

Dirty Linen

My hands cradle the mug of coffee trying to hang onto the last of the warmth. We are sitting, my brother and I, in our mother's kitchen. It should be warm and there should be cups and saucers and tea and cake. But there aren't.

Outside the marble chill of the day lays itself across the valley. The air hangs tight and still above the trees, all life gone to ground in this suspended landscape.

"It will snow soon," I say.

"Yes, probably," he replies, "do you have any wood?"

"There's plenty in the shed."

"I'll get some." He moves his mug to the centre of the table. One end of the tablecloth is blotted with tea stains and crumbs. We sit at the other end, reluctant to disturb the pattern.

"It can wait," I say as he moves to go. He is anxious to be doing something, eager to escape from the fatty air of the kitchen.

"No, I'll do it now, before it snows."

"Douglas, we have to talk about her, we can't go on ignoring what's happening."

He slumps back into the chair and looks away, out the window to the leaden sky.

"She won't change the sheets," I say, "it's nearly three months."

"That's not like her. Do you think we should do it?"

"I've asked and she says No, this is her place. I'm not to touch anything."

"The room will start to smell."

"Yes. She keeps all the windows closed. She spends most of the day in there. Just comes out to eat and go to the bathroom. I don't know what to do Douglas."

"Is she washing? Herself, I mean." I can see Douglas' nose pucker at the thought of stale sweat and creases of skin packed tight with the daily matter of living.

"I'm not sure. She's only in there a short time, but I hear water."

"You could watch the soap," he suggests.

"For God's sake Douglas, what does it matter?"

"Of course it matters Anne, we can't have her living like this."

Douglas, my fifty year old brother whose stainless steel gleams, whose benchtops glisten, whose air is fragrant with Air-O-Zone, pine forest, fresh, clean, crisp.

"Does she know I'm here?" he asks.

"I didn't say you were coming, you know how she gets, but she must have heard us. She'll come out at 12.15 and she'll be sitting up the end there at 12.30 precisely. Just the way he wanted it, lunch at 12.30, tea at 6 o'clock. No matter what."

Douglas was precise, but our father's timetable had even annoyed him. It was Father's one departure from his usual passivity and her one concession. He was the master of mealtimes if nothing else.

"Why all this pussyfooting, Anne? Just call her out, tell her the place stinks and we've come to clean it up."

"Douglas, she may be old, but she does have rights..."

"But if she's not in her right mind..."

"Who said anything about that."

"Well, just look at this place."

"Being dirty doesn't make you mad."

Dirt and Douglas don't mix. Clean is spotless. Clean is sterile. Clean is control.

He was washing, always washing his hands as a boy. 'Such a nice clean little boy,' Mother would say. He was her ideal child. A war child, a child to focus her love while the man was away. But then Father came home, broken and bitter from the sights and sounds of the firing line. So she kept on loving the boy and I was born. I cried and my clothes smelt of stale milk. My food wouldn't stay down. My belly ached and I cried. My cot reeked of urine. My hair was all matted, my face covered with sores. I cried and she kept on loving the boy.

Or so I would construct it. It must have been for the chill of rejection to bite so deeply into my bones.

My hands and feet measure out the frost in the air. A patched and breaking skin encloses a blue flesh.

Outside the clouds are swelling like a heavy grey dough. They press down over the landscape and creep towards the house.

"You'd better get that wood in now," I say.

As he goes he taps the plastic thermometer on the corner shelf as if to endorse my request.

The thermometer is flanked by two figures in two doorways: one a girl with blonde plaits, the other a boy with jaunty cap. Our father had brought it home one night very excited: 'Wet washing will be a thing of the past Vera. With this little gadget you'll be able to tell if it's going to rain tomorrow. See, the girl comes out if it's fine, or the boy if we're in for rain.' The boy had been out for years now, never changing, but he wouldn't let her throw it out. He held onto it as a kind of divining that would relieve some of the uncertainties of life.

The red strip on the thermometer lines up beside the number 40. "Too cold," I mutter.

The porch door bangs and Douglas brings in the wood.

"At least the shed's still in order," he says.

I get newspaper and chips from the basket and push the pieces into the firebox. The flare of the fire stirs the blood in my hands and I hold them close. The top of the stove smokes with spilt fat. I begin the scrape it off and rub the dull black surface with newspaper to remove the residue.

Douglas has stacked the wood and he seems pleased to see me making and effort with the stove. I scrape and rub. It makes me feel calm. He lights up a cigarette and leans against the painted brickwork watching me.

"We've been well trained, haven't we Douglas, to keep our emotions under control."

"There's nothing wrong with that," he gasps before he exhales the smoke in two streams from his nostrils. "That's why she surprises me, so badly affected by his death."

"Yes," I agree, "you'd think that this place had been a love nest and not the reptile house it really was. You know what she said, about the sheets, she said she didn't want to change them because they had his smell on them..."

Douglas is rattling his keys in his pocket as I say this.

"I think I'd better go for some food," he says, "the cupboard's nearly bare, as they say."

I know better than to try and keep him from the task.

I finish the stove and wash the pans and dishes. At first my hands are eager for the sink, but the hot water turns them a stinging red and all I can think about are the sheets and what those two old bodies did in them to make her not want to give them up.

When I hear the car return to the drive I put on the jug for some fresh coffee. Douglas stamps through the porch and dumps a box on the table.

"Damned local shopkeepers, charge you the earth for a few basics."

He goes over to the stove to warm his hands.

"Anne, you've let the fire go out, can't you do anything? Just like you, never could follow through on anything, could you Anne?"

"And what do you mean by that?"

"Just what I said," and as he lists the unfinished courses, the numerous jobs, the failed relationships, I rigidly restuff the firebox with paper and wood.

"Enough!" I shout as the flames spurt through the grate at me and I can close the door.

He reaches for the jug which is spilling boiling water all over the bench.

"C'mon Anne, you're all for talking things through, isn't that what they say?"

"Yes, that's what they say, and I'm just in the mood for a few disclosures, as they say. Why don't we tell her, hey, about the Turkish baths and the smooth Asian boys and what's the latest one, The Toolshed, isn't it? All very nice and clean, isn't it Douglas?"

He is breathless, unable to take in the bad odour I have released into the room. I am afraid of what he will do to me. A Chinese burn perhaps, or a handful of hair from my head, or the whispered taunts of the dinner table.

"Keep - you - voice - down," he manages and turns and goes along the hall to the bathroom.

I rest my forehead in my cupped hands waiting for further words of outrage. Yes, I know about the grey grease around the basin and the shit on the toilet and the clots of hair plugging up the shower.

When he comes out the clock begins to chime twelve. He says nothing. He knows I won't tell, I never did for fear of his spite. He watches the clock and after the twelfth strike, he goes and stands in the doorway looking towards our mother's bedroom. He looks back to me and says, "You're wrong Anne, we don't need to talk about it, someone needs to do something."

"Douglas...," I begin to get up from the table.

"Shut up, and just stay right where you are."

I pull my chair closer to the stove as his stone cold words drop onto me. He stands in the doorway and I sit pressed to the fire as the pendulum swings away the minutes.

At 12.10 her door seeps open and the tiny figure shuffles down the hall and into the bathroom. Douglas goes straight to her bedroom. I can hear his heavy nasal sighing and his thumping hands on mattress and pillows as he goes about removing the sheets.

He has bundled them all up in his arms and has reached the doorway when our mother comes out of the bathroom. She stops in the hallway when she sees him. I watch from my safe distance.

"Put those back," she says, "who asked you to do anything?"

"I'm not listening Mother." He goes to push past her, but she stands in his way. She is unbuttoning her cardigan, she takes it off, then reaches to the back of her dress for the zipper, steps out of it and places them both on the top of Douglas' armful. She is standing there in front of him in pants, singlet and slippers.

"Mother," he begins to protest. She takes off the singlet and starts to push the

pants over her buttocks.

"No, Mother, no," he cries and lets the bundle drop to the floor between them. She has the pants off now and places them on the pile of dirty linen separating them.

"Take it all, why don't you?" she says and steps around Douglas and his rancid pile of rags.

Our father is dead, our mother suffers a grief we cannot touch. I feel the cold. He sees the dirt.

VIRGINIA BERNARD

Intimacy

That old lady who pushed up against me on the bus
I could see what she meant.
I could almost smell her skin under the cardigan.

What do old women do for intimacy
But squeeze hugs out of juicy children
Or break into personal space on public transport?

Rummaging in her bags, her elbow chafed my breast
And when I shifted
She only got to other parts.

No-one had a tongue in her ear last week
And no-one bit her throat or said that
Life makes no sense without her.

CONNIE BARBER

The Multicultural Kore

Hecate, Demeter and Persephone in Australia

They came in the old ships in the luggage
of Europe. Driven or escaping, they passed
through immigration without
declaring their preconceptions
or paying duty on their baggage.

Disoriented as emigrants
who, thinking blood meant death, called
the heart dead, Persephone survives
acting out shadow plays: make
believe springs in Town Hall daffodils,
mocking festivals - Moomba
and fun runs in the suburbs. She fades
when summer turns gold, turns scarlet,
when winter flowers. The sub-text is perverse.

Demeter shewed her hand for years
but her invisible daughter kept
her pact with death sowing dust
and salt in immigrant footprints.

Old Hecate recognised her territory.
She hides in dark escarpments under
painted rock. There the inland
breathes, red earth sings blood and procreation,
and water slides from stars making
its own seasons. One day she may
gather shadowy lines of another
hemisphere into a play, a local
trio, a language of eyes sloughed clean,
a rhythm to hold the land's heart whole.

CONNIE BARBER

Summer

Do you remember the summer when -
Years coalesce: a scraped elbow,
a twisted bike, waterproofed sandwiches.
Torn sails, the rudder split
on the reef could be any summer
like speaking, crying. You hear nothing.

Crickets invaded night. Always the scent
of sugar gums reaching honied hands
through drunken insects into darkness.
Always wattle birds flipping white tails,
crying summer. Always the distances between words.

Seals lying out where herons feed
mark winters. All winters merge
in mist, urgent cows on the hill,
sea eating sand and dune and tree.
Differences, silences, punctuate
the day's zest, the wind behind the breakers.

Remember this one summer: wattle birds,
ant swarms, honey scent at night
like any other. We could not sleep
for the roaring in the trees. Koalas
scrambled along the road, across the car park.
This summer of cool winds
and sun, of sound and scent,
of words meeting, touching edges,
of the rolling of dolphins across the bay.

ROLAND LEACH

The J Poems

J I

I fell into eyes that laughed blue
and swimming all night
came to a solitary shore
and my white petalled ship had gone.

And once I may have heard mermaids
now the sea merely mutters
dying gasps on sand.

J II

When not seeing her
she moves to myth,
white fleshed songs roaming
to the legends of winds.

I imagine her an enchantress
and I too move to myth:
A poor Ulysses on the mast.

J III

Back to the turmoil of days
that fill in spaces,
where dreams threaten to obsess,
and remembering to forget,

Till she appears on the stairs,
eyes the colour of summer sky
and her hair sways as she turns.

J IV

In dream I fall again.
On the lonely blue of a night sea,
I am drowning.

Held by locks of red weed
I scream her name in hollow shells
that rise and shatter hidden songs
over silent ripples.

J V

Among the fantasy of horizons
she appears dressed with white ribbon.

And after all the morning swims and midday talk,
after all the afternoons' wait and wane,
the evening indigo of books and poems,
after it all to have cried out:
'Yes, Now, Now, I will steal you'.

J VI

In the labyrinth of mind and myth,
those secret sharers of self,
thrust and parry, knife and swipe,

and to each day there is a new victor,
the loser heals in a night,
ready to take back possession.

And I wait in night shadow
hearing the mermaids' murmurs
on alternate days
and the song of the first shore...

VERONICA BRADY

An Approach to Vigilance : The Politics of Nicholas Hasluck's *The Country Without Music*

Writing is never really a-political even if the writer may be. The perceptions any novel expresses are part of and influenced by the web of relations and social forces in which the writer is situated. Indeed, it might even be said that the more she or he attempts to resist them, to speak against or from outside of them, the more she/he becomes political. Nicholas Hasluck's most recent novel, The *Country Without Music*[1] is political in this way. Subtly and intelligently concerned with questions of appearance and reality, life and art, it touches on what may be the central political issue for our time. Let me explain.

According to Jean Baudrillard, three orders of appearance, have followed one another in the Western world since the Renaissance,[2] running parallel to changes in value which both reflect and affect social and historical change. These three orders are those of counterfeit, production and, finally, simulation. Counterfeit is the order in which signs are seen as necessarily related to things, to what is the case, which they try to imitate. It thus reflects an established order. The sign is in a sense obligated, linked to what it represents and to reflecting it faithfully.[3] This is reflected in classical art; representation pays homage to a given order of things and to the notion of nationality on which it rests. With the industrial revolution, however, came the proliferation of signs, the production of things according to demand and the substitution of what is artificial for what is "natural". What is important here is not so much resemblance or lack of resemblance, but productivity and consumption.[4]

Today, however, with the advent of electronics and the mass media, we are moving into a new phase, that of simulation, or pretence. Where once a word or an image pointed to its original, like a kind of map, today, in the media especially, words and images become ends in themselves, bearing little relation to anything actual but pointing rather to desire, to the hyperreal. To dissimulate is to conceal the truth. But to simulate is to conceal the fact that there is no "truth"; the word or image itself becomes the "truth",[5] rather as if, to use the image of the map again, the territory it ought to represent, the world of actual people and their experiences, did not exist.

This, of course, is the world of post-modernism. But is also the world which engages Hasluck's imagination in *The Country Without Music*, as his earlier novels, *Quarantine* especially. However, his attitude is ambivalent. Witty, ironic, subversively aware of the absurdities of social and personal existence, his imagination is also conservative in the best sense, concerned not just with continuities but also with loyalties - the central concern of his previous novel, *Truant State*.

It is this ambivalence which not only gives *The Country Without Music* its peculiar power but also its political significance since politics, too, has become a game of images, another media event. Unlike many post-modernist texts, therefore, the reference here to the "real" world is clear, if oblique. West Australians will certainly

relate the island of Gournay, an island in the Indian Ocean off the mainland of a continent, to Rottnest. The people we are introduced to there, an administrator intent on personal profit, greedy and blundering developers, expense account boat trips and functions, and the locals, some discontented but most seduced by the promises of developers and the hedonism of pop culture, are also - sadly - familiar. But, there are more positive images; day-trippers trooping down to the pier for the afternoon ferry, for example, and the peculiar sense of relief and of lightness after they have left and the lights on the mainland begin to glitter in the distance.

At the same time, this reality becomes part of a larger set of metaphors, of exploration on the one hand, and imprisonment on the other. As *The Bellarmine Jar* suggest, Hasluck has always been interested in the Dutch exploration of the Western Australian coast, but here the interest broadens out to include the French - Baudin actually figures by name, but there is also the figure, presumably legendary, of the French lieutenant Bottineau who, stationed on the island of Mauritius, learned from the natives the ability to see beyond the horizon, to see ships before they became actually visible, having learned from them about resonance, the way visible and invisible interrelate - an object of scientific interest to the French Encyclopaedists, of course.

This link between Australia and eighteenth century France is not something we usually acknowledge.[7] But, linked with the other dominant metaphor, imprisonment, it becomes potent. Gournay, it seems, is the product of the French Revolution which was in turn the product of the Enlightenment. In a scene which is both vividly historical and vividly fraught with the fictitiousness of coincidence, Claude Dupuis, on the way to the Chamber of Deputies to make the speech advocating the new model prison, the Panopticon, embodiment of rational theories of punishment, meets both Doctor Guillotine, inventor of the machine for "rational" execution which bears his name, and his former teacher, the village schoolmaster who has just composed the "Marseillaise" in a burst of patriotic fervour. Dupuis invites both to the Chamber to hear him deliver his speech. Listening to him, Dr Guillotine is "captivated by the beauty of his scheme, the symmetry of the logic which would ultimately find expression in the lines of the building to be erected" (54) on the island. Typically, he is all but unconscious of his actual surroundings, as he listens. But the school master sitting beside him is appalled:

> The man was sobbing obtrusively: as though he had just caught sight of some horrible ghost which was bound to outlive him and bedevil every line of music he had ever written. (55)

Obviously, the novel's sympathies lie with him. For all his dedication to the cause of the revolution, Dupuis is sent to the guillotine shortly after - reason devouring yet another of her children. But the abiding power of his dream is clear. It not only inspires the foundation of the penal colony of Gournay and the erection of the Panopticon which still dominates the island, its governor and his allies, the developers and their supporters and publicists, continue it in the present. The governor, Charles Villiers, takes his visitors, especially visiting developers, to see the prison as part of their tour of the island, as if to suggest the link between their schemes and the world of simulation which they express and Dupuis' dream of a prison in which the language of reason, would be the means of control.

So his account of the prison, built around a central hall on to which all the cells were to open so that the prisoners would be constantly exposed to a barrage of orators, might well be an image of a world governed by the media and by advertising. This hall, Dupuis asserts, would be a "venue for incessant feeding of the mind", as the media is supposed to do today in the "information society". There, he tells the deputies;

> A succession of readers will acquaint the inmates with a range of noble texts and improving exhortations. If a prisoner feels in need of rest he will be able to close the panel and, in seclusion, reflect upon what he has seen and heard until he is ready for more. (53)

As the fate of the natives of the island suggests, however, this becomes a form of tyranny, of control from within - the Panoptique Foucault speak of in his analysis of contemporary society.[8] The Governor rules more by the rhetoric of promise than by action, and the Carnival is for him a means of social control, the equivalent of the Roman Emperors' "bread and circuses", except that in a sense the circus, the mass hysteria of the Carnival, becomes a substitute for, not an alternative to, food and material well-being.

In this sense the metaphor of imprisonment, of the island as penal colony, ironically undercuts the metaphor of exploration, the implication being that the heroism of the long and dangerous voyages in search of the great South Land have lead at last to this, to the obsession with material development with a rebel leader, Nathan Lelo, who ends his career as a pop star. The Encyclopaedia's promise of power, of placing "the philosopher above [the] vast labyrinth [of knowledge] which would enable him to view with a single glance his object of speculation and those operations which he can perform on these objects",[9] offers an absolute point of knowledge, the ability to read and understand the world. The French Revolution claimed to fulfil this promise and so to offer an absolute freedom which spelled the beginning of an entirely new story. In the end, however, *A Country Without Music* implies, this promise leads only to tyranny in a different but perhaps more powerful guise.

Moreover, the novel suggest, this conclusion is implicit in the logic of revolution, of the reversal and the break with the past it declares. Any new beginning needs a foundation, a new absolute to replace the old absolute of divine power on which the old regime was based.[10] Dupuis' appeal to the irresistible force of reason lead in his own time to the Reign of Terror and in the present to the permanent ecstasy of media culture, dramatised in the Carnival, in the images of the governor and his entourage and of the bemused and bemusing developers caught up in the world of mass consumption, in the ecstasies of the social, of size, of violence, of sex and information.[11] Excitement and sensation become the equivalent of thought, of the dream of reason, and become equally tyrannical.

All this, I think, is implicit in the novel. But it is anything but the allegory which this account would seem to make it. True, the fascination with the imaginary is perhaps characteristic of colonisation in general and of colonisation in Western Australia in particular - witness its origins in the fantastic prospectus of the Swan River Company which promised an earthly paradise to intending settlers, and the continuing preoccupation with dreams of glittering wealth, often without reference to actuality. Many of the early settlers, indeed, seem to have been simulators before their time - Eliza Brown, for instance, writing home, described the landscape around York as if it were a 'painting by Salvator Rosa'[11] and a bush cottage figures in Charlotte Bussell's letters as if it were a fashionable English house. What was "real" to them was what coincided with models they had made for themselves, imaginative maps they had made and imposed upon physical reality.

Hasluck is very aware of this. It is, in fact, the truancy implicit in the title of the novel before *A Country Without Music, A Truant State*, and to which the main character, Jack Taverne, refers at the end of this story, concluding that they have all been playing truant from the actual world, inhabitants of a "dreamscape" which drew them forever onwards, drawing them further and further from what he sees as essential, "some pivotal point beneath it all, something which survives the ups and downs, the rise and fall, always there,"[13] some centre on which society, as well as the self, is able to turn.

This point is what conservatives would call tradition, a sense of the cumulative weight and directive force of human experience across the centuries. But Hasluck is too much of his time and place to be able to invoke this sense in any simple way, much less make it a paradigm for an allegory of self or of society or of both together. The society he invents in *A Country Without Music*, a society which, as we have said, in many ways resembles contemporary Australian society in general and West Australian society in particular, is oriented to the future rather than to the past. This orientation, moreover, is the very stuff of inconstancy rather than of permanence, the quintessence of unsettlement, of lack of form. Change is its only kind of permanence, and change which is discontinuous rather than continuous, a matter of collision rather than cooperation or consolidation - Robert Drewe, writing also about contemporary Western Australia, labels it "the ricochet principle", seeing what is usually called the "line of development" as a line bouncing off whatever it happens to collide with, making connections between them by drawing them into its own dynamism, which is surely the dynamism of perpetual motion without purpose, "maintaining the flow of narrative"[13], of the ceaseless chatter and sensation of the media, without reference to fact on the one hand or to value on the other.

The world *A Country Without Music* creates is of this kind - indeed, that is surely the point of the title; all of its characters seem to be in process, in constant movement, without the coherent music or melody. Charles Villiers moves from lawyer, to soldier in Vietnam, to lover, to governor; his daughter, Jacqueline from governor's "niece", to student radical, to lover, to actress; the local radical, Nathan Lelo, from radical and patriot, to playwright to popstar; the Australian developer, Geoff, from security and certainty to insecurity and self-questioning, and so on. Theirs is the world as Disneyland, a degenerate utopia in which thought gives way to sensation and sensation in turn to stimulation and politics becomes essentially trivial, a matter of appearances and images and rebellion a matter of street theatre.

Where other writers would enjoy this play of image, sensation and possibility, however, Hasluck's imagination is not at ease with it or with an aesthetic without reference to ethics. Nathan Lelo expresses the sense of ambiguity which preserves him from the simplicities of allegory, making the text much more playful but also, paradoxically, more troubling.

> A good play, it's sometimes said, must concern itself with the basic fears and emotions known to all mankind. But playwrights of the modern era aren't so dim-witted as to rely upon bourgeois conventions to express outrage at what's going on around them in society. Far from it! To us realism is a worn-out shoe. We return to the universals by way of myth and analogy. The truth lies behind the story! (99)

The colonial world about which he writes - and there is a sense in which nearly everyone today is a colonial in the Empire of Signs dominated by the media - is by definition decentred, out of touch with physical and often also with social, political, historical and economic reality. Lelo, a man of his times therefore appeals elsewhere, to more signs, the more sensational the better. As he and his friends, the student radicals, see it, the way to contest the status quo is by means of street theatre, politics as performance, as "free expression", taken as the equivalent of freedom in action, "the will of the actors [becoming] the will of the people" (21), people being seen as actors, playing out their lives instead of living them. As the novel suggests, however, this is not to challenge the status quo but to endorse it, to become complicit in the fantasies of pleasure, power and possession by which it lives. The governor evidently realises this, and the irony he directs against Don, the laborious but in some respects still honest developer, is also an attempt to discredit this honesty.

> These Australians! Good-humoured folk, but burdened by their Anglo-Saxon heritage and dour insistence upon opening ceremonies and the cutting of ribbons; the demand by their government that announcements be made to a throng. Pedestrian drama I call it - the bureaucratic school of acting, theatre of the moderates abound. (122)

At the same time the irony is an index of the author's own uneasiness. Evidently aware of the dangers of simulation, the dangers Orwell sums up in Winston Smith's grim realisation in *1984* that when "the Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears [this] ... was their final, most essential command",[15] like Orwell, he also knows how difficult it is to hold on to this evidence. "[Winston's] heart sank as he thought of the enormous power arrayed against him, the ease with which any Party intellectual could overthrow in debate."[16] As we have said, Hasluck's work as a whole testifies to the fascination post-modernism exerts upon him, its wit, its sense of form and style, its profound sense of ambiguity and of irony and above all the scepticism which has always figured for him as the necessary concomitant of intelligence and respect for others. At the same time here in *A Country Without Music* there is a growing sense that this fascination needs to be resisted, that what matters in the long run is the appeal to tradition, to the empirical and commonsensical. As Orwell puts it, to quote him once more:

> And yet he was in the right! ... The obvious, the silly and the true had got to be defended. Truisms are true, hold on to that! The solid world exits, its laws do not change. Stories are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall towards the earth's centre.[17]

In *1984* at this point, Winston Smith, "feeling that he was ... setting forth on important axiom", writes defiantly in his notebook; "'Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows'".[18]

Things are more complicated for Hasluck. The new world he describes and in which he lives lacks the certainties of the tradition to which Orwell was implicitly appealing here, the moral realism of a Dr Johnson and the empirical tradition of Locke and Hume. Our society is in a sense without a ground, preferring theory, the play of interpretation, to fact - hence perhaps our devotion to what we fondly call "economic reality" or to "free enterprise". We thus find it difficult to appeal away from that theory. In the novel this is the dilemma of the student radicals. The only way they know to oppose the governor's tyranny is to oppose it according to its own logic, the logic of performance, of simulation, turning rebellion into romantic gesture. For them, there are no values which are given, everything must be created, and no truths independent of language or gesture and thus no neutral ground to stand on from which to criticise the present regime. Hence in the long run, they are coopted - as so many former radicals have been in our society.

For Hasluck it appears, however, that style is not enough. He is acutely aware of the tyranny, indeed the prison, of theory and the way Charles Villiers betrays the woman he has once loved and the way the child she bears him and whom he refuses to acknowledge, passing her off as his niece, also in turn finally betrays him suggests that this tyranny does not merely consume people but in the end becomes a substitute for them, delivering them up to what Baudrillard calls "the revenge of the crystal" in which the object, the event, the theory become not means to an end but ends in themselves; permanent process without finality, conclusion or reward but also permanent banality and permanent boredom.[19]

According to Baudrillard, the way to contest this tyranny is by means of the Principle of Evil,[20] by insisting on what contests the fantasy of desire, on physical limitation, on pain, disappointment and failure. This, then, is why the novel insists on the subjective, taking us inside characters like Charles Villiers and his niece and

even, to an extent, the lumbering Australian, Don. Similarly, even in the brilliant and sometimes apparently irrelevant historical scenes, the emphasis is as much on physical reality as on fiction's wilful power to recreate the past and force coincidences. When in one of the historical scenes the young Mozart meets Maire Antoinette, for instance, he slips and falls on the floor. Later the glittering princess, becomes the Queen of France, is shown in agonising labour surrounded by indifferent courtiers and later still becomes a figure in the masquerade - Villiers' dresses up for the Carnival as Marie Antoinette.

This seems like the familiar post-Modernist game with the appearances. In fact, however, it is not. Here the ambiguities, doublings and ambivalences contest the closure of theory, the rule of abstraction disconnected from fact in a world in which "things take on the ideal functionality of the cadaver".[21] Hasluck's imagination resists this closure, insisting on the singularity and loneliness of personal experience and the complications of physical existence - Jacqueline falls pregnant by her lover, Lelo, and Don's marriage falls to pieces because of a photograph. Mistakes and misunderstandings are as important as decisions and careful calculation.

The governor's power depends on the liberation it offers from ambiguity "that influential absence at the heart of .... culture" (99) but so, too, does the power of the student radicals. As Lelo observes, fear of ambiguity, "'an uncertainty about the central facts and the meaning of those facts'", makes for tyranny. "'Doubts don't stop most of us taking sides'". To the contrary, they encourage it. "'To die for an idea is simpler than stopping to analyse it'" (99). Power rushes into the void, expanding it to its own advantage, according to what Lelo calls the principle of "intégralité", "the process of substituting one set of values for another in regard to every aspect of human affairs" (100). In this way, "one controls the formation and dissemination of opinions" (100) and rule becomes a matter of inuendo and suggestion, sometimes of mere gossip.

Values, that is to say, are here not so much imposed but also invented for the occasion. In a new society like Gournay this invention is not only easy but also, in a sense, necessary; "a new nation" as Villiers remarks, "must create a myth to dignify and underpin its origins". (44) This is another parallel, of course, with the French Revolution. Psychologically speaking, Hannah Arendt argues, the experience of revolution, like the experience of migration and settlement, gives rise to a sense that a new story is about to unfold, though, paradoxically, this story usually clings to the present rather than looking ahead, being more concerned to preserve what has been done than to open out to new ideas, developments and possibilities.[23]

A Country Without Music makes it clear that this means that revolutions usually replace one tyrant with another or, as here, bring about an accommodation between rulers and revolutionaries. Lelo and his friends become successful within the system and Villiers remains in power, the radicals' protest having become merely an incident in the Carnival. But it is also clear that Hasluck is not happy with this, troubled by the way power rests upon the kind of emotional seduction Lelo describes:

> Be it prison or the outside world, the rule of one class over another does not depend upon physical or economic force alone ... It rests upon persuading the ruled to accept the beliefs of the ruling class and to share their social, cultural and moral values - their mores (100)

The Panopticon may be a monument to the French Revolution's belief in the power of reason. But this belief of rule is irrational, a matter, as Lelo says, of reshaping "from the inside attitudes which have come down form the past" (100) and remoulding them to fit his aims - he uses the word "compassion" but "obedience" would be better, acquiescence in the mass ecstasy figured in the novel in the Carnival. As Richard Rorty remarks;

> Getting somebody to deny a belief for no reason is the first step toward making her incapable of having a self because she becomes incapable of weaving a coherent web of belief and desire.[24]

Lelo, the revolutionary turned pop star, seems as much concerned with this attempt as the Governor, and the inconclusiveness of the novel's ending in which he and Villiers became allies rather than enemies seems to suggest that this is a world in which it is never possible to make a principled stand because its principle is movement, the play of pointless desire.

This is a question Hasluck poses throughout his work. But it is posed most urgently here, probably because the solution suggested though, significantly, never really tested in *Truant State*, the appeal to the past, to the memory of some point of human and communal reference, symbolised in Jack Traverne's memory of the landscape of pioneering, of "a melon-filled doorway beneath a flap of rusted iron",[25] is not available on his post-modernist island. The appeal to the past, to tradition, belongs in a sense to the mode of counterfeit, to the belief that there is a given order and a set of values which endures and constitute a final point of reference and of appeal. Here, however, in the world of simulation, nothing seems to exist outside a system of signs in ceaseless movement.

Nor is this a mere impression. The narrative's organization is polyphonic, it is told from various points of view, all of them shifting and changing; that of the Governor, the rebel leader, the Governor's niece, who is also the rebel leader's lover, the blundering Australian who also seduces her and, shifting the perspectives of time, of the island's "founder", Dupuis, and of the visionary French Lieutenant whose power continues, sometimes debased, sometimes exalted, in his descendants, or, more truly perhaps, in the flute which is its source.

Mention of this flute, however, points us to the alternative the novel offers or, better, tentatively indicates, to the problem it poses. In the maze of signs without reference, seemingly lost with little possibility of distinguishing true from false, the image of the flute stands out with strange force. It hangs around the neck of the Governor's "niece", Jacqueline, as she leads her "uncle's" guests on their visit to the Panopticon. When she puts it to her lips and blows, the melody is strangely transfiguring, promising an alternative to the prison and even it seems, to the island, pointing beyond its strange chiaroscuro of presence and absence to some further possibility, the possibility summed up in the epigraph from Shakespeare:

> The man that hath no music in himself
> Nor is not mov'd with concord of strange sounds
> Is fit for treasons, strategems and spoils.

Even the Governor responds to this possibility, associating it not only with his dream of love but also with the possibility that there is some kind of correspondence between this music and the order of things, a correspondence which depends, however, not on the music but on the player:

> Played well ... a radiant world is called into being. Played badly, punishment follows - crumbling ridges, dried-up water holes, the sea flat and empty.

The notion that the world is constituted by music is traditional, of course, as the quotation from Shakespeare suggests. But Hasluck uses it differently. For Shakespeare and his contemporaries music was in a sense a faithful echo of the divine order. In this novel, however, it is a sign not of presence but of absence, something rather like Derrida's idea of "trace", of deferral of meaning. The experience of listening to the flute here clears a space in the present, creating a sense of absence, a strange silence and sense of placelessness in which there is not so much a sense

of presence as of being tuned, ready to receive some further music.

The image of the flute thus becomes what Bakhtin calls a "transgradient", pointing to an element of consciousness external to it but necessary for its completion.[26] Nor is this merely fanciful. Consciously or unconsciously, the sense here that an element apparently outside the system may be crucial to it echoes the foundation point of contemporary mathematics, Gödel's theorem, which shows that "an arithmetical system of any richness is capable of generating at least one proposition which must be considered true within the system but cannot be proven within that system."[27] So, here if the islanders find themselves lost in a world without reference, in their own desperate and lonely consciousness, then the music of the flute which is also part of their inheritance reminds them of something else, of some order beyond self which is also an order of value. Hearing it, even the somewhat insensitive Australian, Don, for instance becomes aware of another dimension possible to experience.

> Stillness
> A prickling sense of absence.
> Bringing with it also a sensation of fulfilment as though one's ear, like a rainbow encircled by light, had suddenly and triumphantly arched over its surroundings to take possession of some indeterminate but radiant place close by. (77)

This is not necessarily to assert the existence of this order. What matters rather is to believe in the possibility of its existence.

In this sense, the novel invites us into a world which is framed by a context it cannot fully master and cannot comprehend,[28] the possibility of some abiding order, "a realm ... hidden until now, fragile, invisible, concealed in the stale air" (117), the "stale air" of the island as prison. The sense of this possibility adds poignancy to the other main trope of the novel, the feeling of exile to which the title points also. The inscription over the entrance to the prison, for instance, is to the "brothers who died in exile", though there is a sense in which everyone here lives in exile. The islanders are all newcomers, come from elsewhere, dimly aware that they are trespassers into another world, that of the original people more in tune than they are, "nomads [who] 'sang' the world into existence". True, Bottineau, the French explorer, passed on to his descendants the flute which was for him "the key whereby he unlocked so many of the world's mysteries" (74). But for most there is little sense of these mysteries and even for his descendants the door opens seldom and then confusingly.

Yet the novel insists the possibility that these mysteries exist - the writing of the scenes in which the flute is played is both lyrical and powerfully compelling. If so, of course, then there may be some point of reference, even if it is also a point of irreference, impossible to conterfeit, much less reproduce. It may also be something of ultimate value, at least if we accept Heidegger's proposition that "a value ... is what is valid; and to be valid is the manner in which value as value *is*".[29] In this view value, becomes accessible and capable of acting as a standard only where and when it is experienced. So the dominance of the symbol of the flute and the possibilities it suggests of some ultimate music becomes a source of value, a source which is neither dogmatic nor neutral, as values established by rational argument are. Since a symbol is essentially subjective, only becomes a symbol as and how the individual responds. Thus for Jaqueline, the flute brings news "of a country which required a special harmony in order to exist" (130), whereas it confirmed her ancestor, Lieutenant Bottineau, in his belief in the tradition of a harmonious universe which goes back at least to Pythagoras. Villiers finds it deeply troubling since it reminds him of what he would prefer to forget, of the carnival he went to long ago and fell in love, interrupting his clear-headed pursuit of power:

> I went to it happy, but came back gripped by a sense of discord which has haunted me from that day on. It is always there, a faint clatter from the past. (123)

The fact that this "faint clatter" continues still to disturb him testifies to Hasluck's belief or, better perhaps, hope that this music points beyond itself to something which exists, even if not in terms of our present existence. Villiers may dismiss this sense which came to him in the past as youthful folly. But he still feels as if there were some membrane within him which remains "tuned to receive the repercussions" of this music.

> The membrane is never quite still; and it trembles widely like a window-pane which rattles when a train goes by.
>
> I know what the nomads mean. In the beginning was the echo. There are places in the heart which can be summonded up instantly by a name or a incantation or the murmur of a distant song. (123)

The reference to the nomads, the original inhabitants, here is significant, pointing to the limits of the rational politics which would insist that they must give way before the "superior" European culture. If the prison, the Panopticon, symbolises the rule of reason, then the suggestion of an earlier culture more in tune with the nature of things is subversive. In the long run, the kind of reason the Enlightenment invokes is grounded only on itself, whereas the Aboriginal culture rests on the notion of harmony.

> Trees, rocks, ridges, water-holes and sacred sites [they believed were] ... brought into existence ... by songs and dances which reproduce the vibrations used by ancestral beings. (74)

This is political, of course, though not according to the conventions of contemporary politics. Moreover, the narrative underlines the importance of this passage by showing us Jean Benois, the servant as he reads this from Bottineau's testament; "the finger [here] travelled along each line in turn, slower than before, as if to suggest that this was the crucial passage."(73) The politics this points to has to do with the notion of joy Nietzsche invokes at the climax of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*; "Woe says: Fade! Go! But all joy wants eternity, wants deep, deep eternity".[30] This does not mean, however, that it is impractical, at least not if one accepts the power of images. In contrast to these images which conceal rather than reveal what is the case, the image of the flute points beyond itself to some final harmony, to the dream of deciphering a truth or origin which exists beyond the order of signs, some truth or origin from which we are exiled but which gives point and purpose to our existence.

The phrase that "in the beginning was the echo" (123) thus points towards the recovery of the sense of community whose loss, Hannah Arendt argues, is one of the primary reasons for the drift towards totalitarianism.

> Nothing in our time is more dubious, it seems to me [she writes] than our attitude toward the world, nothing less to be taken for granted than that concord with what appears in public ... and the existence of which it affirms.[31]

As the public realm loses the "power of illumination which was originally part of its very nature"[32] people retreat into themselves, self-interest prevails and with it rule by self-interest. Community, "the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should [form] ... between [the] individual and his fellow man"[33] disappears, to be replaced by communal fantasy. With this disappearance, people as well as the world tend to become invisible, even to themselves, since it is only in the eyes of other human beings that it is possible to discover one's true self and situation, finding in them the "aesthetically (and ethically) convincing experience of human

finitude, of a marked-off empirical objectivity"[34] which prevents the self from dissolving into the flow of experiences and images.

> In the life I experience from within, I cannot, in principle, live the events of my birth and my death; to the extent that they are *mine*, they cannot become events in my own life. The events of my birth, of my valorized being-in-the-world, and finally of my death are not accomplished in one or for me. The affective weight of my life *as a whole* does not exist for me. Only the other is in possession of the values of the being of a given person.[35]

The *Country Without Music*, is set in a void of this kind, its inhabitants strangely ephemeral, almost ghost-like. But the flute provides an alternative to this, symbolised in the popular music of the island, a kind of pastiche, coming "from nowhere and everywhere" (32)

> European tunes enhanced by south sea rhythms: rondos, shanties, ballads, whaling songs, melodies mimicking the concert platform and the music hall. Call it a pot-pouri, a hotch-potch; it was a way of looking at things, a mode of speaking. (31)

This is the music of simulation, transubstantiating the natural into the artificial, and the islanders are addicted to it:

> It was what the Ilios wanted. Namings, weddings, funerals, carnivals, they played it all the time. On Bastille Day and at the blessing of the fleet you could hear it throbbing in the background, music never prescribed by the official programme. (32)

Street musicians play it, for example, as the official party emerge from their official visit to the prison as a sign of rebellion, suggesting that this rebellion is only one side of the status quo, only another form of simulation, of images without substance, of mere self-reference. As Lelo realises, they remain actors and their rebellion merely theatrical; "No matter where we are, the table bearing the looking-glass is the point to which we return". (101)

In contrast, the music of the flute disrupts this order, suggesting that there is more to existence than the here and now, the play of sensuous appearance, that there is "a resonance in nature" (72) and that we should live by this resonance, open to the "call to go further" (Nietzsche). Listening to the flute, Villiers senses this call in the midst of the Carnival:

> As though there might be something in the Carnival itself, a presence, some spectral aspect of the protocol and codes of honour mocked by our festivities which is determined to assert itself; invading the bloodstream, gravitating towards the heart. The bright balloon sinks through the clapping hand again. *A leurs fréres mort (sic) en exil.* (127)

The sense of exile, becomes the guarantee of freedom, troubling the tyranny of the instant present.

Not that the novel is dogmatic about this. Indeed, its great strength, lies in the realization that it is as deadly for the mind to have a system as it is to have none, and the determination therefore to combine belief with irony. The Carnival, the climax of the action, is thus both a joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, of consequence and inconsequence. The point is that what really matters cannot be constrained or put into words, much less possessed - hence the glimpse we are given us behind the scenes of the writer writing:

> But it doesn't work.
> Nothing does.
> I press on for a few pages but soon give up. One thinks of the flute.

> One has only to mention it and other memories begin to crowd in and assail me. A kind of queasiness. (83)

Incongruous as it may seem, the word "queasiness" is apt since "queasy" derives from an Old French word meaning to "wound". The flute's music wounds self-sufficiency, challenging on the one hand the confident belief that there is a clear relation between signs and reality but that on the other hand there is nothing but a ceaseless flow of signs, of language without reference. If the world the novel describes seems to be one in which truth and reference have ceased to exist and with them the possibility of a common discourse or of a common good, then the flute interrupts this world, suggesting that pleasure is not necessarily detached from reality. Similarly its presence interrogates the notion that nothing is either true or false and that "anything goes" so long as it "goes", that is, remains in ceaseless movement. It is possible to play badly. Moreover, this demands judgement. As Jacqueline, a Bottineau, someone for whom the flute is part of her inheritance, puts it;

> [This is] not because what they did was unpleasant to the ear but because they had failed to bring some aspect of the spiritual world into being which might otherwise have revealed its glory. (88)

The possibility of some such revelation constitutes liberation from the tyranny and the boredom of a world without finality.

The novel's polyphonies keep this possibility open. But they also protect it from the temptation not only to totalise but also to make irony and undecidability values in themselves. The symbol of the flute, of a music which offers a glimpse of another kind of order, incomprehensible yet the necessary frame for existence, is therefore the focal point of the novel. Responsiveness to it, not self-enclosure, is the guarantee of freedom. Paradoxically, it also suggests that the place of this freedom lies within the self. This is the point Kafka makes in his parable of the sage whose wisdom we must discover in ourselves:

> When the sage says "*go beyond*", he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labour were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something to that he cannot designate more precisely, and therefore, cannot help us here in the very least.[30] (135)

We must become the parable, take charge of ourselves, "cross over" for ourselves.

A Country Without Music acts similarly, creating a fabulous world which we increasingly come to recognise as our own, recognizing it at the same time as the product of certain kinds of fantasies, which begin to appear increasingly inhuman to the extent that they refuse to acknowledge limit or irony. The multiple and ironic perspectives of the novel therefore make it profoundly political, an interrogation of the weightlessness of simulation, what Kundera calls the "unbearable lightness of being", made not in the name of Baudrillard's counterfeit, but made in the knowledge that this kind of representation is not possible and the hope that we may be able to cease from simulation and live within our limits. These limits, moreover, remain sharp and significant precisely because of the possibility raised by the symbol of the wonderful flute that words like "beauty", "truth" and "justice" have some meaning.

This is a book then, about commitment to this possibility, not in a spirit of dogmatism but in an ironic awareness that our present situation needs interrogation in the name of the "misgivings dazzlingly / Resolved in dazzling discovery"[31] which the Russian poet and exile, Joseph Brodsky, also invokes. Challenging fanaticism in the name of this discovery may be the best we can do, given that the consumer society offers pleasure without responsibility, activity without purpose - movement without freedom. In it, ambiguity, "the influential obscene at the heart of a culture"

(99) becomes the space which politicians, advertisers and publicists of all kinds rush into, turning others' needs into their own advantage. What Hasluck's subtle, acute and beautifully written and constructed novel offers, however, is a different kind of ambiguity, the kind which is celebrated also by Brodsky:

> There is no map of paradise.
> The great Omnium descends on us
> As a free race. We know it, one
> By one, in the right of all. Each man
> Is an approach to the vigilance
> In which the litter of truth becomes
> A whole, the day on which the last star
> Has been counted, the genealogy.
> Of gods and men destroyed,the right
> To know established as the right to be.
>
> Joseph Brodsky,
> "The Soul of Ulysses".

NOTES

1. Nicholas Hasluck, *The Country Without Music*, Melbourne, Viking/Penguin, 1990, 192pp. $19.99.
2. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*. Translated by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Bertcham. New York, Semiotext(e) Inc, 1983, 83.
3. ibid., 85.
4. ibid., 95.
5. ibid., 2.
6. ibid.
7. It seems to me, however, that Tom Shapcott (*Australian Book Review* ("Cool, Disciplined and Very Much In Control") September 1990, No. 124, 9)) takes this link rather too seriously when he identifies the island of Gournay with some French penal colony in the Pacific. To me, the interplay between fiction and Australian, especially Western Australian fact is the point of the novel.
8. Michael Foucault.
9. Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign; Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press, 1989, 31.
10. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973, 39.
11. Jean Baudrillard, *Revenge of the Crystal; Selected Writings on the Modern Object and Its Destiny 1968-1983*. Sydney, Pluto Press, 1990, 16.
12. Marion Aveling (ed), *Westralian Voices*. Perth, University of Western Australia Press, 1979, 280.
13. Nicholas Hasluck, *Truant State*. Melbourne, Penguin, 1987, 310.
14. Robert Drewe, *Fortune*. Sydney, Picador, 1986, 48.
15. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge University Press, 1989, 172.
16. ibid., 178.
17. ibid.
18. ibid.
19. Baudrillard, *Revenge of the Crystal*, 17-18.
20. ibid., 16.
21. ibid..
22. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 88.
23. Arendt, *On Revolution*, 41.
24. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 178.
25. Hasluck, *Truant State*, 311.
26. Tzvetan Toderov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, 95.
27. Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 83.
28. ibid., 43.
29. ibid..
30. Frederick Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zaranthustra: A Book For Everyone and No One*. Translated R.J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965, 332.
31. Hannah Arendt, *Men In Dark Times*. London, Cape, 1970, 4.
32. ibid.
33. Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 83.
34. Arendt, *Men In Dark Times*, 4-5.
35. Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 95.
36. ibid., 96.
37. Shoshoma Felman "Beyond Oedipus: The Specimen Story of Psychoanalysis" in Robert Con Davis (ed) *Lacan and Narration: The Psychoanalytic Difference in Narrative Theory*. London John Hopkins University Press, 1985, 1051.

HEATHER CAM

Crisis 1962

Once in the midst of dinner,
with a memorable and expressive gesture,
my mother swept the dishes from the table
onto the kitchen floor,
got up inspired
and threw all the pots and pans
in a great clatter,
as we three kids and the cat
hastily beat a retreat,
leaving Dad facing Mum
and the spinning saucepan lids.

I remember that upside-down meal
more vividly, with more alarm
than the Cuban missiles crisis:
a matter of stocking cans of food,
candles, and blankets in the basement;
a sort of game of camping played at home
with anxious parents hugging us too tightly
as we set off to school.
The distant threat of Castro waned
next to Mother's domestic detonations.
Tunafish-casserole splatter,
cracked Corning Ware and dented pots
on the homefront were more dangerous by far.

LESLEY FOWLER

grand/mother & daughter/aunt

when they arrived
at the last decision
they went to their beds
and took a pillow
a soft shape
slipped in lace
worked late at night
in the back of the shop

the inner slip: a gossamer
of lawn so fine
it might have been for the emperor's
first son
and embroidered with edelweiss
in thick silk

I want the best
for them: the pillows
were not for sleeping
were chariots
for my grandmother
and my aunt
to ride to heaven

in this city
where expansive gestures had failed
my aunt
shut the one window
against the sound of Mozart
and the air
while grandmother
opened the french doors
of the oven

they lay down together
like sisters
lace to lace
my aunt reached in

and turned on
the gas

no, said my father
it was not like that
my brother kept them
short of money
and in this family
where money is the currency
of love
there was no other way

this time my aunt
stands staring straight at me
her hair is dulled
and dirty
her eyes squint
against the impossibilities of her life
a silent automaton
she pushes the big frame
of her mother
round
and pulls down
the oven door

they kneel
and lay their faces
against the ingrained
grease

Senryu-2

All these young children
now studying Japanese
- bonzai or Banzai?

In the 1980s
after testing we returned
the moon to lovers.

"God bless..." the TV
presenter says - to no-one
in particular.

Painting her nails,
she has something to look at
if he's a write-off.

On the bowling-green
bowlers advance and retreat,
stately as brolgas...

Under the willow
lovers vow eternal love
- and the willow weeps.

A clear night; spinning
his web between the stars, "It's
a life..." spider says.

The gardener kneels
with his clippers; the flowers
begin them to pray.

Watch the trees closely
- they are the traffic-light's green
(when *they* go, *we* go).

KRISTOPHER SAKNUSSEMM

Away Games

When I was a kid I called it
the Bighound Bus, but
I meant the mighty Greyhound -
from Portland
to the Port Authority, the cheapest
distance between two points.
Too many is the number of nights
I spent 'riding the dog'
between broken homes.

I smelled the onions,
rolling into Morgan Hill
at midnight, and the odour
of toilets overflowing
in San Jose. I saw the lingerie
and violence of Oakland neon,
broken glass shining like
broken glass in the street.

But I always look back
to one Christmas Eve
when I was riding with drunken soldiers
smoking White Owl cigars -
two hookers across the aisle
and a junkie beside me who was
in a bad way - all the way
from the 5th Ward in Houston.

Somewhere before the Benicia Bridge,
a black woman rose
with a bassinette she'd been
balancing and when the bus
stopped at a station, she stepped
off for a moment, and I swear
that when she came back,
the bassinette was gone.

On the highway home from football games,
I used to dream about that child.
While the cheerleaders chanted
in the back of the bus, I wondered
what it would be like to grow up
in the midst of smoke and luggage,
soft voices behind me singing *Beat'em, bust'em*
that's our custom, roll'em, roll'em.

ANDREW BURKE

Skin Deep

Hillside Hospital's Ward Three is white and empty except for a man in blue striped pyjamas who sits on the edge of his bed, his bare feet hanging motionless centimetres above the linoleum floor. He sits, blinking thoughtfully, sometimes closing his eyes and keeping them closed for some minutes, but always sitting quite still on the edge of his white bed.

Oh to sleep, he thinks ruefully.

Still awake, he is in some kind of nightmare now. When he was a boy he had nightmares ('bad dreams' his mother had called them) in which he dreamt everything was white. A pure, shadowless, dimensionless scape, yet the shades of white, glowing and pulsating, gave his dream wasteland a frightening perspective, neverending, an eternity of nothing. At the time nothing was made of this: he was young and struggled to express his dream to his parents' friend the doctor.

Now he wished for nothing more than to be able to be witty about what he continues to see, eyes open or closed. He rings the buzzer then waits. His mother's grey face appears in front of his open eyes. He closes them. She stays, she moves towards him, her cheeks fall away, her nose becomes a hole, her lips fall off leaving her with a leering grin. He opens his eyes and shakes his head. His wife's face drifts towards him, smiling. He reaches out and involuntarily shouts: "Margaret!" She is closer now. He closes his eyes thinking she may see him if they both have their eyes closed. A shudder runs through his body. He wills her to go away, but her face moves towards him silently and flakes away to a skull. Just as the others had.

The two night shift nurses come towards him with a torch each. Unnecessary, he thinks, all the lights are on. He tries to explain his horror.

"Whether my eyes ... I keep seeing ... whether my eyes are open or closed ... I see all the people I love, I see their faces as dead faces, withering away ... I see their faces as living death masks ..." He pauses, then emphatically says: "They are only the *living* people I love who I see dying ..."

The nurses look at each other.

"They don't say anything ... they don't move a muscle, they just ... whither ... and kind of float past me ..."

They bend and busy themselves with the bed. The older nurse says: "You've had a nightmare, a bad dream. Just close your eyes, count to a hundred and you'll be asleep in no time."

'No, no, you *know* I haven't been to sleep yet. I haven't slept for two nights. Or three. Or eaten. Or anything ... except these faces keep coming towards me, everyone I love, decomposing, even my dog ..."

The younger nurse giggles and quickly turns to the other nurse whose white bottom

faces her like a chest of drawers as she works on tucking in the bed. She straightens up.

"Is he meant to have sleepers?"

"Doctor didn't say."

"How could he!? He hasn't seen me yet! When *does* he come in to see his patients? What time? What day?" Perhaps the doctor would know about the death faces ...

His young son, just six, cricketer and future astronaut, appears, the colour of death. His skin is perfect as an angel's wing, but part of the left side of his face is rotting away. "Paul!" He closes his eyes to see him better. If he could keep him there maybe they would see him too, maybe then they would do something ... Paul fades away.

'There is little we can do, Mr Kingston. We'll leave the lights on and look in on you later." They move towards the door.

"But I can't stand to see all the ones I love die right in front of me!"

He trembles on the edge of the bed as the nurses look at each other, then him.

"There is little ..." one starts to say, but the other has an idea: "Try to think of them as alive, that could spark an improvement ..."

"Can't you do something, haven't you been trained in this sort of - thing?! I'm not crazy yet I keep seeing people I love who are as alive as you or me, more than me quite possibly, seeing them as dead faces ... and they are rotting away in front of me!"

His daughter had lovely, long, black hair, but her eyelids have lost their lashes and the eyebrows slowly fall off as she faces him. One cheek is smooth just as he had kissed it some hours before, but her other cheek is crumpled and grey like paper ash. Her eyes lose their light as he watches.

He kicks the young nurse in the stomach and punches the other hard in the face then runs out into the corridor. He runs as fast as he can but he need not bother.

The nurses sit stunned on the floor for a moment then help each other up.

"He'll be lucky to get as far as the fence."

At Hillside Hospital's Reception Area a priest glides towards him as he falls out of breath against a wall.

"Father?"

His father has been dead ten years yet here he is walking towards him in this hospital. But he was never a priest ...

"Father, why are you dressed as a priest?"

"Because I am a priest, my son. Now, come with me to the Chapel and tell me what's been happening."

He sobs and falls on his father's shoulder, his light body shaking uncontrollably, his weak arms trying to cling but falling down time after time.

"Thank goodness you stopped him, Father, we thought he'd get to the fence."

He looks up to see the two nurses approaching, one has a crumpled paper cheek and the other is hairless around her eyes. The priest is a stranger who has no nose, just a gaping hole like on a novelty mask ... He slumps against the wall and screams. Is he conscious now? He cannot hear himself. He sees a continuous gallery of friends, Des, Frank, Suzie, Nick, all dead faces long buried, half rotten away with smiles that skulls have, and his mother, wife, sons, daughter, brothers, sisters, all his loved ones decompose in a ring around him like front row at a circus.

* * *

Today is his daughter's birthday. He knows that.

The sunlight is muted through the pine trees. He would like to sit on the verandah

but he can't open the French windows. They have never been locked before. The ward seems whiter than before with the sunlight coming in.

At least now he sleeps at night, although he vomits every time they inject him. Vomits then sleeps. He turns on TV to watch the Second Cricket Test between Australia and the West Indies. Richie Benaud is describing the rain and the state of the pitch from the studio with quick cuts to the Melbourne Cricket Ground where the ground staff are covering up. The rain sleets across like grey hair ...

Who is that? Quickly he turns off the set, but the face stays. "Jim?" he whispers. Silence. The face is dead, eyes closed and hairless, it is the same with all of them now. How could his old neighbour be dead? The old man still jokes about picking up racecalls on his new pacemaker and does carpentry every day, building gates for clumsy neighbours and toys for grandchildren. Last time he saw him Jim was sharpening a handsaw. Perhaps he is dead, he thought. And all the others. Perhaps they won't tell me because they think I am not well. Panic rises in him as his neighbour's face crumbles away.

He calms down and presses the buzzer. He will tell them he knows, he will confront them with it.

He presses the buzzer harder and grins. Yes, his grin widens, he knows their sick game. He puts on his slippers, walks up and down, kicks the aluminium bucket over and laughs as a dozen tissues fly out like birds. Like dead white birds that roll over when you kick the cage over. He kicks it again, harder. It chips the wall.

She comes skipping in, her black hair tied in two ribbon decorated pigtails, and party glitter on her eyelids. She has a yellow balloon for him, a necklace of cheese flavoured party treats and a piece of squashed cake in her hand wrapped in a serviette. The balloon is tied to the bedhead, the necklace fits perfectly over the bedlamp, and the cake goes on the white table.

"You can eat it later, Daddy."

He holds her in his arms tearfully and whispers: "I thought you were dead, I thought you were dead" until she wriggles free and reproaches him: "You're meant to say 'Happy Birthday', not 'I thought you were dead'."

"Sally!" Her mother, his wife, runs into the ward with a male nurse running behind her. She grabs the girl away and scolds her: "Don't you ever run in here without me again, you hear."

The nurse looks carefully at the dented wastepaper bucket, and the chip in the wall and the tissues, then at the man on the edge of the bed. But the man on the bed sees the balloon is yellow, his daughter's dress is yellow, the cheese treats necklace is yellow: the ward has been splashed. He smiles.

"Hello, dear." He rises to kiss his wife. She moves away. She is wearing a grey skirt, white blouse, a dark red scarf. He stands at his bed, confused.

"I thought you were all dead. That is," he modifies it, "I thought you may all be dead. I keep seeing you all, dead, sometimes rotting. I see all my living loved ones as dead and dying, don't I?" he sarcastically questions the nurse.

Suddenly he is overjoyed that they are all alive: his wife, daughter and his two sons who have just arrived. He shouts "Let's have a party! I'll get some drinks" and runs towards the door. But the nurse is faster, he springs like a watchdog and brings the man down hard on the ward floor. Some bones break and the man's nose bleeds over the white linoleum.

The eldest son attacks the nurse who holds him off while the wife screams "What did you do that for?! What did you do that for?!" over and over again. She kneels and tries to hold her husband's head up. His eyes are open but he seems unconscious, his neck is loose, she doesn't like the colour of his face. She yells over her daughter's cries: "Someone get a doctor! Hurry! Get a doctor!"

He sees her so clearly now as her face clenches and loosens, clenches and loosens

like a nervous hand. His daughter's party dress has blood over it and her nose is broken. His eldest son lies inert under the empty bed while his little son wails and runs into the wall and runs into the wall like a broken toy over and over again.

His eyes close, she sees he is breaking down, only his skin holds his broken parts together, only his skin holds him together at all.

SUSAN STORM

Necklace of Tears

I am standing at the edge of the beginning. My face is pressed against the cold shower tiles, hot water streams down my back. My eyes are closed against my pain.

How long have I been hiding behind this frosted glass screen? Over the noise of water splashing on the floor, I hear the happy daytime shouts of the family getting ready for their day. My husband's shaver growls relentlessly in protest against his morning beard, exposing more layers of his vulnerability.

Blonde and innocent my wise daughter opens the shower door and recognises the tears that roll uncontrolled from my eyes, opal pearls in chlorinated water. She looks at me in anger and confusion, and walks away.

This is the day for which we have waited, you and I. The sun is shining. It's the beginning of spring. Gulls swoop and scream over the noise of the surf through my window.

On either side of the river we are doing everyday things. I caress my skin with your soap, and remember the touch of your fingertips on my lips. The hot water pours in a torrent off my hair, down my back, and over my feet that have walked acres of joy and pain.

Outside the shower the friendly noises have ceased and there is room for me and my guilt to dry and dress. I wipe the moisture off the mirror with unmanicured hands. The blur of my face comes into focus. My skin doesn't have the tenderness of youth, but it has the wisdom of suffering. It is a perfectly ordinary face, luminous in its pain and love.

I can't look at my eyes. On glad days I gather a smile a minute and on deep, sad days I batten my soul against the stares of strangers.

"But you're married!" a friend anguished.

We met one promise too late, and you gave me the gift of the rest of your love.

"It won't last," wise friends prophesised.

So long ago I saw your hair curling softly over your collar at the airport, a tall familiar stranger. You crept into the temple of my heart, and softly, like a monk, lit a candle.

"He'll never leave his wife," they warned.

The warm towel is large and thick, and I cocoon myself in it. I am a larva with a soul of a butterfly, swathed in a gossamer shawl of happiness. My blood sings. My mouth is warm and alive.

The bridal veil of the mistress is delicately woven of guilt and love, threaded with joy and pain, spangled with sunbursts and tears. It hangs opaque with heaviness on my shoulders.

"You will never be my mistress!" you trembled. "You will be my lover and then my wife!"

Last night as I lay with my face pressed against my young son's sweet neck, I breathed in his innocence. Trusting and warm, he has no sense of betrayal.

"Of course I'll have to keep the children," my husband begged, tears in his eyes. I will have to kiss them goodnight on the telephone.

What shall I wear for our special day? You've seen most of my clothes. The faded jeans and a favourite tee-shirt, or the elegant silk dress you caressed with your eyes one precious evening? Should I wear the Indian cotton, white and virginal, so that you can touch me easily through the spider web fabric?

Perhaps the denim dress with studs that we chose together so long ago and I wore that first night against which we had been struggling so long and so hard?

I decide on the pale blue denim, soft from the past, that will lead us into the future.

On my wood dresser is a box filled with trinkets with which I sometimes adorn myself. I finger them carefully, running each memory through my fingers like a rosary.

Lapis from India, agate from Africa, pearls from the Orient. In a shop smelling sweetly of frankincense I bought the ethnic hand carved necklace and you bought a book of poetry. The necklace snapped, and scattered like tears the first time you kissed me. I fumble with the clasp.

In my glass house on the hill I have agonised and been tormented, touching each precious object in their turn. I have picked up the silver photo frames and stroked the captured faces with a trembling finger, caressed the emulsion smiles.

My husband has stopped his whistling. Fear gallops across his face for a fleeting moment; the reminder of last night's leftover passion momentarily assures him - all is well.

"Do you want some tea, darling?" he speaks the words carefully, easy everyday words that have a knife edge of formality.

I have filled the fridge with cheese, crisp lettuce and apple cider, chicken casseroles and smoked mackerel. Heavy loaves of rye are deep frozen in aluminium foil. Imported gherkins lie petrified in their glass bottles.

The cupboards are tidy and filled with freshly washed and softened clothes. I have thrown away beloved bits of toys, collections of stickers and bottlecaps. My son's desk is visible for the first time in forever.

We are sitting at the breakfast table this last time. I will not comment on their manners or the Sony Walkman plugged into my gyrating daughter's ears, or the book propped against her bowl of cornflakes. There will be time to hate me later.

My husband smiles at me across the aching distance between us, bridging his love and commitment with a sigh. My eyes fill with tears which roll down my cheeks and drop heavily onto my buttered toast. I am sodden with tears.

"What about your vows?" those friends anguished.

We've shared so much, you and I. One day I'll tell you of the joy I feel, waiting for you each day at our spot. I see you come around the corner, your jacket slung over your shoulder, a skip in your step as you hurry to meet me. I watch you, with a heart huge with love, in the rearview mirror while Vivaldi plays on the car stereo.

It's the everyday separation that has brought us to this.

The new purple shoots of the bougainvillea tremble in the early morning sun.

"I hope it doesn't rain this weekend." My husband stands at the French doors looking out. "The lawn needs mowing."

I can't breathe. He and I planted that lawn, ten years ago. Now it is vivid green, scattered here and there with Alyssum, like freckles.

I've kissed your hands, calloused from weeding the stony patch outside your front door. A refuge from the anger and fear inside the dark house.

Last weekend I planted white petunias which gave me solace, a peace offering

to my family in my wake. This spring they will burst from their beds like a carpet of snow.

"Destroyer of homes! They'd burn you if this was the middle ages!" The sages shook their heads in dismay.

The mantle of doom is wrapped around me like a shroud.

"He is my life, my love, the keeper of my soul," I defended you proudly. My lips sing the song of your name.

My heart misses a beat. I've forgotten to put away your wine glass from our picnic under the trees yesterday. Your singular fingerprint is my judgement.

I feel the warm glow of your skin against mine. Silver water on your satin soft back, soft light of love in your eyes. My throat closes and my face burns hot as a furnace.

My husband carries the knowledge of my crime majestically. He suffers in dignity. I quake at the thought of inflicting more lashes on his bruised heart. He is the real hero. Born of courage and true love, he holds me with a long thin rein.

For the first time in fifteen years he removes his breakfast plate and stacks it in the dishwasher. We attend to the business of sandwiches for school. The children scatter in various untidy directions and leave the disarray of the morning for me to rectify.

I feel a gentle touch on my shoulder and press my cheek to my husband's cold hand. We are bound together by a promise.

"I am torn in two," you wept. "I cannot share you or myself!"

Sometimes I am stoned to death by stares from those who know you and I love too much. The hostile faces accuse the creases in our skin and the sag beneath our chins. Love and passion are for the young, they frown.

"Will we find time for romance, my love," you wept, "with four children to share?"

I am alone in my house. The petals drop from the full blown roses in the crystal bowl. I begin a long litany of farewells to the accoutrements of more than a decade.

Puberty lurks in my daughter's room. The sun catches on the long gold hairs in her brush as I straighten her messy pink bed.

On the covers the extract of a poem: "To mum: whatever you may be feeling, whatever you want to do, remember that I love you and will stand by you too." My eyes mist as I put fresh daffodils on her windowsill. The budgie's cage needs cleaning.

My daughter watches me from her school photograph. And then her cello catches my eye. Doesn't she have a lesson today?

I stand paralysed as the telephone rings.

STEPHEN HALL

Reconstruction

Also recorded; - the guitarist's breathing,
an insinuation of air between the notes.
The room shared with her - as someone
come to inspect the house, test the chairs.

I perform the ritual of art, recreating
for this moment the feeling of a composer
long dead, for a church long demolished,
its stones scavenged into garden walls.

And a string of devices has not suppressed
the warmth of fingers on the frets and
a languid scent gathering in my darkness
of her and beyond of taper-candles burning.

Machines pretend to the music and are
betrayed by their own precision - faithfully
recording the sigh of hands over wood -
chancel rail, neck of guitar, my furniture.

STEPHEN HALL

Signs of Life

I

There has been a rattling in the house:
Breath through the chambers of a throat,
trembling in the extremities - doors, windows.
A paper blind rising like the steady
sighs of a patient on a respirator.

She has shut herself in the bathroom.
The wind of this morning has been wasted
on walls and telegraph poles. Her breathing
is no longer monitored by shuddering locks.
The house is a disconnected instrument.

Again her face, its rooms vacant and dark.
Accusations that she flung through the door,
making it rattle in my mind, have gone;
a cool and wordless body is moving past me,
past blinds, drawn and still at the windows.

II

In bed, muffled in covers, "from the cold",
she says. Any accidental brushing
of our skins is prevented. As if she
is a subject of a mortician's art, only
available to view, an illusion of life.

In the night the covers are slowly stolen
from along my back and pushed into the gap
between us. I half-wake, feeling a line
ruled on my spine by a blade of winter. Dreams
of standing against the draft from a door.

In one dream I forget her entirely, as if
reincarnated in a distant suburb of existence.
On the surface of my consciousness is the

skim of reality - that in the morning the
soft wall between us will be absence of resolution.

III

There is a wall between our window and
the rising sun - morning is an infinite
gradation of light. There are no miracle
cures, the house recovers slowly from
darkness, condensation polishing its lines.

I rediscover her as hair fanned on the pillow
and as the furrows of a pale neck. Then I
hold her and find an affirmation of life,
her pulse, dithering like the tongue of a catch
in its groove, a breeze through slender vessels.

No need now for instruments, secondary signs.
No need for her heart to be counted by the beating
of a loose sheet on the iron roof. This body
curled into the curve of mine is confirmation.
We kiss at the door, made shy by our newness.

STEPHEN HALL

Synopsis

We are told that a centre of low pressure
has moved over our city. Banks of clouds
perform huge, menacing circles around us
- the traceries of a hunger-driven world.

A storm defies forecasts, flags the curtains,
crushes gardens like a derelict herd and
I am sent outside to close the car windows.
My face is streaked and red and breathless.

You look up from the television to see me,
disguised in tears, without logic or sarcasm,
leaning on the door, pushing back wet hair.
Is this the face I have refused to show you?

I lean back, as if afraid. There's no time
for lies. We are hunted by the weather.
It is drawn as ranks and arrow-heads. Rain
drums the door and drives us back to honesty.

STEPHANIE BENNETT

After "The Bush" for Brett Whiteley

Artist, you are not erratic
because your sounding self
Gives off steam, and
Your garden is perfumed
With red and black crosses
Stunted in regrowth.

You are the day-lily
Closeted in
A colony of thorns-
The patchworking
Pin-cushion far too awake
To let the sun go down.

Even the blue bloody murder
You sing on white days
To your Dutch Master's chair
Is an ode
Of repair to all
That's missing in the incarnate.

The green planet spins and
Has your thumb-print on it.
The king tide you hold
Aside to ransom-
Thunder's your
Birthrighted witticism.

The erratic comes
From another source:
A gallery at night
Where canvasing cargo
Takes to flight...
The walls in a state
Of chill collapse.

MARK MILLER

My son, aged 5 months

In the next room
my son sleeps
his tiny mouth a zero
his breathing easier now

Here, in this room
I lie awake
turn on my side
unable to
comprehend
I rehearse
soothing words
first aid

Listen for any
sound
wheeze of breath
restless tossing
gasping cough
on the other side
of the wall

I think
of the future
days when I
won't be with him
his trips and
falls
struggles
to take root
elsewhere
his blooming
apart

It is early
in the clammy half-light
of my room

I listen for his
soft cry
I drink coffee
watch moths
around the courtyard light
& worry.

IAN TEMPLEMAN

In a Foreign Tongue

You decorated the page of text
with graffiti of suggested amendments.
The new translation
grew from you pencil quick scrawl
and the songlines you grafted to my tongue
and the images you transplanted in my eye.
My words now contain
in part, the pulse beneath your skin.

As a stranger in your territory
I am uncertain how to acknowledge the gift.
The language and ritual
are unfamiliar and my immigrant
manners appear stilted, out of fashion
as your voice dances through my mouth.
In my home country,
a blessing, an embrace would be appropriate,

MAXINE MORELAND

A Song for the Singing

The round sun rises, bright and clear, promising heat. Drops of dew star the lawn and the air is scented with jasmine. But a chill wind stirs in the south. In the distance the storm broods, waits and broods, while somewhere lightning beckons the thunder.

Neutral as dust, I wash and dress with a pointless precision but still there is time to think and to fear. I will not think of Rachel. I will think of pleasant things, of round, red apples, white petalled camellias and red wine in a crystal glass.. I will imagine white parrots wheeling, sea-sparkle dancing and light silver spangling the trees.

Grains of sand fall in the hourglass, the pendulum swings, tick, tock, tick, tock. I have no power to stay the hour, and no desire; it is better to act than to chafe and to wait. And, before I arrive, there is the drive and time to delight in the high, blue sky and the trees' green dance. In the dazzle of sun, I am distanced from death. But the journey ends and too soon I see the lawns of the cemetery and near them the stones, guarding the graves. Further on is the church, hunched and hard-edged against light become brittle, and, outside, a few people stand waiting uneasily. Here a woman holds a sad bunch of flowers; there a child taps at her mother's knee. No-one converses; each is aloof among strangers. Safe in my car, I am free from their stares and alienation.

The sun nears its height, the mourners move and I must join them. Slowly I take the keys, step from the car, close the door and turn the key in the lock. In the harsh light I am vulnerable, exposed, delicate as an eggshell. Near the church six men are bearing the coffin; the sight is like a boot to the belly, but my feet carry me through the church door. Inside the shadows press down; there are no seats and the people stand pinned to the walls by the public gaze. In the centre of the room stands the coffin, black and rectangular.

Silent I wait, while the world trembles, becomes hard to grasp. Time is precious, life is precious. Rachel, how could you take your own life? Others found happiness, sack-shaped women, girls with faces like carp; but not you with your midnight hair and your doe-brown eyes warm as the sun. When you gazed at the glancing light of the poplars, you saw the tremor, not the dance. When night descended, you turned your face from the quicksilver stars.

It was not always so. In our green days, our red days, sometimes you danced, sensual as fire, spinning where I could not follow. But you whirled so fast that you tripped and, in falling, spied the stake in the pit. From then on afraid, you denied your family, mistrusted marriage and waited for lovers to leave. How thin your life must have been, brittle as a black twig on a burnt bough. No stair worth climbing, no echo worth catching, no bone worth worrying, no weight in the world. Crouched

where the light could not reach you, you yielded to darkness and let him embrace you. Before it was finished, did you fight your dark lover in too late denial, did you clutch at the curtain, afraid to let go? Your death is part of me, and I am part of your death; the widening ripples of my actions touched and betrayed.

Now the priest begins his lament. He is in love with his sorrow; he rolls his tongue round its taste, sucking its juice. I wait for a word of your talents but he knows only death, and my anger grows white as forged steel. Rachel, I have seen you happy, have seen you dance like foam on the waves, like sun on the sea. Oh, I wish I could conjure bright flowers to flourish, to flaunt in his face for you and the light!

All things have their moment. Time the destroyer is time the redeemer and the priest is finished at last. Men carry the coffin into the sunshine and lower it into the ground. The dark grave gapes, raw earth moist with weeping; I hide behind backs to shut out the sight. It is then it begins, the nightmare sound, the thud, thud, thud, like a great bird pecking. Spectral as crows, men, dressed in black, shovel dirt on the coffin. Thud, thud, thud! Horror presses upon me blacker than night.

Fire is preferable, quicker, cleaner. Better to become one with the dancing flames than moulder, sealed in the earth. Thud! Thud! Thud! There is coldness at noonday and shadows like daggers. The trap snaps shut! Before me the chasm, spanned by a hair, and behind me the tiger, ready to pounce! The storm swoops and darkness plunges with huge, beating wings! Helpless I toss, whipped by the wind, torn by lightning, battered by thunder. Rachel, you have left me naked to the wind's blast, the lightning's lash and the thunder's crash, in which I hear your laughter. For you have brought me face to face with death; in weeping for you, I weep for myself.

Sudden silence prevails, and stillness, like a paused picture frame. Then stirs a rustle slight as a sigh as the mourners depart one by one. Not for them the solace of friendship after the funeral, of wine, food and laughter to keep death at bay. I drive away in the bruised afternoon under the bright, blue sky. The sun is descending and the shadows are tall. In my garden the flowers shiver, small, blue butterflies tremble and I know that soon they will all, all of them, die.

And for what, after all, do we endure? I think of the things I abhor - dust in corners, dirty coffee cups, the phone that stops ringing, the lash of indifference. And of old age, where the wheel turns full circle and the old, like the young, cuddle soft toys and call out in the dark. Worms eat the apple, leaves rot, and we know that one day we will wither and die.

My life is cluttered with the ordinary, the trivial. "It is not enough!" I cry. "What else is there?" And so am happy, since it is the search which delights and not the discovery, the journey which excites and not the arrival. Life rounds with experience; wisdom grows slowly like rings on the bark of a tree. Although the line of my flesh scruffs and blurs, I know that the light is stronger than night. There are so many things for delight - treacled honey cored with the sun, the stars' white fire, a pillar of moonlight over the sea. Now I know that, though the dark falls, yet the blood sings. Rachel, I will dance in your memory, sway to music bright as a flame.

This life is so frail that a touch of the finger will brush it away. But before that chill wind blows me cold to my death, I will fight with my fists, bloody my spear and spur my horse full tilt at the light. For that is the key - not the ecstasy of the towering moment, but the skill to distil joy from the instant, the drive to look upward and rejoice in the sun.

Rachel I wanted to write you a testament which was also a song. This litany is for you. I intended a tribute woven with joy, and find it is threaded with grief. Forgive me if the tune is too mournful, and the words do not sing. In the end, it is my heart, not this lament, which celebrates you.

MATCHAM CAINE

The Avon Valleys

a summer idyll

Each is a cupped hand,
amongst other cupped hands:

pious, incorruptible,
waiting for rain.

The monotonous pendulum of the sun
is what hollows them, still hollows,

stripping the earth in burnt layers
as it rubs the dry inland breezes between its own palms.

Now all is stained a nicotine yellow
and lines branded into the rock tempt intuition.

They've dragged water uphill to the apple orchard, the grape,
and carried the walls of makeshift humpies:

each the salt of the earth.
Have tossed aside trees, picketed holes,

and at night, the moon on her back in labour,
endured the twisting of seed through brittle pores.

Their legacies include rounded flint stones and
masticated leather, along with rust-eaten hoes and other tools

lying dust-encrusted outside abandoned chicken houses.
... Are worn down perhaps

but not buried yet -
their blood stretches back to never.

At 'Grandma's Beach'

The beach is edged with yellow gazania and a jaunty wind
A day for rolling up knee-high, like old jeans, and wading deep.
Sail slashes the foam, boardriders throb on waves
A container ship squats in sullen patience.
Small grandson and spade are busy with timeless tasks –
building castles to fall to ruin,
scooping buckets of water back to the sea,
digging out footprints that 'spoil the sand'.
I hold his hand across rock pools where the water ripples
like t.v. test patterns
Brightly clad holiday-kids clamber and scream for crabs and periwinkles.
They gobble the fresh sun with hungry bites.
Out at the point where the sea sprays a feathered backdrop
two nubile Sirens in disco-dance entice loitering youths
and wise-eyed gulls.
With connoisseur's care we pick over shells and dried shapes of weed-
a boy's brown eyes are eagle swift –
and two red-veined rocks to fill his bucket.
As we clatter home across the sand
we see a circle of young girls weaving
wreaths of yellow to deck their hair,
modern Nereids, in celebration of the gold weather
and their own ripeness.

MICHAEL SPINDLER

The Peacocks

In the courtyard
are five peacocks,
four normal, the one white.
Like a demure bride it
picks and places each delicate step,
its train of layered lace
strokes the ground;
the others with slow, spreading
extravagant fantail erect
proclaim their insurpassable style,
with mannequin *hauteur*
disdain all that is not perfect.

Then, come the cries,
unnerving, scalp-freezing,
sudden high-pitched yeowls
that rebound against the walls,
cries of the demented
the tortured.
Like patients in padded cells
the peacocks wail.

Is the albino, white and pristine,
oppressed by the others' voluptuous iridescence,
the assault of petrol blues, Venusian greens?
Are they dismayed at the purity of that feathered snowfall,
dropped, outrageous and innocent, among the tropical
palms?
Is a spirit, Philomela-like, trapped in your form,
one that shakes loose momently recalling her encasement
in a howl of irremediable, inescapable grief?
Or, are you too,
for all your regal show,
cracked by incompleteness?
Riven by not being
what you can imagine?

When such beauteous creatures cry out in pain
we humans, sapient only, smile
in knowing sympathy.

MICHAEL SPINDLER

In the Courtyard of the Arts

Through the hot afternoon
water pulses from spouts
falls from the fountain
plashes, cold and gleaming,
upon the baking brick.

Within these walls
the young palms stretch for the sun;
their fronds biting at the blue
cast shadows of sharksteeth
upon the ordered terracotta.

Around, stand the peacocks
in contemplative pose,
one all white
a Miss Faversham
trails her lace in the dust,
turns at each opening door
expecting the groom come at last;
the others, luxuriant and natural,
coloured by generation on generation
into an orgasmic palette
scream in mockery
at human design, the effort of art,
being but icons
of a purely accidental beauty.
Beneath philosophy's window
they profess their Being,
peak in through the glass
at the eccentric torment of Becoming.
They strut their sexual stuff,
intimidate with gorgeousness,
flaunt the feather
that made Darwin shudder.

Through the hot afternoon
the water pulses from spouts

that curl in verdigris imitation
of green stalks,
plashes on brick
in comforting murmur
we soon cease to hear.
We know it most by a sudden emptiness,
after the tap is turned
when a silence swift-gathered in backwash
weighs
like a dear absence
we had forgotten.

REVIEWS

Richard D. Jordan and Peter Pierce (eds), *The Poets' Discovery,* Melbourne University Press, 1990, pp. xv, 576, $22.95, ISBN 0 522 84402 2.

Anthologies are naturally subjective collections, demonstrating the preferences and prejudices alike of their editors and compilers within the added constraints of period and kind. This collection is more circumscribed than most because it is tailored to fit the historical basis of the separate colonies of Australia prior to Federation. The men and women whose work is selected as illustration of colonial development include poets well-known, both in their own time and ours, together with others whose appearances in print were confined to the few occasions by which they are now remembered. Their poetry varies in quality and some of it might not have found a place in a less specialised collection. As presented here, it forms part of the literary reaction to the nineteenth-century colonial situation.

The editors have divided their material into sections, one for each colony and another shorter one for Federation poets. These sections are further divided into categories of newspaper and monograph verse, a distinction created as much by the early difficulties experienced in finding suitable vehicles for publication as by the verse itself. There is a general introduction in which the rationale of the collection is defined, plus separate introductions relevant to each section, a useful set of biographical notes, a bibliography that invites further reading and two indexes, one of authors and the other a subject index. Informative footnotes to some of the poems are included also, provided either by the poets in the original version or by the editors.

A comprehensive and detailed framework through which to present the poetic exploration of life in colonial Australia is thus established. It is a valid means of extending knowledge about our colonial forbears as well as increasing understanding of their varied and frequently bemused reactions to strange surroundings and hitherto unlikely circumstances. But it is also a concept that might have worked better if the chosen poets had been allowed to appear together in a less structured anthology. Colonial borders can be artificial divisions when transcended by common themes. Each colony developed differently according to the time of settlement and the reasons for foundation, but the geographical and historical differences seem less important than the similarities when poets around the continent are deploring their exile or, having become acclimatised, speculating upon their new country's future greatness. The regional distinctiveness that the editors have observed is blurred within the overall context of nineteenth-century Australian verse.

These poets were following an established literary tradition. Most of them were first generation Australians and, in form and style, their poetry belongs to an immigrant culture that was largely derivative. The subjects they chose and the themes that they explored are what makes their work a recognisably colonial product. In response to the Australian landscape and the Aborigines whom colonisation had displaced, the country's lack of known history, the hardship of life in the outback and the prospect of solitary death, they expressed the hopes and fears of their fellow colonists. They lampooned their politicians and, in the absence of officially appointed poets laureate, they took it upon themselves to write appropriate poems for recitation on public occasions. They also wrote about the joys and sadnesses of celebrating Christmas in Australia, of shipwrecks, bushrangers and, in time, of the prospect and eventual reality of nationhood.

The most important poets in the collection come from New South Wales and Victoria, the largest of the colonies and the ones where cultural activity was developed to the greatest extent during the nineteenth century. Charles Harpur's narrative of black/white conflict 'The Creek of the Four Graves' is a feature of the New South Wales section. Henry Kendall, Henry Lawson and Christopher Brennan are others whose work here earns a rightful place. In Victoria, 'The Sick Stockrider' by Adam Lindsay Gordon stands out amongst the poems of Gordon's contemporaries George Gordon McCrae and Marcus Clarke, the latter turning his hand to the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the eight-hours movement. These are the better-known poets, likely to be found in other more generalised anthologies. Their reappearance here is welcome, but it is the minor, almost forgotten and occasionally unidentified poets who provide us with unexpected gems. Who could not sympathise with the anonymous bushman who details the trials of life in what appears to him to be a 'land of gloomy desolation'? He concludes his lament

> From every turn my fate directs, I feel the gloomiest effects - By day by hosts of flies invaded, At night by wild dogs serenaded.

The verse could be improved upon, but the sentiment is surely representative of summer discomfort in primitive and otherwise isolated surroundings. For the resurrection of this and other examples of our sometimes painful poetic beginnings, the editors are to be commended. However, the value of the collection as a whole is affected by the demands of their restrictive approach.

Lurline Stuart

David Brooks, ***The Sheep and the Diva and Other Stories,*** McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1990, $12.99.

T*he Book of Sei* (1985) must have been a hard act to follow. David Brooks' latest book is a collection of nineteen stories, encompassing a wide range of topics and narrative strategies. There is a particular pleasure in reading many of these tales, not merely for the enjoyment of the curious style, but for the interest of the ideas. Brooks' writing also makes the reader reflect, slowing down the process of reading and drawing attention to the act of writing itself.

Some of the pieces here take the form of essays rather than traditional stories. 'The Avenues of Lost Time', for example, is a discussion of the problems inherent in traditional, temporal notions of history and speculates about the possibility of spatial forms of history. For 'Is not history, after all, only the *evidence* of history, and all that exists of the past but what is somehow here, now?' Furthermore, Brooks wonders, what is the difference between 'the texts of history' and 'the texts of story', for both are discursive, and history can be verified 'only by consultation of more texts, more sets of signs'? The 'old story of time', he suggests, with its 'myths of causality', is 'no longer good enough' (pp. 87-8). Thus history might be considered spatially instead:

> Might it not be that the true connections are not so much between one moment and the next, between this day or hour and those that have just gone, as between, say, this taste and a person we have not yet known, between the atmosphere in this elevator and a ship on the Aegean in 1856, the encrustations of paint on its railings, the profound depth of the sea about it as it passes the island of Skiros, all structured not in one clear line, but backwards and forwards in what we have known as time, in an arrangement we might night quite random, telling a 'story' that is less like a narrative that a tiny detail from a map of that great, ghostly city I have spoken of? (p.88)

Is this invoking a modernist ideal of spatiality, or a post-colonial, post-modernist interest in geography rather than history? Either way, it raises questions about how, in such terms, we would think about categories of difference we are just leaning to recognise as historically constituted: race, gender, class etc. (This raises interesting possibilities, though it might be difficult to decide what makes a connection 'true'.) The anecdote concluding 'The Avenues of Lost Time' contains a complex image of layered forms of space - a jigsaw containing two rogue pieces laid over a map of the world - which is imaginatively transformed back into time, the dominant metaphor.

In a collection of nearly twenty stories some pieces are inevitably more appealing than others. I liked the first three somewhat less than those which follow, though this is partly a matter of getting used to the pace and rhythm of the prose. Of particular interest are 'The Book', 'The Wood' and 'The Diva'; as well as 'Nadia's Lover', an account of reading others' lives (and constructing one's own) as a sad kind of soap opera; and 'Disappearing', in which several academics begin to fade, become transparent or take on the features of their surroundings. One becomes 'almost indistinguishable from his own rose garden'; another turns into 'a kind of human cricket bat', while a professor disappears completely into the corner of the picture hanging in his office (pp. 49-51).

There is an air of melancholy in much of the writing here which works in interesting ways against the elements of gothic and the grotesque. In 'The Family of the Minister', for example, fungus, mould and other forms of wildlife begin to grow around and within the repulsively hygienic bodies of the characters. The story maintains a fine tension between delicacy and disgust and is, moreover, occasionally on the verge of becoming extremely funny. Brooks' humour is largely repressed in this collection, however (though this too may vary according to modes of reading), apart from such moments as a parody of Kafka: 'One morning, after a night of particularly disturbing dreams, Dr B. awoke to find he had become a text' (p.117). 'Dr B. and the Students'

is a disturbing, funny and rather horrible tale of the-body-as-text; or, is-there-a-text-in-this-body? A detailed analysis of the relationships set up amongst gender, textuality and anxiety in this story might produce some interesting results.

The Sheep and the Diva engages with contemporary theoretical issues of langauge, meaning and history and also considers the problems these cause from a humanist perspective, especially for the individual's sense of his or her own life as a meaningful narrative. This too is worth considering in gendered terms, for women and men have been located differently in relation to traditional master narratives of the self. Altogether, the stories explore a number of post-structuralist ideas and, most importantly, the anxieties they generate.

Trudi Tate

***The Macmillan Anthology of Australian Literature*, edited by Ken Goodwin and Alan Lawson** South Melbourne, The Macmillan Company of Australia, 1990. xxii, 629.

The common preconception about a new anthology of Australian literature would probably go like this. We would find a chronologically ordered set of pieces which would allow us to amble through the years from the white settlement to the 'coming of age' of Oz Lit in the 1980s, a reassuring myth of progress and development. Dutiful obeisance would be paid to cherished but dimming memories of school texts, emphasising our 'bush tradition' which makes city-dwellers feel heirs to a localized version of the innocent primitive and our very own pastoral. Women and Aboriginal writing would be triumphantly discovered at the end, as if they had suddenly appeared.

Not so the substantial *Macmillan Anthology*. Here we find twelve different sections (labelled A to K, presumably to prevent us from assuming they are ranked in any order of priority), each containing a mixture of poems, stories, chapters from novels, essays, each from different 'periods'. Aboriginal songs and white satire rub shoulders, as do men and women, Anglo Saxons and middle Europeans.

What we are given, in fact, is at least two anthologies, and a few other 'do it yourself' ones as well. One is a collection of Australian writings so substantial, various and historically diverse as to convince even the most sceptical browser that Australia has always had literary voices of maturity and distinctiveness. If some pieces won't please you, others certainly will.

The second, implicit anthology concerns the groupings of items, and we are given (again, not in chronological order) glimpses of the changes in social, aesthetic and critical attitudes over the last two hundred years, in Australia and also in the wider, intellectual community. Each section opens with a short, critical statement, and the consistent vantage point is the assumption, now familiar from the debates of the 1980s, that 'literature' is a construction, a crafted artefact rather than a transparent medium for 'reality' or an expression of unmediated feelings. The opening section, 'Place and People', suggests that there is no single, agreed concept of 'Australia', but rather a whole range of sometimes discordant and contradictory constructions. The selection in the first section deliberately throws together some of the discordancies - Kingsley and Lawson, 'Rudd' and Spence, White and Johnston, Dawe and Humphries (a Sandy Stone monologue). The fundamental point made in this section, in commentary and selection, about literature as construction is traced and exemplified in others. 'Mapping and Naming' reminds us that white writers have been with some arbitrariness and anachronism, applying a set of metaphors and ideologies, ideologically loaded ways of seeing Australia, to a wholly neutral geography. If we believe one version is pre-eminent and 'true', then the section 'Cultural Politics' demonstrates that we are doing little more than engaging in debates which have been bequeathed to us by writers locked in intertextual warfare.

Other sections show that the stance taken by a particular writer or reader on these debates about 'the Australian experience' will reflect that person's cultural context. To a migrant from Italy, Estonia or Vietnam, the whole debate about the creation of a 'national identity' in the 1890s and the 1970s may be irrelevant. The idea that white Australian culture has been forged in the mateship of the bush is insulting to an Aboriginal whose ancestors have lived in deep companionship with the land for 60,000 years, just as it is insulting to the migrant working women in Rosa Capiello's *Oh Lucky Country!*. Furthermore, that Aboriginal or Italian woman may be living in inner cities faced by problems utterly unlike anything faced by their forebears. Even the old verities about

anti-authoritarianism explained by the convict system, and the apparently straightforward, non-experimental modes of writing, are both questioned in sections on 'Convictism' and 'The Writing Process'. For those who wish to reinforce prejudices, this anthology will be maddening. For those who are, in Helen Garner's words, willing 'to bend the bars a little, just for a little', it will be refreshing and surprising.

The editors do their best to unsettle even their own arrangement with suggestions about 'Extending the Sections', 'Reordering the Sections', and 'Inventing New Groupings' in order to avoid the danger that even their own efforts will lead to just another canon of authority. The 'chronology' fanatics are catered for by being able to work through a 'Chronological List of Items'.

For better or worse, however, even the most pluralist editors cannot escape their own historical moment. There is an implied homogeneity and it is reflected in the favoured critical terminology of 'discourse' and 'construction', terms which I dare to say date themselves. The 1980s have made us cagey and worldly-wise, regarding all writing as a closed system of language use and ideological coding. But the paradigms constantly change in unpredictable ways. Just as the Anthology appears to have been compiled before the political concentration in Australia on multi-culturalism (which is more than just 'The Migrant Experience' and 'Cultural Intersections'), so it inevitably came before momentous events in both western Europe, where in 1992 the whole concept of 'nation states' will be shaken to the core, and in eastern Europe where maps are being redrawn along lines of renewed cultural sovereignty. To throw another ingredient into the volatile mixture, the task of international co-operation in saving the global environment will dominate the 1990s. These are not just new constructions or discourses: they are fundamental changes that make all theories of regionalism deeply problematical.

Looking back rather than forwards, there have been similarly fundamental historical shifts reflected in Australia and Australian writing, and an anthology based on equality between discourses does not address them. Even if the historical changes which have occurred and will again occur in terms of Australia's relation with the world cannot be fully reflected in an anthology, I should like to have seen more emphasis placed on the rebels and visionaries, even the influential politicians, who have insisted that there are realities which require political action. Discourse and construction may be dessicated terms that inadvertently help to re-marginalize literature, ushering it away from moral engagment and political intervention. There are new international groupings which are emerging. New Zealand's stance over nuclear policy in the Pacific has had a profound effect around the world, and the Middle East continues to focus clashes between racially-defined nationalism and global imperialism. Australia has become for the first time inextricably and militarily involved in the Middle East. The Indian Ocean basin has acquired more importance than Europe or the USA for Australia. Such events can have the effect of making any anthology of Australian literature seem inward-looking in ways that we cannot afford.

As long as the demand for anthologies continues, we shall need new ones, and like Tristram Shandy's biography each will be behind its own times. But until the next one, this Macmillan volume gives us a generous 629 pages and a lot of enjoyable reading.

Bob White

Dorothy Green (ed.), *Descent of Spirit: Writings of E. L. Grant Watson,* Primavera Press, Sydney, 1990, 245 pp.

Descent of Spirit gives an indication of the range of Grant Watson's writing, a formidable task for any single book. The collection draws attention to a rich and valuable series of essays and novels which have been to a degree ignored in Australia. Watson's novels were never much considered in Australia and largely ignored in Western Australia which provided the setting for his Australian fiction. There is little evidence his essays and natural history and philosophical writings were any better known. In England and America, though his fiction was known and respected, the essays, published in a number of books, and articles in newspapers and journals, with his broadcast talks for the BBC, may have gained a wider public. In this sense, his 'books ... about the Australian bush', Grant Watson admitted, 'were not very successful, nor were they altogether failures'.

Descent Of Spirit offers an insight into the essays and personal recollections, from his writing on biology, natural science, and philosophy.

This sort of categorising is perhaps misleading, since with Grant Watson these borders fuse to form his own kind of observation and speculation. His keen and often vivid detailing of biological and physical observation lead to philosophical speculation. Detailed biological observation, often written with great insight and a style which involves the reader, may conclude with an outright statement of belief, belief in processes of natural order, but also in ultimate purpose that can only be made from a personal conviction. These essays stand for themselves, may be complex and resist brief discussion, and reveal the author's methods, his observation, and his beliefs. That they do so often take a leap into views some would say are not, and can not be, supported by the data he provides, will delight some readers, irritate others.

The essays, though they range in time, derive from a time which still cultivated the essay. It is easy enough now to see that form of communication being eroded, in part, ironically, by radio that Grant Watson himself adapted to, and by visual presentation, in one form of which he was adept. But he was during the nineteen twenties and thirties one of those concerned with the fallout from Darwin and Huxley, Freud and Jung, the work of Einstein - groups and individuals of diverse views and conflicting convictions, seeing a general as well as a specialist audience, Eddington, Alexis Carrel, Russell, Wells, Julian Huxley, Whitehead, a host of names. Grant Watson was not a lone voice in dissent or affirmation in an era shaped by these concerns.

For readers of Grant Watson's fiction the essays offer an understanding of the thinking, the preoccupations, the perceptions of the man who produced a series of novels that stand in many ways alone in Australian writing. They are a part of Australian writing, and there is an irony in the fact that because they were concerned with little known areas of Western Australia as a background and integral part of human relationships their appeal was lessened in England and America at the time. After all, who was interested in human beings who were unwise enough to live in remote parts of Western Australia. And Grant Watson remarked that even friends asked 'Why write such macabre and revolting, harrowing pictures?' Today our susceptibilities may be a little less vulnerable, but it was that country, in particular the little populated areas of the Murchison and northern coast he visited in 1910 that Grant Watson never forgot, and which gave a fictional shape for much of his observation and speculation.

Part of the interest of Watson's account of *Bernier Island, An Embarkation, Corroboree* in this selection relates to his early novels of Western Australia. Bernier and Dorre Islands, with Carnarvon, form the basis of the first of these novels, *Where Bonds Are Loosed*, and the novel which followed, *The Mainland. Corroboree* lies behind part of the search for understanding of the land and the Aborigines by the lonely station manager of *Out There*. These recollections are obviously close to the novels and story, though the books in which they were published come a good deal later. They have less immediacy than the fiction which came from the same incidents, are less detailed than essays not directly concerned with that fiction, but reveal the observation, a sense of community of all natural things beyond that of human beings who lived and suffered in those places, and which was suggested so powerfully in the novels. The earlier essays, such writing as Grant Watson's moving and beautiful account of a year, in his *Moods Of Earth And Sky*, with its richness and deep involvement, are closer to the mood of his fiction. And perhaps inevitably the recollections could not reveal the depth of his concern, the power of his feeling. It is the novels that tell why Watson could never forget those places often of near desert and those islands of the desolate encampments and hospitals.

His short story, *Out There*, may be seen in the same light from his quite full account of the man and the setting which gave him the basis of the story, an account published long after the journey, in *Journey Under Southern Stars*. These essays and recollections seen as backgrounds to Grant Watson's fiction, however, else they may be read, reveal a great deal about the insight, the power, the concepts and skills of his fiction. The writing included in *Descent Of Spirit*, and the introductions of Dorothy Green and E.J. Steele may persuade readers to look again at Grant Watson's essays. The collection should certainly persuade them to turn to the novels.

Peter Cowan

Beverley Farmer, *A Body of Water*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1990.

When I came to Perth for a short time in 1998

I rented a flat right around the corner from the Queen's Hotel, one of the celebrated Matilda Bay chain. From the outside, it looked like an ordinary pub; the only hints that inside there might be something different were the alfalfa sprout lunches and the beautiful people that ate them on the red brick verandah that I passed on the way to the bus. One day someone took me there for a drink. Well, it was actually night, but I still could see that this was no common watering hole. The shell of the building was emphatically visible: the dark painted bricks, the tubular scaffolding gave height and a haunting beauty to the interior; against them the lighted bars were as intimate yet artificial as sound stages, and somehow the very staginess of it all seemed honest and real - far more, say, than the finished look of fully 'decorated' interiors. The building was being open about itself. It was in the process of becoming. So this is postmodernism, I said.

Process and product. In the seventies we talked about this a lot. It began, I suppose, with political preoccupations; the new left and its offshoots could not longer believe that ends justified means; it was all too apparent that means determined ends. So how you did something became just as important as what you were trying to do - or more so. Art, too, became process. But literature may have taken its time catching up. Well into the eighties writers, especially women writers, were praised for 'well-crafted' pieces and wrestled with problems of 'voice'. *A Body of Water* is a breakthrough, a book with all the empty spaces and scaffolding left behind. It is partly a writer's diary, spanning twelve months from February 1987, but here and there a poem or story dots the text. These are nourished by the diary but somehow the juxtaposition enhances the interest of both. It's exciting to see this and to see it so well done, so artfully done. For no-one can really believe that even with its workings exposed the work is any less an artifice.

It is significant, I think, that the book's central metaphor, the subject of its paradoxical title, finds its most finished expression in the story appearing almost in the middle of the text. The story takes place in a room by the sea. Inside the room is a framed print, a gift to a woman from her male visitor. The print (a reproduction of Matisse's *Vase with Red Fishes*, that is reproduced again on the book's jacket) is a picture of a room. The window in the picture overlooks a square. On a table in the centre of the picture sits a glass container with two red goldfish. The woman in the story says, 'If we immerse it in water they could swim off'. The man is not pleased: 'You dare!' 'Fresh water, of course,' she says. 'Salt water'd be fatal. They'd float away with their bellies up. Over the balcony and off into the flooded square where gulls would swoop and snatch them away.'

The woman in the room in the story imagines the couple who are sitting in the room in the picture. In fact it is hard to tell which couple is which, they seem to float into each other, which is right, because the woman in the story lends to the woman she imagines all the frustration she feels in her relationship with the man who has given her the picture. The two identical red-gold fishes are mirrors of each other, like the woman and the rooms in the stories. The stories spill into each other, manifesting the protean quality of their creator's preoccupation.

Water, in all its forms and associations, permeates' the book. And yet it is its containers: glasses, vases, pools, oceans, that raise the deepest paradoxes, that point to the constant threat to containment. Glasses can turn water to ice, but like vases can overflow; the tide is forever washing away. That image of water sweeping the fish from their bowl, out of the room and into the flooded square is telling, and in this paradoxical sense another of the book's motifs is architecture. The house where Farmer sheltered is permeated by the sea just as the self she seeks to withdraw to can never be wholly sealed; the mind itself is a cavern open to dreams. She wanders through rooms which please or arrest but can never quite hold her. And so she traverses through the book, stopping now and then at the finished pieces, the four stories and twenty-odd poems, until she comes to the dazzling 'Land of Snows' at the end.

I doubt if there are many people who could write a book of this kind and make such a fist of it. It succeeds not because it is an idea that has found its day but because Farmer is a truly superb writer. There is not a passage on the page that hasn't been mulched, raked, and brought to flower. But the interesting thing is that the 'finished' pieces are often the least intriguing - what is fascinating is that stroll through her mind, getting from one point to the next rather than actually arriving. I have always admired her writing, but can now appreciate the range and depth of her thoughts. There is a wealth of

erudition and understanding in this book but she manages to convey this without a trace of pomposity or showing off. Like all impressive thinkers, she is forever learning, and so the reader learns too. Alongside the poetic images we have come to expect from Farmer are her meditations on death, plants, food, ceremony, writing, love and mysticism, all informed by an intelligence steeped in many cultures.

Is the art in these creative gropings, though, fine as they are, any less than the art in the poems or the stories? The question is unavoidable but unthinkable. For what does it say about the struggle to make a work of art if the story of the struggle surpasses the story that's created? Is a diary entry to be approached with the same reverence as a haiku or a tale? Or perhaps the book, which itself defies classification, makes the question irrelevant after all. It works wonderfully as a book should work, because the whole is the impact of the interplay of its parts.

Sara Dowse

Anthony Lawrence, *Dreaming in Stone*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1990, 72 pp. $14.95.

Dreaming in Stone, by Anthony Lawrence, is an impressive first collection by a poet who has built up extensive credentials with previous magazine publications.

Lawrence looks outward at the world, not (or not obviously) inward at his own state of mind. These are poems with a kind of physical strength about them. What he writes, however, is not simply descriptive poetry of nature, events or landscapes, but also poetry arising from "Man's search for meaning", an exploration of the nature of existence that is part of every serious poet's role:

> On the island of Hydra in the Aegean Sea,
> there are three hundred and sixty five churches,
> one church for every day of the year,
> and each with a single bell
> floating at the end of a rope.
> Some have been built into the sides of hills
> with icons
> glowing in dark corners
> and a statue keeping watch from a grove
> of olive trees, its wrists garlanded
> with tendrils of vine.
> Others climb whitely from headlands,
> their open windows filled with the Peloponnese.
>
> On Christmas morning, hungering for communion
> I heard a brief celebration of the birth of Christ.
> It began with donkeys trumpeting into the hills,
> and roosters answering each other ...

The phrase "hungering for communion" sums up a good deal of the theme of this book. However, this is not exactly communion in the sense of "I want to be 'we'."

What gives Lawrence's work much of its distinctive quality is that he seems to specifically reject both the recently predominant modes of the yearning for a group consciousness and the violent and apocalyptic assertion of Self. Regarding the latter, his delightfully iconoclastic "John Berryman's Death" concludes:

> ...Now he is shaking hands with strangers and collapsing
> his umbrella. It's time to say goodbye.
>
> He steps out from his life, no theatrical swan-dive
> from a railing high above the ice. His days and leap
> judged badly, he plants himself in the bank.

Poems like "The Killer Whale and the Man" approach problems of alienation and of coming to terms with the *esse* in a perceptive and technically skilful manner.

Some of the poems are, I think, too modest. "The Min Min Lights" for example, is a theme which could have sustained a much greater poem. "Goanna", on the other hand, is a small poem of perfect balance:

> I was standing outside the killing shed,
> ankle deep in skulls that knock and roll when you kick them.
> I was thinking about the way a sheep dies,
> the knife in behind the wind-pipe, the head snapped back over the knee,
> when a black goanna ran up my back
> and fixed its claws into my neck.
> It's tongue was flicking in my ear.
> I screamed and reached behind me,
> trying to lift its claws from my skin.
> The sharp pain, the fear, the way a sheep dies.

Lawrence's work has far more in common with the informed, outward-looking but rational "post-modernist" style of Mark O'Connor or the West Australian Rod Moran than with the weirdly over-praised pseudo-Romanticism of the Michael Dransfields and Charles Buckmasters. Despite, or because of, not being concerned with the pseudo-romantic pre-occupation with Self,

Lawrence actually achieves a genuinely individualistic voice. This is shown, too, in the remarkable clarity of thought and image which the best of these poems achieve.

In fact Lawrence, as well as being himself, is also, I think, one of a number of voices heralding changing times and changes in both the poetic and the general consciousness.

This is a poetry for an age that knows there are no easy answers though there are hard ones, and that, as Solzhenitzyn put it, "the only way out in upward". It is a large claim that the newest-developed poetry in this country today is heralding a change in human consciousness, and may seem a disproportionately large one to make about what is, after all, a first slim volume by a relatively young writer.

However, I believe that signs of such a change can be seen in the work of Lawrence and a number of other contemporary Australian poets.

Lawrence's poem "God is with Me as I Write This Down" shows a distinctly post-modern awareness of the *esse*:

> God is with me as I write this down,
> though he would not look over my shoulder
> or ask me to read what I've done.
>
> Yesterday he was with me at the river
> as I watched the redwinged fisher take
> its unprotesting catch from the water.
>
> Between the willow's beaded veil
> and the river's grey light, God moved
> as the day moved me, speaking outside time
> ...

Perhaps we can hope to leave this century if not sadder then a good deal wiser. Lawrence's poem "The Art of Killing" and a number of others dealing with the natural cycles and inevitable demands of the basic rhythms of life seem to me to be moving towards saying this.

There is a shedding of illusions but not a descent into nihilistic despair or the frenzied search for some tolling moment of truth. It is one reason why the work of Lawrence and other poets writing in the same general area may be particularly important today.

Hal Colebatch

Gwen Harwood, *Blessed City: Letters to Thomas Riddell 1943*, ed. Alison Hoddinott, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1990, 295 pp.

Blessed City is a wonderfully entertaining collection of letters written by Gwen Harwood to her friend Thomas Riddell when she was twenty three. The letters are full of humorous anecdotes and commentaries on everyday life while also providing a valuable insight into the poetry of Gwen Harwood, as such a personal side of the poet has never been displayed before.

Harwood has been criticised by some critics for her apparent conservatism and traditional use of rhyme and metre. This image may have some truth, but Harwood has always managed to inject some new dimension or perspective which has given her poetry the standing it has in Australian literature today. This quality is also displayed in *Blessed City*, where some may see Harwood as the conservative, twenty-three year old woman living at home with her family, working in the public service, playing organ at the local Church and constantly referring to Biblical quotations or the lives of saints and theologians. Such a superficial summation would fail to acknowledge the tremendous sense of humour, intellectual wit and critical stance she has towards certain aspects of society. Her poetry also overflows with a similar wit, irony and intellectual force.

The letters range from humorous anecdotes of home and work to the discussion of religion, philosophy, poetry and music. At all times there is a great sense of humour evident, whether discussing everyday events or literary matters. For example:

> Oh Tony,
> A Beard! The first words I saw in your letter were 'I am growing a beard ...' I was filled with joy, the most complete and intense joy. You can have only the faintest idea of what a beard means to me - I have never in my life had a bearded companion. I shall sit opposite you in trams, and look at your beard.

and

> The Nut Cracker Suite began very prettily but before long some damned FAIRIES appeared, with no clothes and cretinous faces and dirty big wands.

Harwood's use of irony and her perceptive eye for the absurd in everyday life are revealed in her letters. There are many hilarious moments in *Blessed City* which are usually a result of the writer's lively wit and the ability to exaggerate commonplace events to the realm of the metaphysical. This is always done without pretention, although Harwood is critical of people and

institutions, it is never malicious or pompous as is the case with many satirists.

The letters combine a mixture of comments and anecdotes on domestic life and work with more "intellectual" discussions of the arts. These are often placed side by side and the reader observes a curious mind moving from a discussion on evil ('Everything, insofar as it has existence, is good, that is, nothing is created evil'.) to the mundane topic of 'worn-out pens' then back to a survey of Eastern philosophy. This juxtaposition of the mundane and the grandiose, the commonplace with the external is also a favourite technique of Harwood in many of her poems.

These letters reveal other traits in Gwen Harwood as a young woman that appear in her later poetry. She adopts many masks in her letters (Theophilus Panbury, Tiny Tim), especially when she sends off poems or stories to her friends. By creating these pseudonyms she distances herself from her own material and can join in a critical discussion of it. Harwood is famous for her pseudonyms and use of masks in her poems. She also shows her interest in German culture and it is easy to see where the personae of Professors Eisenbart and Krote were formed.

Gwen Harwood's two poetic voices of satirist and lyrical poet are evident in *Blessed City*. There are many descriptions where the young writer notes the natural surroundings or phenomena:

> Last Friday after sunset there was a most unearthly light - the kind of light that comes after there has been a storm leaving clouds in the sky. The clouds were of quite unimaginable colours and the light seemed to fill the air with almost tangible colour; it turned the grass and trees a strange green and took away the sense of distance, so that all the houses around us looked like the flat painted backcloth of a stage ...

Blessed City reveals a young Gwen Harwood who is bursting with imagination and a zest for life. It is this intelligent and witty lady who would later show these qualities in her poetry. The fine eye for detail, the humour, irony and interest in religion, philosophy and music shown in *Blessed City* are present in all her works from *Poems* published in 1963 right through to *Bone Scan*, published twenty five years later.

Roland Leach

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

IAN ADAM — is a prominent Canadian critic and a recent editor of *Ariel: An International Review.*

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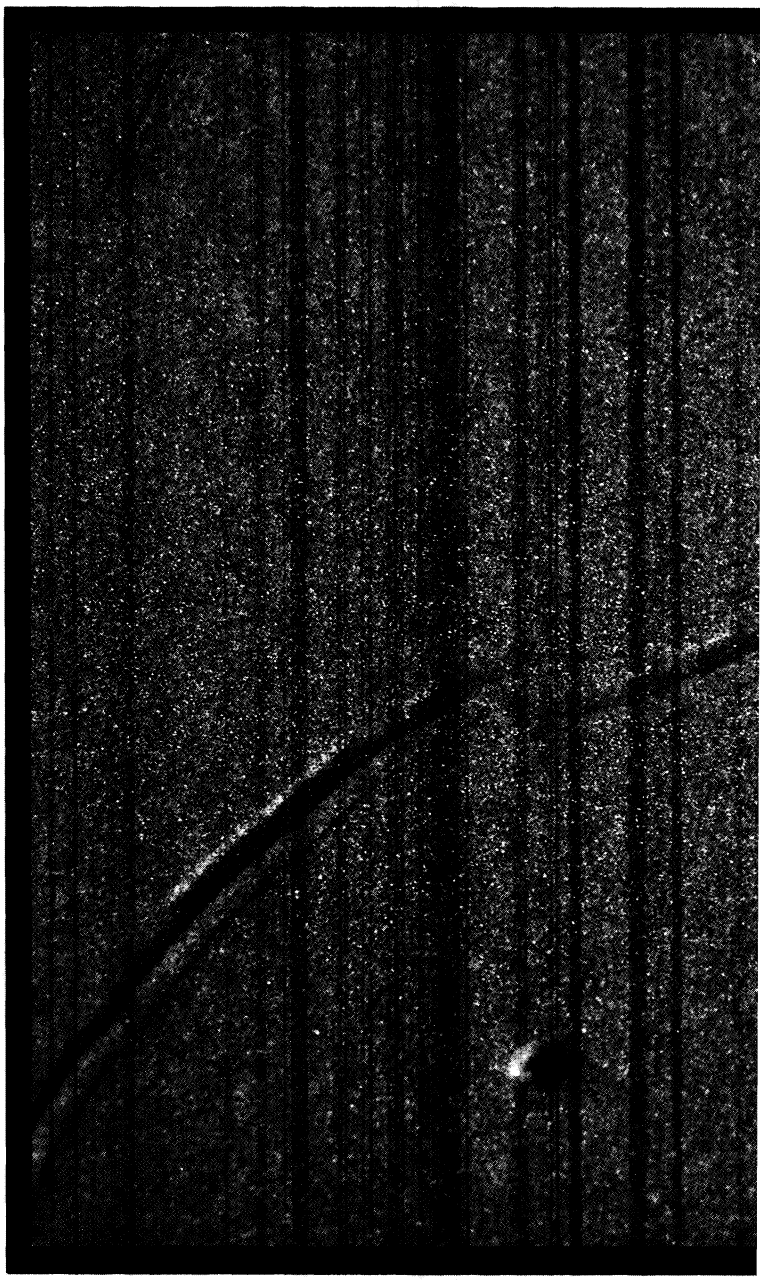

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