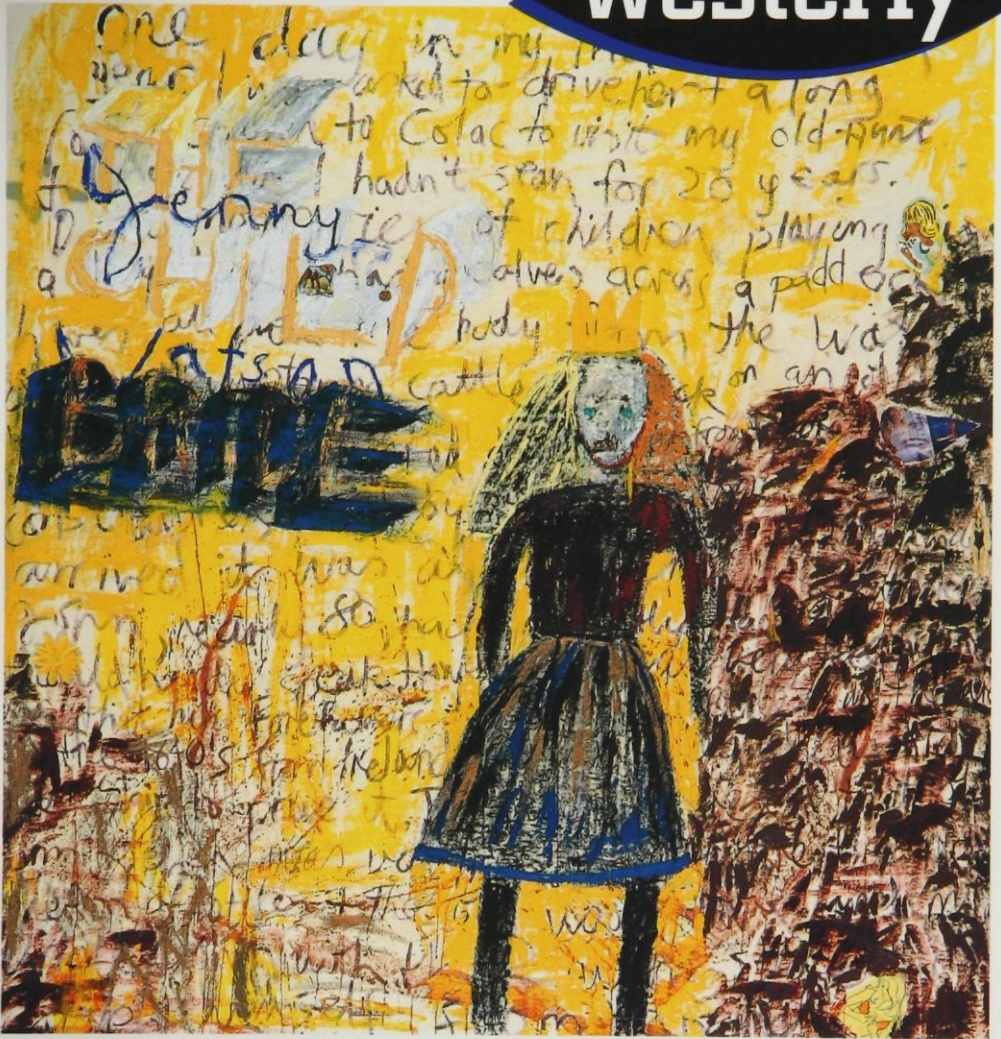


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# *The University of Western Australia*

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH



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**A Young Writers Issue**

Special Guest Editor will be poet and short story writer  
**Andrew Burke**, and Young Editors,  
**Sarah French** and **Shaun Tan**

*The issue will feature poems, short fiction and articles relevant to young people's concerns and culture from writers who are under 30 at January 1st, 1998.*

In 1968, *Westerly* published a Young Writers Issue featuring many young writers such as Andrew Burke, Nicholas Hasluck, Viv Kitson, Rhyl McMaster, John Romeril and Michael Wilding, who have since gone on to make their mark in Australian literature as playwrights, novelists, and poets.

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## **Voyaging In, Out and Down Under: a Discussion of Elizabeth Jolley's "Vera Wright" Trilogy**

Journeys are a recurrent feature of *My Father's Moon* (1989), *Cabin Fever* (1990) and *The Georges' Wife* (1993). Protagonist Vera Wright travels continually by train, bus and bicycle. She voyages half across the world from Britain to Australia and flies from Australia to New York. On foot, she treads a maze of suburban streets, wheeling young children in England and pushing her husband's wheelchair in Australia. Such journeying corresponds both to Vera's progress through life as a social being and her inward development.

Baldly summarized, the narrative covers Vera's experiences at her Quaker boarding school as a student nurse at a large Midlands hospital during World War II. Befriended there by a surgeon, Dr Metcalf, and his wife, Magda, Vera has a brief affair. But Dr Metcalf leaves for the war and is rumoured to have been killed. Now pregnant, Vera leaves the hospital and works as a mother's help. When her daughter, Helena, is born, she remains at the maternity home for several years as an unpaid assistant before taking a job as matron at a boarding school, Fairfields. Conditions there are so miserable, she departs for London, accompanied by Helena, in the vain hope of being rescued by a former colleague, staff nurse Ramsden. Vera then travels to Edinburgh in response to a magazine advertisement, arriving exhausted and destitute to work as a maid in the household of a brother and sister, Mr and Miss George.

An amorous encounter with Mr George shortly after her arrival results in another pregnancy and the birth of a second daughter, Rachel. Vera continues working as a maid, but—while Miss George cares for both children—eventually goes on to qualify as a doctor. Returning for a year as resident surgeon to the same hospital where she was nursing, Vera enters into a further erotic entanglement with Noël and Felicity, a brother and sister leading a bohemian existence on a small farm nearby. Contracting tuberculosis from Noël, she is forced to spend time in a

sanatorium. Shortly after, Vera and Mr George voyage to Australia to take up professional appointments, he at a university and she as a hospital surgeon. On board ship, she becomes involved with a wealthy widow and later visits her rural property where the two experience a brief idyll. Despite this, however, her life in Australia remains bound up with Mr George.

Such a bare-bones account gives little sense of an episodic, non-chronological narrative full of gaps which leave readers "to weld the pieces together by the spaces."<sup>1</sup> The three novels resemble a musical composition (in sonata form perhaps?) as the narrative circles back on itself with themes and motifs repeating and echoing one another: "I know now that an image can be repeated as often as a phrase of music can be repeated, perhaps with slight changes of rhythm or key."<sup>2</sup> Vera, who recounts her own story, is revealed as much through her relationships with people—her parents, staff nurse Ramsden and Gertrude, the old woman whose farm is located near her parents' home—as by events in her life. Through her narrator, Jolley explores both the concept of memory and its effect on narrative as well as the provisional nature of subjectivity. In late middle age and much chastened by experience, Vera relates events which happened fifty or so years earlier. Sudden shifts in chronology are accompanied by equally rapid shifts in mood as intense absorption in the turmoil of adolescence and youth is interspersed with moments of detached observation and analysis. As Vera moves through time, she continually re-presents herself to the world and we must view everything through her eyes knowing how devious and deceitful she can be, while even the mature narrator admits her memory is unreliable. The name, Vera Wright, with its puns on writing, righteousness and truth, points to a blurring of truth and fiction.

Similarities between Vera's autobiographical account and certain aspects of Jolley's own life blur the boundaries further.

*My Father's Moon* is probably the most autobiographical book that I've written...but Vera as a character is not really me. Her background is my background. The background of hospital and the school and of wartime is very real. The things that the father says to Vera, my own father said to me. But I am not Vera.<sup>3</sup>

1. Ray Willbanks, *Speaking Volumes: Australian Writers and Their Work*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1992, 119.
2. Elizabeth Jolley, *Central Mischief: Elizabeth Jolley on Writing, Her Past and Herself*. Ringwood: Viking Books, 1992, 114. Further references given in the text prefaced by CM.
3. Willbanks, 118.

The appearance of a collection of semi-autobiographical essays *Central Mischief* (1992) between the publication of *Cabin Fever* and *The Georges' Wife* adds to the complexity. We cannot avoid recognizing versions of Vera's eccentric high-minded English father and her Viennese mother, charming and fretful by turns, from Jolley's accounts of her own parents in interviews and essays. Like Vera, she weaves in and out of fiction and seems to have been creating these characters well before their appearance in the novels. In an interview, Jolley says her mother had a lover, and a piece about that situation first appeared in 1987, the author claiming in yet another interview that it "is sort of autobiographical."<sup>4</sup> "Mr Berrington" was reprinted in *Central Mischief* with a comment by the editor, Caroline Lurie, that it was originally written as a piece of fiction. Mr Berrington then appears as a character in *The Georges' Wife*, as the lover of Vera's mother, and readers familiar with the essay in *Central Mischief* can scarcely help drawing on it imaginatively to amplify that particular episode in the novel.

Whatever echoes of Jolley's own life they contain, the "Vera Wright" novels are highly literary and richly intertextual assuming reader familiarity with a wide range of musical and literary compositions. They follow the tradition both of *Bildungsroman* and its sub-type *Künstlerroman*, though, strictly speaking, Vera becomes a doctor, not an artist. She frequently expresses a desire to write, however, and, in setting down her life story, she both engages in literary composition and comments on the nature of fiction. Moreover, Jolley equates healer and artist: "There is a connection between nursing and writing. Both require a gaze which is searching and undisturbedly compassionate and yet detached" (*CM*, 51). We follow Vera's development from adolescence to maturity in which a measure of self-knowledge and understanding have been painfully acquired.

I do not pass on anything from my work but carry it myself in my experience. There is a great deal that has to be known and, at the same time, it must stay hidden in the heart.

To the questions, is there a Balm and is there a Physician? my answer is, yes. There is trust, there is courage and there is kindness. These are the ingredients. And anyone can be the Physician.<sup>5</sup>

4. Paul Kavanagh and Peter Kuch, *Conversations: Interviews with Australian Writers*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1991, 163.
5. Elizabeth Jolley, *The Georges' Wife*. Ringwood: Viking Books, 1993, 180. Further references given in the text prefaced by IGW.

The *Bildungsroman* genre, which traditionally assumes a male protagonist, poses difficulties for writers who adapt it to a female hero because the range of social options available to young women has, until very recently, been so narrow. Moreover, the romance plot, culminating in marriage, generally assigned to fictional heroines is rarely congruent with the narrative structure of *Bildungsroman*.

Virginia Woolf grapples with this in her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), set early this century and containing much debate about women's social role. A young woman, Rachel Vinrace, travels by sea with her aunt and uncle from London to South America where she spends time as their guest in the coastal town of San Marino. Richard and Clarissa Dalloway, a more aristocratic couple who join the voyage briefly, look down on Rachel and her companions as slightly weird, arty intellectuals. Rachel, however, is fascinated by them both, but shattered when, in an unguarded moment, Richard kisses her passionately. At San Marina, Rachel, her aunt and her uncle associate with a group of middle-class English tourists holidaying at a nearby hotel, a microcosm of Rachel's familiar social milieu. Among them is Terence Hewet, a young, aspiring novelist who accompanies Rachel on a group expedition to a village in the jungle. There they fall in love and become engaged, but must return to the constrictions of everyday social life in San Marino. Rachel falls ill from fever apparently contracted at the time of her engagement, and, after a brief illness filled with delirious visions, she dies. As Rachel Blau du Plessis comments: "The novel draws on the traditional concern of love plots—the production of the newly joined heterosexual couple—and of quest plot—the *Bildung* of the protagonist."<sup>6</sup> Rachel's engagement transforms the quest plot into a marriage plot whereby "the energies and potential of the female hero are contained" (52) and her death is Virginia Woolf's protest against the hegemonic power of such narrative conventions (50).

Dr Metcalf recommends this novel to Vera on their first evening alone.

The book is *The Voyage Out* by someone called Virginia Woolf.

"A lady writer," I say and feel ashamed to have said such a stupid thing.

"Thank you," I say. I like his hand, the feeling of it as he gives me the book.

I tell him I am afraid it may be too difficult for me.

"Try it," he says getting up.<sup>7</sup>

6. Rachel Blau Du Plessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*. Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 47. Further references given in the text.

7. Elizabeth Jolley, *My Father's Moon*. Ringwood: Viking Books, 1989, 90. Further references given in the text prefaced by MFM.

Like Rachel, Vera voyages outward into new realms of experience and inward within herself, but, unlike Rachel, she is a survivor. She also has rather more freedom—a career in the paid workforce is a real possibility and she is less strictly chaperoned, though her twentieth century education has prepared her little better than Rachel's nineteenth century one. Her fascination with Dr Metcalf and Magda resembles Rachel's with Richard and Clarissa Dalloway. When Rachel first recognizes her sexual vulnerability and the need for a chaperone, she reflects:

By this new light she saw her life for the first time a creeping hedged-in thing, driven cautiously between high walls, here turned aside, there plunged in darkness, made dull and crippled for ever—her life that was the only chance she had—a thousand words and actions became plain to her.<sup>8</sup>

Hedges form an important motif in Vera's story. Once she transgresses social taboos by becoming pregnant to a married man, she feels hedged out, rather than hedged in. Beyond the hedges she looks at lies a realm of apparent security and social acceptability: "I like this garden and wish that it was my place with the children's toys all over it and a husband coming home in the evening." (CF, 67) The link with Woolf's novel is further reinforced as the names of its two principal women characters, Helen and Rachel, are repeated in Vera's naming of her two children, Helena and Rachel.

The young, unmarried mother of two small children is an improbable *Bildungsroman* hero and a still more unlikely protagonist of romantic fiction as Jolley ironically indicates. Soon after her arrival in his household, Mr George gives Vera a poetry anthology inscribed with the following quotation.

You have first taught me,  
You have opened my eyes  
To the unending value of life (CF, 230)

The lines, from the poetic sequence *Frauen-Liebe und-Leben* (Woman's Love and Life) by Adalbert von Chamisso and set to music by Schumann, occur in the poem "Du Ring an meinem Finger" where the young woman rejoices in the engagement ring, which will become her wedding ring, promising to live solely for her

8. Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, 70.

husband.<sup>9</sup> Initially Vera accepts this view of love, though her only wedding ring is one she has bought herself for sixpence and it is many years before Mr George provides another.

Vera's youthfulness in comparison to Dr Metcalf and Mr George also corresponds to a convention of romantic fiction where heroes have the advantage of age, experience and social class. In each relationship she yearns for release from social isolation and marginality to participate in a larger life of culture, art and intellect, but while this happens to some extent with Mr George, she still feels an outsider. Although Jolley does not engage in class polemic, she delineates sharply the fine lines, even within Vera's middle-class milieu, which distinguish insiders from outsiders. At boarding school, Vera seeks to place herself within social hierarchies based on appearance, a process she continues when nursing and again when working at Fairfields.

Almost at once I begin my game of comparisons, placing myself above someone if more favourable and below others if less favourable in appearance. This game of appearance is a game of chance. Chance can be swayed by effort, that is one of the rules, but effort has to be more persistent than is humanly possible. (MFM, 31)

Food, in the novels, is an important signifier of social privilege, desire and the relationship between them. At the hospital, Vera steals food from a supply of luxuries in tea-chests marked "Emergency—Iron Rations. Doctors Only" to brighten up the meals she must cook for nurses on night duty, and her affair with Dr Metcalf is a further attempt to filch some happiness for herself. The Metcalfs appear unaffected by food restrictions, offering Vera an array of delicacies whenever she visits, completely unaware that foxy Magda is serving her up as a special treat for Dr Metcalf. Food rationing, which persisted for several years after the war, becomes an indicator of how people are forced into vigilantly protecting their share of necessities with each nurse carrying around her own allocations of butter, sugar and jam while the pregnant Vera struggles to obtain the appropriate ration book. The old farm woman, Gertrude, provides a supply of black-market eggs and poultry for Vera's family and her place becomes a haven for Vera, but the dressed fowl, damaged by a fox—"not much taken, just a wing and bit of breast"—Gertrude offers her,

9. A translation of von Chamisso's text is found in Eric Sams, *The Songs of Robert Schumann*. London: Faber, 1993, 133.

symbolises her eventual fate at the hands of the Metcalfs, for she too will suffer clipped wings and a wounded heart (*MFM*, 109).

While Jolley shows the oppressive effects of rank and hierarchy, she particularly condemns society's sexual hypocrisy and secrecy. Considering the stigma once suffered by unmarried pregnant women, the mature Vera comments ironically on changed social mores: "Playful spinsters and exuberant lesbians give birth and special seminars are held to discuss the phenomenon of these people wanting to keep their babies" (*CF*, 6). But the youthful Vera is castigated by hostile Health Visitors: "Paid for your pleasure with pain eh? Didn't think of that did you? Can't have the one without the other can you!" (*CF*, 112) Her mother reproaches her for "breeding like a rabbit" and her father's sister, Aunt Daisy, travels to Edinburgh to inform Vera she has disinherited her (*TGW*, 37-8). Mr George can't bring himself to tell Miss George that he and Vera are lovers and even Vera feels she cannot inform him that he is Rachel's father. But the passage of time renders such secrecy futile. The importance of being unable to tell Miss George "the one thing we needed to tell her" withers "like the limbs of an old man when he no longer walks" or like household possessions in a house no longer used (*TGW*, 36). Mr George becomes a helpless old man and Aunt Daisy's treasures, once denied to Vera, decay and corrupt. These novels also challenge the "norms" of heterosexuality and marriage by portraying so many characters in different types of relationship. Even Dr Metcalf, reputed to have had eleven nurses pregnant, leaves job and wife in pursuit of Smithers, a male hospital orderly. Characters who are themselves involved in irregular sexual relationships condemn others' transgressions. Vera's mother takes a lover and Aunt Daisy enjoys a lesbian relationship with her Companion, Miss Clayton. Vera reflects that such "meaningful relationships" occur not only in the rarefied setting of novels like *Women in Love* with "all those stockings, a defiance of red, of coral and canary" but among quite ordinary people. "My own stockings, like Miss Clayton's and my aunt's, are black" (*TGW*, 56).

As a young woman, Vera struggles constantly to establish her own identity. Although pregnancy and motherhood affirm her, they limit her choices about who she is while making more urgent the question of where she belongs. In *My Father's Moon* Vera must contend with institutions like schools and hospitals, but *Cabin Fever* recounts her search for a home where she can feel at home, a place which contains books, music and a friend with whom she can share insights about them. This need is linked to the very practical problem of finding physical shelter. Jolley explores home and homelessness through the framing image of *Cabin Fever*—an

overheated hotel room in New York where the mature Vera attends a medical conference. Despite arriving a few days early, hoping to visit art galleries and walk in Central Park, she is psychologically trapped in this room, just as, when young, she remained for long periods in households deprived of beauty or cultural stimulus because she required shelter. Sheltered enclosures threaten stagnation, but leaving them is perilous, as in the anecdote Vera recollects of a young man who has lost all inclination to leave the hut where he is snowed up in the mountains. Once enticed out and encouraged to cross an ice-covered stream, he finds the ice too thin and is soaked in freezing water, just as the youthful Vera spends much of her life on very thin ice.

Looking down from her hotel window, Vera sees someone living on the frozen New York footpath “partly surrounded by bags stuffed with rags and possessions” (CF, 90) and finds herself obsessively watching this image of her homeless, younger self. Inhabiting safe enclosures isolate individuals from their past selves, from the homeless and even from those on the same level as themselves.

I am still here on the twenty-fourth floor and when I sit in front of my mirror I can see, in the mirror, someone on the twenty-fourth floor across the street. He is sitting upright at a table and is in his shirt sleeves. I have no idea who he is (CF, 51)

Vera also fears that mysterious streams of water trickling behind the walls may break through, inundating her room. Reassured this is merely the sound of an old-fashioned heating system, she recollects many similar pipes in the past which ones “lined rooms, passages and corridors”, realising it is floods of memory which threaten to overwhelm her.

Home is a principal site where gendered identity is constructed and Jolley presents Vera's story not only in relation to romantic fiction, but also to Freud's Family Romance. The trilogy explores her relationships with her parents directly and indirectly through linking it to her relationships with men, with couples and with various older women characters. For Vera, one meaning of home is her parents' household, which she simultaneously yearns for and longs to escape.

I do feel I want to be at home with my mother. I know this is stupid. The very stupidity of the wish is enough to make me start crying. I know that after a very short time in my mother's house I always want to leave, to go on to some other place—somewhere else. (CF, 65)

Socially, Vera feels uncomfortably set apart by speaking German at home, her mother's tongue and the language of cherishing which, in wartime, becomes the language of the enemy—a paradox reflecting the relationship between mother and daughter who remain embattled throughout the narrative. In patriarchal societies, women are expected to maintain the facade of respectability and police their daughters morally. Vera internalises her mother's constant reproaches—"How could you with your education and your background breed like a rabbit" (CF, 199)—carrying on resentful debates in her head.

For myself I don't seem able, in my mind, to get rid of my mother's thoughts, her voice or her tears. And there is no welcome, at present, for her in me. (CF, 201)

Yet simultaneously, she remembers her mother's tender cherishing and yearns frequently for her presence.

At loggerheads with her mother, Vera is drawn to and inspired by her idealistic, unworldly father. He is a somewhat abstract character, perhaps because he is such an ideal figure, although his impracticality—"your father has given away his winter coat again" (TGW, 83)—is mildly comic, as when he insists on taking Vera and some school friends for a picnic in the rain. "This has always been his attitude to rain, the fact that it will not be much and what there is will do good" (CF, 181). Yet Vera's memories of him, particularly when he sees her off on her various journeys, are deeply sorrowful, infused with a guilt which is never quite explained. When working as a nurse in theatre, the resemblance between the anaesthetist's voice and her father's makes her long for home (MFM, 53), and in her relationships with Dr Metcalf and Mr George, both so much older, she seems to seek a father figure, even though, "There is something hopeless in being hopeful that one person can actually match and replace another. It is not possible" (MFM, 53).

Vera's association with an array of couples provides further narrative comment on her relationship with her parents. Some, like Sister Peters and Hoob, or Mr and Miss George, provide refuge, whilst others, like the Metcalfs, involve her intimately in their relationship. Unaware of being patronised for her naivete and social background, Vera is almost as attracted to Magda as to the husband for whom Magda has procured her. After living with the Georges for seven years, Vera is drawn into a similar relationship with the androgynous brother and sister, Noël and Felicity, Oxford graduates eking out a living on a farm near her parents' house.

Socially superior to the Metcalfs, they are much poorer and even more corrupt. Vera's prime function is to provide food supplies and their contempt for her social origins is barely concealed: "her accent is *appalling*: (TGW, 76). Nevertheless, they manipulate her into bed, all three together. But, as with the Metcalfs, Vera feels she is entering a wider cultural sphere, "encouraged towards all that is worthwhile and beautiful" (TGW, 80). Noël and Felicity, however, identify her with Ibsen's Hedwig in *The Wild Duck*, a young girl losing her eyesight whose family have transformed their loft into an imaginary forest where they keep a wild duck injured in one wing, symbolic, among other things, of Hedwig herself. When the fantasies and deceptions represented by this world of illusion are exposed in the course of the play, Hedwig plans first to kill the wild duck, but, distraught at her father's rejection of her, deliberately shoots herself instead. Vera's vision is metaphorically defective and the wild duck with its injured wing becomes yet another image of her thwarted aspirations like the damaged fowl Gertrude once gave her to take to her mother. Nevertheless, unlike Hedwig or Rachel Vinrace, she remains a survivor.

Despite its harmfulness, she laments losing her relationship with Noël and Felicity and all it appeared to offer.

Patients and illness are on one side of life and romantic beauty and ideals seem to be removed to another unreachable side.... If I am to be outside or only a part of a special obligation it is not enough.

I want to be the giver and the recipient of the whole and it seems that I never shall be. (TGW, 93)

The tuberculosis with which Noël infects her symbolises both the taint of corruption and its necessary purgation: "With an indescribable terror I picture the haemorrhage which will, if it does not kill me, rid me of the diseased areas in my lungs and allow the quiet unseen healing to commence" (TGW, 89). The sanatorium proves a turning point in Vera's life as she gradually comes to accept her marginality, even acknowledging its positive aspects. Associating with the Metcalfs and with Noël and Felicity has disrupted the career and conventionally respectable marriage her mother desired for her, but also delivered her from their stultifying boredom. "Not knowing then that I was being, in the eyes of my mother, wrecked, I went forward towards the consequences, being rescued at the same time" (TGW, 71)

Several older women act as surrogate mothers in Vera's life. Gertrude, with her mixture of innocence and shrewd commonsense, tries to warn her against the Metcalfs, offering to extend her little farm so Vera can become part owner. Even

though she ignores this offer of an alternative home, memories of Gertrude's pastoral retreat console Vera throughout her life.

The sky always seems nearer at Gertrude's Place. It seems to come down, rain soft and swollen, the clouds rosy at the edges and shining as if pearls are sewn into their linings, to the top of the grassy slope which goes straight up from the windows of the living room (MFM, 108)

Miss George, although a spinster, spends her life mothering, first her younger brother and then Vera's two children. One complexity of Jolley's trilogy is that some characters assume an emblematic dimension. Despite her self-reproach for past actions, the narrator expresses little remorse that her daughters have been raised by another woman, but this, perhaps, is because Miss George emblematises Vera's maternal aspect. Indeed, she seems to assume that Vera will continue her own maternal role with regard to Mr George—She sees in you someone who can go on looking after him. People don't ever do things with complete unselfishness—and by the end of the trilogy, Vera is playing mother to her elderly husband (TGW, 26).

Vera is mothered in differing ways by two other characters—staff nurse Ramsden whom she meets through her hospital training and the rice farm widow who befriends her on the voyage to Australia though ultimately she rejects them both. Ramsden, a refined, cultivated woman versed in music and literature, seeks to enlarge Vera's horizons by encouraging her to listen and read and, while the yearned-for intimacy never actually develops, she remains an ideal figure haunting Vera's consciousness. The widow is a more material and materialistic character whose pretensions to culture are dismissed by Mr George: “her talk about music...is the kind of rubbish put on record sleeves to enable people like her to talk as if they enjoy music and know something about it” (TGW, 114). But her earthy vulgarity is pitted against European cultural snobbery much as the character, Madge, is set at odds with the Viennese Heimbach family in Jolley's earlier novel, *Milk and Honey*. Like Madge, the widow epitomises Australia itself, particularly its promised abundance after the deprivations of post-war Britain, as she lavishes clothes on Vera and explains how she and Mr George will “have to learn to eat meat, to really eat it” (TGW, 115)

Vera's life story provokes shrewd commentary. On hearing that the Georges supported her through medical school, “The widow bets all the same that my mother and father would have turned themselves inside out to put me through and would not have required me as a maid or for *other services*: (TGW, 110). The widow's

property, which Vera eventually visits, corresponds in some respects to Gertrude's little farm as an image of female independence and autonomy. It also reminds Vera of her mother: "Like my mother's house, my widow's house stands open to the spring, to all the seasons..." (TGW, 164-5). The property also represents a space where women can relate to one another personally and sexually, free from social pressures and intrusions. As a young woman, Vera idealises the intimacy she observes between pairs of women friends, like Ramsden and staff nurse Pusey-Hall at the hospital whose discussions range from "music theory to deeply religious philosophy" (CF, 103) or Sister Russell and Dr McCabe discussing books or plays while working at the maternity home (CF, 146).

Vera experiences lesbian desire in her brief relationship with Lois, a fellow nursing student, in her yearning for Ramsden which, though never expressed in word or deed, appears to be reciprocated, and in her encounters with the widow. But relationships with men determine the course of her life. Falling in love with Dr Metcalf, she rejects Lois and, when Ramsden complies with Vera's request to visit her family home, she turns her back at the railway station unable to cope with informing the older woman she is pregnant. As the widow points out, "a man, like an illness, can separate people, can break a friendship..." (TGW, 116). But although, for Vera, lesbianism remains essentially the road not taken, in the novels it seems to offer a haunting possibility of harmony and mutual understanding between women. In *Cabin Fever* the mature narrator warns readers not to expect a romantic resolution: "I mean, how can anyone's life in reality, at the present time, contain the fulfilment of expectation and the happy ending of a romantic fiction" (CF, 237). The "happy ending" implied here, however, is not heterosexual union, but "a confrontation of recognition, a reunion" with Ramsden in the present in Australia. The actual ending of the trilogy where Vera wheels her ageing husband through suburban streets is counterpointed by the immediately preceding account of her brief pastoral idyll with the widow, and news of the generous legacy she bequeaths many years later despite Vera's failure to maintain contact. Another possible "happy ending" is cancelled out.

Vera's rejections and betrayals of other women also represent the failed relationship with her mother which fills her with sorrow and guilt comparable to that evoked by memories of her father. Although her mother and Ramsden appear as opposites, the narrative establishes certain links between them. Like Ramsden, her mother seeks to develop Vera's musical tastes, sending her records of a Beethoven string quartet and some Bach: "You might not like this music at first...It

is a sophisticated music. You will like it very much later on...You must learn to wait" (CF, 27). When Ramsden offers Vera a gift of any book on her shelves, she chooses, as she considers, badly, "a book full of embroidery designs and diagrams of needles in the act of making stitches" (CF, 46). Later she realises how her mother could easily interpret the designs, recreating them in exquisite stitches. Embroidery recurs throughout the novels as an image both of refined, delicate beauty and of artistic creation. Miss George was an embroidery teacher and her students' work contains some of "the daintiest and prettiest things" Vera has ever seen (CF, 226), while the widow's house and its surroundings are "a green embroidery stitched with firm green seams into a corner of the pale bleached land" (TGW, 164).

Although Vera never learns to sew, she constantly embroiders the truth, something artists inevitably do, as Jolley indicated when her heroine, remembering Ramsden's embroidery book, regrets not having chosen poetry instead: "Rilke, for example, the Orpheus poems" (CF, 46). Encouraged by Ramsden to read Rilke, Vera associates her with these lines from his poem, "Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes".

But hand in hand now with that God she walked,  
her paces circumscribed by lengthy shroudings  
uncertain, gentle and without impatience.  
Wrapt in herself, like one whose time is near...(MFM, 22)

Set in a surreal, ghostly landscape, the poem describes Orpheus walking through the underworld while his dead wife Eurydice and the messenger god, Hermes, follow behind. Unlike other versions of the legend, Rilke's Eurydice is too preoccupied—"Full as a fruit with sweetness and with darkness / was she with her great death"—to notice her husband's presence or to comprehend his attempts to rescue her.<sup>10</sup> When Hermes tells her Orpheus has destroyed her chance of escape by looking back, "she took in nothing, and said softly: Who?"

In Jolley's trilogy, Vera is the Orpheus figure and Ramsden, her principal source of inspiration, corresponds to Eurydice. "I never told Ramsden I was trying to write because what I wrote was about her. I wanted to write about Ramsden. How could I tell her that?" (MFM, 23) Just as Orpheus fails to bring his beloved back from the dead, so Vera cannot make contact with the woman on the train whom she imagines might be Ramsden. Worse than the likelihood she is not, is the possibility she actually is Ramsden and has entirely forgotten Vera, merely asking like Rilke's

10. A translation of Rilke's poem is found in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems*, tr. J.B. Leishman. London: Penguin, 1964, 39-42.

Eurydice, "Who?" Whereas Rilke's Orpheus holds a lyre which appears to have grown to his hand "like twines of rose into a branch of olive", the youthful Vera carries an empty violin case to impress other people, but also indicating her artistic aspirations. It is empty because she is still too young to have acquired the experience and skill necessary for an artist, though these are ultimately manifest in the narrative she composes.

To express and fully develop her artistic vision, Vera must, like Orpheus, descend to the underworld. Her misdeeds, errors and follies form part of the process as she plumbs her own depths, reaching a nadir in her relationship with Noël and Felicity and the resulting illness. Eventually Felicity, quoting from Dante's *Inferno* urges Vera to leave and "go with your illustrious and suffering ma and pa" (TGW, 97), for it is values they have instilled which ultimately enable her to emerge from darkness. Noël and Felicity address Vera as Persephone (as well as Hedwig), the goddess who emerges every spring from the realm of death where she is held captive by Pluto and released only through the efforts of her mother, the corn goddess, Demeter, a figure associated with Vera's mother and the widow (who farms rice), both of whose houses "stand open to the spring".

Ironically, deliverance is further accomplished by moving to Australia, the land down under, with the widow as psychopomp. Not only does this remove Vera, to some extent, from narrow and inhibiting class boundaries which enclosed her in Britain, it provides a perspective of distance from which she can view her formative experiences on the other side of the globe. Like any writer, she relies on the underworld of her own subconscious and, to record her life story she must also penetrate the past, probing the depths of memory. As Orpheus sought to resurrect his beloved wife from the dead, so Vera tries to recreate as living presences people who once shaped her life and consciousness.

Vera's life is constantly disrupted, but this, Jolley implies, is inevitable within fiction recounting a young woman's experience in the mid-twentieth century. The *Bildungsroman/Künstlerroman* genre, with its pattern of individual development towards an achieved goal, is disrupted by the romance genre where heroines move inevitably towards a culminating marriage which absorbs them without trace. The romance genre itself is disrupted by a peculiarly twentieth century consciousness of how adult sexuality is infused with the complexity of children's relationship to their parents. In Vera's narrative we see a young woman negotiating conflicting desires and expectations while both shaping her own nature and learning to live with the person she has become.

## Learning to Swim

Every time we touched each other, we left a fingerprint of sweat,  
the grass died back, the hens stopped laying,  
and on the fig tree outside my bedroom the figs ripened.  
That summer we read girlie magazines spilling beer  
on my white sheets and over the pages of Penthouse.  
His big body was pale as parsnip, black hairs sprouted  
in unlikely places but his hands were like talc and  
I loved his unhappiness, his migraines.

I'd always had boys before, stumbling through their paces  
lights off and everything, even their knees, strange in the dark.  
This was so different, like learning to swim  
after years of walking your hands in the shallows  
fooling nobody.

Look, now I can backstroke and butterfly,  
I can dive from the high tower.  
He opened me like an oyster,  
like an artichoke. I was brine and undertow when he broke  
over me, his hands full of music, each finger  
singing a note purer than sainthood.

I swaggered into the year wearing that song  
never again so unknowing,  
never again so electric.

## Red Eye

The bloodshot eye  
and the good one that return my gaze  
from the mirror, guide me  
to the eye clinic;

its generously-sized  
waiting-room, a confession:  
the complaints are many;  
and like a dog

cornered by threat, I stare,  
unblinking,  
at the company  
I now keep the length

of my waiting. Far  
into the room with veiled windows  
and prints—by an artist  
with decorative flair—

I see the whole assembly wears glasses,  
familiar of blur  
like an inversion  
of the ocular

process that made,  
amid rank swamp, primal  
membrane bud into light,  
and at last's brought us,

marvellous-eyed  
—once! —to the beige  
and sage green decor  
of the clinic, for correction.

Darkness, or, rather,  
absence of light, will have  
its way again, waits  
as patiently. Unless

like a worm suddenly  
unearthed, I squirm  
amid the slickly  
serviceable decor

and lousy magazines  
(some are freed from reading)—  
a collective test  
when a mere bug can pick

a real leaf from plastic!  
Let there be cathedrals,  
great paintings, the night-sky  
emptying its light, all

(I'll reward) for my good eye;  
and let the other  
soon again offer proof  
of the Argument from Design.

## Ettie in the Blue Wing

Ettie yabbers away.  
Three words.  
It's pot luck which she'll  
choose today—  
yummy, bugger, money  
a loud endless chant.  
They tell her to shut up.  
She can't.

## Crows

Three midnight crows  
clumped

on the power-line  
like oily

black rags, aaark aaark  
at my back

each croak a hurling  
of stones

as if they  
knew.

## The Valley of Tears

At 1.28 am she wakes up, hearing the woman scream. She can hear the scream as it falls along the cliff top. The cry starts loud and high and ends, fades out dimly, lower and softer. She can't tell where it comes from. She thinks it is from the cliff but can't be sure.

She imagines some woman throwing herself off the escarpment into the tops of trees and the rocks underneath, or perhaps a man has pushed her. A lover she has been keeping secrets from and who now wants to be rid of her. And perhaps the woman will drown in the light air on the way down as the scream drowns in the night air too. She listens but can't tell. The scream had surrounded her and now it is falling.

The scream falls down the cliff-face into the valley below. She can hear the woman scream. The woman must be falling, the scream falls with her. The woman should fight back. If it is indeed, a lover, the woman should shield her face with her hands. But the scream is a scream of defeat. A fear-sharp edge of scream which embraces fear as if there is nothing else. Is this what the final scream of courage sounds like as it leaves a body? Is the scream the tearing a person makes when the end of their courage has been reached? The falling off before they have really begun. Is this where all the trouble comes from—a simple finishing of the last reserves of courage?

The young woman swears that she was already awake when she heard it. The scream, the tear. This is not a story, not a scream that you can hear alone. She goes upstairs to her mother and becomes younger than her sixteen years. Mother, Mother, Mummy, did you hear it? The scream?

The mother has not heard it. The mother has been dably asleep, lying next to the step-father. She has been dreaming of disturbing things, things she does not understand, nothing, however, about screaming women. Leave me alone, she says.

Leave me alone and brushes her hand against her daughter. Leave me alone. The mother wants to be left alone, to sleep, to find the thing which has disturbed her in the night. To finish the dream. But the daughter won't go away. Yes, the mother says Yes, yes, what is it? because the girl is her daughter and the daughter thinks she has heard a scream, a woman.

So then the mother wakes the step-father, and he looks around the perimeter of the yard. He steps lightly on the dewsoft maidenhair. He looks. He doesn't see anything, not even the light of the only other farm they can usually see from their house. He listens like an animal, one ear tilted higher than the other. Like a cat. There is nothing. He goes downstairs to the other daughter, and hears her sleeping breath, in out, calm, not disturbed by screaming. Her skin is almost luminescent in the low light.

Then, without warning she wakes, sees the man's face hardly lit at all in the quiet bedroom and screams screams in fright until the man is forced to turn on the light and calm her. It's me. It's me. It seems silly to ask if she had heard a scream, she had been asleep, he could see it. Nevertheless he asks her and she speaks incoherently about a man in a yellow robe, something she has been dreaming he supposes. A man with wispy hair. He comforts her and she turns back to her warm sheets. Mother, mother bed, hold me, comfort me, the man with the yellow robe is here she says to herself. She goes back to the dream, to the man in the yellow robe, who holds her in his arms and strokes her hair. Gently. Gently.

By now everyone else is awake. The two half-sisters, the half-brother. None of them heard anything. The others look everywhere for the source of the screaming which the daughter insists is real, really happened, but they find nothing. They call out into the dark from the balcony, but no one answers their anonymous cries. They think someone might have fallen and have vague fantasies about rescue attempts before they go back to bed, to sleep their unworried sleep.

The step-father privately thinks that the daughter has dreamt it all, although she says she hasn't. She says she had been watching television and nodded off for a moment. Was the scream her own? She can't believe it. Was it she who cried out between the babble of infotainment and advertorials? Was it she who could not stand, any longer, the bouffant hair, the American teeth, the tight blanc mange faces, milky and gelid, even on television? She hopes not. The young woman stays awake holding the papery hand of the step-father who is ill and sleepy. Never mind he says to her.

Then the young woman wants to call the police but, as the step-father points

out, she is the only one who heard it. The next nearest house has its lights off, they are still asleep. Is she sure? But it is getting very late and she is losing her ability to discriminate. She had been sure.

They do not ring the police. Even the young woman thinks how absurd it would be—the conversation with the police officer. She knows what they would think, bored on the end of the phone.

Deep in the valley Ruth wakes.

She is used to her insomnia, she has lain with it as long as she can remember. Usually she wakes, reads books, her scientific journals, or works on some theoretical problem which calms her. Mathematics and the tiny cosmologies of physics have a grace and motion of their own which sates her and she falls asleep again an hour before she has to be up. She doesn't worry if the night consists of small slivers of sleep and large slabs of reading and thinking. She's used to it and doesn't fret.

Tonight though, she frets. She keeps turning and worrying. She does not know why she has woken so early. Normally she wakes at three. This morning it still seems night, and there is a discord in the air. The sheets are twisted. The stillness that lovers have remarked on has deserted her, and her body is alive with something she cannot name. Her mind full of panthers and lynxes, stalking and then reappearing, close to her face. They do not make any noise. She cannot call up her friendly spirits, her protecting agents, and she feels bereft and lonely in the world more than she can say. Ruth, Ruth, she says to herself in a gentle voice but her voice sounds strange, and not at all comforting. She doesn't sleep, nor can she read. She turns and turns and frets about things which can't be changed. She gets up and makes herself some tea and stares at the night garden. Finally she turns to the cards. Not that she believes them exactly, but she is lonely and it gives her something to bounce off, something to react to. She is talking to herself through these cards she knows it, but she believes that there is something, many things perhaps, about time which she does not understand and maybe through the cards she will learn. Her rational, blinkered mind scoffs at these fanciful justifications.

She lives in the valley, believes that she has a guardian angel, three of them in fact, and she talks to the cards late at night when the world's time is twisted like an insomniac sheet, wrenched around and creaking in the night. Where there are tears and rips in the fabric of things and where she can sometimes slip a card between the many universes so tightly packed together.

She does this with questions. She wants to know whether things will get better.

This will be a good question. She will try to understand what the cards seem to say, and although she cannot always understand what is being said, she always tries to be an apt pupil, an attentive conversational partner, if only with herself.

Tomorrow she will go on a journey, and she is anxious in a way that makes her think that she is having a premonition of danger, don't go, don't go. She reminds herself that it is always like this before she steps out of the valley, and so far she has always returned, although not always unchanged. The world out of the valley is different, and she is a stranger there. She is a different person, a singular person, not someone who is part of the fabric of the valley, not someone socially related to everyone she meets. Someone with a position, however insignificant, in the scheme of things.

Actually, she is afraid of the cards, and she hasn't opened the box yet.

Sometimes she thinks she has the gift of insight and understanding. There is much she understands, but much, even about herself, that she doesn't. Sometimes, though, she sees, without understanding, in a whole phrase, a whole vision. She did not hear the scream.

She is afraid, because the world does not seem to be hanging together as it should. Something is amiss. Something is wrong although she doesn't know what. Perhaps it is her. She is too afraid to open the box. She leaves it on the table and goes outside and looks up at the escarpment and feels ill. Perhaps it is the feeling of a scream that she has. Perhaps it was she who screamed.

The next day, in the daylight, the scream has disappeared. In its place is a tenuous grey light which Ruth feels much happier in. She packs her clothes, it's only a few days, she will be home soon she says, and forgets the prescience she thought she felt on the previous night. She puts everything in a small bag, and decides not to take a camera. She is sick of the idea that everything needs to be recorded. She puts her papers in order.

She has to catch a train and then a bus, and then an aeroplane, and then a bus, another train and then a taxi. She prefers not to drive to the airport because it disrupts her concentration. If she is on a journey she wants to be absorbed in the process of the journey. In the isolation even a routine journey gives. She has brought with her the work of Chaung Tzu—styled 'a Chinese mystic'. She knows nothing about him or his work other than that he is a follower of, and a deviator from, Lao Tzu the much more famous philosopher-mystic. The train is full of teenaged women talking about clothes. They're silly, but she doesn't judge them—this is what young women do at their age. It's about mating she thinks. Young men kill themselves in

wars or cars, and the young women adorn themselves so as to attract a good range of males to choose from. The girls wave at young men out of the window of the train but the young men don't see them.

Meanwhile the varying ridges and sharp edges of the escarpment file past the window of the train.

Of course Ruth did not die or come to any sort of grief on the journey, and it revealed only what she had taken away with her. She needn't have gone anywhere, perhaps, to learn about how things were put together. With what tenuous and odd connections things draw strength and cohesion. She had slept little and strange fits of crying had broken up the hotel nights. The smooth table tops of the professionally made beds looked as if made for virgins. Nevertheless the panthers lurked in the hotel closets and she imagined their fur.

The world remained itself, ordinary, she got on the buses and lanes and came home to sit in the garden.

At this time of the year the poppies were out: big headed and long-limbed like schoolgirls, they stood about with excellent indifference. Oranges hung from their tree, lemons from theirs. She walked into the township and bought bread from the young woman in the bakery, who smoothed back her thin hair with the back of her wrist and passed over the change with the other hand. Ruth could feel the soft touch of her skin, warm and comfortable. This was the young woman who lived on the escarpment heard the scream.

They smiled at each other politely. Warm enough for you today? said the young woman, and Ruth replied that it was, but the young woman was already serving another customer. Ruth took the bread, went out, crossed the road and bought some milk then walked down the road to her home.

Everything remained in place.

The houses had a solidity which she had never noticed before. They sat on the earth so deliberately. Cars went by with absolute purpose and had anyone noticed Ruth they would have seen an unremarkable woman coming home from the shops carrying bread and milk, walking easily in the warm morning sun.

When Ruth reached the front door, there began a terrible screaming. It was as if the fabric of the world was suddenly wrenched, as if all the metal things were abrading all the other metal things. Vision slipped and the door was no longer a banal rectangle of ornamental wood but a rhombus. She looked at her immobile hands and they became slow and unable to move the key into the lock. She did not

know how to fight. The noise tilted in her ears. She knew that nothing she could do now, or any prescience she might have had would affect the outcome. And, brilliant as people thought her, she could not unravel this thing.

She wondered in this strange warping whether it was just her, or whether the world had in fact shifted and that she was one witness among many. There was no way of knowing. People would not say. Or would say: I had a bit of a turn on Saturday, or, I think I have a migraine coming on, or ... any one of a number of things. But she felt that it was bigger than the circumference of her body and that the tension she felt, the tears, the feelings of foreboding were not a sign of madness but a response to something amiss, something strange in the network of things which she could not understand.

The world straightened again. It might only have been a millisecond, a nanosecond, that it had been adrift but the objects in her house seemed to have a new disposition. It seemed like the house of a stranger and she was surprised that she still knew her way around the house, and knew where all her usual things were. The teapot, the knives.

In the following weeks the young woman on the escarpment often had the sensation that the mountain was shifting. She said to her mother: Was that a tremor? but the mother was taking care of the step-father and said: I don't think so dear. The young woman went to the job in the bakery and watched the world as if it were about to explode. She didn't want to go out with her friends because they seemed, for no particular reason at all, to be grotesque. She couldn't understand them, or what she had ever seen in them. She watched late night television, and let the dark circles grow under her eyes.

After five weeks, both the young woman and Ruth had become accustomed to living in this shifting world. They made allowances—like sailors becoming accustomed to the uncertain motion of the deck under their feet. It was not exactly equilibrium but it was a way of negotiating the tricky surfaces of things. There was a silence now but in the sixth week the screaming began again.

The young woman on the mountain ran out to the edge of the escarpment looking for whatever wild beast or woman it was in pain. She stood on the edge as much as she dared and called out until her throat became rough with calling.

Ruth paced the floor of her bedroom like an animal. Her sleek skin riding over the muscles. The palms moist and vulnerable.

She walked in the garden in the night. Brushing the poppies with her dressing

gown as she strode with long steps through the weeds and among the over-hanging trees. She was alert, analytical, distanced when the man in a yellow coat stepped into her path.

What do you want? Ruth asked him. She was startled, but not afraid. What do you want? It was almost as if she had been expecting him or someone like him.

He stepped forward and the screaming began again. The earth seemed to be shifting its axis. The young woman on the escarpment shifted and swayed, wild-eyed on the edge.

What do you want? Ruth called out. What do you want? She looked at his eyes and knew he was part of it. The one wrenching the world around.

He came closer and was saying her name, Ruth, Ruthie, in a soft breath like a lover.

What do you want? Ruth asked him again.

He lifted his hand as if to caress her face or assault her—she could not tell which. She could not tell whether he was evil or whether he was some benign saving force.

And then the earth screamed with a wrenching scream again and all Ruth's passion and sleekness, her fear and her courage combined, leapt into her until she could not tell whether she herself were evil or benign. She stayed pivoted on the ground as the earth shifted and moved.

He moved his hand closer to her face and she was suddenly joined with something she didn't understand. Her hands became strong. She took him by the hair and flung him into the poppies, beating him wildly with her fists. He was an old man and held up his hands in front of his face.

Please, Please, he said.

She picked up a stone and beat him with it, smashing the smooth skin of his forehead. Blood ran into his thin hair. She ground his eyes and broke the old yellow teeth of him. She beat him. She could hear herself screaming at him although she could not understand what it was she was saying. She beat him until he didn't move and no longer spoke. She beat him until she herself was exhausted, and then lay on his body like a lover until her green dressing gown was wet with dew and until the screaming stopped.

The woman on the escarpment cried deep tears, and Ruth stood up. There was nothing more to be done.

Ruth went inside and looked at her beautiful mathematical papers. She moved the figures and symbols around and became absorbed in the hunger of it. The

elegant creatures on the page aligned themselves in patterns which were deeply charming to her, covered any rift. Then she slept, her head resting on her work in the still early morning never dreaming she would see him again.

David Buchanan

## Whet Stone

On this ridge above the sea sees  
our opened wide French-doors  
let a nor-westerly surge in  
off the Indian Ocean  
through my clothes & hair  
salt air takes my face  
as between her hands  
like a stolen glimpse  
refracted as colour  
through olive trees, pruned vines  
budding almond & peach blossom  
revel between gusts  
flurries like snow  
in forecast showers  
on terracotta paths,  
their fired clay whetted  
turns sunset red in the rain.

## Behind Glass (or My Life with Bishop Berkeley)

'A toast!' someone declared, lifting a burnt, dry slice towards the camera.

'To poverty!'

'To youth!'

'To the joys of living three to one cramped bedsit!'

Everyone had his say, her say, before the camera flashed and caught us there in our student years, two weeks before our first first-year exams, not a decent meal in days, not a bob between us, yet somehow pissed as newts (excuse the language, but it comes or came with the territory).

One, two, three, four ... Count them. Seven! Seven of us. Three girls to four lads. I know what you're thinking, I bet it was your man who missed out. Why else would he be bothering to tell the story? He's obviously the one who didn't make it to Happy-Ever-After Land. And you'd be right. Look at the six happy beaming faces and then look to the left. That's me with the long face, out there against the horrendous wallpaper on my own, trying desperately to look uninterested in the carousing, the Bacchanalia, the couple-ology. That's me affecting a serious, late-teenage scowl, an intellectual furrow pasted on my brow. That's me on the 10th of June, nineteen eighty-three. I bet you don't even remember. I bet you were too busy framing the scene for posterity.

Snap! How arbitrarily eternities begin.

But don't get me wrong, I know you had other things on your mind. Your own life, for instance. And I couldn't fault you on that. I'm not here attempting to place the blame at anyone's feet or on anyone's head or in anyone's hands. I'm not attempting to pass on guilt like some physical burden. If the Good Bishop has taught me anything it's not to try to unload your grief on others. For a start, you can't depend on others. You don't even know who others are, for heaven's sake.

Who was anybody then? Who were those people I lived with and shared breathing room with? I can hardly remember them. I know what their snoring sounded like and I can still smell the clutches of dirty socks on the bedroom floor, but I know not where they came from nor where they went. I saw them as their paths crossed mine briefly, and we exchanged words.

'Are you coming out for a drink tonight?' or 'What about the party, James?'

'I don't think so,' I'd say, and then creep to the window to watch them swagger off down the road to the students' bar, whistling at every female that passed, whooping at some joke they'd heard or told already forty times before. Talking about me, too, no doubt, laughing at me behind my back. But that I didn't mind. I was never one to mind the opinion so long as I was in the thoughts of others. Much and all as I disliked them, I envied them their carefreeness, their frivolity, their abandon. Once, for instance, they tried to flag down a female professor's car right outside the door. I was transfixed there at the window by their bravery; silent, awe-struck, an insect behind the glass.

You first met me, or I first met you, or whatever, in the college library. It was a couple of months before the night you mysteriously turned up at that party in our house and took this photograph before you left. I was lugging Berkeley off the topmost shelf and almost knocked myself out with it when I saw you. You wore the reddest red dress, the loudest possible colour in that most silent of places. I was so brown, so dowdy, as enclosed as the well-thumbed books, you passed without noticing me.

In fact, if there was an image that would sum up our relationship it would have to be that one: you in a blaze of your own light; me, as Shakespeare had it, darkling.

And our theme tune, the music if they ever made a film about the pair of us, would be the hushed rustle and panicked heartbeat of a library. And maybe the swish of your dress against your thighs as you passed. Just for the pathos. 'A toast,' someone repeated, somewhat less confidently than before, but, unbelievably, they laughed again and called for more photos to be taken, and assumed even more lurid and self-degrading poses; but you had all the evidence you wanted by then, all the proof and effects to confront me these years later with the crime of my foolishness, my shyness, my youth. You thanked us—us!—for the drinks, made your excuses, as they say, and left. I followed you to the door on the pretext of simply doing my duty as the only sober member of the party, but someone was already there before me: Grant, that plastic American with the designer teeth who wasn't even interested

in you, in love only with himself and his reputation, merely up to his habitual flirting.

'Will you be all right getting home on your own?' The smarmy cretin. And saying it as loudly as he could to play to the audience inside. His own girlfriend even laughed, but I seem to recall she 'accidentally' spilled a glass over him before the night was out.

You'd wisely chosen your time to depart. Even with Grant leering beside me, I thought: if she looks back now, I'm going out there to talk to her.

But Grant had other ideas.

'Grab yourself a beer there, Plato.' He punched me on the arm.

Then the laughter again and the cheering and the music suddenly up so loud that I wanted to smash the record player (even though it was my own). And the frenzy of all of them pushing to see the photograph mysteriously developing before their eyes. (I only saw it days later when I discovered it, bent and forgotten behind a sofa cushion, and I was interested then, not in those who could be seen, but in you who couldn't.) So instead I avoided the melee. I listened to the gutted thump of party music from the lavatory or the tiny kitchen and wondered how far down the evening road towards town you could still hear the sounds of my pain.

I'll tell you something about Berkeley in case you don't know, in case you haven't come across him since. I don't mean to be insulting, but lots of people quite happily and successfully get through life without knowing dot all about our friend George B.

Well, for a start, he was an Irish philosopher and bishop, who lived from 1685 to 1753, or who died when he was 68, whichever you prefer. Not a bad innings, eh, 68? Then again I suppose there's no great physical wear and tear on a philosopher. Weak eyesight, temper tantrums, withdrawal symptoms, but generally no stress or high blood pressure. And on top of that Berkeley was a bishop, so God was probably on his side and a little more than usual.

Nevertheless Hegel made it to sixty-one, and Aristotle was sixty-two. Immanuel Kant and Plato himself reached the fine old age of eighty. They say that orchestra conductors live longer on average than people in any other profession. Something to do with the restorative quality of music, no doubt. But where would that leave me in my gloom and silence: condemned to die before my thirtieth birthday? I can only hope that a precedent has now been set by these enduring philosophers, and that philosophy will sustain me a modicum longer, clutching the

stretcher at either end to carry me, ever more dependent for support, onward through my years.

You think *this* is a depressing picture? Wait till you hear about Berkeley!

What did Berkeley believe about objects? You'll be interested in this, being, as you are, fond of the camera and the world of images. Berkeley, if I've got him right—and he's not an easy one—Berkeley reckoned that objects (and to a photographer, that's just about everything, no?) objects exist only when they're being perceived! Get that? Only when they're being perceived. Close your eyes, or ears, nose, nerve-endings, taste-buds—and they're gone! Ka-pow! In a flash. Gone. No more.

I was afraid for you for months after I read that, afraid to blink when I saw you in case you disappeared, and afraid that, insignificant as I was in the background of your life, when you tired of the camera and no longer saw me, even briefly, among my friends, I'd be gone forever for you, too, blank as a piece of photographic paper accidentally exposed.

That's what I was like in those days—fatalistic to the point of heroism. I followed you everywhere and worried constantly when you went away for weekends. I kept this photograph with me wherever I was, not to prove that I had been and therefore was—that I mostly wanted to forget—but that *you* had existed, that behind the eye of the camera was the beholder.

And surely that is no small thing, no small tribute or trivial accolade I give you now, self-lessly (if someone without a self can truly be said to be able to give anything). I created and kept alive a version of you that you would never know and that I could never know myself, by definition. When people ask me how were my college years, you can imagine how difficult it is for me to talk about my studies as pursuits in and of themselves. For nothing I did was not intimately connected with you. I saw you down those summer-lit corridors, and it was as if we were at opposite ends of a telescope: you radiant, magnified, magnificent, eclipsing the sun; me, tiny, lost, a weightless mote amongst enormous tomes.

And yet, against hope, I imagined our existences were interdependent, that you could not survive without me as I could not without you. And I came to believe that we were like planets at our apogees, the most distant points of our orbits, and that we could only become closer over time. I believed that the telescope was already extended as far as it could be.

Needless to say, I was wrong.

The last time I saw you—and you'll remember this, you'll remember me from this if from nothing else I've said—the last time was when I was sitting at the entrance to the exam hall for my finals. Philosophy, of course. I had my head down, not in a book—it would have been too late for that, and anyway I'd studied hard—but examining the ground, the step immediately below me. I was looking at the ants that the long dry summer months seemed to have conjured from nothing.

No one could remember ever having seen so many ants around as were around that summer. We had them in the house, in the kitchen, even in the bedroom. They scaled the bare walls to the press in a perfect line as if they were climbing an invisible rope to the promise of food. And I was drawn to them; to their power in numbers; to the notion that they were so inextricably linked, like an army, one to another, you could hardly call any one of them an individual. None could have survived without the rest. None could have believed that if he shut his eyes, *à la* Bishop Berkeley, the rest would cease to exist. He could feel their existence in his blood.

I was thinking this, or some such thing, when I looked up and there you were. Like the vision of erotic beauty saints and suicides have the night before they chose their paths. Photographing again, this time some clown in his birthday suit who stood mockingly before the students anticipating doom, stepping in an instant from his trousers into the Drunken Yobbos Hall of Fame.

And you were photographing his moment of glory and courage. *His* moment. While all *my* moments and hours and months of perseverance and faithfulness went unseen, lost in the background still.

And that was it. I stood up then, and I approached you.

And it was I who screamed, 'I never want to see you again,' and glared at you, a stranger, before I ran into the dark examination hall.

## The Carpark Market

*In memoriam Vladimir Nabokov*

Hergesheimer slips from his Sunday bed, his weekend treat of still-sleeping suburban popsy alongside not to disturb, shaves, showers, speeds to bring back from the bakery, the supermarket, the crispest croissants, the richest apricot jam. To receive as reward, oranges also eaten, strong coffee being now sipped through its cumulous cap of frothy cloud, her suggestion of carpark market, this in place or stead of their customary bayside habitual stroll, a restaurant lunch to follow, a return to his, Hergesheimer's, rumpled Sunday afternoon bed. To jeopardize such a ritual? With a market? To place in hazard such a routine? At a market? Suburban popsy? she says, actually a brink-of-divorce separated mother of four, a gathering interest in porcelain and pottery, a modest acquirer of patterns and old plates. So indulge me a little here and there, says Hergesheimer, never one to waste a word when for the same money you can throw in a whole bag, I'm hot.

### *The Tazo Seller*

A youngish fellow stands behind his trestle table. No crowd accumulates. His wares are basically two sleek and immaculate official albums, turn the pages, each available item in its plastic pocket correctly placed and positioned within. How lovely! What a collection! How desirable! How shiny and colourful and smooth! Hergesheimer engages the youngish fellow in Sunday carpark market conversation or talk.

“Wow!” says Hergesheimer.

The brash Bugs Bunny.

“Hey!” says Hergesheimer.

The bold Marge Simpson.

"Gosh!" says Hergesheimer.

The brave Luke Skywalker, this last in hologrammic presentation, a touch of the Tazo you get your Emperor Palpatine too.

"Miraculous!" says Hergesheimer, simultaneously acknowledging and applauding the technology, also alluding, not to be outdone, a particular Tazo in his own albeit modest collection incorporating depth of vision, no less, the optical sensation of 3-D.

"You seen this one?" says the Tazo seller, picking from its protective pocket a shimmering simulation of motion and movement, the leap, the hand, the throw, the ball, the basket, five separate stages, the T. s. informs him, all on the one seemingly simple athletic superstar disc.

Hergesheimer enquires the price.

"Fifty cents," says the Tazo seller.

Hergesheimer muses and ponders and considers.

"Well, I started out this morning saying fifty cents," adds or amends at this precise juncture of the proceedings the Tazo s., "except the way people have been going through them, you know, to complete their collections, I think I'm not unfair to re-evaluate at two bucks."

Whereupon Hergesheimer, in response or otherwise to this forthcoming intelligence, admits that he's not really a serious collector, aged and elderly for a start, as can be seen, a white beard sported in fact, instantly noticeable, his thinning on top absence of surplus hair, just lives near a school is the story, the occasional kid will occasionally drop one, Hergesheimer picks them up.

"My own story more or less exactly," tells him the Tazo seller, shooting out to Hergesheimer a smile somewhere between helpless and shy, limning quickly his life as schoolteacher, a rapid sketched vista of fallen and forgotten Tazos underfoot thick as autumn leaves.

## ***The Watches***

Here is a man selling watches. Wrist watches. Pocket watches. Bold plastic. Bright metal. Of this size. Of that shape. In two glass cases of such crammed and crowded spilling profusion as to suggest a child's playbox dream treasure, gold and silver in its every shining and styling, a burglar's bonanza, riches beyond ransom, a black-patched buccaneer's briny trove.

Hergesheimer slides in a shoulder.

This is crap, of course, this is rubbish, this is your foreign battery farmed modern ersatz Mickey Mouse world, that very rodent in unabashed open strut white-gloving the passing of his own tickless time, as no less dates, as also depths, as even the side by side showing of capital city sidereal difference, your every start bump and stop button and rotating clockwise waterproof bezel in sweat shop stolen plagiarist connivance, in mockery of immemorial measurement, whiz-bang! wham-bam! lucky to last you even halfway if that to your home, this is junk.

Hergesheimer eases in an ear.

And plastic! To include plastic! To display plastic! To wave in brazen showing such giveaway flag! The very footings and foundations of foistered fraudulence, or so Hergesheimer's grappling understanding of the matter, being here undermined!

Hergesheimer noses in a nose.

Or is some other game being played here? For the seller of watches produces now from the privacy of his own pocket another watch. Hergesheimer ogles in an eye. Of a name make renowned. For the buyer before him. Of a price in three figures. Hergesheimer breathes in a breath. As this way, that way, in hooked sunlight catching, the wallet of the connoisseur flashes free of its sea of everywhere surrounding dross.

### ***Psychic Readings***

She is Madame Olga. She is Madame Tamara. She is fifteen dollars. Take a seat.

### ***Rain***

Rain falls on the Sunday carpark market, a sequined sprinkling of introductory drops. The dealers in dresses dash into action, of woollens, of cotton, as likewise of paper, the sellers of books. Will it be huge? Will it be heavy? Are we talking salvage or saving of stock? Of postcards. Of magazines. Of comics. Of stamps. Of the newspaper, the actual very issuance of particular newspaper, disseminating the demise, courtesy of an assassin's bullet, of the Irish upper hand in American politics. (Where were you then? Hergesheimer doesn't remember.) Of rustable ruin. Of runners' white socks.

As quickly to cease, to stop, in handful of countable drops, to fall no more. Back with the dresses. Out with the books. What a way to earn a living. The deceased American President, protected by cellophane, unharmed, unsold.

Hergesheimer thinks of his mother.

### ***The Cafe***

Hergesheimer sits with the suburban popsy brink-of-divorce separated mother of four in a suburban cafe, outside, as is today's fashion, a table in the street. They have ordered and will shortly drink and enjoy an encore of coffee, eat in accompaniment a French style baguette of rare roast beef. She thanks him sincerely and profusely for suffering the Sunday carpark market. Her handbag bulges with finds and treasures and discoveries, three plates pertinent to their period, the nicest, if you hold it a certain way, look, what do you want for two dollars, you don't even notice the chip.

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## Sergei and Nikolay: The Tale of Two Victims of Stalinism

I met Sergei and Nikolay during my first year in Australia, in a place called Shannon River, a Western Australian state saw mill situated 52 km south-east of Manjimup on the Nornalup Road, a winding gravel track which had long since become the South-Western Highway. When I arrived at Shannon River in April 1950, having landed in Fremantle in the previous month, the place was in the last throes of pioneering. To the north of the track which bisected the nascent timber town was the nearly completed timber mill, a cluster of unlined huts for single men, and a fibro structure called the boarding house, a name which I found puzzling because, as far as I can remember, it had no boarders during the nine-and-a-half months I had spent there. To the south was the manager's residence and houses for married men—I can't recall even the approximate number because we single men, all "New Australians" serving out the compulsory two-year contract under which the government could direct us to any job anywhere in Australia, hardly ever ventured beyond that strip of gravel which functioned as a sort of unofficial social divide. A bush railway, out of action during much of the rainy season when a heavy downpour would wash out a primitive culvert here or a hastily constructed embankment there, connected the mill with Northcliffe, the end of the state railway system. Northcliffe was also the source of our provisions brought in three times a week by the local grocer cum butcher, in an 1920s ute straight out of the silent movies. Life was monotonous but peaceful, almost serene, except for the fortnightly bus trip to Manjimup, then little more than a railway siding with gaping emptiness on one side and a row of rickety shops on the other. Every second Saturday after pay day most of Shannon River would squeeze into a battered school bus and repair to Manjimup, the families with children setting off for the shops and other errands, the single men heading straight for the local Mecca, the Manjimup Hotel, where they

remained until it was time to board the bus and head back. The return journey was like something out of a Monty Python sketch. After about twenty minutes or so the driver, without any prompting, pulled up at the roadside so that the drunkards, always seated up front, could answer the call of nature. The men would stagger out, line up—facing the bush—against the entire length of the bus, pull down their zippers and empty their overflowing bladders, in full sight of the women and children. The spectacle was repeated with increasing frequency, and the journey took usually twice as long as the morning trip to Manjimup. Once back, some continued the spree in their huts, usually in groups of three or four, emerging the next day drawn, bleary-eyed—and broke.

Sergei and Nikolay belonged to that motley crew of mid-century wanderers called displaced persons, men and women uprooted by the vagaries of the Second World War and the subsequent spread of communism through eastern and central Europe. Shannon River was the first Australian home to a fair cross-section of these casualties of that decade of cataclysm. There were, if I remember correctly, representatives of at least eight nationalities, not counting the Australians, in this miniature replica of a typical refugee camp in Europe—Poles, Ukrainians, Russians, Latvians, Lithuanians, my compatriots the Czechs and Slovaks, a Bosnian and a Dutchman—the latter an economic migrant who had brought his family to Shannon River because of the house which went with the job. All had a story to tell, but most preferred to keep it to themselves; the wounds were still raw, and remembering too painful. The only one who didn't need much prompting was Sergei, a chirpy Ukrainian dismissed by most as a tiresome simpleton. In years by I thought of him only now and then, and only for brief moments—once, I recall, during the uproar caused by Demidenko's *The Hand That Signed the Paper*—but today I can see him so vividly that his face is almost as clear in my mind's eye as when I had known him almost fifty years ago. I can make out his blondish, slightly carrotty hair, his pale, pock-marked face, with faint pinkish overtones, his prominent cheekbones typical of many east Europeans, and his grey-blue eyes which seemed to perpetually wander; his blackened teeth, or what was left of them, had never seen a dentist. He had huge palms with surprisingly stumpy fingers one of which was missing, but this did not stop him from swinging the axe (no chainsaws then) like a showground champion, for he was as strong as the proverbial ox, all muscle and no flab. He could neither read nor write, and had an earthiness about him which reminded me of the sons of the soil who peopled my childhood summer holidays spent on my grandfather's estate. Like many Russians and Ukrainians, he had a great need to talk,

and when I got to know him better he would chat for hours, seated on the steps of his hut, about his childhood, prattling in his rustic Ukrainian (in many respects close to Slovak, my mother tongue) sprinkled with kitchen German, the lingua franca of the German and Austrian refugee camps.

Sergei's father had been a farmer, with a couple of horses, a cow, a few pigs and some chickens, "like everyone in the village", he used to say. In 1930 (the date is mine, not his) came Stalin's collectivisation drive, designed to liquidate the rich farmers, the so-called kulaks, much the same way as the Tsarist middle classes and much of the intelligentsia had been done away with after 1917. Brigades of party activists, worker battalions, Komsomol students and detachments of the GPU, the successor to the notorious Cheka, descended on the countryside, forcibly subjecting entire villages to the will of the Party. Kulak came to mean anyone who resisted collectivisation, a class enemy to be stripped of his land, his livestock and even his home implements, and cut adrift in the countryside or herded into cattle wagons for exile in the frozen north or for incarceration in the Gulag. When the peasants resisted, by killing and eating their livestock, the brigades of the righteous, the idealistic builders of socialism for whom the end justified the means, however horrid, redoubled their efforts. Deportations multiplied and, despite a meagre harvest, the authorities took their arbitrarily prescribed quota of grain, without regard for what was left over. The result was the "terror famine" of 1932-3 which claimed perhaps as many as ten million lives (estimates vary between six and eleven million), "one of the greatest criminal acts of the century",<sup>1</sup> made even more despicable by the fact that, even at its height, the Soviet Union sold grain abroad to finance its crash industrialisation program. It brought complete victory to the Party in the countryside and shattered, with one obscene blow, the immemorial life of peasant Russia. It was also, sadly, kept largely secret from the outside world.

I was familiar with the famine, with its barbaric train rides and stark inhumanity, from Viktor Kravchenko's powerful *Chose Freedom* (1946), a book dismissed in much of the West as the work of a traitor, having bought a copy in England which I had visited as a university student in summer 1947, the sunniest English summer, I was told, for a century or so. (As an aside, it's worth recording that when I was quizzed, after my escape in 1949, by the Viennese CIA as to why I left Czechoslovakia, I responded with the title of Kravchenko's book. The expression—a mixture of wonder, puzzlement and derision—on the face of the CIA

1. Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991*. The Free Press, 1994, 199

agent, himself an earlier refugee from Czechoslovakia, was something to behold. It was only much later that I began to understand his reaction to my unduly optimistic naïveté.) But Sergei gave the famine an immediacy and vividness which only a first-hand account can conjure, as he spoke about his childhood with an uncanny detachment as if he were describing something which happened not to him but someone else, a friend perhaps or someone he only knew from hearsay. One morning strangers came to their house and put down in a book everything that was in it, including the pots and pans, and took the whole lot to the kolkhoz. He saw his father for the last time as he was being shoved, together with hordes of shrieking men and women, into cattle cars. I don't remember what happened to his mother; perhaps she, too, ended up in the frozen north, or simply died from grief and despair. Sergei became an orphan of collectivisation, one of the army of *bezprizorny*, the homeless children forced to subsist as scavengers in Stalin's Russia, wandering from village to village, begging and foraging for food, speaking the special jargon of the wild waifs. He talked of mass hunger in the countryside, of people eating anything they could lay their hands on, cats, dogs, mice, wild birds, grass, tree bark and even horse manure which sometimes had undigested grains in it, of villages full of dying men and women, children with bellies bloated by hunger, people not walking or talking because they had no energy, no poor, no rich, only an army of beggars. He himself had been issued with a *volskyi propust* (wolf's pass) which banned him from coming within so many versts of any town. I don't know how he survived until the war, but I recall clearly what came next. He was rounded up by the local German-employed militia, together with other villagers, one morning during the "first winter of the war", and whisked away to Germany in an unheated, locked box car. On arrival the dead were piled into trucks and taken away, while the living became *Ostarbeiter*, working from squalid camps, underfed and despised by the local Germans. Not once did he see the inside of a cinema, a pub or any other place of entertainment while the Nazis ruled—all such distractions were strictly prohibited for the disdained "workers from the east", as was all association with German women. I have no idea how he had muddled through after 1945, or how he contrived to avoid forced repatriation to the Ukraine (a point I discuss later). But I shall never forget his peasant's assessment of Soviet communism, vastly superior in its succinctness to anything that has come from the pen of the most informed western sovietologists. It went like this:

Lenin skripochku igrayet,

Stalin dujet trubaka.  
Vsyu Rosssyu projebalit  
dva Sovietski duraka.

The best translation I can come up with goes as follows:

Lenin plays the violin,  
Stalin blows the horn.  
Fucked up by two Soviet dimwits,  
Russia lies forlorn.

Nikolay was the opposite of Sergei. A well-educated Russian, related to the plane designer Alexander Yakovlev, the architect of the various YAK aircraft which were the mainstay of the Soviet air force during the war, he was as taciturn as Sergei was loquacious, his face as taut as Sergei's was reposed, and he never smiled. Hard as I try to call him to mind, all I can remember is his high forehead and his eyes—lifeless, cold and steely like Arnold Schwarzenegger's in his *Terminator* films. Not that his physique was anything like that of the herculean Arnie; he was slightly built, and much shorter than the Viennese money machine. And he drank—I swear I've never seen anyone drink to such excess, before or since. Every second Saturday he would come back from Manjimup well primed, his bag full of grog, and disappear into his hut from whence he would emerge, totally spent, just in time for the Monday morning whistle. Occasionally the routine varied. Instead of spending the whole weekend out of sight, he would suddenly appear in his doorway, a half-empty bottle in his hand, and stagger from hut to hut, shouting obscenities in his incongruously cultured Russian. One weekend he ran amok with an axe—a regulation four-and-a-half pounder, the standard issue for all treefellers—brandishing the bloody thing in a terrifying display of uncontrolled aggression. We locked ourselves in our huts and prayed for a miracle. I'd like to believe that I don't frighten easily, but on that Sunday morning I was numb with fear—a couple of blows with the axe would have shattered my door, and I would have been a goner. But after a while the din stopped, and when we ventured out we saw Nikolay sprawled on the ground. His face was grotesquely contorted, and a trickle of saliva oozed from the corner of his mouth.

I can't remember when I caught the first glimpse of Nikolay's secret sorrow. It might have been one of those boozy Saturday afternoons, as he sat on the doorstep of his hut, next but one to mine, neither quite sober nor yet quite sodden, and I had

rambled over to say a few friendly words. Nikolay, it transpired, hated the *Amerikantsy* as much as he detested the communists. They were responsible for despatching to a certain death of untold numbers of Russian prisoners of war who had survived the horror of German POW camps. In April and May 1945 over one million of these wretches had fallen into Allied (mainly American) hands and were sent back to Russia, in many cases against their will. Nikolay was quite guarded that afternoon, but became more relaxed as time went by. One day—it may have been just after the Korean war had started and the camp was abuzz with talk of another world war and how we all would go home once the Americans had belted the daylight out of the Russians—he began, haltingly at first, to talk about the events in a camp near Munich where a group of Russian ex-POWs, due for imminent repatriation, had barricaded themselves in their block. The Americans fired tear gas into the hut, broke down the door and began to drag out the desperate men one by one, pulling or carrying them towards the cattle wagons which were to take them towards their doom. Some still in the hut tried to disembowel themselves with broken glass or to cut their throats or wrists. There were belts and ropes hanging from the rafters from which dangled the bodies of the men who had hanged themselves; and blood, rivers of blood, was everywhere. “*Bylo uzhasno, bylo strashno*”, repeated Nikolay, becoming visibly distressed; “it was horrible, it was awful”. The soldiers, he went on, cut down the dangling bodies, but some were already dead, while those still alive begged to be shot rather than sent to a certain death. Some of the wounded fought desperately as the Americans tried to patch them up and had to be bashed into unconsciousness; it was the only way they could be doctored up and stretchered to the trucks. Many came to before they could be locked up in the trucks and tried to run away, reopening their wounds and staining the snow with their blood but were grabbed, beaten again and tossed inside. I remember asking Nikolay if any succeeded escaping. His reply, after a long silence, was: “Yes, some did and hid with German families.”

A few weeks later Nikolay brought up the subject again. The men in the accursed camp were *Vlasovci*, followers of the ex-Red Army General Andrei Vlasov who had the bad luck to be captured in the summer of 1942. Vlasov had been briefly a household name in Czechoslovakia, because it was his troops—mainly former Russian prisoners of war who chose to fight Stalinism, even if it meant throwing in their lot with Hitler—who had saved Prague from certain destruction in May 1945. On 5 May, the war all but over, the Czechs, as always careful not to overdo their patriotism, took to the streets, proclaimed the restoration of

Czechoslovakia and gained control of almost the whole of Prague. But the celebrations became shortlived when Prague was unexpectedly reoccupied by nearby SS units: Germany might be beaten, but it was the duty of the SS to fight to the last man. General Patton's army was some 80 km away, near Plzen, but could not lend a helping hand—Czechoslovakia, as the country was soon to discover, had been handed on a plate to the Russians at the Yalta conference, together with Poland and the rest of eastern Europe. (In a secret provision of the Yalta Treaty the western Allies also agreed to repatriate all Soviet citizens in their hands, regardless of whether they were POWs, *Ostarbeiter*, *Hiwis*—men and women who had volunteered for work in Germany—and even genuine refugees.) So the Czechs appealed to the Vlasov men who were then bivouacked south-west of Prague and about to surrender to the Americans. The Vlasovites obliged and, in a brief engagement, helped the Czechs to liberate Prague a second time. Fearing a massacre—by then the citizens of Prague were having doubts about their collaborations with the “enemy”—Vlasov’s “army of the damned” headed back for the American lines. Not all made it: some were caught by the partisans and shot on the spot, while others were captured by Red Army patrols. Most of those who surrendered to the Americans were handed over to the Russians and either executed or sent to the Gulag. The Red Army entered Prague on 9 May, one day after V-Day, and became overnight the city’s official saviour: Moscow was eager to eradicate from the historical record all traces of an anti-Soviet Russian army and to anoint its own troops as the sole liberators of central Europe. “The Germans were shoved out of Prague from an unexpected direction” wrote Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago*. “Did all Czechs realise later which Russians had saved their city? Our history is similarly distorted; we claim that Prague was saved by Soviet armies, even though they couldn’t have gotten there in time”.<sup>2</sup>

It was Solzhenitsyn who initially reminded me of Nikolay, Vlasov and all that human misery caused by Yalta which has since been explored in a vast body of academic literature, memoirs and biographies, among them Nicholas Bethell’s *The Last Secret* (1974), *The Victims of Yalta* (1977) by Nicolai Tolstoy, a direct descendant of one of the Peter the Great’s ministers, Count Peter Tolstoy, and Mark Elliott’s *The Pawns of Yalta* (1982) which explores the topic from the American angle. The Vlasov who emerges from these works is an enigma. His career until his capture in 1942 was an epitome of Sovietism. A peasant by birth, he was prevented

2. Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Collins/Fontana, 1974, p. 259

by the 1917 revolution from completing his studies in an orthodox seminary but had nevertheless fought with distinction in the Civil War and became one of the new “Red Commanders”. He joined the Party in 1930, a year or two before his father had been “dekulakized”. One of the heroes of the battle for Moscow in 1941, he was personally chosen by Stalin to save a Russian army which had been trapped by the Germans in the Volkhov swamps as it tried to break the blockade of Leningrad, and was flown into the raging hell in March 1942. He immediately concluded that only a breakthrough to the east could save his soldiers but Stalin ordered him to stay put and fight to the bitter end. Vlasov’s men were left without food or supplies of any kind; we “had cut off the hoofs of dead and rotting horses”, said one survivor, “and boiled the scrapings and eaten them”.<sup>3</sup> Stalin’s intransigence cost him ten divisions—and Vlasov himself, who was captured in July 1942. Leningrad, too, was left to die in the noose.

Vlasov had thus lived through the worst excesses of the Soviet system—the cold-blooded savagery of collectivisation, the paranoia of the army purges, and the ineptness with which Stalin and some of his generals had conducted the initial stages of the war—and when a group of high-ranking German officers approached him to head a Russian National Committee—an embryonic government-in-exile—he agreed. Referred to sometimes as the Russian de Gaulle, presumably because of the physical similarities between the two men, Vlasov was never more than a nominal head of the various anti-Soviet groupings formed in Germany (such as the Tartars and the Cossacks), because Hitler would not have a Slavic *Untermensch* as an ally. His movement remained militarily insignificant until the end of 1944 when he was allowed to recruit and organise a Russian Liberation Army (*Russkaya Osvoboditel'naya Armiya*, or ROA). By then it had become irreparably tainted by its collaboration with the Nazis, even though Vlasov and many others who fought Stalin found little comfort in the black logic of Nazi racial determinism which relegated them, as Slavs, to the lowest rungs of humanity, just ahead of the Jews; in fact, as Martin Malia put it in his *The Soviet Tragedy* (1994), the “movement was anti-Soviet without being pro-Nazi”.<sup>4</sup> His aim throughout 1945 was to surrender to the advancing western Allies and join them in the coming clash with the Red Army—the Vlasov men who liberated Prague, the reader may recall, were about to give themselves up to the Americans when they answered the Czech call for help. Vlasov

3. Solzhenitsyn, 252

4. Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy*, 287

himself was captured by the Russians in somewhat mysterious circumstances, while technically a prisoner of the Americans—"he was not returned so much as commandeered by a special Soviet unit while in American custody".<sup>5</sup> says Elliott—and was hanged with nine other high-ranking "traitors" in August 1946.

For all its military ineffectiveness, the Vlasov movement amounted to the largest military defection in history. If all the auxiliary formations (such as the Russian Todt Labour Battalions which built much of the Atlantic Wall) and fighting units are included, around one million Russians served in German ranks during the war. Most were former POWs who joined to escape the unspeakable wretchedness of their incarceration, but many were also driven by a desire to avenge the grievances they, and their families, had suffered under communism. During the first eight months of the war, because of Russia's military unpreparedness compounded by Stalin's self-defeating "no retreat" orders, the Germans captured perhaps as many as four million Red Army soldiers; for the entire war, the figure was approximately 5.75 million, or every fourth Russian under arms. Their treatment ranks among the worst barbarities of a war abounding with them; by the time it had finished, some 3.7 million perished from systematic destruction and neglect, institutional or otherwise. A single example, a survivor's description of a POW camp near Minsk, says it all:

Outside the city there was a camp for Russian prisoners, soldiers and civilians. Or rather, it was not a camp. It was a great expanse of open plain surrounded by electrified wire and machine-gun towers. There lived (not for very long) 60,000 Russians. They were unhoused and virtually unfed; the winter of 1941-2 came on... Within a few months the 60,000 had been reduced to a more manageable 11,000.<sup>6</sup>

But brutality was not all the Russian POWs had to contend with. Disowned by their own country, they became non-persons; the USSR, wrote Solzhenitsyn, "did not recognize its own soldiers of the day before".<sup>7</sup> Soviet men and women were expected to commit suicide rather than give themselves up. Anyone who surrendered or fell even temporarily behind enemy lines, like Shukhov in Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, became instantly a traitor. There were no exceptions. When Stalin's son Yakov was captured early in the war, the

5. Mark R. Elliott, *The Pawns of Yalta*. University of Illinois Press, 1982, 85

6. Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Victims of Yalta*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1977, 36

7. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 219

Germans sought to exchange him for one of their own bigwigs in Russian hands but Stalin refused, confiding in Marshal Zhukov that “Yakov will prefer any kind of death to betrayal.” The Marshal was deeply moved, Tolstoy tells us; “he was not to know whose was the betrayal”.<sup>8</sup>

I am certain that Nikolay would have told me much of what I've just related, had it ever occurred to me to ask him. But I was too young then, too self-absorbed, and had not lived through anything even vaguely resembling his own ordeals. Besides, what questions could I have asked, and would he have answered truthfully? Did he desert? Where and when was he captured? How did he elude repatriation? But there is one thing of which I am certain: he was a Vlasovite, and his account of the blood-curdling scenes which took place in January 1946 in that bleak camp near Munich was correct in nearly all details. That camp was Dachau, the scene of untold atrocities only a few months earlier, and Nikolay's description of what happened there matches closely those of former POWs as well as an official report about the disturbance by the US political adviser in Germany, one Robert Murphy, which I found in Tolstoy's *The Victims of Yalta*.<sup>9</sup> Although this does not prove that he was in Dachau, he clearly knew Vlasovites who had escaped the Soviet dragnet—which leads me to believe that he was one of them, given the absolute secrecy with which the repatriation of the Vlasov men had been conducted. I can only guess how he contrived to become one of the so-called non-returnees, Soviet nationals who simply vanished into the countryside just before or after V-Day, or have successfully posed as former residents of the Baltic countries or eastern Poland, areas seized by the Russians in 1939 and 1940. (The western Allies did not recognise these annexations and refused to use force to repatriate anyone who could convince them that he hailed from these territories.) Securing a new identity was also a common ploy, and if I were a gambling man I'd give you any odds on Nikolay having done just that. Forgery was the mainstay of what was left of the German (and Austrian) economy after the war, as I can happily attest: it cost me 300 Austrian shillings, about a fortnight's average salary if I am not mistaken, to buy an Austrian ID card which got me legally from Vienna (like Berlin smack in the middle of the Russian Zone, and similarly divided between the occupying powers) to Linz in the American Zone. It was all quite simple. Outside the building harbouring the CIA office where all refugees from Czechoslovakia had to present themselves for “debriefing”, a neatly

8. Tolstoy, *The Victims of Yalta*, 398

9. Tolstoy, 355

attired man speaking Czech with a Viennese accent (pre-1918 Vienna had more Czechs than any Czech city except Prague) came up to you and gave you a slip of paper with an address, and your ID card was ready in a couple of days, provided you had the cash. I dearly wish I had kept mine. It was a condition of the transaction that you agreed to return the document—by post, would you believe—and I was silly, or perhaps honest enough to comply.

Was Nikolay a traitor? The concise *Oxford English Dictionary* defines treason as “violation by a subject of allegiance to Sovereign or to chief authority of State (e.g. by plotting Sovereign’s death or engaging in war against him)”. This is quite straightforward until one poses the inevitable question: what happens if the plotters succeed in chopping off the sovereign’s head or win the war against him? In the real world where might is right, the test of treason is purely pragmatic: only the losers go down in history as traitors, while the victors become the political superstars of the day. But things are not always that simple. Treason may become exculpable, indeed laudable, when the would-be traitors are motivated by high ideals or a “just” cause, even if, as happened to poor von Stauffenberg when he tried to blow up Hitler, they do not succeed. Thus Lenin and the Bolsheviks were not traitors because their cause (overthrowing the tyrannical Tsarskoe regime and improving the lot of common people) was just and honourable. But would one not have to concede the same point to Vlasov and his men who took up arms against a regime infinitely more oppressive than the one overthrown by the Bolsheviks in 1917? The answer, I think, is both yes and no. His cause, his aims were just, but it was his misfortune that in order to try to achieve them he had to ally himself with Hitler, the evil incarnate. “I lost”, Vlasov is supposed to have said just before his capture, “so I remain a traitor until such time as in Russia freedom comes before bogus Soviet patriotism”.<sup>10</sup>

And Nikolay? I see him as a man twice betrayed, the first time, like millions of Russian POWs, by Stalin’s appalling blunders, diplomatic and military, which led to their captivity and subsequent abandonment by their own country, the second time by the Americans who despatched thousands upon thousands of his comrades to Stalin’s tender mercies. I imagine that it was the second betrayal which rankled more because it was so incomprehensible. Today, knowing what Nikolay could not have known in 1950, we are inclined to think of the Vlasovites’ return—a denial of the traditional right of asylum—as a tragedy born out of political expediency, “fully

10. Tolstoy, 292

comparable to the Nazi treatment of Jews".<sup>11</sup> The decision was taken partly because of the sheer numbers (between 3 and 5 million) of Soviet citizens in western Allies' hands, but mainly because of the overriding need to preserve the east-west alliance on which, it was believed, hinged the whole world's future. So the West tried not to upset Stalin, while Stalin was bent on laying his hands on every single Russian who had strayed behind the confines of his empire. The use of force was made morally justifiable by propaganda, skilfully fuelled by Moscow, against the unfortunate Russians who, through hatred of Stalinism or sheer instinct of survival, had compromised themselves by collaborating with the Germans. The public remained ignorant of the real issues involved; those who tried to enlighten it, like Gorge Orwell, were shouted down. Outside the top brass no one had the slightest inkling of what had been agreed at Yalta—and neither had, needless to say, my friend Nikolay. Not that it would have made any difference, for his hatred of the Americans bordered on the irrational.

But the Americans were not the only transgressors; if anything, their interpretation of the repatriation provisions of the Yalta Treaty was more liberal than that of the British. In May 1945 some 25,000 strong Cossack units (including women and children), formed much earlier than the Vlasov contingents, surrendered to the British in the Drau valley in southern Austria, just outside the town of Lienz. (They had fled their Don and Kuban homeland before the advancing Red Army in 1943, taking their families with them.) The story of their forcible return is so spine-chilling that even the events at Dachau pale into insignificance. Kept secret (except for a few accounts by survivors, dismissed as gross exaggerations) until the opening of relevant British archives in 1972, it tells of British trickery and deceit—such as initial hints that they might be invited to join the British army as some sort of foreign legion, or a later invitation to their officers to a "conference" with senior British officers which never took place; instead, the men, who had given up their side arms, were driven to a wire enclosure and handed over to the Russians. The rest, it was thought, would be reluctant to resist. In fact, a battle ensued in which the frenzied crowd, led in prayer by Orthodox priests, resisted for most of the day a battalion of British troops who had to resort to clubbing, fixed bayonet charges and machine-gunning of those who had tried to escape. There were many suicides; several men shot their wives and their children before shooting themselves; women flung their small children into the raging Drau

11. Tolstoy, *The Victims of Yalta*, 22

and, having crossed themselves, followed them into the abyss. In the end flame-throwers had to be used to force people into cattle trucks. It was too much for even the most hardened veterans who discovered that it was one thing to kill a kraut in the heat of battle but something altogether different to use force against children and women; they could not cope with terrified and hysterical people who threw themselves on their knees before them, begging to be bayoneted or shot to death rather than being sent back to “a land where a man has no rights”.<sup>12</sup> Some soldiers vomited, while others broke down completely. “It was the only time”, wrote a British officer, “I ever saw an Argyll and Sutherland Highlander in tears”.<sup>13</sup>

What makes all this even more dispiriting is that much of it was unnecessary. While the Cossack men had indeed fought against the Russians, their wives and children had not, and the British were not bound by Yalta to repatriate them. The same applies to many older Cossacks, Tsarist fugitives who fled their country in 1919 but were nevertheless handed over by the British in an “excess of pro-Soviet zeal”.<sup>14</sup> Although decisive evidence is missing because the crucial documents had been destroyed in the late 1960s as not being “worthy of permanent preservation”, everything points to the conclusion that the “end of the Cossack nation”, as Tolstoy calls it, had been authorised by the very man who only ten months later was to bitterly attack Stalin in his famous Iron Curtain Speech, namely Winston Churchill. But that, as they say, is another story.

\* \* \*

Both Sergei and Nikolay are probably dead. Sergei was in his late twenties when I knew him, Nikolay in his early thirties, and their health must have suffered as a result of their wartime and post-war privations; Nikolay, in addition, seemed to lack the will to live. The place called Shannon River is also no more: the mill was sold to private interests in 1961 and closed seven years later. All that remains are some stunted fruit-trees where once the family quarters had stood, a few files in the state archives, various bits and pieces in the local rag, the *West Australian*, and a feature article in the *Western Mail* written not long after I had sneaked away—without completing my contract, I must confess—which waxes lyrical about the end of the “age-long silence” in the heart of the karri country: “Where once the scream of the

12. Nicholas Bethell, *The Last Secret: Forcible to Russia 1944-7*, Andre Deutch, 1974, x

13. Bethell, 145

14. Bethell, xii

black cockatoos was the harshest note, and where the south winds sougled softly in the treetops with none to heed, is now heard the day-long droning of circular saws as they sunder mighty logs".<sup>15</sup> Sergei, Nikolay and the dozens of others who had once lived (but not loved) there are mentioned in a footnote: "The mill was mainly built by New Australians".

15. 23 August 1951, 61.

Bruce Dawe

## The Drunkard

And since it seemed to him Death had been drinking  
and made the sort of error drunks can make  
when, of a host of people He'd been thinking  
of taking, He had made a gross mistake  
and chosen her (on any simple reckoning  
the least deserving of His cruel regard),  
the most beautiful, the one whom Life seemed beckoning  
to better times after having it so hard  
—since by His drunken folly He had taken  
the wife and let the second-rate husband live,  
it was hardly, then, surprising that the shaken  
survivor found it difficult to give  
respect to obligations that might bind him  
when of the cause of breathing being bereft  
(and with her ghostly presence to remind him  
how much, indeed, was gone, how little left).

## Cycle

When we were kids everything was home  
for as far as our legs took us. The unending  
backyard with the three mango trees and the weather  
discoloured fence was limitless. Forget  
the mozzies and the sandflies, on those almost brutal  
afternoons we played there until the onset of night.

When we progressed to scooters and then bikes, night  
was what brought us, reluctantly, back to the lights of home  
and the hot kitchen, the family meal and the brutal  
Radio News—battles and Wartime with their unending  
promise of Victory and their gloomy stories. We'd forget  
the world outside the wireless. We'd forget the weather,

crouched down to listen. Our parents were quiet. The weather  
of life-and-death was taught 7 o'clock at night  
and every night. I still cannot forget  
the switch to attention at that News fanfare. Home  
was the refuge alright, but we learned the unending  
threat of News voices. News was always to be brutal.

Adolescents, in the '50s, our motorbikes made brutal  
assertions in the suburb. Out in all weather  
(rain stung like needles) we discovered the unending  
power of movement. We burned up the night  
in that decade post-war, when to stay home  
was a sneer. The momentum was up, don't forget.

Later, even cars and their comforts failed to forget  
the two-stroke, the four-stroke decade. We learned to be brutal  
then, but we also were moving so far out of home  
that we vanished and were as predictable as weather  
and we did return, sticky with hunger and the night  
winked and was tolerant and it all seemed unending

though timing was all. The cycle is not really unending,  
merely sufficient to prove that we need not forget  
all the paces, the classes, the voices. Night  
confines as much as it opens. Peace can be brutal  
and war can be as unremarkable as weather.  
Weather, though, was what first brought us home

and it is strange, and perhaps brutal, to think of home  
as having this unending lien on the weather,  
especially as we forget so many things in a good night.

## **ASAL 99 SYDNEY**

### **— CALL FOR PAPERS —**

ASAL 99 will be organized by the University of Western Sydney  
Macarthur and Friends Rozelle Writers Centre, Sydney 2-6 July 1999.

Papers may be offered on any appropriate subject and will be especially  
welcomed on the conference theme—Australian Writing and the City.  
Abstracts of approximately 200 words for papers of 20 minutes duration  
should be posted to the conveners by 11 December 1998.

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email: f.degroen@uws.edu.au

## Zenography

What pursuing couldn't give him  
Pursuit could, and we've not heard the end  
Of it yet: his nightmares of being gunned down  
In some rain-riddled alley by a thin-  
Fingered chick he knew nothing of  
Or of what he owed her, or why  
Her bullets were etched with his initial  
Or what she might want with his sleep,  
Which until recently he'd considered  
A sprawling privacy, a one-member club  
Where if anyone did the shooting, he did;  
And the target: he could see it round as sunrise  
But always missed it anyhow, on purpose.

ii

News at 11 has it he hopscotched  
Train tracks from here to halfway  
Across the Middle East to get away  
From her, stopdrop and rolling  
To check his latitude and longevity  
With a sundial, sixshooter and sextant,  
Losing shekels and sleep on his to and fro,  
Exiting [www.checkpoint.com](http://www.checkpoint.com), slaloming traffic  
And jumping through Windows six stories up,  
Caught between de la mode modems and tarot cards,  
Not knowing if he was a zilch or a zeus,  
Zapped like sevice in a microwave  
Or the lightning thrower himself, a hired gun  
Ending upside-downstairs macrofiched  
In the liquid asset slipstream from zero to one.

iii

He took abacus and shibboleth as call-signs,  
Instepping the hypocaust with a matchbook  
And prayer-wheel, a nuclear family of worry dolls  
Under the mattress, later than ever before  
For the glockenspiel performance in the square,  
Madhattering snipers and viral diskettes  
Through green-light districts of cybersirens and pixels:  
Zeno, agent double-aught-zero, leftover and underdone  
Like a limpet with a vertigo complexion,  
And neither twisters of cotton candy on her panties  
Nor the revenant in her squadcar database  
Could stop him, the gilded, the rampant,  
The braille-whiz, followed follower  
Falling headlong shortwindsocked, idempotent,  
At a sub-90-minute virtual marathon pace.

iv

Impossible to quarantine or tranquilize,  
The numinous numismatic philatelist  
Disguised himself as a postal employee  
For God, scrambling messages to deepfry  
Over the telephone wire, sunny-side uptown  
And layover-easy, Valletta, Tel Aviv, Ljubljana,  
Playing hot-potatochip and cloven footsie  
With women of all races, colours and greeds,  
His name decreed an international holiday  
Appearing in every thou shalt not want ad  
In the greater tri-state area, until he contracted  
A wicked case of the herephrasis epidemic,  
Saying what others said in fewer but zingier words  
And signing his letters in lipstick and egg yolks:  
Insincerely yours, The Overheard.

v

He never got to the promised landlubber resort,  
The delinquent delineated to something short  
Of just over midway to Mayville, and she never  
Caught up to him either, the acrostics stayed crosswired,  
Her Chamber of Commerce vetoed by commodified lust  
On the half-shell, and the age of the image went on  
Into the next, a genealogy of buffer religions  
With saints the *pari passus* of the Asymptote,  
But he knew he'd be back in an argonaut clipper  
In the year of the *offcentre* arrow, arrogant  
As a footnote fax, or a diver asskicking the bends  
Or an ex-lover dumped for his passport and innocence,  
Almost arriving, no less than the means to his end.

## Scribblings, Scraps and Drafts: Genetic Criticism and Contemporary Australian Literature

As we looked at those early manuscripts and jottings, we constantly discovered that behind the published novels was a mass of material so good it must have been very hard for the authors to abandon it. Observing their process of artistic selection and control made us re-read the published works in a new way—it was as if we were learning to read them all over again, with a greater sense of awe.<sup>1</sup>

Manuscripts, rough drafts, planning sketches, journal notes and other debris left after the publication of a work of literature reside in libraries or in bottom drawers awaiting some future use. In Australia, libraries and tertiary institutions have continued to build their collections of literary manuscripts with the encouragement, at least until recently, of various forms of public funding. The Register of Australian Archives and Manuscripts compiled by the National Library of Australia lists over 20,000 manuscripts and archival collections of all kinds.

Traditionally, literary manuscripts have been valued as artefacts of their authors and as the raw material for biographers and editors.<sup>2</sup> In this article I will discuss a more recent interest in manuscripts to show the processes of textual development of a work and as a field of investigation for the literary critic. To illustrate some of the issues which arise, particularly when studying contemporary works, I will also present a brief sequence of drafts of a short story by Robert Drewe, "Shark Logic", which was published in his 1983 collection, *The Bodysurfers*.<sup>3</sup>

1. Kate Grenville and Sue Woolfe, *Making Stories*. St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin Australia Pty Ltd, 1993.
2. Klaus Hurlbusch, "Conceptualisations for Procedures of Authorship", *Studies in Bibliography* 1988 (41): 100-135.
3. Robert Drewe, *The Bodysurfers*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan Publishers Australia, 1983.

Readers, critics and psychologists have long speculated on the creative minds and working habits of authors, and as early as 1800 Mme de Staël anticipated the possibility of tracing the processes of production through a study of manuscripts:

One could compose a treatise on style based on the manuscripts of great writers; each correction supposes a mass of ideas which decide the mind often without our knowing it, and it would be most interesting to indicate them all, and to analyse them as well.<sup>4</sup>

It is only comparatively recently, however, that manuscripts have been regarded in their own right as texts which may provide insight into the way writing develops, from early drafts to the published work. In Australia, Kate Grenville and Sue Woolfe's *Making Stories*, from which my opening quote is taken, briefly examines manuscript fragments from the work of ten contemporary Australian authors, backed up by interviews, and taps into the public fascination with the creative processes of writers. Jon Stallworthy's well-known studies of Yeats' poems are earlier examples of the study of the creative process through textual development, but Stallworthy's sources extend well beyond the drafts of the poems to journals, correspondence and the comments of friends and contemporary critics. The result is a wide-reaching biographical, textual and historical reading.<sup>5</sup>

## Genetic Criticism

A systematic approach to the study of drafts, manuscripts and other texts which precede the final literary work has developed since the early 1970s, mainly in France, under the name of "*critique génétique*". Its techniques and methodologies are varied but have in common a concern with the textual development of literary works for the critical insights they may reveal. French genetic critics have tended to concentrate on works written in the period 1850-1920, and in particular those of revered national writers such as Hugo and Flaubert, Zola, Proust, and Valéry.<sup>6</sup>

4. Germaine de Staël, *De la littérature* Edited by P. Van Tieghem. Geneva: Droz., 1959 (Originally published 1800). Discussed by Frank Paul Bowman, in "Genetic Criticism", *Poetics Today* 11(3): 1990 Fall: 627-646.
5. Jon Stallworthy, *Vision and Revision in Yeats's Last Poems*. London: Oxford University Press, 1969.
6. The history and theoretical antecedents of genetic criticism are traced in detail by Frank Paul Bowman in "Genetic Criticism", *Poetics Today* 11(3) 1990 (Fall).

Louis Hay, an early and influential exponent of genetic study, describes the approach as simple in principle: it is understanding a work of literature by its textual history and not only by its realisation.<sup>7</sup> The content and the structure of manuscripts—marginal notations, additions and deletions, cross-references, drawings and symbols—comprise a field of investigation from which to increase the significations and multiply possible readings of the final text. The method of genetic criticism is extensive empirical work on an author's manuscripts, and from that work,

...it is possible to reconstruct the process of creation and thought through a fully conceived sequence of analytic operations: deciphering, establishing the chronology, seizing the writing as it moves.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Text and avant-texte***

"Text" and "work" are terms which are central to any discussion of textual criticism and analysis. In traditional narratology, the text is the words on the page, and the ultimate interest of textual study has been the published or final version of the text. Post-structuralist theory has offered a wider understanding of "text", as a process which has its existence only in language. Roland Barthes defined text as a dynamic process of continuing construction by the (ideal) reader, an *activity* of associations, contiguities and cross-references, from within and outside the particular text. Barthes distinguished the text from its concrete form as "the work", the artefact "occupying a portion of book-space (in a library, for example)". The work is determined by its history, and is filiated to an author who is regarded as the legal and moral parent and owner.<sup>9</sup>

Barthe's redefinition of text as activity provides a basis for the genetic approach to the formative texts of a literary work as process, rather than product. The area of study for the genetic critic is the *avant-texte*, "the chain of writing operations that have preceded the appearance of the text proper."<sup>10</sup> In some cases the documents which embody the *avant-texte*, or "pre-text", of a work will be

7. Louis Hay, "Critiques du manuscrit", in *La Naissance du Texte* ed. Louis Hay, (Librairie Jose Corti, published with the assistance of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique 1989) 9-20.
8. Louis Hay, "Does 'Text' Exist?" *Studies in Bibliography* 41 (1988) 68.
9. Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text", Reproduced in *Textual Strategies* ed. J. V. Harari. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979, 73-81.
10. Pierre-Marc de Biasi, "What is a Literary Draft? Toward a Functional Typology of Genetic Documentation". *Yale French Studies* 89 (1996), 26-58.

relatively easy to discover, and will be all the manuscripts and other drafts which remain in existence. In other cases a process of selection may be necessary from a mass of manuscripts, typed drafts, journal notes, planning sketches, research notes and other documents.

The selection of the pre-text documents is a critical task which will be determined to some extent by the aims of the critical project. A structural analysis of a novel, for example, may require a more limited selection of manuscripts than a close textual study of the development of a poem.<sup>11</sup> Pierre-Marc De Biasi, a critic and editor of Flaubert, has proposed a model which aims to reduce the subjectivity of the selection of the pre-text documents. His "typology of genetic documentation" divides the *avant-texte* into developmental stages, from the earliest provisional collection of sources by the author, through the phases which de Biasi broadly labels exploration, preparation, structuring, research, composition and post-composition. In this model, the process of the pre-text will end at the fair copy sent by the author to the printer for the publication of the first edition.<sup>12</sup> De Biasi takes a teleological approach to the critical usefulness of the pre-text, and tests the relevance of manuscripts by reference to the finished text, arguing that as a critical resource the study of a work's manuscripts offers "a sure method of checking and enriching hypotheses constructed on the basis of the text".<sup>13</sup>

There has been some commentary on the nature, aims and results of genetic criticism. Critics have questioned the assumption that genetic criticism may serve as a hermeneutic procedure at all, because of the very indeterminacy of the creative process evidenced in an author's manuscripts. It is argued that if the *avant-texte* by its nature is open and indeterminate and exists only in the movement of its transformation and development, then any effect that pre-text material may have had on the determinate and closed "final" text, will be, at best, speculation.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, Christine Froula adopts a post-modernist view of all texts as unstable and indeterminate, and argues that the very openness of any text allows its reception as a process rather than as an artefact. The genetic criticism project reflects developments of human knowledge from psychology to quantum physics.

11. Bowman, 634.

12. Biasi, 39.

13. Biasi, 56.

14. Laurent Jenny, "Genetic Criticism and its Myths". *Yale French Studies* 89 (1996).

Genetic criticism—which is not by any means limited to the open aesthetic forms of modernity but deployed upon cultural artefacts of every kind, period and place—participates in the modern awareness of the potentialities that the aesthetic “event” ... may disclose, displace, defer, or temporarily bring into play as it unfolds through time.<sup>15</sup>

### **Practical problems: the documents of the pre-text**

The example given at the end of this article will indicate some of the practical limits to genetic criticism, particularly in the study of contemporary works. The manuscripts of the Robert Drewe story “Shark Logic”, held in the University of Western Australia’s manuscript collection, are incomplete. The earliest draft is an autograph of only the first portion of the story. The second is an incomplete typewritten draft of the first part of the story with some lengthy handwritten additions and amendments, and the typed text reproduces much of the earlier autograph draft. There is a typewritten draft of the middle portion of the story with lengthy handwritten amendments. Two complete typewritten drafts reproduce the earlier drafts and are themselves amended by hand. A further complete draft is typewritten and has been labelled by the author as the final manuscript.

As this example illustrates, the documents of genesis of a work will rarely, if ever, be completely retrievable. More or less will have been destroyed, lost or suppressed and the gaps may not be discoverable from the existing manuscripts. In contemporary works, the use of the computer will mean that available draft material may be even more incomplete than in times when earlier writing technologies were in use. While many writers still draft early versions by hand, the computer will often reduce the number of subsequent drafts and render more opaque the process of development of successive drafts.

Finding and identifying the documents available for study in relation to a work is an early and sometimes problematic task of the genetic critic. An author’s manuscripts may reside in a library but the author (or the executors of a dead author) may hold additional manuscripts and some detective work might be required to locate material. Copyright and terms of access must be negotiated. Material in libraries and other collections may have been rearranged so that the temporal ordering of drafts is difficult. Louis Hay has pointed out that even where

15. Christine Froula, “Modernity, Drafts, Genetic Criticism: On the Virtual Lives of James Joyce’s Villanelle”. *Yale French Studies* 89 (1996) 113-129 at 115.

the available witnessing documents of the genesis of a work appear to be most complete, only a fraction of the complex creative processes of the writer may be revealed or discoverable from the manuscripts, and this presents a further limitation on the ideals of genetic criticism.<sup>16</sup> Hay's point however, is that genetic textual study does not aim to present a psychological record or analysis of the development of the mind of the writer, and its object is not merely a biographical or historical one. While speculation on the circumstances of writing or on the mind of the writer as reflected by the text may be appropriate in a biographical or psychoanalytic project, the genetic critic will aim to study the text and the pre-text in their own right, from the best textual evidence available of the development of the work.

### **Editor, Author and Genetic Critic**

The common concerns of editing and literary theory have been recognised by various commentators and will not be detailed here.<sup>17</sup> Editors have always been concerned with the author's drafts and manuscripts in order to produce the published book, and something of the textual development of the work may be made available to the reader in annotated editions or in a few instances, by fully "eclectic" editions. The scholarly debates concerning the editor's approach to the author and authorial intention are beyond the scope of this article, but a particular intersection of editorial, theoretical and genetic concerns occurs in the function and the person of the author. The recognition of the author in both editing and critical practice is illustrated by Edmund Campion's comment that genetic criticism "strives to reproduce in a critical edition all the readings that an author created for his or her work."<sup>18</sup> But it may also be that the editor and the genetic critic will approach the manuscripts of a work differently. For the editor, the text must be determinate at some point, in the sense that there is a complex, the "work", in which the openness of the text must finally be contained in order to present an edition. The genetic critic on the other hand attempts to follow the author's movement through the successive texts as they are written and the texts remain open and unstable during the writing process. Speaking as an editor,

16. Hay, "Does 'Text' Exist?" 68.

17. See for example D.C Greetham, "Textual and Literary Theory: Redrawing the Matrix". *Studies in Bibliography* 42 (1989) 1-24.

18. Edmund J. Campion, "Early Modern French Literature", in *Scholarly Editing: A Guide to Research*. D. C. Greetham. New York: The Modern Languages Association of America, 1995, 417-437.

Hans Walter Gabler argues that because the developing text, while it is under the author's hand, is unstable and indeterminate, authorial intention is a process and not a notion to be discovered or fulfilled by the editor. The editor is confronted with only the documentary evidence of the author's acts of writing, and the editor's choice of a text in a critical edition should not be characterised as the "ideal text" determined from a discovery of authorial intention. Gabler favours eclectic editions which set out the documentary evidence of the author's compositional choices for critical study, on the basis that authorial intention is a textual force to be studied.

The text in the determinate record of its instability falls to the editor therefore not for the fulfilment of its real or assumed teleology, but rather for the description and analysis of its documentary existence. It is because the record is determinate that it becomes amenable to editorial scrutiny and treatment at all. Yet underlying the text recorded are the intention-guided processes that cause its instability. The process-character of the text is thus ultimately due to the process-nature of authorial intention.<sup>19</sup>

In the context of literary theory, the author was most notoriously removed as a vital source of the text, and as a determinant of meaning, by Roland Barthes in his 1967 essay, "The Death of the Author".<sup>20</sup> Barthes diminishes the notion of the author to a metaphorical dynamic moment, as "never more than the instance writing". In a practical way, a genetic study of contemporary literature requires the critic to decide a view of the author: the author may be alive and writing, and living nearby. Should the author be approached at all in relation to the text or should the person of the author be left, as Barthes would maintain, as a historical accident which bears no relevance at all to the text? At the risk of erring on the side of pragmatism, I would argue that all evidence of the process of production may be considered, including comments of the author. For the critic to extend the pre-textual investigation to the person of the author, even by means of interviews, need not deny the structural and textual focus of the endeavour. Equally it does not imply an acceptance of authorial intention or a tumble into the intentional fallacy. It is as a source of evidence (always tested by the analyst

19. Hans Walter Gabler, "The Text as Process and the Problem of Intentionality". *Text* 3 (1987) 107-16 at 111.

20. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in *Modern Criticism and Theory* ed. David Lodge. London: Longman Group UK Ltd, 1988, 167-172.

as to reliability) particularly of organisation of documents, temporal order of drafts and completeness of the documentary material, that the author will be uniquely qualified to assist the genetic critic.

However, the writer's comments bearing on intention and interpretation should be treated with scepticism for the obvious reason that the intention may be imperfectly realised or knowingly distorted. The writer may not have seen the material which preceded the published texts for many years and may not lay claim to an authority over the material because of the fallibility of memory and the natural distance from the work which the writer feels over time. In this sense too, the author of the contemporary work is not accessible to the genetic critic, even if she lives in the next street, but is accessible only through the text itself.

Some of the fascination and the limitations of examining the pre-text documents of a contemporary Australian work will be illustrated by my example from Drewe's "Shark Logic". Handwritten drafts have been reproduced here in italics, as are handwritten amendments, and typed text is indicated by normal typeface. Interlined amendments are indicated by / and superscript, in typeface or italics as appropriate. Where a deletion is illegible, "?" is used. Draft A is an autograph of the first portion of the story. Draft B is an incomplete typewritten draft with some lengthy handwritten additions and amendments; the typed text of B reproduces much of draft A. Draft C is an incomplete typewritten draft of the middle portion of the story and has lengthy handwritten amendments. Draft D is a typewritten draft reproducing in typeface many of the hand-written amendments which appeared in draft C, and itself has handwritten amendments; draft D is the earliest available complete draft of the story. Draft E is a further complete draft of the story, typewritten and hand-amended. Draft F is typed and is labelled by the author as the final manuscript.

The finished story is deceptively simple in form, written as a first-person narrative which is revised in a later draft to the form of a "journal". The narrative gradually reveals that the narrator was a teacher who has faked his own death by drowning and has moved under a false identity to an Australian coastal town. As in many of Drewe's stories in *The Bodysurfers*, the man is in midlife and is, to say the least, in crisis. The narrator emerges as an obsessive man who records the bizarre logic of his escape in this narrative, and who covers his alienation from the world by peculiar rationalisations.

The story uses an extended metaphor of the coastline as a margin—the farthest the narrator can run, the place where he seeks peace and finds violence. It is the

boundary between the order of the land and the nameless threat of the sea, between rationality and the unconscious, and the point where the narrator is forced to face the terrors lying in his unconscious self. The narrative speaks of the protagonist's unwillingness to face the horrors that he knows lurk in the depths of the sea, and his equally powerful urge to cross the margin. As the title implies, this is also a story of logic: of the narrator's carefully planned escape, his attempt at a logical rendering of his past life and the illogicality of his explanation of his fears. In this sense the story is strongly gendered, laying bare the surface rationality of the male who has tried to run away from the instinctive and the unconscious and the terrible. The title is a paradox, as sharks are a symbol of unreason, of pure instinct, the creators of gut fears.

The narrator has travelled from the inland, where he is safe from sharks, to the coast, where he wanders constantly along the shoreline meditating on the horrors of the sea. An aquarium in the coastal town is the narrator's vicarious experience of the sea, and he views the sharks through the margin of safety glass. In the later drafts of the story, he stands with excited children watching sharks glide past, just beyond the glass. The following short extract from the story, in which the narrator describes his viewing of the sharks, will illustrate the textual development of some of these themes.

The author's revisions to the first available draft of this section of the story, draft B, refine and concentrate the metaphorical image of the sharks as the dangers beneath the surface of the consciousness of the narrator. The revisions also develop the metaphorical place of the narrator on the margin: between air and water, sea and land, obsessive control and the terrors of the unknown, fascinated by the danger of crossing over but remaining unable to do so.

In early drafts the narrator describes his visits to the sharks in a generalised way, which implies that he makes frequent visits to them; it is not until the final draft that the image is refined to describe in the past tense a particular experience of the narrator. There is an obsessive quality to the general but clinical nature of his descriptions, and to his careful listing of the types of shark in the aquarium. This is heightened further by the description of the cruelty of the shark's eyes which appear in revisions to draft C. A revision to draft B has the narrator visiting "several times" and in a revision to draft C, the sharks "endlessly circle". By draft D, the adjective "cruel" is applied repeatedly to the eyes of the sharks. Drafts B and C will be compared first, followed by drafts D and F.

The sharks at "Deepsea World" -- two grey nurses, a tiger, a hammerhead and miscellaneous / *gummy* small fry -- are better value for money ~~in my opinion~~. / *I've gone to see them several times*. Their tank is bigger, three-tiered, with numerous viewing panels. ~~You~~ / *Their* eyes can be / just a foot away from ~~yours~~ if you wish. The teeth, of course are just as close. ~~The lips~~ / *Sharks'* mouth/s is / *are* slightly open ? at all times; the individual serrations on each tooth are quite clear. As their bodies stream past the windows one can / *even* see the / *scars* and parasites on their bellies. Strangely, the sharks hold less terror ? For me when I can see them like this. It / *'s* ~~is~~ when I climb up to the top tier of the aquarium / *in the sunshine* and look down on its open, unglassed surface where the turtles rise, snorting, for air that I most fear the sharks. [B]

The sharks at "Deepsea World" -- three grey nurses, a tiger, a hammerhead and miscellaneous gummy small fry -- are better value for money. I've been to see them several times. Their tank is bigger, three-tiered, with numerous viewing panels. ~~As they endlessly circle~~ ~~±~~ their eyes ~~can be~~ ~~are~~ just a foot ~~away~~ from yours ~~if you wish~~. ~~It is not~~ ~~Without being too~~ ~~overly anthropomorphic, to point out~~ ~~I think that they are as cruel as one would~~ ~~I could~~ *imagine*. Their teeth, of course, are just as close. *I've noticed that* ~~Sharks'~~ / *keep their* mouths [are] slightly open at all ~~the~~ times; the individual serrations on ~~each tooth~~ / *the teeth* are quite clear. As their bodies stream / *serenely* past the windows one can see even see the scars and parasites on their bellies. The sharks actually hold less terror for me when I can see them like this. It's when I climb up to the top tier of the aquarium in the sunshine and look down in its open, unglassed surface where the turtles rise, snorting ~~for air~~ / that I most fear the sharks. [C]

In draft C, the author retypes the passage in draft B as revised, and further revises C by hand. The narrator's voice is sustained with the addition of the pedantic, "without being overly anthropomorphic, I think...". The "I" of the narrator is now sustained, and the tone of the description becomes more conversational. The image of the eyes of the passing sharks is sharpened by the removal of the conditional "if you wish" in the first sentence. The narrator now describes the shark's eyes as "cruel as I could imagine" with a consequent building on the suggestion of a depth of fear in the narrator that hints at suppressed hysteria. The effect is to render the

monologue more intimate, a change which is perhaps consistent with the later recasting of the story as a journal.

Drafts D and F are set out below; draft E is not shown in this example as the changes from D are not extensive. The published text is identical to draft F and shows extensive re-arrangement of the order of the text and lengthy additions to the available preceding draft, which indicates at least one missing draft of this section. The aquarium is described more carefully as a place, part of the extended metaphor which has been contrived in the other parts of the story; the walls seep, the margins are leaking (between air and water, conscious and unconscious, fears which may be vicariously experienced and the total immersion in the unknowable), and the place has a somewhat sinister atmosphere. The author places the narrator now among children, perhaps to hint at the childish nature of his reactions. The language is again made more personal; the narrator's experience of the sharks is related as direct experience of an occasion, told in the past tense, and then moves to the present continuous tense in which the narrator seems to momentarily lose himself in meditation.

The sharks at "Deepsea World" -- three grey nurses, a tiger, a hammerhead and miscellaneous gummy small fry -- are better value for money. I've been to see them several times of a Sunday afternoon when time *especially* drags for me. Their tank is bigger, three-tiered, with viewing panels at all levels. As they circle ceaselessly their eyes are just a foot from yours. Not savage eyes exactly; *there's no jungle glint*. more cruel, heartless. Without being overly anthropomorphic, I think they are the cruelest eyes I could imagine. Their teeth, of course, are just as ~~close~~ <sup>near</sup>. I've noticed that sharks keep their mouths slightly open all the time; the individual serrations on the teeth are quite

There were hints of seepage in the grey cement walls. The aquarium's windows streamed with condensation. Through misty glass children strained to peer beyond the scarred tuna and mundane yellowtail passing by, seeking the scary stuff. Then a shark appeared, grey, sleek, straight out of a TV documentary, a horror movie, and drifted past my face so slowly I saw its scars and the tiny parasites on its belly, even the opening and closing of its gills stirring the faint weed shreds on its skin.

The children oohed and aahed and jerked back from the windows. The shark cruised on, and five or six other sharks of all sizes gradually materialised from the murk and

clear. As their bodies stream serenely past the windows you can see even the scars and tiny parasites on their bellies. Actually the sharks hold less terror for me when I can see them like this. It's when I climb up to the top tier of the aquarium in the sunshine and look down on its open, unglazed surface where the turtles rise, snorting air, that I most fear the sharks. [D]

drifted after it.

You notice the teeth first, then the eyes. Sharks keep their mouths slightly open all the time, their lips drawn back from those irregular, sharply serrated teeth. The eyes, cold as a machine's, are also kept open. They are not savage eyes exactly - there is no jungle glint - they are just cold. I don't wish to be anthropomorphic, but I think they are the cruellest eyes in Nature.

I am drawn <sup>back</sup> to the aquarium regularly. I view the sharks through the windows and then I climb to the roof of the aquarium, in the sunshine, and look down on its open surface where the turtles rise, snorting. [F]

As the story proceeds to the end of this section, the metaphor of the glass margin is extended by the image of the still surface of the water in the aquarium. Now the water surface has only its surface tension as a boundary. This boundary is able to be disturbed and the narrator is thrilled and frightened by the thought of breaking through. This passage is in a sense the climax of the aquarium metaphor—it is a “concentrated” image of margin between air and water, the known world and the unknown terror of the sea, between logic and instinct.

The example given here is too brief to show the development of the story as a whole, but the movements in the pre-text reveal a consistent building of the narrator's voice and character, a progression towards simplified and refined images and a sharpening of the metaphorical significance of the story.

Genetic criticism focuses on “the author's workshop” and tries to articulate some of the processes of production from the best evidence remaining after the publication of a work. The approach is flexible in its methodology and opens up an understanding of the text as a process extending beyond the limitations of the printed page. The author returns, if not to the workshop, at least as a creative force to the text, and as a presence beyond the text.

## Pleading Guilty

*'Does the Jury find the defendant, Mr. Thomas Derwent, Guilty or Not Guilty?'*

\* \* \*

Perhaps I should write you a letter, Tom. There are some things I'd like to tell you. Some things I'd like to explain. I'd like to tell you about that party, Tom. How I only went because James was going (*your* nephew, I know, though he once told me he's never been close to you, that he's always been Julia's darling). How I've never really enjoyed parties, especially the sort I imagined Julia would hold. A table full of her sophisticated arty friends, your clever legal buddies. Everybody quick, everybody beautiful, everybody with so many interesting things to say. And all so removed from my little world—wealthy, cosmopolitan, childless.

I could imagine them (long before I even met them) wondering what on earth Julia saw in me—wondering what had attracted her to such an ordinary, such a suburban, such a plain little thing. I saw you wondering that weekend in Oberon, could tell by the slightly quizzical (oh but gentle, gentle) way you asked me if I was enjoying my weekend, if I wasn't too bored (with you immersed in paperwork and Julia so busy organising her next weeks schedule) ... and yes, perhaps I would have been bored or at least a little lost if James hadn't called in.

And don't think, Tom, don't think please, that I've never wondered what it was that attracted Julia to me. In the last few months I've thought about it endlessly, endlessly, but I'm no closer to knowing, no closer to understanding, no closer to the truth.

\* \* \*

Here's how they meet:

Sandra's at the Leagues Club, the kids are with their father, she's done aerobics, been for a swim. She's peeling off her new speedos, black, modest, a towel draped carefully around her body. There's this woman standing naked at the locker beside hers. Sandra doesn't look at her, averts her eyes, but the woman starts talking. 'You were in that class weren't you?' she asks, bending slightly to pull something out of a sports bag, 'that aerobics class, I mean.' Sandra smiles cautiously and nods, meeting the woman's eyes and trying not to glance at her jiggling breasts. 'That new instructor's fucking hopeless, isn't she? I was thinking I might complain, say something to the coordinator, but it'd be good to have someone back me up? What did you think?'

'I... well really I'm not... this is my first time, you see...'

The woman shrugs and pulls a T-shirt over her head. 'Are you in a hurry? Come down and have a coffee with me. Or how about a drink?'

'I don't know, I really should be...'

The woman pulls on Levis, starts buttoning her fly. She's wearing no underpants. 'Oh come on. Ten minutes. It'll do you good, help you cool down.'

Sandra wants to go home, have a hot chocolate, watch telly, go to bed early; wants to luxuriate in the lack of noise, the lack of mess, the absence of demands, but there is something appealing about this woman and her boldness. Something appealing too, about the prospect of adult company.

'Okay. But I have to shower first.'

'Excellent. I'll go find a table. In the members bar.'

Sandra tiptoes across the slippery floor towards the showers, towel still wound firmly around her torso. The woman looks up from tying her laces. 'By the way,' she calls, 'my name's Julia. Julia Derwent.'

'I'm Sandra Grey.'

'See you soon then Sandy.'

\* \* \*

*'Mrs... er... Ms. Grey. You have stated to the prosecution that you saw Mr. Derwent slam Julia Derwent against the hall mirror. That he then held the broken champagne bottle against her throat and told her that she had humiliated him for the last time, that she*

*deserved to die, that she should say her prayers. Yet my client, Mr. Derwent, says that you were not in the room at any time during the argument, that you and Dr James Macfarlane were indeed upstairs during this time, a fact which is corroborated by statements given by two others who witnessed you leave the lounge room.'*

*'I put it to you, Ms. Grey, that you were not in the lounge room, that you neither saw nor heard Mr. Derwent attack his wife. I put it to you Ms. Grey, that at the time of the alleged assault you were in fact engaged in certain ah ... let us call them sexual activities. Activities that would render you entirely oblivious to any event taking place downstairs.'*

*'I put it to you Ms. Grey, that you are lying.'*

*'Are you lying Ms. Grey? Are you lying?'*

\* \* \*

If I wrote to you, Tom, I'd tell you how I don't see anyone much anymore. How I've stopped going to aerobics, stopped seeing James, haven't spoken to Julia. And maybe I'd tell you that I don't go out much at all. Oh, I do what I have to, all the mother things: school, sport—drop them off, pick them up. Twice a month I do the shopping. The girls walk up for milk and bread. Nobody's suffering.

\* \* \*

*'Are you aware, Ms. Grey, that Perjury is a serious offence?'*

\* \* \*

They meet for a drink, then, every week after aerobics. They go out together. They get to know one another.

*'What are you doing this weekend?'*

*'Nothing special. Phillip's got the girls....'*

*'I'm going to Lawson's on Saturday, why don't you come?'*

*'Oh, I don't know, I've got a few things to do.'*

*'Come on, it'll be fun. And there's a good movie on at Double Bay. We can go out after for dinner.'*

*'I'll think about it.'*

'Come on, Sandy. You need a bit of fun.'

'Really, I've....'

'Come on.'

\* \* \*

*'Dr Macfarlane, you are Thomas Derwent's nephew?'*

*'Yes sir, he's my mother's brother.'*

*'Dr. Macfarlane, previous to this, er ... this attack you allegedly witnessed, had you ever seen your Uncle inflict any physical injury on your Aunt?'*

*'Well I've never actually seen, but my parents and Julia....'*

*'But you've never actually seen?'*

*'No. No I haven't....'*

*'No more questions Your Honour.'*

\* \* \*

'You know you're wasted, Sandy, don't you? Absolutely wasted.'

'But I like being with the girls. I enjoy being a mother.'

'Jesus, Sandy. You've got so much potential. That bastard's really fucked up your life hasn't he?'

'Honestly, I don't feel like that.'

'Sandy, listen. I know people, you know, in TV, in the arts, I'm sure I could find something... something that would suit you.'

\* \* \*

Some people are bad, I remember her telling me. It was just after your arrest, Tom, Julia was staying at my place, it was late, we were drinking. 'Some people are bad,' she said, 'some people are evil. Evil. And they attract people like you and me. The good ones. It's inescapable, irresistible, she said, some kind of magnetic force. Fate. Karma. Whatever you want to call it. They feed off people like us. They need us. We

liberate them, define them. Maybe we even create them. Just look at the Jews,' she said, 'look at the Jews and the Nazis. The Serbs and the Croats. And us, look at us: you and Phillip, me and Tom.'

*Just look at us.*

\* \* \*

'I'm going out to Oberon this weekend, we've got a little shack out there. We just take a bit of food, a lot of wine, go for walks, read, chop wood. Why don't you come?'

'I've got the girls this weekend. Phillip has to work. But thanks anyway. Maybe next time....'

'Bring the girls,' says Julia, 'They'll be fine. Plenty of things to do outside. Tom's nephew is meant to be calling in on Saturday. He's a bit of a dull stick, a country GP. I need you there to occupy him. And you've never met Tom, have you? Oh you have to meet Tom. You'll never understand me if you don't know Tom. Oh, don't worry, he's always charming when there's company.'

'That's it, don't argue. You're coming.'

\* \* \*

Perhaps I'd tell you how I can't face myself, Tom. How, if I lived alone I'd take down all the mirrors, or cover them up. How, instead, because of the girls, I can only try to keep clear of them: walk through the lounge to avoid the hall mirror, leave the wardrobe doors wide open—never mind the spilling out clothes, squint slightly whenever I have to go into the bathroom. Out of focus, blurred a little, distorted, I don't have to see myself. I don't have to face myself.

\* \* \*

'We're having a dinner on the 19th, Sandy—it's our 21st anniversary. Though I don't know that that's anything to celebrate. You'll come won't you? Everyone'll be there .... Yes, James is coming. I thought you two hit it off—he's asked after you a couple of times. You'll come won't you? I need you to be there, Sandy. Say you'll come.'

\* \* \*

*'Ms. Regent, you have stated to the police that you and Mr Athol Blair were the last guests to leave the Derwent's anniversary dinner, and that you left their Elizabeth Bay home between 1.45 and 1.50 am the following morning. You have also stated to the police that the defendant, Mr Thomas Derwent, arrived at your home in Potts Point at around 2.20 on that same morning, in a distressed and dishevelled state claiming that his wife had attacked him, had indeed threatened to cut his throat with a broken champagne bottle.'*

*'That's correct.'*

\* \* \*

Sandra sits between James and a woman who owns a Paddington gallery. The woman (willowy, elegant) has barely acknowledged Sandra's existence apart from a limp offering of her hand on introduction. 'Regent. Carla Regent. And you're one of Julie's gym friends? I'd heard you'd taken up exercise, Jules. Can't quite imagine you doing aerobics, all that puff and jiggle.' But James is here, next to her, keeping her wine glass full, gently quizzing her on this and that, drawing her out, making her feel warm, feel wanted.

The main course over, it's time for speeches. Tom toasts his wife, the guests; he is charming, witty, the perfect host. Then Julia stands. She is flushed and glittering, more than a little drunk, perhaps. She empties her champagne glass in one mouthful. Sandra leans closer to James, their shoulders touch, his hand, large, warm, finds hers under the table. Julia speaks. 'This seems an opportunity not to be missed,' her voice is low, breathy, intense, 'not to be missed, with all of you here, all of our dear, dear friends.' She pours herself more champagne, finishes the bottle, her glass overflows. 'Yes, all our dear friends—mine, Tom's—to announce that as far as I'm concerned, twenty one years of marriage is twenty one years too many.'

She smiles then: smiles at Tom (all her teeth showing, triumphant, exultant); smiles at her guests (sweetly, oh so graciously); smiles and smiles and sips her champagne.

\* \* \*

I had no idea, how could I, that she was capable of such a declaration. And it seemed to me then that you took it well, considered it a joke, did your best to make your

guests comfortable, encouraged them to stay. I had no idea (I hardly know you, Tom) that your laughter was forced, your geniality strained. That you (that anybody) had taken Julia seriously.

Believe me, Tom, I had no idea.

\* \* \*

*'You have also stated, Ms Regent, that Mr Derwent was extremely concerned that in resisting his wife's attack, he may have caused her some physical harm, and that he felt he should return in order to ensure that she received any necessary medical assistance.'*

*'Yes.'*

*'You dissuaded Mr Derwent from this course did you not Ms Regent? Could you explain to the court the reasons for your advice.'*

*'I told Thomas not to worry about Julia, that James and um ... Julia's friend were still there, that they'd look after her.'*

*'And Mr Derwent was not aware that this couple were still in the house?'*

*'No, he was surprised, he thought they'd left. He had no idea they were still there.'*

*'And how was it that you were so sure that they were still there Ms. Regent?'*

*'I'd noticed when I left. They were in an upstairs bedroom. The light was on and they'd left the window open. You could hear them ... you could see them from the street.'*

\* \* \*

Tom sits talking to the Paddington Art gallery woman; Julia is chatting—she giggles, fizzes, flirts—to a curly-headed barrister. She darts glances at Tom occasionally, but he seems engrossed in the other woman's conversation. Sandra and James sit together on the lounge sipping coffee.

'Tired?' he asks.

'No. Not really.'

'Come upstairs,' he says.

He is unbuttoning her shirt (his fingers gentle, warm, practised) when the front door closes. The last guests. The party's over. Later, Sandra thinks she hears voices (raised? angry? she can't tell, doesn't really care), but neither of them hear the sound of smashing glass (the hall mirror? a champagne bottle?), the crunch of fist against flesh, the final slam of the door or even Julia's sobbing.

\* \* \*

*'...must remember that as a Queen's Counsel Mr. Derwent is a highly respected member of the legal community and that he has many years of diligent public service behind him, and many years ahead.'*

*'You have only two rather suspect accounts of the alleged attack on which to base...'*

\* \* \*

She came to us that night Tom (we were there, remember, who else would she turn to?) she came to us that night and I bathed her bruised skin, James sutured the broken flesh on her shoulder. Eight stitches, Tom. I watched him, his clever hands, the tiny stitching: finer, neater, than my grandmother's fancywork. I made her coffee, Tom, laced it with whiskey, watched her grit her teeth.

\* \* \*

'I'll ring the police,' says James when the last dressing is applied.

Julia sits on the lounge, head back, eyes closed.

'Wait.' Her voice is slow, harsh, painful. 'Just wait a while.'

Sandra wanders around the room, collects a few wine glasses, an ashtray, sighs and puts them all down again. James is sitting beside Julia, one arm running along the back of the lounge, his eyes on her, urgent, intense. 'You have to report him, Jules,' he says, his fingers (clever, gentle, warm) pushing hair away from her face. 'This can't go on.'

Julia opens her eyes, 'He tried to kill me, James.' She reaches for his hand, grips it. 'He smashed that champagne bottle, said he'd cut my throat, said I'd humiliated him for the last time. He pushed me hard up against the hall mirror, said I deserved to die, told me to say my prayers ....' Her breath catches, James strokes her hand gently

with his thumb. 'That's when you came down, wasn't it, James? That's when you came down and pulled him off me.' She is squeezing James' hand now. 'You heard him say it,' she says, 'You saw him hold the glass to my throat, didn't you, James? If it wasn't for you I'd be dead. Dead.'

'And Sandra'—for the first time she seeks out her friend—'Sandra, you were there too, weren't you? With James. You saw him, too, didn't you? You heard him, didn't you?'

\* \* \*

*'Does the Jury find the defendant Guilty or Not Guilty?'*

\* \* \*

She came to me Tom—she asked for my help. She was my friend, Tom, and I had to support her.

She'd have done the same for me. I know she would.

\* \* \*

*'Guilty, Your Honour. '*

*Guilty.*

## ellipsis/unlocated body

*one*

after some weeks  
the travelling body shakes  
itself loose and begins  
to inhabit another dimension  
of space      mirrors are  
scarce here and the discovery  
that your body has shifted  
slightly to one side      settling  
just to the edges of its normal  
outline      renews a shrewd  
distrust for borders

*two*

vienna squats in a great  
ring flaring outwards;  
each Bezirk the numbered reminder  
of a fortress city      here 1920s  
apartment blocks lumber  
in elephantine grey  
clumsy and reassuring      the streets  
of the 14th Bezirk  
jigsaw together slowly under  
a summer heat airless and stifling  
with traffic      there is no  
intense blue harbour to soften  
the afternoon graciously  
and the ellipsis of that fact  
is fostered by crazed 3d dreams  
from an earlier dimension  
teeming with menageries  
real and imagined

*three*

in the fading autumn sunlight  
you sit sedately in the Hofgarten  
among rows of green latticed  
chairs with the elderly viennese  
in hats it is so  
disciplined yet you feel  
haltingly a path through  
this realness; linguistic tendrils  
creeping into the gaps of  
thought compounded by  
the pressing of unfamiliar lips

*four*

another city looms large;  
strident words etched onto  
its venerable buildings your body  
by now strangely marked  
and blemished with this fleeting  
procession through geography  
and ontology the breath  
already fossilising in  
resurrected lungs

## The Constant Future

The wind is the constancy of the future  
coldly demonstrated to us,  
this air, that hits and stings me  
is not the same air as it was  
a moment ago,  
it keeps coming at you,  
so steady, you imagine  
it is some kind of force,  
or that you can imagine it.

But you can't.  
The thing keeps flowing,  
yes, like a river if you like,  
and the streaming stuff  
that you feel hammer against you  
is already gone  
and some new thing,  
some new air or style  
is already upon you, and gone  
and upon you, and gone.  
The future is like the wind  
so constant, such a force,  
invisibly it bends you,  
I can feel it defining me,  
as a wind tunnel  
will shape a car  
it keeps presenting itself,  
like a good full forward,  
with nothing to show for it  
but this tattered opponent,  
head down, eyes streaming,  
driving on, in defeat.

## Portrait of Lynette

*Le Net.*

She holds her in the palm of her hand, between bent fingers that hint at a fist. Her brow forms elderly lines and her mouth makes the hesitant shapes of someone striving for memory.

*Le Net.*

She says the name slowly, stretching it out like elastic until it snaps from her mouth complete. She reels it back in, eats and digests, then spits it back into the air. She says it until her voice is cigarette hoarse and no longer co-operates with her overworked lips.

Her fingers collapse and the picture turns in on itself.

Nothing.

\* \* \*

My mother keeps a photograph on her bedside table. The edges are torn from her constant touch and the paper buckled by too many tears infecting its surface. Sometimes she complains about it falling apart. When I ask her why she doesn't frame it she says its because she likes to keep it close, it helps her to remember. But a frame will keep it intact, I tell her. Frames, borders, definitions. Sometimes you just can't prevent things from falling apart, she replies.

My mother doesn't fall apart. She allows her face only subtle movement, and is proud of the way she swallows her lot. I don't let things affect me she says, to anyone that will listen. My father calls her the rock because of her steadfast nature. I guess that makes me the water. I crash and ebb alternatively, and my father thinks I will wear her down one day.

The photograph has turned orange with time. It is as though the day progressed from the moment of processing but couldn't get past the sunset. My mother is surprised it hasn't turned the colour of night. A better symbol, she once said.

The girl in the photograph seems pleased by the infinite gold. Her skin has turned the colour of autumn, and the hair that falls to her shoulders in short waterfalls, the colour of light. Her smile splits her face in two. Such a happy child, my mother says, without a hint of joy. Even her eyes are smiling.

My mother never smiles. Sometimes the corners of her mouth twitch, as though being pulled by hooks and invisible string, but that is all. My father says this is because she blames herself for all that has happened. I think she blames me instead. I seem to be an expert at stealing smiles away and replacing them with uncomfortable silences and hunted looks. I'm sure my father would agree with that.

The girl in the photograph leans across the bonnet of an old holden. Her dress is covered with embroidered strawberries that have been burnt to ochre by the change of light, and in her hands she holds the ends of a string of daisies that hang from her neck. She reminds me of a snake handler, collared by pythons.

When I was a child my father would take me to the zoo. He would tell me stories about killing snakes on his parent's farm and finding babies in their bellies. I didn't like these stories. Years later, I confused them for my own truth and thought it was me he had split like a pea shell. Whenever he came to see me I would hide behind the bed so he couldn't find me, or I would scream for the nurses. I imagined him elbow deep in my abdomen, searching for snakes. My mother told me not to be silly, that my mind was just playing tricks on me, but later, when she spoke to the doctor, she was crying. My father didn't visit me again after that.

My father doesn't share my mother's obsession for the photograph. In the weeks after I returned home from hospital she would force it into his line of vision with an unusual display of vehemence. Look at this! she would say, her lips collapsing in on themselves. I don't understand how anyone...My father would push it away so it couldn't be seen, then press the heels of his palms into his eyes. The great thunder of his temper would dissolve into dark clouds and the words; neither do I, would rise from the mass of his hunched body as soft as smoke.

Sometimes I question my mother's rock resemblance. I think if I dissected her, carved a line from breasts to abdomen and peeled back her skin, like peeling fruit, I would find instead of compacted earth and a few fine veins of quartz, a cavity filled with a lifetime of words tangled together like worms. Every now and then, late at night when she is alone, I hear her struggling against them. I listen to the staccato of her sobs fracturing the silence and try to find meaning in the impatient, incomplete sentences that escape from between her defiant lips. Sometimes there is nothing but a jumble of mucous thick noise, other times, a circle of syllables sticking like a record, followed by a hoarse question: What did I do wrong?

My mother doesn't show my father the photograph anymore. She prefers, instead to punish herself.

On the back of the photograph are the words, 'Lynette York,' written in black ink. The letters are fat and irregular and vaguely familiar, and appear to be falling down the page. Some of the letters are written in capitals. It isn't my mother's writing. My mother's handwriting is small and tight. Her letters are as uniform as her facial expressions. When she wrote her answers to the hospital's questions on the day I was admitted, her writing was so small and indecipherable that the doctor asked her to do it again. My father took the pen from my mother's unsteady hand and answered instead.

My father's handwriting is shaky and unsure, except on that day, at the hospital when it was punctuated by bold loops and defiant full stops. That day, it reminded me of the way a child writes when trying to do the best it can. I imagine he was writing with his nose close to the paper and the tip of his tongue edging out from the side of his mouth. Hissing, perhaps.

I don't write at all. I tried to write in hospital but I couldn't make the letters go in a line. I piled them, one on top of another, until their meaning dissolved into a tangle of ink on the page. Sometimes I ruined the paper before I had any words on the end of my pen. Perhaps there were just too many words that needed to be said.

Perhaps I have contracted my mother's word worm disease. Sometimes I think I feel them, these blanketed sentences, expanding in my stomach and eating up the space behind my sternum, but my mouth and tongue refuse them. I can no longer make the sounds they require.

I don't remember if I wrote before I went into hospital. I don't remember anything, except what my mother has told me, and you can't always trust your mother.

\* \* \*

She holds her in the palm of her hand, the sound of her past face, in her ears. Her voice halts its steady beat of syllables and heaves. The question she has asked so many times fills up the room she stands in, and pushes against the child she has trapped in the curls of her fingers. Nothing. She is met my deaf walls and the unforgiving smile in her hand. Her hot words, so imploring, are swallowed again, unanswered.

## Tangled Cottons

Angela's house on the hill has a pulse; it breathes and the sides move in and out as it lurches and racks and shifts in the heat. At night it squats with eyes shut, haunches drawn up, and a crusty scab on the side gapes loose weatherboards.

When I'm there I am a knot in the wood; their grain flows around me, unperturbed. I can sit as still as an Eccles cake and Angela and Paula thrash and eddy to each side in their trail of sand, dog hairs, plasticine, fluff, and the stringy bits off the sides of bananas.

Lately Angela has lost her smoothness, the simple easy way she had. She's starting to thicken and coarsen up, she's losing her looks

little chooks,

scattered in the dirt.

Paula swelters in her pink party icing, blue and white socks and shiny black shoes, the kind little girls have to have. She stalks a chook, it squats on the baked earth and Paula leans and stuffs it under one arm. The black feathered anus bulges and spits out a poop.

Paula's hair is frayed calico. She carries eggs in the loose swag of her skirt. Angela calls her "my honey girl" and lets her stay up late.

\* \* \*

I didn't want to come but I didn't know how to say no. When I arrive they're playing Snap. Angela glances up and Paula's hand scatters the cards.

"Snap!" she yells, her round plum of a chin casting a shadow down her neck.

"Hi, Paulie."

"Bring me a present?"

She runs across to pull on the hem of my skirt. Her feet leave the floor and I feel the stitching crack.

"No! Off please!"

"Aw!" She whines like her mother.

"Hey, sweet honey-girl, off to bed."

Paula wails and her knuckles gouge her eyes, waaa! like a baby.

"Off and brush your teeth. I'll come and say night night."

I drink lime coola cordial and read the paper while Angela cuddles her daughter to sleep. I hear muffled giggling until at last she emerges from the bedroom rubbing her eyes, swallowing back a yawn. She pushes hair off her face, thin brown strands that I long to cut.

She fills the kettle and plonks down in a chair near me.

"So how are you?"

"Tired," I snap and rattle the paper shut. She isn't expecting this and she glances up at me, eyebrows loose with disappointment.

"Oh. Why didn't you say?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter," I retreat, backing down. I sigh. "It's not that bad."

"Okay." She pours me a tea and unfolds the end of the biscuit packet, and all the time I wonder if she remembers she invited me over for a meal.

\* \* \*

At home I shower, powder my armpits and put on a long blue seersucker dress. I comb the wet hair behind my ears and lean on the balcony rail with a bottle of Kahlua, bare ankles swinging. My tears are short and white and leave wax scars down my face.

\* \* \*

Angela's upper lip droops in the middle, like a pea.

Angela, I think, straighten your lip.

Angela, I think, cut your hair.

Angela, I think, discipline Paula.

Eat real food.

Wash your dishes.

Fix your house make your bed emptyyourbin take CONTROL OF YOUR LIFE, ANGELA! I think.

I tell her nothing of this.

\* \* \*

I meet a man with balls soft as camembert and a way of lying back on my mattress that reminds me of sponges on the ocean floor. He tells me he loves the contours of my thighs, and my crooked smile, and he tells me he's going to write a song about me.

Before he arrives I pull down my pants and lift up my skirt and rub myself across the sheet, marking my scent like a cat.

\* \* \*

Angela's down the back trying to burn old papers in a forty four gallon drum. Long dry grasses sway and drown in the hot breeze and only when I scream out from the back step does she turn and wave and stop stuffing papers into the flames. The loose fingers of an overhanging gum tree smoulder and burn.

\* \* \*

He brings his guitar and strums while we are joined like dogs. He sings in a frail, high voice that I don't recognise, and I can't help it, I start to laugh.

My body squeezes him out in little railroad pushes until we are separate and I collapse on the sheet, giggling in shame.

I'm not sure it will ever be the same as it was.

\* \* \*

Angela and Paula. The same person at two different ages. Angela has freckles on her boobs and all down her forearms. Paula's are scattered across her cheeks.

\* \* \*

I have a dinner party. My new man, and Angela and Paula.

Paula is allowed to wear a dress-up velvet gown hitched in with a green ribbon at the waist. She combs her hair and paints my lipstick on her coat-hanger lips.

Angela turns up in jeans and feet like grubby arrows in sandal straps.

I mix her a rum and coke and she tells me she is miserable, she shouldn't have come, why doesn't she go home before she puts on a damper. The image of Angela, wearing a huge loaf of soft damper like a beret, sticks in my mind.

I tell her to shut up and stop feeling sorry for herself and her shock implodes

like a sucked in plastic bag. With lips the colour of withered plums she sips her drink.

My man arrives with two bottles of wine and a two litre plastic bottle of Club Lemon. He kisses me with his teeth locked together in a grin so I know he is nervous too.

My sponge diver, my minstrel, my fool.

Paula waits behind the armchair, back straight, a party smile on that red-painted mouth and her round blue eyes on the Club Lemon.

Over the meal I drink too much wine and slump into a chair as they drink coffee.

They are talking.

Of course they are.

Paula's asleep somewhere.

"I've never met a man who's in touch with his emotions," Angela says, warming her cup between her hands.

"I consider myself to be very emotional."

Angela leans forward and her freckles gape.

"Then you are one of a kind."

He certainly is.

"You know I write songs?"

"Really? Do you sing?" He doesn't even flinch.

"Yes, I sing every day. I find it clears the emotional channels."

I blush.

"Could you sing now?"

"I don't have my guitar. I'm better with that."

"No," I say too loudly. "You don't need the guitar. Just sing."

So he sings my song, his voice high and childish, and whether it's the effect of candlelight on his face or the wine I've drunk, I don't know, but his voice strokes and soothes and enters the cold lonely places in me. I am deeply ashamed that I laughed.

Angela doesn't laugh. Her knees lean together and her hair hangs into her eyes. Angela is lost.

Or I am lost.

He helps her carry Paula to his car and gives her a ride home.  
Cheerio.

Tarah.

Buried deep in me is the seed of betrayal, tough and sharp as a plum stone in the throat. I put on my long blue dress and open the cask I was keeping just in case. I carry my glass and dance to the silence with long swishy steps that twirl round the table and the armchair, circuit the room. I come across Paula's dress scrunched up behind a chair and swoop it into the crook of my arm. A train, a trail, a tiara, a veil. I continue my dance, my silence, my grief.

I sit down, crying. The velvet dress slips and I crush it in my hands and wipe my eyes and snot and long strings of saliva.

Then he is back. The door opens and he kneels on the carpet in front of me, holds my shaking hands and pulls gently at the crushed gown.

"What is it? What's wrong?" he croons and I know he hasn't been with her, he came back for me. I allow him to pull me out of the chair to bed and eventually my crying stops.

He rubs my back, my hips, my wonky buttocks, then spurts onto my belly like a fish and spreads the wet with the heel of his hand.

\* \* \*

Once you've left, you can't come back. The wound closes behind you. I clamp my thighs together, sit curled in the chair in my bedroom. I will keep my scent locked inside me, bottled up, stoppered. Safe.

He calls and knocks but I am a shell and I am locked tight.

\* \* \*

*Me I am a shell  
fractured in the rinse of sea  
to bleach high and dry.*

\* \* \*

Angela and Paula make me a cup of tea.

"I'll put the sugar in!" shouts Paula, and stirs until the ringing spoon reverberates round my dried, empty skull.

"Want a bikkie?" Angela holds out the packet. Her nails are dirty; she's been

planting spinach.

“Have you seen—?” we both ask at the same time. I take my cup from Paula and she sidles inside the bridge of my arm, lending me her warmth, her weight, her simple affection. Her hair brushes my cheek.

“So he hasn’t called.” Angela scowls at the table. “And I thought he was different.”

“It was me. I didn’t want—”

She’s shocked and her eyes open wide to reveal the deep weak blue.

“Why? What did you do that for?”

I drink the tea and don’t answer.

Later, before I leave, Angela’s out squirting the hose round at her seedlings. Paula’s up the tree, cracking and snapping twigs. The rusty gutter leans towards her, sprouting weeds.

Angela. My skin feels ingrained with the same grubby dust as the garden bed, my tongue coated with ashes.

Angela, I think.

Paula, I think.

“Paula!” I call and she looks down, grinning, and throws a twig which tangles in my hair.

“Take care,” I say. I glance at the house. The window frames flake dead skin, and the glass is blank. They hold no reflection. Everything is absorbed.

At the gate I feel the other stick hit the middle of my back.

## Domestic, Don't Call the Cops

There was a cruising row outside the house last night  
and in the morning two pickets missing from the fence.  
How naked the surrogate front garden feels,  
a comfort world pricked with a question,  
a smile of plant seclusion suddenly tooth-gapped  
by fiercer wakings, prompter rips of love and hate  
than possess those who stirred and swore it late.

What passion tears palings from the crossboards,  
one to each combatant, if so fair?  
The improvised clubs by dawn apologetic,  
a wooden contrivance converted to an armoury,  
await restoration by a few hammer blows.  
No blood, no splinters, no corpse in the grass  
just a yelp and a whimper, let the midnight pass.

## Ebor Falls

Ebor falls are just wet enough to fall,  
the ground I stand on, the northern aspect  
buffed hard as nails by wind and sun is dry enough to burn.

The understorey's opposite  
and this pattern reverses  
twisting a helix down the nervy creek

microclimates merging in succession.  
The numerous fires and absence  
of harbours clotted Cook's log,

followers scouted the coast  
crossed the bars in favourable conditions  
and rowed their longboats to the head of navigation.

Improbable settlements  
germinated next to the startling rapids,  
it's always a metamorphic future.

Like new world trappers, the cedar cutters  
infiltrated into history's tight interior,  
used the dry season and lookouts

to track down *Toona Ciliata*,  
one of only three deciduous trees  
that loomed from the canopy like fire.

They hauled out nearly every one  
bullock teams likely following original tracks.  
Prospectors followed rushing every creek

for golden moments, discovering on the way  
all the alluvial flats useful for foreign farming  
happy churning out rich butter.

A steady existence and decline  
introducing the feral and clearing the native  
vegetation. And the black ways?

Mouldy on the archives of the tongue.  
The drover's sitting in his saddle inside  
a driz-a-bone, engrossed in a paperback.

The car noses in amongst the young beef cattle  
meandering the last of the long paddock.  
Waiting hopelessly for birds,

the die-back trees are sticks bleached  
way past meeting the challenge  
of the worst drought in faded memory.

## Consultation

The surgeon draws an S in ink across my sole exactly where his incision will be. As my toes curl, he says the mass is flush against bone and enmeshed in nerves, but firm. This pleases him. How long has it been there, he wonders, probing again, eyes closed. His hand moves with precision down my instep, where tendons stretch, and curves back over the arch. Like a magician, he distracts me with his gestures and voice, making nothing of something, moving fast, all patter and smiles. He shifts position and my foot is bathed in harsh light that flows past his shoulder, accenting the high gloss given off by my skin over the growth.

## Beyond Grande Ronde

At the edge of town  
a white horse wearing half  
its winter coat shivers  
in the sundown wind.  
The field behind her,  
stippled with shadow,  
shows precisely where  
autumn has lost its grip.

We drive west as high  
clouds flush and blanch,  
choked on the light  
thickening before our eyes.  
Fifty now, I have learned  
it is the promise  
of storm, not storm itself  
that stills faith in the last  
hour, the last breath.

We slow when the road  
narrows, dips and rises  
into a purer air.  
The swollen river curves  
away only to return just  
as the road curves away.  
Singing together, we climb  
into the Coast Range  
and a deeper darkness  
just over the summit.

## Nest Builders

Is it deck or pergola they're building  
at the small house on the corner block  
the young bloke with tattooed arms  
biceps like patterned aubergines  
his mates all shorts and carpenter's aprons  
while a slim bride, six foot of grace,  
helps out with paint and beer.

From where I stand beyond the fence  
it's easy to think they're nailing  
the layered planks of their dreams  
and envy them their certain skills  
the confident ease with which they move  
and hammer a usable elegance  
four-square into place.

And when I see her the next summer  
sunning, deck-chaired with a book  
by the potted palm and plaster statue  
I'll know it's too neat to think  
she's reading words like these that seek  
to celebrate their young making  
along such unstable, flimsy lines.

No, she'll be reading paperback  
romance and wondering if the life  
they're striving to perfect  
the sturdy home in years to come  
when desire is habit and the kids have left  
will prove when all is said and done  
all too little or all too much.

## Tim Winton's *The Riders*: A Construction of Difference

Ever since the Independent Member for Oxley's maiden speech in the Australian Parliament on 10 September 1996, Australia has been engaged in—obsessed by, one could almost say—an orgy of self-definition. Attacking “the privileges Aboriginals enjoy over other Australians”, she declared that “I and most other Australians want our immigration policy radically reviewed and that of multiculturalism abolished. I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians.” She also said that “the government should cease all foreign aid immediately”.<sup>1</sup>

Widely interpreted as racist, ignorant, ill-informed and plain bigoted, Pauline Hanson's comments on Australian society have attracted not only a measure of grass-roots support but also ongoing media attention. The Prime Minister's apparent wishful hope that the whole thing would just fade away through lack of public interest proved illusory, as discussion of her, and her misleadingly named One Nation Party, multiplied. Polls taken on the first anniversary of the party's founding indicated that in her home state of Queensland support stood at 6%, though elsewhere it had sunk as low as 1%. Overall, her support averaged 3% across the nation<sup>2</sup>. But at the Queensland State Election in June the party averaged 23% of the vote, and the election of eleven of its members caused the Liberal/National coalition narrowly to lose power to Labour. With a federal election looming, uncertainty and debate over the nature of the Australian electorate and its attitudes to multiculturalism have come back to the fore.

Also prominent in the media has been the question of Aboriginal Reconciliation. Feeding into the discussion about this, of course, have been the profoundly challenging Mabo and Wik High Court decisions, both of which have

1. *Hansard* Tuesday 10 September 1996.

2. *The Weekend Australian* April 11-12, 1998, 2.

consequences not only for land tenure, but also for the nature of Australian society and its attitude to history, and for the relationship of Australian citizens of all ethnic origins towards the land they live in. The recent passing of the Prime Minister's hotly contested "Ten Point Plan" to deal with Aboriginal Land Rights has not put an end to this debate.

Relevant to Aboriginal Reconciliation has been the revelation of the full plight and extent of the forcible removal of children from their Aboriginal parents, the issue of the Stolen Generation. The Prime Minister's refusal to apologise on behalf of the Australian government for the misguided and inhumane policy of earlier governments raises questions as to the relationship between guilt (for the sins of our forebears) and responsibility (for their present-day victims) which are often discussed with considerable lack of clarity. The term "the black armband brigade" used to denigrate those with "bleeding consciences" who believe that an apology is called for, is just one example of the confused thinking characteristic of this issue, since a black armband is a symbol of mourning and sorrow, not an espousal or admission of guilt.

The moral and political questions raised by these issues and their accompanying media exposure are of long-lasting importance to Australian society, but are beyond the scope of this essay. I mention them, though, because they bring back sharply into focus something which, towards the end of the Keating government's office, had seemed to be fading from public scrutiny, if not from private thought. It had seemed then that whether it was universally accepted or not, Australia was becoming a progressively multicultural society, and that Aboriginal Reconciliation was one further—and vital—step in that direction. But the 1996 federal election replaced Labour with a Liberal-National Party Coalition Government, and a Queenslander who had been expelled from the Liberal Party won the seat of the former Governor-General and one-time Labour minister. Quite suddenly, the nature, composition and direction of Australian society came back on the agenda. Once again, national identity became open to debate.

Of course, national identity has always been open to debate. In a sense that I will argue briefly soon, national identity actually is a debate, and the current controversies regarding Hanson and the various interlocking Aboriginal issues can be seen, not as "about" what identity the nation is going to have for the next decade or so, but as a particularly volatile phase of the nation's identity *at the moment*. If this is so, what we have at present is a plural identity at odds with itself—what one might consider the norm in most societies—as distinct from the multicultural ideal of a

plural identity which is internally harmonious.

National identity as debate is conducted or constituted across a number of forums, the mass media being just one among many which include the arts, popular music and film, sport, clothing and eating habits, architecture, and public policy. It is a debate which has both internal and external dimensions, in the sense that it involves a series of negotiations between factors which are considered internal, and hence integral to, a particular construction of identity, and factors which are considered external and hence foreign to it. If one thinks of a national identity as being constituted in a Lacanian or a Kristevan way in terms of both an internal and an external Other—their models of subject-formation being what I propose here on a national scale—then obviously, for a post-colonial nation such as Australia, this also involves negotiation with Britain, the former colonial master.

The process of decolonialisation through which Australia went can be seen as having four broad and, to some extent, overlapping phase.<sup>3</sup> Each phase is characterised by a particular set of relationships with the dominant colonial power, and is responsible for the construction of a distinctive cultural model. Each phase can be seen as corresponding with a step in the historical processes of decolonisation and decolonialisation, and is the result of, as well as an agent in, changing material conditions<sup>4</sup>. But one must be careful not to identify the cultural models they produced as belonging only, and rigidly, within those particular historical periods. As we shall see, the process of identity formation is far from simple and uni-directional.

It is not possible—nor necessary for my argument here—to look in detail at these four phases and the cultural models they produced. Very briefly therefore, the first is one of early colonial imitation of metropolitan cultural constructions. This was followed by that phase of conscious revolt, achieving a focus in the eighteen eighties and nineties, where nationalist sentiment was accompanied by an egalitarian, anti-colonialist, anti-bourgeois, anti-authoritarian, rural or “bush” construction of national identity. I will return to this shortly.

The third phase can be described as one of protracted and increasing disengagement from the influence of colonial hegemony. Australia has been

3. I use the term decolonialisation to signify the psychological and sociological aspect of decolonisation. Long after colonies have acquired political autonomy a colonial mentality can linger, and decolonialisation refers to the process by which this dissipates.
4. For a recent discussion of these matters, see John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, especially Chapter 4, “Economies of Value”, 131-169.

involved in this for much of the present century. It entailed a period of “shopping around” for cultural influences, as can be seen by the growing importance of American models after the Second World War. While it looked to some that the adoption of American models was merely a matter of changing colonial masters, its effect was ultimately to relativise the power of all external influences as such.

The fourth phase, which is where we are today, eventuated from this. It is now hard to locate any one external source of predominant and ongoing cultural influence. The hegemony of one former colonial power has finally dissolved into a plurality of influences and borrowings which contest and combine with local and indigenous cultural forces. Cultural dependency has developed into cultural independence, though not, one hopes, cultural isolation. But however much this condition superficially resembles it, it must not be confused with the eclecticism so famously and caustically described by Jean-Francois Lyotard as the “realism of Anything Goes”:

You listen to reggae, you watch a western, you eat McDonalds at midday and local cuisine at night, you wear Paris perfume... and dress retro..., knowledge is the stuff of TV game shows.<sup>5</sup>

We may well do all of these things, and those who look back to an earlier and largely imaginary simplicity of meat pies and the Jack Davies Show may regret it. But I would still claim—despite the Hanson phenomenon—that in Australia these are not the marks of a loss of identity, but of a pluralist, inclusive, relatively confident multicultural identity whose relation to the postmodern condition is positive rather than a matter of regret.

Each of these four broad phases of cultural and colonial/postcolonial relationship produce distinctive constructions of cultural identity. But it would be a mistake to consider the shelf-life of these constructions as co-terminous with the broad historical periods in which they first appeared. For example, while it is tempting to think that the nationalistic eighteenth nineties version of Australia has had its day, this is not so. As Graeme Turner points out in his recent study of nationalism and popular culture, *Making it National*, the late nineteenth century image of the working class masculine heroic battler was successfully refashioned and recycled a century later in the media constructions of Australia’s financial and corporate high

5. Jean-Francois Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*. Sydney: Power Publications, 1992, 17.

flyers. Turner writes:

The construction of the Australian national character underwriting 1980s nationalism was, of course, anything but new. The Australian it celebrated (examples we will meet later include the media constructions of Alan Bond, Malcolm Turnbull and Jim McClelland) was most often very familiar: the cheeky, resourceful larrikin who populates Henry Lawson's stories and who was enshrined as the 'national type' in the work of Russel Ward. This version of the national character is prescriptive, unitary, masculinist and excluding.<sup>6</sup>

It was indeed a related version of the 1890s and 1930s Aussie battler, frustrated with an apparently unheeding government, wary of government assistance to Aboriginals or others of non-Anglo-Celtic origin, and distrustful of Asians (who are seen as failing to "assimilate" and thus a peril to "genuine" Australian culture), which was articulated in Pauline Hanson's maiden speech. As Juliana Schultz points out in a recent article, Hanson's supporters during the recent Queensland election were not so much those from the relatively stable and affluent regional areas, but those on the urban fringes—many of them relative newcomers to the state—for whom the dream of sunshine and tropical living had proved illusory<sup>7</sup>. "People can cope with change if they can see a future, but without clear leadership the future is invisible and the past as alluring as Lorelei," Schultz comments. And the past these people turned to is an image of Australia, and a set of political policies, which is in many respects a made-over version of the xenophobic, racist and anti-establishment eighteen nineties.

These examples of cultural recycling strikingly indicate that a national identity is not a final product, but an ongoing process, one which is played out on a two-way street. Like the Kleinian stages of child development, which are not entirely dissimilar, each phase of cultural self-construction, and its accompanying images, remains a possibility to be revisited and replayed, should historical and social conditions permit or demand it. But each time a past model is resurrected it is refashioned in accord with the ideological and historical dictates of the moment.

One other point that needs to be stressed here is that the process of cultural self-construction—which is what cultural identity really is—is usually a comparative, or

6. Graeme Turner, *Making It National*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994, 5. See also Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958, for the classic account of such a figure.
7. Juliana Schultz, "Queensland, Another Country." *The Australian Magazine*, July 25-26, 1998, 32-5.

relational one. John Donne's famous statement that "No man is an island" is as true of nations as of people, even an island nation the size of Australia. Even cultural independence always implies, and is constituted by, independence of an external Other. However this idea—which involves a theorising of identity along Lacanian lines—has come only relatively recently to Australia. Instead, for much of its history, Australia disguised the relational nature of its identity by predicating it on a series of exclusions. Pauline Hanson's claim to be "just an ordinary Australian" representing an electorate which is "typical of mainstream Australia" strikingly illustrates this. These exclusions gave the illusion of some kind of essential Australian character, by rendering inadmissible and thus, it is hoped, invisible or inaudible, that which was deemed not to be a part of it. This is what Turner means when he talks of a "version of the national character [which] is prescriptive, unitary... and excluding."

The White Australia Policy, which limited immigration to those of European and, more often, Anglo-Celtic ancestry, and which was officially abandoned only in 1973, was a striking illustration of definition by exclusion. To be Australian was to be not Asian, not "coloured" and, preferably, not non-Anglophone. It also meant not to be Aboriginal, since the indigenous inhabitants of Australia were not granted the right to vote until 1967. Popular notions of Australian identity have also retained—at least until recently—the masculinist bias of the late nineteenth century nationalism which was adumbrated in Ward's study, *The Australian Legend*. As Kay Schaffer and, more recently, Susan Magarey, Susan Sheridan and Sue Rowley have pointed out in their book *Debutante Nation*, to be Australian also largely meant not to be a woman.<sup>8</sup> However, as Graeme Turner writes:

Increasingly, as we move from the 1980s through the 1990s, the orthodoxies of Australian identity associated with 'the Australian legend' have become the subject of critiques which view them as mythic inventions carrying regressive consequences for the nation that believes them. As women insist on their inclusion within images of the national character, as indigenous Australians demand that their history be acknowledged by white Australians, as the proportion of white Anglo-Saxons in the Australian community shrinks, the disparity between the licensed batteries of national imagery and the 'realities' of national cultural

8. Kay Schaffer, *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1988; and Susan Magarey, Susan Sheridan and Sue Rowley (eds), *Debutante Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993.

experience is exposed as the consequence of longstanding discrimination, oppression and imperialism (5).

Turner argues that this “oppressively consensualising ideology” (7) which “addresses a single national character and depends upon a singular version of history” (10) is in the process of giving way to a national identity which embraces the plurality of contemporary Australian society. Turner refers to this new identity as “hybrid” and sees its best and clearest exemplification in recent Australian film. Furthermore, the adoption of such a hybrid identity can be a “key strategy for... challenging Eurocentric definitions of nation” (124) which “largely assume as their object a nation-state composed of individuals drawn from a single ethnic, religious and cultural source” (122). In contrast, the situation in Australia today “involves proposing a national identity which celebrates its hybridity rather than its purity” (124).<sup>9</sup>

Turner is referring here to Australia’s growing multiculturalism and its consequences. Despite the attitude and policies of the Howard Liberal-Country Party Coalition and the alarming support Pauline Hanson has attracted, I believe Australia has moved to a situation today—in literature as well as in film—where cultural identity is seen as more inclusive of diversity than exclusive, more plural than singular, more multivocal than unitary. Difference is seen now as residing within Australian culture, and is not to be found only by looking outside it. The Anglo-Celtic voice, which according to Sneja Gurnew has been dominant, while undoubtedly still very powerful, is now heard as one among many, including the Aboriginal. Consequently, as Gurnew says, “Minority discourse ... undoes the power of dominant discourses to represent themselves as universal”.<sup>10</sup> (Such a “universality” was, of course, always only a representation, albeit a powerful one, both socially and politically.) However, as we have seen, the Anglo-Celtic voice with its traditional baggage has not disappeared from within Australian culture, but — like others—is capable of re-inventing itself as conditions and times require. For the remainder of this essay I want to turn to another recent manifestation of it, as it occurs in Tim Winton’s latest novel, *The Riders*.

9. For a succinct account of the term hybridity, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989, 33-37 and 97-104.
10. Sneja Gurnew, *Framing Marginality: Multicultural literary studies*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994, 42.

*The Riders* was published in 1994 and shortlisted for the 1995 Booker Prize.<sup>11</sup> It is Winton's sixth novel, his first having been published in 1982 when he was only twenty two years old.

Unlike his earlier fiction, *The Riders* is set in Europe. In this respect it joins a long list of Australian novels which have their setting outside the country, a list which includes such diverse works as Henry Handel Richardson's *Maurice Guest* (1908), Christina Stead's *For Love Alone* (1944), Patrick White's *The Twiborn Affair* (1979), Murray Bail's *Homesickness* (1980), and Glenda Adams' *Dancing on Coral* (1987). What is different about *The Riders*, though, is the very explicit way it constructs a model of Australianness by means of a set of contrasts with Europe and Europeans. It thus has clear affinities with novels such as Henry James's *The American*, *Portrait of a Lady* and *The Ambassadors*, no matter how utterly different in tone and style they are from Winton's novel.

*The Riders* is a story worthy of the American novelist Cormac McCarthy, in the way it ruthlessly strips illusion after illusion from its main character, who is catapulted into the depths of misery, desperation, and degradation, before he gains a sense of acceptance and his dignity is affirmed. Inexplicably deserted by his pregnant wife while he is refurbishing a ruinous bothy, or cottage, in Ireland, Scully sets out on a search for her across Europe accompanied by his daughter, Billy, who has been so traumatised by her mother's desertion that she cannot speak for half the novel. Their search takes them through the expatriate British population of the Greek island of Hydra, via Italy and Paris to Amsterdam, where Scully comes to accept that Jennifer has irrevocably deserted them, perhaps for a new sexual identity as a lesbian. It is a bleak tale, with "the Riders" of the title appearing as a vision of hopeless but noble persistence and determination in the face of defeat, characteristic of a Celtic heroic past, and symbolic of a possible future for Scully which he is determined to avoid.

The novel is basically picaresque, structured as a search for Jennifer which becomes also a search for meaning and, indeed, for value. Its partial Mediterranean setting is reminiscent of *The Odyssey*, another search for a wife and a hearth, and a number of comparisons beyond the scope of this essay could be made. Not surprisingly, value comes to be defined through a series of contrasts, of which Scully is the centre: most particularly Scully/Ireland, Scully/Jennifer, Scully/the English expatriates on Hydra, Scully/their French acquaintances, Scully/the educated or

11. Tim Winton, *The Riders*. Sydney: Macmillan, 1994. All subsequent references are to this edition.

artistic, and Scully/Billie (his child). By means of these contrasts, Scully and what he stands for—those qualities and values which go into the construction of his character—are tested, clarified both in his mind and in the reader's, and found to be adequate.

It is not without significance that Scully is renovating a cottage in Ireland. Although the choice was apparently Jennifer's, it is in Ireland, before he learns of Jennifer's desertion, that we discover that he is good with his hands, has few artistic pretensions, is naively but utterly unsnobbish, and is deeply and persistently in love with his wife and daughter. It is also in Ireland that he forges a relationship with Pete-the-Post, a local who befriends him and assists him, not only in his renovations but also, tentatively and tactfully at a distance, in his emotional distress. Scully is a good bloke—a bit unpolished, but that only underlines his filiation with the working-class Aussie male of a former time. His relationship with Pete-the-Post has many of the trappings of mateship: it is between males and forged in the absence of women; it involves physical labour and mutual self-help; it is unquestioned and not based on any obvious quid pro quo. It seems to be based on unspoken mutual need: Pete's for friendship and something to do when he is not delivering mail; Scully's, initially for assistance with his renovations—such as getting the power connected—and later for a trustworthy confidant, someone male who will not betray him as Jennifer has. The Irish setting reminds one of the Celtic and working-class elements in the mateship tradition, but adds a nostalgic but also tragic element to it (in the form of the Riders) hitherto lacking in it. However, the one aspect of Scully's character which differentiates him markedly from earlier examples of this figure is his deep and persistent love of his wife and daughter. His willingness to work hard and to improvise is directed to the enterprise of building a home for the two female characters in his life. When his dream of a happy family trio, in which Jennifer can indulge her new-found artistic aspirations, is destroyed, his Odyssey begins.

The narrative voice of *The Riders* is predominantly that of Scully, much of it in the form of an interior monologue. The following passage, in which the realisation of what has happened to him comes clearer towards the end of the novel, is characteristic. Thinking about Jennifer's relationship with their French acquaintance Dominique, it finally occurs to him that it could be homosexual. This provokes a semi-drunken, passionate, soul-searching confrontation of his own naivete in the face of a deviousness which is not only feminine but also decidedly marked as European:

Shit, for all he knew they could have been at it in Paris right from the beginning, with him so bloody glad she had someone to be with. Marianne, Jean-Louis, they probably knew all along. Their disdain, it was contempt for his blind trust, his weakness. And the baby, the baby was a hoax, just a vicious bloody decoy to free herself with. Setting him loose on the tumbledown bothy, buying time. He'd never laid eyes on an ultrasound image, a doctor's bill, a test result in Athens, trusting prick he was. He had no other child, then. That still got close to pain. A couple of days ago, knowing that might have broken him. But he'd gone past something. He'd crossed a line. No baby. No wife. No marriage, nothing he could look back on with certainty, nothing that didn't look like quicksand. And who knows, maybe she'd bolted with all the money as well. In the name of what—love? Personal development? The bohemian life? (336)

This bout of *in vino veritas* is strikingly synchdochic of the whole of Scully's Odyssey of self-discovery, and it establishes a set of juxtapositions which the whole novel asks us to endorse. It does not require extensive analysis to see how two sets of values are constructed in opposition to each other. On the negative side, we find sexual transgression, deceit, collusive deception, disdain, pretensions towards that modern cliché, "personal development", the feminine and Europe. On the positive side, which is Scully's, we find fidelity, trust, love of family and of one's forthcoming child, trust again, endurance, understanding, the masculine—all invested in the traditional close association of Australia and Ireland. Earlier in the novel Scully thinks of himself as "the Ignoble Savage" who told "redneck stories" to the people they got to know in Paris, "amusing yuppies, handsome, curious and unlike people they'd known before"(278). Now, he realises that the very disingenuousness he had prided himself on was treated by the French—and probably by the expatriate English Lotus-eaters on Hydra—with contemptuous amusement. His daughter Billie's perceptions buttress his values. After a horrendous night in the Metro, which recalls Odysseus's descent into Hades, she decides that

Paris was pretty on top and hollow underneath. Underground everyone was dirty and tired and lost. They weren't going anywhere. They were just waiting for the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame, the whole town, to fall in on them. (322)

The message is clear: those famous icons of French culture are without foundation. Where there should be moral substance and grounding, the innocent eye of the

child sees only tiredness, aimlessness and dirt.

The satirical edge to some of *The Riders* is sharp. But although Scully's experiences during his search force him mercilessly to confront and admit his naivete, little of the satire is directed at him. He drinks too much, and in the course of the novel he has to learn a little "European" predatoriness in order to survive. After sleeping with Irma, the strange Circean woman of dubious honesty who picks up with them in their travels through Europe, he steals "eight hundred francs in crisp new notes" (313) from her. But this, significantly, is to protect his child. On the whole, with his straightforward honesty and unsophisticated but devoted masculinity, his adeptness with his hands and his willingness to tackle hard outdoors work and improvise, his basic honesty and goodness and, it must be said, his inability to understand women, he is the most recent avatar of the traditional construction of the Australian of the "legend". That he is a devoted family man is not a contradiction of this, but a demonstration of how an earlier paradigm can be reconstructed and modified, yet still retain most of its basic qualities. It comes as no surprise that Scully senses a mythological or spiritual empathy with Ireland, and that some of his happiest moments are working with his friend, the Irish postman, on the refurbishment of the cottage. This, as I have mentioned, accords with the "legend's" Celtic and working-class colouring. His moral antonyms are the backstabbing effete expatriate Poms on Hydra (that multi-headed monster of mythology) and the hypocritical French, who support the testing of nuclear bombs in the Pacific while professing interest in "wild" Australians and an ecologically-driven abhorrence of kangaroo-tail soup (278).

*The Riders* is the most recent—and one of the best—examples of the "Anglo-Celtic" constructions of Australian identity. Even though it is set in Europe, it exemplifies what Gurnew would characterise as an exercise of the "ethnic majority's" claim for universality. The voices that speak the narrative, even the child Billie's—who, after recovering her ability to talk, becomes an increasingly frequent narratorial locus—are entirely from that position. Significantly, Jennifer neither appears nor says anything (with one exception, p. 271), and their former French acquaintances hang up when Scully phones them. The novel, in effect, renders them speechless, and we get to know them—in so far as we do—through the initial naivete and the goodwill of Scully who, we are induced to believe, will not maliciously misrepresent them. In the absence of any countervailing discourse, the novel suggests that the "Anglo-Celtic" male will truthfully represent those who are not of its persuasion, be they women, foreigners or lesbians.

This raises the question, however, of whether the speechlessness of the women in *The Riders* also renders them powerless. If one thinks of the powerful women figures in other novels by Winton, such as Mum in *That Eye The Sky* and Oriel Lamb in *Cloudstreet*, this would be unexpected. It can be argued therefore that Jennifer's silence is in fact the exercise of her power. Her refusal to explain, her decision to make a clean but shattering break, is the means by which she realises her autonomy, her escape from a philistine and uxorious husband whose devotion to her she feels to be imprisoning. Her silence, her refusal to communicate, is what impels Scully on his search for her. If he knew where she was, or why she left, he would be less in her power.

Her brief and speechless appearance in Chapter 38 (271) and her unspeaking phonecall to Scully in which she inadvertently hears her daughter's voice near the end of the novel (365) sketch in her need:

Into the windtunnel of the Rue de Rivoli they come, bent as a single tree, clothes and shopping demented with flapping. She slips back into the bleak doorway to let them pass blindly by without feeling the heat of her love... she wonders how far to follow, wondering when enough is enough, asking why it hurts to need so badly. (271)

This is as close as we get to Jennifer, although her "denim leg... the sharp-toed boot disembodied by mist and angle" (369) eludes him in Amsterdam in the novel's closing pages. She is defined as a partial body particularised by its clothing, as absence, as a fugitive and listening silence, as an undercover agent—but with agency nonetheless. Scully's memory of her earlier, naked, weeping after making love, gives her a body, but only within his romanticised version of their relationship (70). Her motivation is gradually and partially clarified as his foggy and alcoholic assessment of this relationship begins to posit her as an individual rather than as little more than a component of a marriage and family. But she remains an enigma: "Was will das Weib?" Freud famously asked—"What does woman want?" Scully seems not to have the answer. *The Riders*, by disabling Jennifer's ability to speak, emphasises her power, but augments her as enigma.

Jennifer might be read as a counterpart to Scully's Anglo-Irish Australian monoculturalism. He disparages her pretensions to high culture, but the novel fleetingly accords her dignity and identity. The name Jennifer signifies bourgeois respectability—she is not Jenny, or Jen, or any other shorthand democratisation,

and she aspires to a version of art beyond Scully's serviceable and practical craftsmanship. Nobody could question Winton's own commitment to serious culture: popular though his novels are, he is certainly not a "popular novelist". There is nothing of easy romance, no predictable plotting and characterisation, no comforting ideological conformism in his fiction, and certainly not in *The Riders*. But his fiction has been Aussie in a very non-bourgeois way: snotty-nosed, scratchy around the crotch, sweaty under the armpits. Adults are often viewed from below, from the perspective of children such as Ort in *That Eye, The Sky* or Fish Lamb in *Cloudstreet*<sup>12</sup>. The names of the children in Winton's fiction—Ort, Fish, Quick, for example—signify their demotic, non-canonical status. They signify their lack of an accepted place in sophisticated adult discourse. On the other hand, the name Jennifer and the art she aspires to are adult, feminine, cosmopolitan, independent, and threatening to the masculine home-grown and hand-made.

\* \* \*

*The Riders* demonstrates the durability of one construction of Australian cultural identity, and its ability to adapt. It is a thoroughly modern novel, by one of our finest novelists, and it sets Australia on a world stage with an almost Jamesian precision and Dostoevskian obsessiveness. The fact that it tests its version of cultural identity and cultural value almost to the point of destruction indicates great artistic confidence as well as great ambition. That it appeared when it did, and that it has received such acclaim, says much about the moral, social and political needs and problems to which fiction provides imaginary solutions. Among other things, it articulates a fear that men, no matter how devoted they may be to partner and family, may not understand their counterparts and, in return, will not be understood by them. So it is not fortuitous that it articulates a version of Australian identity in which masculine pragmatism and clumsy honesty are deployed to reconstruct a very traditional yet renovated version of a durable and servicable Australian model of cultural identity. Artistic pretensions, even aspirations, beyond this paradigm are the domain of women and foreigners—all of whom, if they speak at all, speak in a foreign tongue. Yet they are there, tentacles reaching beyond the initial comprehension of Scully. Clearly *The Riders* itself is one of them: tentatively

12. Tim Winton, *That Eye The Sky*. Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1986.

sounding out the limits of one paradigm of cultural and artistic identity, and the threats and possibilities of another.

Despite its predominantly oppositional structuring of masculine and feminine, Australian and European, *The Riders* must not be confused with the xenophobic and racist pronouncements of Pauline Hanson. Dependent upon prejudice, nostalgia for a non-existent monoculture, and universalising rhetorical generalisations, her attack on Aborigines and Asians has no moral basis. Even its statistical and financial rationale has been shown to be erroneous.

Winton's novel, on the other hand, is deeply concerned with morality. It is not fanciful to read it as an attempt at renovating and rehabilitating an earlier construction of the Australian male, and at rescuing it from the disrepute its more recent avatars threatened it with. Scully exemplifies an honesty, trustfulness and consequent vulnerability which act as a positive foil, not only to other characters in the novel, but also to the dubious exploits of some of the corporate heroes of the nineteen eighties mentioned by Turner. Nonetheless, the univocal cultural identity the novel constructs and defends so painfully, largely—though not entirely, I hope I have demonstrated—avoids the implications of Australia's developing multiculturalism and changing gender relations. As a consequence, it is only one among many Australian identities that we might recognise as ours. And it is the totality of these in their plurality of voices—not a single one, no matter how distinguished—which constitutes a multiculturalism that may yet turn out to be one of Australia's best experiments, despite the inevitable protests of the ignorant or the bigoted.

## The Promise

Two details strike me as I enter the dining-room of my one-time home: first, the dun-brown sepia tone that envelopes my father, my mother and all the others gathered around the *Pesach* table, notwithstanding that the polished chandeliers, the silver candlesticks and the *kiddush* cups shine in all their lustrous festive fullness; and, second, that the seating about the table, the cutlery, the dishes and the wine upon it remain in the minutest detail as they were then when, on this night fifty years ago, Hana and I left it to join the uprising taking place outside.

Now, as then, Father is reciting the *Haggadah* to the accompanying undertone of my brothers, my sisters, their husbands, their wives. Dressed in white *kittel* and *kippah*, with greying beard down to his chest and the dark folds of scholarship circling his eyes, he is every bit the patriarch. The young ones, meanwhile—my nephews and my nieces all—surreptitiously nudge each other in the ribs, pull their sisters' plaits and grimace demonstratively, having helped themselves all too zealously to my mother's piquantly nose-tingling horse-radish, prepared for the occasion from the very keenest still to be had from Chaskiel's along Leszno. this bitter herb—so has Mother remarked earlier on setting the table—may well remind us of the bitterness of bondage in Egypt, but—she has also gone on—will anyone remain to remember our own bitterness of bondage within ghetto walls?

The table-cloth, as it was then, is starched to the purest white; the *Haggadot*, on the other hand, are much dog-eared and stained through long and loving use; the soup for the *matzoh* balls is seething on the stove, the salted eggs tantalise even from the kitchen, while the candles flicker as splendidly as then, save that, the last time, they had also trembled with every rumbling of a crumbling building outside, and flared sometimes, too, as flares of other kinds lit up our windows with exploding red-yellow-orange flames.

I have just enough time to take in the scene in all its familiarity, when Father,

looking up from his *Haggadah* with his contemplative type-setter's eyes, smiles in that calm and genial way of his, and beckons me forward.

"So, Shimen, you have come home," he says with a clasping of hands and momentary shutting of eyes. "Forgive us for not waiting before starting, but we did not know if we should expect you. After all, it's been so long."

He brushes a filament of fluff from his beard and reaches out to me.

I, Shimen, long-gone exile now come back, I go up to him, kiss him on a cheek and am kissed in turn.

"How you have filled out," he says, laying a hand on my shoulder as with his other hand he bids everyone else around the table look my way, "don't you all think so? You were such a noodle when you left and as white as a candle is white. But now—may no Evil Eye fall upon you—how well you look, so healthy, so tanned, even, I should guess, a little prosperous. You were right to leave when you did... However much I tried to hold you back. If only we here had all done the same. But..."

He turns up his hands, bites a lip, and, rocking ever so slightly, lets the word hang.

What Father has said is true. Since my leave-taking, I have indeed greatly changed.

He, meanwhile, has not gained so much as an extra grey hair.

Nor, for that matter, has Mother altered at all. There is in her small round plumpish face not a single added wrinkle, nor one surreptitious blemish that was not there before, nor roughening about her nails, nor one rebellious hair seeking release from beneath her head-scarf. As she was then, so is she now, soft in form, in speech and touch; and shy, as, on turning from Father to kiss her too, she touches my hand with the most feathery lightness of her own, and says, "Thank you for not forgetting us, *Liebeniu*... Go, sit down. Your place has been kept for you all this time."

Following her directive, I make my way towards my seat. My path takes me around and behind my brothers and my sisters-in-law, my sisters and my brothers-in-law, as also behind their children, my prankish nephews and nieces, some thirty in all; and, as I pass them, I touch an arm here, a shoulder there, here a shawl about a sister's neck, there fingers raised towards me, or a turned-up brow, a cheek, a nephew's chin or a bun of hair. They are all—all—as I had left them then. As ever, there is grease under Avreml's nails, signs of his bicycle-shop clinging to him always, on Itzik's fingers the indelible stains of printer's type, and on Yankev's eyebrows the

tell-tale flecks of the house-painter's art. Meanwhile, what an *eshet chayil* is my sister Soreh to her Meshulam, shyly quiet scholar making his name as a master scribe! How devotedly Rivke dotes upon her Shloimi and their Children Isrulikl, Yosl and Shmulek sitting between them! How blessed is Dovid, my bookseller brother-in-law, to have chosen Leahle for his wife! While no other match in heaven ever made can compare with that of Avshalom and Rochel, the youngest of my sisters, he, father-to-be of the infant growing inside her, coddling her as if with cotton-wool, she, mother that she is to be, delighting at being so coddled.—In short, in short, what gifts to my parents they are, what blessings and what sources of price!

Had it all but been permitted so to continue!

And had my own life but turned out so wholesome!

At my place and at the place beside me that had been Hana's, there lie our *Haggadot*, the two of them, both open, both on the same page now as then, still recording the place at which, after the washing of the hands and blessings over the *matzot*, *haroset* and bitter herbs just before the meal, I had risen from my seat, said with a passion I could contain no more, "If this is truly a festival of freedom, then let us like our ancestors in Egypt again be free", and, following a volley of gunfire and rumbling that made the candle flames fairly leap, left the table and run outside, Hana following me, saying, "If you're going to fight, I'm coming, too", with Father calling after us, and Mother, too, and everyone we left behind calling also, calling also, calling also what..., calling what, calling what...?

I was never to know. Hana and I were within the taking of a supernumerary breath in the rubble street below where clamour of another kind—of shellfire, collapsing buildings, crackling infernos and snipers' fire—muted any made by mere voice.

This time, however, and for the present, I sit down, whereupon Father, addressing me, says, "We're truly glad you've come, Shimen. We have often talked about you and Hana."

Hana and I had been but three months away from marriage. People had come to question the very sense in such things.

"Why, why in these times?" they asked, "Waking in the morning, you might well be dead by nightfall?"

A glance at my sister Rochel with child and her Avshalom confirmed me in my customary answer.

"If we emerge from this, can anything else make more sense?"

"I haven't seen Hana since that night," I say now, in reply to my father.

"Not since we joined the resistance in our separate ways."

"Then while you're here, back in Warsaw, you will try to find her, I guess?"

Mother says.

I look about me and scan every face—Mother's, Father's, my brothers, my sisters', their children's. They, in their turn, search my own.

"You mean...", I begin, "you mean... Hana, she is still alive?"

Though always the one of fewest words, it is Mother again who speaks. Father, nodding, endorses what she says.

"She is not in this world," she says. "We have looked everywhere but not once have we seen her. We have supposed then that she must have survived in yours."

"You truly believe so?" I say.

"Just as truly as we have looked everywhere." It is Father who, drawing together the edges of his *kittel*, replies. "After all, Hana was already so much a daughter to us, how could we not do all to seek her out?"

To which I am prompted to answer, "While I, too, I waited for her, asked after her, sought her, but having in the end to accept she was no longer in my world either."

"Then," Father reflects. "maybe, then, one of us may yet find her. We in this world, you, in yours, though please God that she be in yours."

Please God, indeed. But, truly insofar as I know it, Hana is no more.

We parted that same *Seder* night at the entrance of a sewer which, after having made contact with the leaders of the uprising, she was about to enter on a reconnaissance mission outside the ghetto walls. I was to remain to fight with the resistance within. I was then twenty-two; Hana was nineteen.

"Who knows when we will meet again?" I had said then, clasping Hana's hands firmly in mine.

"Who knows if we will ever meet again?" she countered.

Another flare of fire, one of several since we had descended into the streets, passed low over our heads.

"But if, Shimen, *mein geliebte*," she had gone on to say, "if, God willing, we survive, let us then, six months after the end of this war meet in the Market Square."

I had answered with a leavening laugh, even though not even the combined weight of the Urals and Carpathians could have been so suffocating at that moment. "We'll just have to survive, Hanele *meins*, won't we?"

Having said all that there might for the present be to say about Hana, Father, after a brief reflective pause, changes the subject altogether, whereupon he is joined

by the others—by Mother, Avreml, Soreh, Itzik and Rivke, and by Yankev, Leah, Meshulam, Avshalom and Rochel—who, leaning, turned or skewed towards me in escalating galvanised curiosity and volubility, ply me with a succession of questions as they want to know this, know that, know whatever I may possibly be able to tell.

“What is happening now in your world out there?”

“Are there still wars going on?”

“Have any of our cousins, uncles, aunts survived?”

“Where have you yourself come from?”

“Where are you going from here?”

“Have you, may no Evil Eye fall on them, a family, children, grandchildren, perhaps?”

This last question is—can only be—from Mother, such things being always chiefest among a mother’s concerns, while Father follows with a question that, likewise, can only be a father’s: “Do you keep *Shabbes*, Shimen, celebrate *Chanukah* and *Pesach*, go to *shul*, light *Yizkor* candles for us all?”

I answer each question in turn, now passing an eye over my brother Avreml’s pixie face, now pausing over Soreh’s *sheitl*, meeting as unyielding as I can Itzik’s exploring fixity upon me, reaching out to touch little Isrulikl’s soft black spiralling sidelocks.

“Our war has long been over,” I answer, “but it hasn’t in the least put a stop to others.”

“We also have our own home now,” I answer, “in Eretz Israel, tht was palestine in our time.”

“I only know of Aunt Baile who lives in Argentina,” I answer, “and Uncle Chaskiel in Montreal. As for others, I’ve found no others.”

As I speak, I turn at random the pages of the *Haggadah* and come across a favourite verse of Father’s which, every *Pesach*, he had sung with ardour, adoration and unquestioned trust.

“Blessed be God, King of the Universe, who has redeemed us as He redeemed our ancestors from Egypt...”

“Let us pray to God, the God of our fathers, that He bring us to other festivals and holy days that will come to us in peace...”

“Let us sing a new song of thanks to God for our salvation and freedom...”

The last time I heard him sing it, on the night of the uprising, a Molotov cocktail exploded in the street below just as he finished.

I continue meanwhile to answer their questions.

"As for myself," I say, "I live in Australia. In Melbourne...It's as far away from here as one can get, and, after what happened here, that is good."

"One makes a nice living there," I say. "I'm into men's suits. I have my own factory, fifty people working for me and the best stores across the country among my outlets."

And: "I was married," I say, "but things did not work out well. So, I'm divorced. I have two grown-up sons, one a manufacturer, the other an engineer, both with children of their own whom I sometimes see."

And: "As for *Shabbes*," I say, "and *Pesach* and *Rosh Hashana*, *Chanukah* and so on..."—here, confronted by Father's probing gaze, I fumble for words—"I... Well... the war... *Our* war, it changed many things... so many, such as the way a man looks at the world, at other men, even...even at God. And then there is the country itself... The way one lives in Australia, and its people, its spaces, its culture, its climate, and what it means to be there a newcomer, a stranger, a Jew... One must live there truly to know..."

Father's mien, mild as it is, lengthens with a creeping but recognisable sense of dismay.

"Yes..." he says, raising a hand to his *kippah*, "I hear what you are saying. You have settled in a wilderness void of God, you have yourself abandoned God, while no home have you where you may eat warm soup, or study *German* or feel a child's kiss on your cheek. While all those things our people died to preserve... *Shabbes*, *Purim*, *Pesach*, *Succoth*, the *Yom-tovim*... you re saying that these today mean little to you?"

I am reproved. Around the table, breaths are held in wait for answer, even by the children, my nephews and nieces, who, though understanding little of the content, recognise the weightiness of the moment. Even Rivke, so much a talker, hangs uncommonly steadfast to my lips.

I nod my head, shake my head, indicating "Yes", indicating "No", putting an end to this vacillating charade by rapping a fist against my brow.

"When the war ended," I say, "and I learned that you had all gone the way of martyrs, I climbed a mound of rubble in what had been the Square, there to try to make sense of the assault upon the ghetto, the daylight killings, the deportations and the ruin of everything that had once seemed so sure, precious, inviolable. One

certainty kept returning. One truth. And that, an appalling one: that your martyrdom, like all martyrdoms, was the price paid for obeisance to a lie. And, therefore, all for nothing! And all a waste!”

“A lie?” Father asks. “All for nothing? When we lost so much, so many...All for a lie?”

“That there was someone, somewhere, Who saw, heard and cared, and Who, so seeing, hearing, caring, would be greatly moved to protect, deliver, redeem...”

“Such things are a lie, Shimen?” Father breaks in. “A lie? To this have you come?”

He raps a finger against his *Haggadah* which he has opened on a particular page.

“Shimen, listen,” he goes on. “Let everyone listen.”

His voice rises to the majestic as he begins to recite, the attentions of the family being less on him than focused squarely, searchingly on me:

“When Israel went forth from Egypt, Judah became His sanctuary, Israel His dominion.

“The sea looked and fled, Jordan was driven backward. The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like young sheep.

“What ailed thee, O sea, that you did flee, Jordan that you were driven back? You mountains that you skipped like rams, you hills like young sheep?

Tremble, O earth, in the presence of the God of Jacob, who turned the rock into a pool of water, the flinty rock into a fountain.”

Throughout the recitation, I hold my head bowed, tracing, even as I listen, the intricate patterns in the table-cloth that Mother by her own hand once embroidered so devotedly. With heaviness of heart, I venerate those fingers that once worked the cloth, I ache on recalling the loving application endowed to it, and, awed again as on the first time by the precision of the needlework, I bite my lips over the marked-out loss, the despoliation, the waste, the waste even of these.

The recitation completed, I look up.

None could be more regal—so immaculate the *kittel* over his shoulders and *kippah* on his head, so full and authoritative his beard, so probing his eyes circled by the dark rings of wisdom. Only the sepia tone of the surrounds mutes what

might otherwise be brilliant white, luminary resplendence, He has held fast to me throughout that brief recounting, I know, and even now his gaze does not waver. I have given him reason—this, too, I know—for pain, disappointment, anger and aggravement, but more than any of these, he is questioning.

“All this too is a lie, Shimen?” he says. “A lie that, when He willed it, and *because* He willed it, He brought us out of Egypt, as is also stated here”—raps again at his *Haggadah*—“with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm? And a lie that He did so with wonders and signs?”

“The *Haggadah* is an embellishment,” I am tempted to say, “with the Hebrews in flight from the pursuing Egyptians as earth-bound and radical an event in its day as the cattle-trucks shuttling about Europe in ours. And with God nowhere in sight.”

Not this, however, do I say.

But rather: “If that which happens happens by His will, why then did He will it that you, Father, and you, Mother, and you, Shlomi, Soreh, Itzik, Yankev, Rivke and the children—the children, tell me, why the children?—should be taken, all of you so gifted, so good and so mightily loving of Him, and saved me instead, the least endowed and the least deserving, who, in surviving, has come not only to live every day joyless and with heartache, but also to repudiate Him as a fiction, an invention, a fable?”

Not a flicker ruffles Father’s demeanour.

“If God chose to take us,” he replies, “we must acknowledge that He had His reasons. In His design, every man has his hour, each thing its place. If you survived, that too was for a purpose.”

Never before was voice raised under that roof with a tenth part the vehemence I permit myself now.

“No!” I cry out. “No! To us, the highest value has always been the clinging to life, the greatest grief its loss. So tamely to explain its taking is to violate the highest—the sole!—possession most truly ours. While if I truly did survive for a purpose and not by chance, I challenge that it be revealed to me that I may not so repeatedly fail it!”

Father raises placating palms before me.

“A Jew may repudiate God, but will never himself be repudiated,” he says. “For God needs man as man needs Him. But until His ultimate purpose becomes known, it is for men to create their own purposes. And for that, Shimen, even now may not yet be too late...”

I huff. I cut across Father in a way I would never have done before,

"For me, fifty years ago was already too late," I say, "when I learned that there is none above, nor below, nor in the wings who directs the dramas, tragedies, comedies and farces down here. There is only we, we ourselves, mortal men all, some of us wise, others less so, some *menschlich*, others brutish, some choosing well, others badly, the happy ones reaping justly that which they have sown, those shredded and dismembered into offal reaping that which not always they but others with names like Amalek, Schicklgruber and Haman have sown for them."

Father nods. He sways. He blinks. Of ten parts of the world's sadness, nine parts now weigh on him.

"Shimen," he says. "what has become of us, that we are. What has been left to us, that we have. But Shimen, my son, alive that you are, without family, without blessings, without belief, what do you have, what is there left of your life?"

The question gives me pause to reflect.

What is left?

I am about to shrug my shoulders, turn out my palms and say, "Time is left. Approaching his end, can any man but claim more?"

But there are questions and there are questions: questions that are true questions and questions the woven stuff of rhetoric.

And rhetoric won't be denied.

What is left?

I form a pyramid with the fingers of a hand.

"Time is left," I am about to say instead. "Time, yes. But memory, too," I am compelled now to add, "memory, to remind myself at times how, even if not all has turned out so ai, ai, ai, I have just the same, and starting out with nothing, yet made a life for myself, built up a respected name, and raised two sons of whom you would surely have been proud."

But where there are questions that are true questions and questions that are the stuff of rhetoric, others still cast down a challenge.

And before challenge one does not retreat.

What do I have, what is left then of my life?

This time, I forge two pyramids with the fingers of my hands and weigh one against the other like scales.

"Time is left," I say, truly say this time. "And memory," I say. "Time for living out my days and memory to recall the better things I've done. But also this, Father: hope. Yes, hope. As you yourself just said: until ultimate purpose be known, to

forge my own and trust that even now its consummation may not be too late.”

A touch at my elbow causes the scene to be transformed. For a lingering instant, everyone at the table — Father, Mother, everyone — assumes the fixity of hardened wax. No-one is gesturing anymore; no-one is speaking, nor laughing, nor tugging at a plait or nudging a rib. Even the lights of the candles are caught in mid-flicker, the silver of the *kiddush* cups lose their sheen, the table-cloth, but a moment before so white in its embroidered exquisiteness, turns dun-brown and plain, while the script of the *Haggadot* around the table fade too as, with the arrest of the scene to immobility and silence, the room's matt sepia yields then in a blinking to a heavily dust-laden dreary foxedness that has eaten into wallpaper, corner cabinet and mantel.

The vision past, I recognise that where, but a moment before, there stood the festive table ringed by a family re-enacting ancestral liberation, there stands now the same table that had been ours, which, stripped of its covering, is dark, deeply scratched, chipped and desertedly bare, save for a tawdry pink ceramic vase in its centre containing a meagre handful of wilting jasmine, and bordered by six equally beaten-about dark chairs. Meanwhile, the cabinet still stands in its former corner, its one-time candelabra, kiddush cups, *havdalah* set and Shabbat ware replaced by cheap plates, mugs, bottles and bowls; the rugs on the floor have faded, thinned and become stringy through wear; a television set stands alongside the window where a coat-stand had been; while on the wall which had once carried row on row of Father's *siddurim*, *machzors*, *Tenachs* and full set of the *Talmud*, there now hangs a yellowing curling photograph snipped from some ten-grosz magazine of Pope John Paul watching over all.

“You have seen what you wanted, Pan Obiatz?” says the woman Masha Kupcycz beside me.

Masha Kupcycz is corpulent and flabby, her cheeks sag like dough, her hands have a similar matt puffiness, with fingers as short, broad and square-tipped as a peasant's. She has just returned from the kitchen where her *kapusta* has boiled over. Its nose-turning acidity enters with her.

“Thank you,” I say, adding nothing, nor giving her reason to expect more.

Panie Kupcycz, though, has things of her own to say.

“It's funny,” she says, “but on seeing you, I keep thinking how all of us, wherever we end up, we want at some time or another to go back to where our feet first learned to run.”

I sense rather than see her solid bare-armed corpulence following me as I move

towards the door. The kapusta sets my teeth on edge. I have never liked the stuff; much less do I like it now, befouling, as it does, not only the immediately surrounding space and chattels, but also the recollections of an ambience where—scarcely so much as reflected upon by her, I wager — my own feet, where a score of feet, had indeed first learned to run.

“Just next year,” she goes on, “my Juszek and I, we plan to visit the village we lived in before we came here. My mother, sweet Jesus Christus be kind to her”—in the hallway mirror, I see her cross herself behind me — “my mother she’ll be ninety and our whole family Brzrezinski, seventy of us now, counting all her great-grandchildren, maybe even more, we’ll all be coming together to celebrate, ‘cause it’s not many that reach ninety in this world, is it? And of course, it will be good to see the village again, it truly will, ‘cause the past it really does hold on to a person, don’t it, Pan Obiata?”

Panie Kupczycz might well say more on seeing me out, but no more do I find compelling reason to linger on in this place. I have been, I have seen, I have remembered, I have received the dead in the present. For, as long as memory remains, no-one fully dies, memory being as much the Jew’s surest salvation as also his special genius.

And so, much as the past does assert a hold, on descending the stairs, I shed progressively that worn, irrecoverable, sepia-invested past, to be confronted instead by an onslaught of shimmering, momentarily blinding white light rebounding from the broad summery boulevard before me as I step outside. Up and down the street, the asphalt glows with a hot silvery sheen, the shadows are at their most frugal, while against the windows that pepper the long tiers of stolid, almost impregnable buildings that line each side, shafts of sunlight shatter into slivers and splinters even as the wavering white-blue surface of the Vistula visible beyond the cross-streets fragments it into a myriad prisms. Alongside and before me pass successions of cars, taxis, vans, trucks and bicycling messenger boys; gaggles of tittering made-up shop-girls, too; and office clerks delivering folios, mothers wheeling prams alone and in pairs, elderly couples trudging past on swollen feet, and a policeman, a pair of red-headed children, a street-sweeper, a club-footed mechanic, and who knows who else and how many more, not one of whom gives me, unmistakable stranger that I am, at the very least a sidelong glance. While a single room may still contain any number of Obiata souls, not the whole length and breadth of this quarter, rubble that it had become followed by subsequent reconstitution, can—or will—any more acknowledge a single Obiata loose end. Not that, having once been indigenous, I

am now an outcast; besides which, even to be an outcast need not be too profoundly disquieting as long as a man may still keep his name. But what I am...What Shimon Obiatz is as he walks casting but the flimsiest shadow at his feet is but a one-time initialled Obiatz serviette; he is the Avreml Obiatz Bicycle Shop, he is the Itzik Obiatz Printing Press and the Yankev Obiatz Decorating Firm. In short, what Shimon Obiatz is—I, that is, one-time child of Warsaw, printing apprentice, resistance-fighter and, now, visiting returnee home — is a man who, having no leftover name in the place, simply *isn't*.

Nonetheless, even as one who isn't, I walk on. I carry neither guide-book, nor map. Nor do I need to ask directions. I walk wherever I choose, my mood my guide with the streets as familiar to me as the veins on my hands. Here, in the attorney Melech Shulkes' doorway, Leib Becher was mown down by gunfire; here, outside Peisi Telushkin the *melamed's*, Gitl Heskes threw herself under a tank, blowing apart both self and tank; and here, from a flaming window three floors above Sztaingrib's bookshop, Sholem Gleichseit leaped down, dashing skull and the last of all possibility of survival to oblivion everlasting instead.

And what of Shulkes, Telushkin and Sztaingrib themselves in that time?

"To think that, once, a king, no less, invited us here and now a nation of philistines gone blind are annulling his vision." — Thus, Shulkes the attorney.

"Whatever portion we re dealt...If the *Ribbono Shel Olam* had intended things to be different, they would have been..." — Thus the *melamed* Telushkin.

And from the bookseller Sztaingrib: "They may mutilate our bodies, burn our books, but the souls that reside in them — these, never!"

Of their end, I never learned. But suffice it to say that the reality was not likely to have been far removed from speculation.

My mood being my guide, then, it leads me to the Old Town Square, a generous quadrangle alive with colour, talk, tittering, laughter, movement and music. Around it stand a number of bright lively kiosks selling black *kawa*, *pierozkis* and cake with tea and rum to a multitude of chattering folk who amble by there, or lounge against lamp-posts, pillars and council signs, or pause to chatter briskly as they meet, or who simply sit at tables and on benches backed by flower-beds and shrubs, the while watching the violin orchestras, buskers, baggy-trousered street-comics and red-bloused dancers in the centre display their art. In their midst, toddlers and youngsters in sailors' outfits and patterned caps and little girls in floral dresses run, skip and flit about; young men and girls engage in earnest or light converse; old men sit hunched in contemplation over chess-boards; while their

wives chatter amongst themselves or hum faintly over knitting or embroidery. Folk memory has it that here and in its surrounds miscreants had been publicly flogged, statesmen had negotiated treaties, composers and poets had brought light and given voice to the nation's soul, while astronomers had scoured the heavens' reaches for humanity's illumination of another sort.

With the sun at its zenith having so pounded at me on my passage here, I am overcome by a torpor compounded of heat, heartache and exertion and feel I must sit down. I find a seat at a shaded table near the chess-players and their coterie and sink into it with all the weight of the present and the past upon me when a woman's voice scarcely more than an arm's-length away calls my name.

"Shimen! You don't recognise your Hana?"

I turn, come to face the woman square-on. She is sitting at the table across from me with the two-toned brown umbrella tilted over her and stirring a *kawa* with a spoon. She is dressed in a black much-weathered cheap cotton skirt, a matt-blue blouse, her cardigan of a still deeper toneless blueness and a rumpled hand-knitted black and brown shawl about her shoulders.

For moments I say nothing. I look, simply look even as she looks back, a woman bordering seventy, much filled-out, stocky and grey, there being little unique in that, but at the same time unmistakable, impossible to mistake, with her nose curved in just the way I had always thought fetching, with her dimples so deep beneath her cheeks, and the contour of her lips barely changed in all of fifty years, even if all else — her hands, her brow, the padding about her eyes and her neck, her chin have submitted docilely, as mine have done no less, to the dictates of accumulated years.

Taking in all this — the dowdiness, heaviness, greyness and doughiness of colour as of texture that have so overtaken her — I am given to remember suddenly so much, too much, and want there and then, all torpor notwithstanding, to run away.

But I stay, and, instead, I ask, I say, "Hana? It is you? It is you?"

There are smiles and there are smiles: smiles variously of mirth, gladness, pleasure, amusement, bitterness, irony, spite. With a hint of a smile—no more, just a hint—which might be read in any of its connotations, she turns a pudgy index finger towards her breast.

"Who else?" she replies. "You made other arrangements here? You expected someone else to keep a seat for your return?"

I scan her every facial line where, once, my hands had more delectably done the

work of eyes.

"You have waited," I say, "you have waited all this time?"

"What do you mean 'After all this time'?" she replies. "To me it is only yesterday. To me it has always been only yesterday. You see, even eternity is but a day when the moment one is waiting for is coming or, as it has now, finally comes."

"And you have waited all this time?" I say.

"Why do you keep saying 'all this time', Shimen, when, against that same eternity, fifty years is scarcely an hour, scarcely even as much as a minute?"

"And so you have waited every day?"

Hana nods ever so faintly.

"A promise is a promise, Shimen."

"And you want to say that you have kept yours," I say, "while I for my part did not?"

"And *did* you?" she asks.

Did I?

History takes on a darker, greyer, harder tint of its own, It is a play-through of burnt-out buildings, precarious ruins, barbed wire fences, army trucks arriving and departing, people scaling stony mounds, seeking shelter, scraping for past possessions, scavenging for food.

"Yes Hana," I reply. "You may not believe me. But I did."

"You *did*?" she says.

"In this very square," I begin to elaborate. "In this very place. In November '45. On the twenty-first. Six months to the day after the end of the war. As we agreed."

"But you didn't wait."

"I didn't wait?" I say. "On, yes, I waited. I waited, right here in the midst of all the rubble that was here at the time, with everything around desolated, levelled, charred, with scarcely a place to sleep, a crumb to eat, a tap to shave by. Neither your home, nor mine still stood, I needn't tell you. But I waited. But then people carried tales of further pogroms, there was talk of more war, I could trace as much as one other Obiatz anywhere who may have remained alive or even one other Bleifuss of your own family who could tell me that I may still venture to hope for your return."

"And so you left."

"Papers came through for transfer to a DP camp, with the likelihood of moving on to Paris. All the same I waited, Hana, I did; and kept on waiting even as friends, strangers, officials I asked if they could find out anything about you, they all called

me crazy, a fool, a fool, yes, for holding to a promise to meet a fiancée when the surest promise that any man could make was a pact sealed with the Angel of Death. But I did wait, Hana, I did, until nightfall of the twenty-first, when I let myself be talked into joining a convoy heading west..."

"While I...", says Hana, "while I..." — biting a lip, she sways as if touched by a suddenly risen breeze — "how the jackals must have laughed, while I arrived around midnight, the message I gave Yankev Belkin of course not having reached you."

"Yankev Belkin?" I ask. "A message?"

"Belkin, another from my camp. Appointed as an official who was sent on a mission ahead of the rest, but also carrying from me to you a message that my transport had been delayed. But he never got this far. I learned later that he'd been murdered by peasants when he took it into his head to re-visit his hometown on the way."

"And you've been waiting since?"

"I've been waiting since."

"Because of a promise?"

"A promise made on the threshold of hell but, for that very reason, sealed for me in Heaven."

"Any you have had no other?" I go on to ask. "No husband? No children? Nobody?"

"I have what I have," she says, "and what I have I have."

She then glances at her watch and rises.

"And now I must get back," she goes on to say. "My meal-break is over."

She deposits a few *kopeks* on the table, stands up, pushes back her chair, and, beckoning with a podgy finger, bids me follow.

"Come," she says, "we can still talk on the way."

At the rear of the Square, interspersed between the kiosks, are pastry shops, crafts stores, an art gallery, a hair-dressing parlour and fruit stands. Across the street on one side stands an old-age home between a wide-fronted sheet-glassed furniture store and a motor electrician's workshop; on the other side are the local police station and courthouse squat between a two-storeyed heavily-draped reception-hall to its left and a similarly imposing greystone many-windowed orphanage to its right.

It is in this direction that Hana heads and, as we walk, I tell her, as briefly as the passage allows, something of Melbourne, of my factory, of *landsmen* living there whom she might recall. And even as I do so, I, in my turn, remember other things,

but above all the younger lively Hana who had been my fiancée at a festive table, brightly-lit and richly-laid, that, now fallen to a ageing alien couple Kupczycz, had once seated a joyous, thriving and pious family, an honour to the name of Obiatz.

Crossing the street, we make towards the orphanage through whose heavily hinged rough-hewn doorway we pass. The entrance hall opens upon an office on one side and a waiting-room on the other and smells strongly of naphthalene. Vapid wall-paper the shade of dried-out seaweed covers the walls; the ceiling is a lattice of crevices, its one-time whiteness is blotched the blue-green of ingrained copper, while our steps, Hana's and mine, clatter over-loudly on the crude mosaic design that makes up the floor, causing me to tread lightly like some trespasser there.

## REVIEWS

Archie Weller, *Land of the Golden Clouds*, Allen & Unwin, \$19.95, 378pp. ISBN 1-86448-338-5

Archie Weller's new novel, his first book in seven years, is going to surprise his readers. Weller attracted considerable attention with his first novel, *The Day of the Dog* (1981) and the subsequent short story collection *Going Home* (1986). Each work earned him a reputation as a social-realist writer of unusual power and insight, with Adam Shoemaker saying of *The Day of the Dog* that "There is no other Aboriginal novel in which a sense of being foredoomed is so clearly conveyed" (*Black Words, White Page*. University of Queensland Press, 1989, p.172). Unlike many other realists, Weller also showed himself to be an innovative stylist by layering multiple possibilities of meaning into his work through elaborate patterns of imagery and quick, deft twists in narrative point of view. In short, whilst his readers could be forgiven for expecting (and looking forward to) "more of the same", there were always grounds for suspecting that he might produce something ... well, *different*.

*Land of the Golden Clouds* is set in Australia 3000 years into the future,

and is a science-fantasy epic that many people will compare with Tolkien and Asimov. As a result of global nuclear holocaust in 1997, the future Australia is an irradiated wasteland which is randomly inhabited by human survivors—many of them physically mutated, and all culturally hybridised and displaced. In short, this future Australia is a form of *terra nullius*, but a *terra nullius* which is in fact populated with many human tribes, each seeking to understand and preserve its own cultural identity despite the pressures of the physical struggle for survival.

That's not to say this novel is an allegory; *Land of the Golden Clouds* is imaginatively far more rich than allegory. Its mode might best be described as a kind of intellectually provocative *canvassing* of issues which co-exists with an intricately-plotted storyline.

It is hard to do justice to the epic nature of that storyline, let alone to the artistic integrity it displays. The public appetite for fantasy has grown enormously in the last decade, offering commercial prospects so tempting that even major Australian publishers (such as Pan Macmillan, Harper Collins, Random House, and Penguin) have begun to establish their own "stables" of Australian fantasy authors. Whilst the general public may regard

Tolkien as the "model" for such works, the actual exemplars are more likely to be contemporary fantasists such as Stephen Donaldson or David Eddings and the kinds of "cultural special effects" which are typical of high-rating tv science fiction series such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation* or *Babylon 5*. When these influences are woven together, the resultant fictions are peopled with numerous characters from different races and species, each gaudily distinct from the other, and the writer's task is to establish the key characteristics of each group, then push them into conflict with each other. Thus we find books with blurbs which ask, *Who would survive when the peaceful Y'yotha farmed the fringes of the warlike Kk-ree empire?*

Archie Weller subverts all this with a wickedly clever elan. *Land of the Golden Clouds* has a four-page cast-list which embraces over one hundred distinct characters, and those characters represent a multiplicity of tribes and peoples: the Tribe Elk, with its Violet Lynx Foot clan; the Children of the Moon in the City of Bones; the bat-like People of the Caves; the Keepers of the Trees; the Purple-Crowned Lorikeet People, and so on. These groups could be said to be "gaudily distinct" inasmuch as Weller takes pains to help the reader to visualise the different markings and

finery and ceremonial accoutrements of each. But, more importantly, they are shown to be linguistically and ontologically distinct.

The outlook and background of the character known as Port Rial become more comprehensible as we learn that his name is of Ras Tafarian origin, and the nature of Ras Tafarianism becomes more implicitly clear as it is linked with folklore about the "long-lost Island" from which his people came. There is a race of Asian scientists with an interest in healing, a race of blue-eyed whites whose social codes and beliefs are a distorted literalistic version of biblical Old Testament laws, and—more lightheartedly—a small tribe of worshippers of a strange crimson orb whose sacred sites are known as the Wakkah and the Essigee. More central to the narrative is the clan known as the Night Bats or Nightstalkers, a shunned subterranean race who prey upon humans by eating their flesh and fashioning bat-like wings from their skin.

S'shony, one of the book's most prominent characters, is a Nightstalker who becomes an outcast. Pregnant to a member of the race of Sun People, she shows compassion to Ilgar, a male of yet another different race (the Tribe Elk of the Ilkari Nations) and this causes her to fall

outside the morality and tolerances of her own people. Predictably, this leads to a "love affair" between S'shony and Ilgar, but Weller uses this formularistic ploy to advance the notion that tolerance and understanding lie in dialogue and self-discovery. S'shony and Ilgar discover that, underneath the differences created by centuries of cultural overlay, they both share a human heritage. Even more importantly, they grow to understand that this shared heritage allows them to strike against the barbaric Nightstalker clan by killing its leader (a nasty piece of work who sports a necklace strung with the skulls of babies). Dialogue thus leads to understanding, understanding to tolerance, and this in turn can lead to triumphant action which eliminates barriers to greater tolerance and dialogue.

The Weller message is not as trite as that last sentence, but it is based upon a passionate, committed belief in reconciliation and reconciliatory action. The various characters and tribes have separate, individual quests, but at core the quest of each is twofold: to discover and preserve cultural identity, and to guarantee the survival of that cultural identity. Weller's significant (and revolutionary) contribution to the contemporary science-fantasy genre is

to use his vast, sprawling narrative to demonstrate that such a quest can broaden into a process of pluralism. Instead of creating cultures and races which are fixed and monolithic, poised to go into battle against enemies who are equally set in outlook, Weller concentrates upon fluidity and evolution as characteristics of cultural heritage. In their quest to survive, his "good" characters seek space to be allowed to live-and-let-live (whereas the "bad" characters seek the destruction of anyone who is different) and his more sensitive and intelligent characters see the need to modify their identity and beliefs (within acceptable limits) if this will promote harmony and tolerance.

A number of reviewers have already hailed *Land of the Golden Clouds* as a potential watershed work in contemporary fantasy writing, including reviews in *The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *Australian Book Review*, and Adelaide radio. It is also a significant work in terms of Australian literature, and an eloquent voice in the debate about reconciliation.

Van Ikin

**Debra Adelaide, *Serpent Dust*, Random House, 1998.**

In *Serpent Dust*, just as Reverend Twineham desires in the end "a clearing out, a frank restoration of the wholesome truth" (185), so Debra Adelaide attempts, after almost two hundred years of "terrifying silence", to give utterance to a part of Australia's history which has been largely ignored, if not intentionally concealed. The novel is a fictionalised rewriting of early white Australian history, its *raison d'être* in Twineham's admission that "the [white man's] documents do not always contain the story" (186). Tench, the "Colony's Official Scribe" (192), is ultimately seen to have been "remarkably unbothered by the moral knottiness of the tales and events he conveyed" (192). The text is a weaving together, then, of a number of voices "speaking across the years"—the voices of the young Aboriginal woman, Dyirra, of the First Settlement's surgeon, of the historian, Watkin Tench, of the convict, Cowper, of both Reverend and Mrs Twineham, and of six marines sentenced to death for stealing. In its projection of these individual (and largely unheard) points of view, *Serpent Dust* bears a strong resemblance to Kate Grenville's *Joan Makes History*, wherein Grenville

attempted to rewrite Australia's history from the imagined viewpoints of women whom masculinist historians had ignored. The official historical excerpts used at the beginning of each section of Adelaide's novel are reminiscent, too, of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*.

Tellingly, however, Twineham doesn't reveal the whole truth, after all. He withholds the weighty fact of his paternity, although he hypocritically (because with a considerable degree of regret and envy) reports on the birth of a child to the now elderly surgeon back in England. In his dismissal of Dyirra when pregnant, he foreshadows those other white men who were, through the years, to act so carelessly, callously and irresponsibly towards Aboriginal women and the children they fathered with them. Furthermore, given Twineham's clerical vocation, his treatment of Dyirra satirises the superficial and hypocritical nature of the very religion that whites forced upon people who were, themselves, deeply moral, and steeped in a spirituality of their own.

When Twineham looks back later upon the "sad irony" (198) of himself reading "words of succour and hope" from the *Book of Matthew* to groups of Aboriginal people shortly after his arrival, he feels nothing but shame. The novel at this point is a clear

indictment of the very nature of Christianity. For what happened on Australia's foreshores undermines the very foundations of the religion Twineham came to Australia to propound. And the tragedy for the Aborigines lay, ironically, within the very words he chose to preach:

Or what man is there of you,  
whom if his son ask bread, will he  
give him a stone? Or if he ask a  
fish, will he give him a serpent?  
(198)

The novel culminates in Twineham's tragic recognition that, "In truth we offered them nothing, nothing of value" (191). His bitter regret that he never tried to master even Dyirra's Aboriginal name—"Why was it so difficult to make that small effort to get her name right?" (193)—is not as "absurdly trivial" as Twineham suggests it might be. Even in these (if only slightly more enlightened) times, Anglo-saxon travellers still enjoy the supreme luxury of being able to speak English to, and be understood by, people in many other nations. It is quite a different experience altogether—and a very humbling one—when this proves impossible. Twineham confesses:

We were all akin in this, all so  
consumed with our superiority,

convinced of the virtues of our  
own world, we could not even  
hear what was coming from the  
new land we had entered. (193)

Since first contact, there has never been an "exchange" of language and culture between Aborigines and whites which allowed each race to maintain its dignity and sense of self-worth. Rather, imperialising whites have acted upon the assumption that they constitute the standard to which all other races should conform. Twineham's admitting to this arrogance and ego-centrism in himself is an admission that, unfortunately, too few white Australians are willing to make:

Now I understand my  
greatest difficulty. All along I  
have presumed this was my story,  
and it is not. (186)

And just as Twineham doesn't, until much later, "ponder the elusive cause of the [small-pox] disease" (195), many white Australians still blindly refuse to confront the root cause of the "illness" which continues to beset Australia's Aboriginal population. While the small-pox disease is a tragic historical reality, it also becomes in *Serpent Dust* a metaphor for the continuing societal afflictions from which contemporary Aboriginal

people suffer. The demeaned existence of Aboriginal people since white contact is exemplified in Dyrira's physical state after her "recovery" from the ravages of small-pox:

And I had changed. I knew without even trying there would be no more night sight, no more magic. No more special understanding flying into my head and exploding in a bright flash. No more talking mind to mind. (215)

...and I am still here, becoming more and more like the maiyal every day, with my eyes so damaged that I can only see in cloudy shapes the images of my former world, with my powers all shrivelled to nothing... I felt my face... Half a nose, my lips raised in a sneer. One eye nearly closed over, the other hiding; patches of skull at the hairline. Holes all over my face. Once my skin gleamed smooth, like the fur of water wurra scrambling up the riverbank. (16-7)

(Katharine Susannah Prichard similarly depicted the degeneration of the Aboriginal race in the physical decline of the Aboriginal woman, Coonardoo, in her then ground-breaking [but now, for different reasons, equally contentious] novel

about race relations, entitled, *Coonardoo*.)

While Cowper's treacherous act against Dyrira and her people is the act of one individual, yet, like Twineham, we are all complicit in the ensuing calamity by dint of our apathy and/or our refusal to acknowledge the true source of Aboriginal affliction. The dust of the serpent becomes, then, a metaphor, too, for collective white guilt. We might all benefit from asking ourselves, as Twineham does:

Have I ever cared, have I ever done any virtuous, responsible, moral act, have I ever made a single sacrifice or reparation or apology? (196)

Dyrira's story serves, as well, to underline the pain suffered by the individual who is considered 'different' as a result of miscegenation. While Dyrira is a character in her own right, she also becomes a symbol of the cultural "misfit", and raises the very sensitive issue of identity for those Aboriginal people who are the progeny of (often forced) relations between (usually) white men and Aboriginal women.

Cowper rightly regards his own countrymen as "a snivelling short-sighted mass, too afraid to truly look at the land they have claimed for their

own" (171). Although white, he paradoxically manifests an almost-Aboriginal incredulity of his fellow-colonists, an almost-Aboriginal contempt for white ignorance and parochialism:

They came all this way only to perch on the edge looking back across the water, too scared to more than glance over their shoulder at the vastness beyond.  
(17)

He is the only one of the colonists who appears conscious of the whites' extreme vulnerability in terms of their number, hence, of the fact that white settlement is established only upon the good grace of the site's indigenous people. This is an important fact that too few white Australians take the time to consider. We were tolerated. We were permitted to stay. And thus ended the one period in the history of this continent when its inhabitants might reasonably have constituted themselves as a veritable One Nation Party—yet didn't...

When we enjoy Sydney's harbour, now, from its numerous vantage points, when we stroll along its foreshores, sail its waters, laze on its beaches, too few of us ever think of the Aboriginal tribes who lived on its foreshores before white invasion, who

were pushed back, not only from their main food source and water supply, but from its many and varied sensual pleasures.

During that first winter the natives stood back while their fishing territories were being poached. Stolen.

And what did we offer in return? Salt pork, which to them tasted foul. Damp grey flour, rice that wriggled before it was cooked. (191)

*Serpent Dust* evokes the beauty of that earlier, unspoilt landscape. It focuses on natural elements that were, and still are, an integral part of the Australian psyche—the play of sunshine on water, the blueness of the Australian sky. It should not be difficult, then, to appreciate the sense of loss those first contact Aborigines suffered in Dyrira's understated desire: "the desire for our life as it was, for our land as it should always have been" (217).

Aspects of the Australian landscape are described in the novel through the eyes of English colonists seeing them, in all their strangeness, for the first time. Twineham finds "the grey and drooping gums ... with their slack leaves and their bleeding sides and their untidy rags of bark" (182) particularly remarkable:

Now I wonder if they were in mourning all the years of their existence? Was their whole purpose this sad stoic anticipation of this one brief moment, the single grain amongst the handful of sand which was the past, when an entire world, however small, would end?

Did they stand there, some of them many scores of years old judging from the rings the sawyers counted, silent, moving drowsily, awaiting the inevitable, the brutal tearing away, a monument to that irreversible or inevitable moment. (178)

In these passages, Adelaide expresses sensibilities in close accord with my own. Twineham's perception of gums as both "observers [and victims] of the ravages in this place" (182) is one that I happen to have shared, and which prompted, in fact, the following poem:

### Flooded Gum

*The Vincent Tree*  
Eucalyptus Grand is  
Height 215 feet—Girth 23 feet  
Bruxner Park Flora Reserve  
Orara East State Forest 4412  
ha.

Surprised perhaps  
when first they came  
blundering into your domain

invading cool tranquillity.  
You watched in horror then  
tongue-tied  
as family fell with groans  
and died.

Helpless you stood  
stuck fast at foot  
mute witness  
trapped as in a dream  
while others buckled at your  
side  
white-lightning struck  
scarred paralysed;  
or rooted to the spot in fear  
a few survived the massacres  
to live  
charred replicas of selves  
when lines of fire wiped out  
lives.

The ground resounds still  
with their pain.

Here you've stood  
two centuries long  
grounded firmly in the earth  
which seeded you and gave  
you birth.

Flooded Gum—  
with memories  
with choked back tears  
mute histories.

Given the current political state of this country, I, personally, would like to see books such as *Serpent Dust* and Boon Pryor's *Maybe Tomorrow* become, not only set texts on the HSC syllabus, but mandatory reading for

every Australian's future eligibility to vote! By reading such books, we can't help but become more humble, compassionate and tolerant citizens, more desirous of that importantly equal exchange between races, of knowledge and experience. For one should not be left wondering about any racial group in the end, as Twineham is left wondering about the Aboriginal people: "what could I have learned from them?" (200). And it might not be entirely unrealistic, after just two hundred years of white settlement, for us to think of our own position in this country in the way Twineham ultimately does: "I am still only a visitor here" (201).

Lesley Walter

Robert Manne, *The Way We Live Now: The Controversies of the Nineties*, Text Publishing, 1998, 281pp. \$22.95.

In *The Way We Live Now* Robert Manne offers an overview of the way Australia has evolved in the last few years, but in turn also explains much of his own journey across different political and intellectual arenas. For many people the essays will come as old news, given that they have previously appeared in a variety of

publications in Australia. Manne's own Introduction to the collection notes moreover that "The pieces do not add up to a comprehensive whole", and that they are "occasional pieces, attempts to come to terms with events of the day—an election, a new book, a troubling social issue, a major public scandal, a divisive cultural affair". Nevertheless the collection constitutes a revealing mirror into the soul of a particular section of, and time in, Australian society. Manne writes in a lucid, informed and polite manner, though often engaged in a dialogue with people on whom such sophistication seems to be lost (eg., Pauline Hanson, John Howard, the new-old guard at the helm of the publication he once edited, *Quadrant*).

The essays collected in *The Way We Live Now* were written largely in the Nineties, although "Innocence" is dated 1989. There are essays on politics (such as the Federal elections of 1993 and 1996, the internecine struggles in the Coalition, the rise of Pauline Hanson) and essays on national identity which seek to address the re-emergence of race as a determining factor of the way we see ourselves as Australians. Amongst some of the most moving essays are those addressing the *Bringing Them Home* Report, such as "The Stolen Generations" and "Whisperings of the

Heart", and the mood of expectation Manne (against all odds?! ) saw in the election of the Coalition government in 1996. He writes powerfully of the sheer callousness of some of the main protagonists in the process of removing Indigenous Australian children away from their families, and compassionately of the few White voices who tried to speak out against it. By relating his own condition of post-Holocaust Jew, born in Australia to survivors of one of the cruellest moments in modern history, Manne explores the complexity of our own situation today in relation to the condition of Indigenous Australians. For the day will come when a report as damning as that produced by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 1997 will focus on the passage of the Wik legislation in 1998, highlighting its centrality to White Australia's contemptuous treatment of Indigenous peoples.

Indeed, so much of what Manne writes falls within the "I told you so" mould that it is astonishing that he has not yet set up as a full-time clairvoyant, fifty bucks a pop, thank you, Madame Sosostriis. As Peter Craven noted a few weeks ago in *The Australian* (June 30th 1998), *The Way We Live Now* illustrates both the brilliance and the accuracy of Manne's prescience, though Manne himself

shies away from such claims. But I suppose he knows that others have been saying all along what he too has begun to see in more recent years, and often much more coherently; for instance that the Coalition went out of its way to accommodate the likes of Hanson and Bob Katter (it is called freedom of speech, the Prime Minister likes to remind us). Manne's own role as a public intellectual comes under scrutiny, though perhaps not quite as closely as one might have expected. Personally I find it mind-boggling that even a man as perspicacious as Manne could write, as recently as 1993, of John Howard as "a decent honest bloke". No wonder he writes so caustically about the Coalition's 'aborted revolution' in *The Way We Live Now*. Read as a whole, however, the essays offer a fascinating account of the way Manne has moved from being a fairly right wing ideologue (who else would take on the editorship of *Quadrant* in 1989?! ) to what, today, and to the likes of that esteemed journal's readership, must be very close to being a communist. But then when Jeff Kennett can become the voice of reason and decency in the face of the rise of a culture of hatred and intolerance propagated by Pauline Hanson's One Nation, you know the world is a strange place indeed. And you heard it first on SBS. But not all is

politics. Manne writes about literature, as when he addresses the Helen Demidenko affair, or the many stones thrown at and by Helen Garner; about film, as when he explores the controversy that surrounded the attempts to ban Piero Paolo Pasolini's *Salo*, or trash such as *American Psycho* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*; about sex, as when he tries to make light of President Clinton's hyper-sexuality; about the directions the present government has in mind for our universities; about euthanasia. Did I say Manne does not write about politics only? But what else is there? To be sure in "Innocence" Manne begins by recalling his young daughter's "current passion [-] kangaroos". He goes on to tell of its development, and of his trials and tribulations as the father dragged along by this strong-willed girl, chasing after kangaroos around the paddocks. But then Manne is the father of an innocent young girl, and as such cannot help but find himself thinking about the world in which his daughter lives, and into which she will grow up. So that even in "Innocence" he returns to what clearly is his strongest passion, political analysis, and concludes the essay with a scathing comment on programs developed to teach children "to distinguish between physical affection

and abuse, and, thus, to take action against adults threatening them with sexual harm". Manne contends that those children most at risk are not likely to be protected by such programs, while those who are the recipients of genuine love and affection on the part of adults may develop a troubled awareness of what constitutes affection and what is abuse. "There are many ways to harm a child. The vilest and most obvious is physical abuse. The most common form for us, however, is the unwitting but unremitting assault on innocence".

"Not everyone will agree with Robert Manne on every issue but no one who wants to understand Australia can afford to ignore this clear, passionate, balanced voice", the blurb of *The Way We Live Now* tells us. I could not agree more. One of the most endearing qualities of Manne's latest book however is the extent to which it is a 'performative' *mea culpa*, that is, the way in which it depicts Manne's own "act of contrition" in post-*Quadrant* times. Read separately over the years the essays might have impressed by their sophisticated analysis, by their passionate tone, or accuracy. Read as a whole they make us aware of all the times we may have been tempted to hang our heads and say "I, too, am sorry", and failed to do

so. As a "new" father of children younger than Manne's daughter was in 1989, I was touched most of all by "Innocence". Why, I wonder. *The Way We Live Now* is that kind of book too, difficult to explain. What is it about? Australia and Australians. It is about this, and about that, a book to be read slowly, and a book that anyone who has ever been tempted into a position of intolerance should do well to read. I guess that leaves out only John Howard and Pauline Hanson.

**Tony Simoes da Silva**

**Kevin Brophy, *Creativity: Psychoanalysis, Surrealism and Creative Writing*.** Melbourne University Press, 1998.

The most productive and powerful element of Kevin Brophy's new book is its sheer enthusiasm and pleasure about the business of writing. This is not a surprise, of course, because Brophy is a writer and a teacher of writing. This book is valuable because such dedicated studies about writing are few and far between. And particularly not in the generous and wonderfully diverse form that *Creativity* offers us, which includes high theory, historical survey work, fabulous anecdotes, and stories,

fragments and meditations on expression and language.

*Creativity* is a study of where writing comes from and some of the paths it heads down. It is a remarkable study of many things and, in a sense, can support a range of diverse readerships: it is a book that tackles ideas, illustrates them with the creative work of the writer Brophy, and looks to antecedents and, to some extent, explanations of how creativity and writing in particular has allowed itself, celebrated the fact even, to become part of the operations of intellectual institutions such as the university. What are the benefits for the writer, the university, the writing itself?

Brophy states in his introduction that this is a selective, not exhaustive, study, and the path he takes, alongside a bicycle path on a simple street map of Melbourne to speak to writing students in a classroom, is one that runs right through the intellectual heartland of the twentieth century. Ideas in flux, movements of people formulating things: Sigmund Freud, the Surrealists, particularly Andre Breton, Jacques Lacan.

Again, from the introduction:

I have chosen to focus on the discourses of psychoanalysis, Surrealism and Lacanian psycho-

analysis because they represent a series of decisive transformations and divisions in contests over questions of creativity tied to some of this century's major upheavals in artistic practice.

He formulates ideas about creativity, about the process of writing, and tracks the method of free association adopted by Freud from the example in a treasured creative writing manual he was given at the age of fourteen, and then applied by him in his clinical practice. The suspension of reason, the secular confession, this time in a medical model, a not-recorded mode. Brophy gives us intriguing information about individual practice and the status of these results, traces, as the materials for the writing of the case study. And then the interest in free association by the Surrealists: automatic writing, the unconscious as a technique for the production of texts, the inexhaustible murmur of the unconscious.

And then onto contemporary practice in the creative writing classroom and workshop—the borrowing of the techniques, often in a circle and usually without the historical understanding of the exercise which, after all is not required because it is, simply, a good and enabling writing exercise. But

Brophy's tracking of meanings and purpose through the century is fascinating, and carries with it a mass of details as well as philosophical considerations of some of the contested sites around "creativity": what it is, how and why it can operate.

And the little details, like the meeting of Freud and Breton in 1921 in Vienna, the tensions and funny expectations of this meeting of an old man and a young man, both interested in the same things, and the particular way Breton recorded it. Or that Freud, the "greatest love specialist in the world", was offered, in 1924, \$100,000 by Samuel Goldwyn to go to Hollywood to write scripts and advise on film. Another fascinating exercise Brophy follows is to document the similarities, the points of commonality between the descriptions of consulting rooms of analysts by writers: Freud's by Breton, Lacan's by Stuart Schneiderman, Rene Allendy's by Anais Nin.

I have a stake in all of this investigating: as a "creative" writer teaching "creative" writing in a university, writing novels and supervising and examining other people's novels in the form of Master of Arts dissertations, the ground can become a little muddied at times. There are many salient and effective

arguments in this book for future considerations of the whole practice of teaching creativity in universities (as if the real work of such an institution is not creative!). These considerations are urgently required because this area of academic work is growing like crazy: most Australian universities now have creative writing programs and many of them extend to postgraduate studies.

Brophy argues strongly for such programs to firmly remain within departments of English and Cultural Studies, to not be sequestered out into their own "pure" spaces.

Creative writing workshops do not have to be havens for a narrow or defensively craft-oriented approach to writing. They have the potential to be sites for literary writing which is outside of a canonical history, limited genres, or modernist ideals of genius. They can be responsive and unpredictable in ways that are not possible for courses structured by detailed curricula.

The cut and thrust of argument, of critical theories, of an understanding of the world of discourse. Brophy quotes Foucault:

What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to

individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art?

And follows it with these words:

Creative writing (...) is one of the more valuable and interesting experiences the study of literature can provide. It is one of the points at which literature is revealed, not as a site for self-expression or as the exercise of genius, or as a history of great books, but as a process close to the flow of power relations in a modern society, a process central to our experience and construction of our selves.

As an individual implicated in and with an investment in this venture, these and the other lessons of Kevin Brophy's book are salutary and confirming, as well as challenging. It is a useful book: both in its theory and pursuit of an understanding of where the concept of creativity has come from, its snaky path through this century, as well as by its practical insights and generosity of offering these lessons through the act of making and crafting something.

**Terri-ann White**

## CONTRIBUTORS

**CATHERINE BATESON** is a writer living in the Central Highlands of Victoria. Her second collection of poetry, *The Vigilant Heart*, is being published by University of Queensland Press. **JOHN BENNETT**'s new collection *Field Notes* is being published this year by Five Islands Press. In 1989 he won the Mattara Poetry Prize, and recently resigned from the National Parks & Wildlife Service to undertake an MA in Creative Writing at Wollongong University. **PETER BIBBY** writes poems, plays, filmscripts, music theatre. Edits books, acts and sings. Lives in Broome. **PETER BISKUP** recently retired as a lecturer in librarianship and archives from the University of Canberra. He is author of *Not Slaves Not Citizens: The Aboriginal Problem in Western Australia 1898-1954* (1973); *The New Guinea Memoirs of Jean Baptiste Octave Mouton* (1974) and *Libraries in Australia* (1955). **PAT BORAN** was born in Portlaoise, Ireland in 1963 and has been widely published in Ireland and the US. In 1997 he was City of Dublin Writer-in-Residence. **DAVID BUCHANAN** is a playwright, musician/composer as well as a poet. He won the Swan Gold 1992 Outstanding Playwright Award for his second play *Looking Off the Southern Edge*. **ADRIAN CAESAR** is a Canberra writer and critic. His book of poems *Hunger Games* was published in 1996. **TONY SIMOES DA SILVA** is a PhD student at The University of Western Australia. **BRUCE DAWE** is one of Australia's best known poets. His most recent book: *Mortal Instruments: Poems, 1990-1995* (Longman, Australia). At present he is teaching U3A classes and enjoying it.... **JANE GIBIAN** was born in Sydney in 1972, completed an Honours degree in Australian Literature in 1995, and has been widely published in Australian magazines. **VAN IKIN** teaches in the English Department, U.W.A, and is editor of *Science Fiction* magazine. **WENDY JAMES** is a Sydney writer. She has had short stories published in various journals and is currently writing a novel. **DOROTHY JONES** teaches at the University of Wollongong. **JOY KILIAN** studied Creative Writing at Curtin University, and has lived in Albany WA for the past two years. She writes whenever she can, in between looking after two young sons. **SERGE LIBERMAN** is a Melbourne doctor and short story writer. He is the Literary Editor of the *Australian Jewish News*. **MORRIS LURIE'S** most recent book is *Welcome to Tangier*, twenty linked stories, published by Penguin Books. **JOHN MALONE'S** first collection, *Suburban Bonsai*, appears in *Friendly Street New Poets One* (Wakefield Press, 1995). **CHRIS MANSELL** is a poet who lives in

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