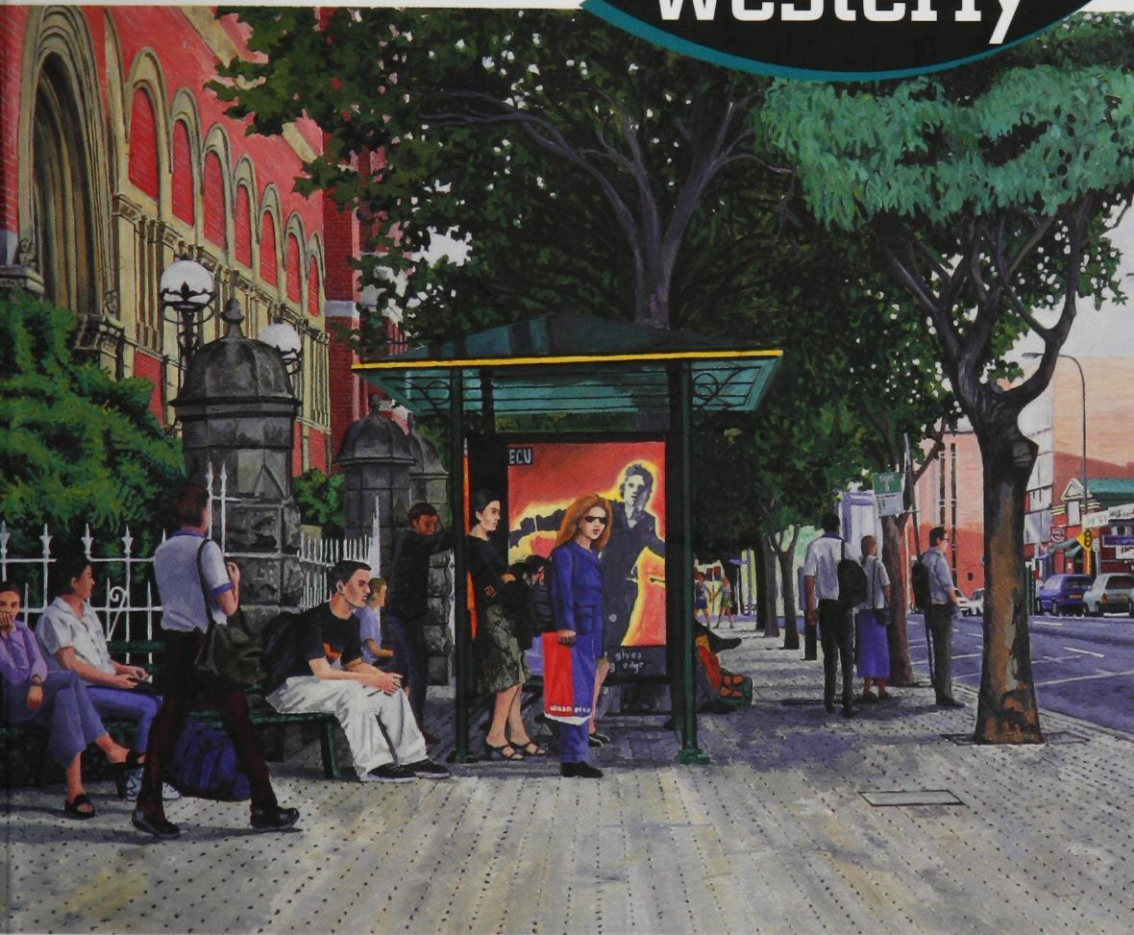


# westerly



stories ◀ poetry ◀ articles ◀ reviews ◀

volume 45 ▲ 2000 twenty dollars



# *WESTERLY*

Volume 45, November 2000  
(Asia and Australia)  
ed. Delys Bird & Dennis Haskell

Centre for Studies in Australian Literature,  
University of Western Australia 6907  
Australia

**in affiliation with**

## *SALT*

Volume 12, August 2000  
(Europe and America)  
ed. John Kinsella

Churchill College, University of Cambridge  
England CB3 0DS

---

This is the first issue of *Westerly* in its new structure, with *Westerly* and *Salt* published annually: *Salt* in the first half of the year, *Westerly* in November. Together the journals offer the best new poetry, fiction and critical work from Australia and Asia, Europe and America.

*Westerly's* editors welcome this affiliation with *Salt* and our new, annual *Westerly*. We wish it continuing success.

Cover design by Robyn Mundy of Mundy Design, using Thomas Hoareau's *Perth Bus Stop*, acrylic on canvas, 76 cm x 110 cm. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

---

## **WESTERLY**

an annual review ISSN 0043-342X

### **Editors**

Delys Bird & Dennis Haskell

### **Editorial Advisors**

Pat Jacobs (prose) Marcella Polain (poetry)

### **Editorial Consultants**

Bruce Bennett (ADFA, Canberra), John Kinsella and Tracy Ryan (University of Cambridge), Susan Ballyn (University of Barcelona), Diana Brydon (University of Guelph), Yasmine Gooneratne (Macquarie University), Douglas Kerr (University of Hong Kong), Brian Matthews (Flinders University), Vincent O'Sullivan (Victoria University, Wellington), Peter Porter (London), Robert Ross (University of Texas at Austin), Andrew Taylor (Edith Cowan University), Edwin Thumboo (National University of Singapore)

### **Administrator**

Monica Anderson

**All work published in *Westerly* is fully refereed.**

*Westerly* is published annually at the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature in the English Department, The University of Western Australia with assistance from the State Government of W.A. by an investment in this project through ArtsWA. *Westerly* is affiliated with *Salt*, edited by John Kinsella and published mid-year. The opinions expressed in *Westerly* are those of individual contributors and not of the Editors or Editorial Advisors.

### **Notes for Subscribers and Contributors**

Correspondence should be addressed to the Editors, *Westerly*, Department of English, The University of Western Australia, Nedlands, Western Australia 6907 (telephone (08) 9380 2101, fax (08) 9380 1030); email [westerly@cyllene.uwa.edu.au](mailto:westerly@cyllene.uwa.edu.au); web address: <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/westerly/> Unsolicited manuscripts not accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope will not be returned. All manuscripts must show the name and address of the sender and should be typed (double-spaced) on one side of the paper only. Whilst every care is taken of manuscripts, the editors can take no final responsibility for their return; contributors are consequently urged to retain copies of all work submitted. Minimum rates for contributors – poems \$40.00; stories/articles \$90.00. Contributors are advised that material under consideration for publication may be held until August 31 in each year.

Subscriptions: \$22.95 per annum (posted); \$40.00 for 2 years (posted). Special student subscription rate: \$16.95 per annum (posted). Single copies \$22.95 plus \$2 postage. Combined *Westerly* and *Salt* subscription \$46.00 per annum posted. Email Subscriptions \$10.00 to [westerly@uniwa.uwa.edu.au](mailto:westerly@uniwa.uwa.edu.au). Subscriptions should be made payable to *Westerly* sent to the Administrator, CSAL at the above address.

Overseas subscriptions: please see back page.

Work published in *Westerly* is cited in: *Abstracts of English Studies*, *Australian Literary Studies Annual Bibliography*, *Australian National Bibliography*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature Annual Bibliography*, *Arts and Humanities Citation Index*, *Current Contents/Arts & Humanities*, *The Genuine Article*, *Modern Language Association of America Bibliography*, *The Year's Work in English Studies*, and is indexed in *APIAS: Australian Public Affairs Information Service* (produced by the National Library of Australia) and *AUSTLIT*, the Australian Literary On-Line Database.  
*Westerly* 2000

## CONTENTS

### POEMS

|                       |     |
|-----------------------|-----|
| Shirley Geok-lin Lim  | 20  |
| Amber Genevieve Flynn | 45  |
| Bruce Dawe            | 47  |
| Matt Robinson         | 54  |
| Brendan Ryan          | 71  |
| Knute Skinner         | 74  |
| Ryan G. Van Cleave    | 76  |
| Andrew Sneddon        | 104 |
| Judy Johnson          | 107 |
| David Cookson         | 110 |
| Uli Krahn             | 130 |
| Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm | 132 |
| Coral Hull            | 133 |
| Roland Leach          | 147 |
| Bill Fewer            | 150 |
| Laisha Rosnau         | 167 |
| Mal McKimmie          | 169 |
| David McCooey         | 183 |
| Mike Williams         | 184 |
| Jordie Albiston       | 186 |

### STORIES

|  |    |
|--|----|
| The Robert Parish Fiasco               | 7  |
| Joshua Wilson                          |    |
| Eugen's Fall - Geburtstag, Vienna 1810 | 49 |
| A. F. Johnson                          |    |
| There is a Car Travelling              | 57 |
| Brendan Somes                          |    |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| A Mile from Grapple X  | 93  |
| Maggie Joel  |     |
| In Search of Lost Angels   | 100 |
| Maggie Joel  |     |
| The Mirror Game  | 125 |
| Maya Linden  |     |
| Until the Wall Broke   | 135 |
| Ouyang Yu  |     |
| Dear Circus Aerialist  | 161 |
| jennifer wawrzinek   |     |
| A Short Report from Happy Valley                                       | 188 |
| Wayne Macauley   |     |
| ARTICLES   |     |
| Evil, Time, Redemption   | 37  |
| Marion Campbell  |     |
| Authenticity in Brian Castro's <i>Stepper</i>                          | 60  |
| Michael Deves  |     |
| Interstitial Narratives: Italo Calvino and Gerald Murnane              | 111 |
| Paolo Bartoloni  |     |
| Giving a Word to the Sand  | 151 |
| Noel Rowe  |     |
| REVIEWS  |     |
| Acts of Noticing: A Consideration of Some Recent<br>Australian Fiction | 23  |
| Carmel Macdonald Grahame   |     |
| No Camps or Movements: Recent Poetry                                   | 78  |
| Tracy Ryan   |     |
| Stories about Other People: Recent Non-Fiction                         | 170 |
| Tony Simoes da Silva   |     |
| NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS  | 193 |

## FROM THE EDITORS

We welcome readers to this, the first issue of *Westerly*, the leading magazine of literature and culture in Australia and Asia. From 2000 *Westerly* will be published each November, in an issue of at least 200 pages, and its area of concern has been extended to include the whole of Asia, rather than just the Indian Ocean region as previously. *Westerly* is also now affiliated with the magazine *Salt*, edited by John Kinsella from Cambridge, and covering work from America, Australia and Europe. *Salt* will be published in mid-year, and readers may subscribe to both or either magazine. We appreciate any feedback from readers or writers on the magazines.

Delys Bird & Dennis Haskell  
Editor

### PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE

The Editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to *Westerly* in 1999

Jan Teagle Kapetas

for her story 'Immigrants' that appeared  
in the No.2 Winter 1999 edition

# JOSHUA WILSON

---

## THE ROBERT PARISH FIASCO

### *men without women*

Robert Parish, wandering poetic footpad of sure-footed wandering and sore-footed verse, appeared on my doorstep one morning, years ago, wearing faded violet overalls. His trademark mane and beard streamed from almost the very centre of his face, leaving only eyes, nose and teeth, and he held a shiny, careworn satchel which fluttered with fresh airport tags. He seemed a little drunk.

The sky was that peculiar Melbourne shade of pale. It was cold out, the cherry blossoms lay muddy in the gutters and so, without weighing the situation, I invited Parish to stay, or at least to pause.

—Huzzah! he bellowed, giving me the first intimation of the painfully exuberant days to come, and continued as I led him down the hall (—Unscrew the locks from the doors, unstop the bottles, unleash the whores!) to the rear of my single-storey terrace, where he dumped his bag in the laundry. Then he grappled me in a clumsy hug, crying tears of relief. —Oh mate, he sobbed, —you've really come through this time. If ever there was a truer friend than you I'd knock him down for a bastard and a usurper.

—Thanks, Rob. Really, it's nothing.

—Nothing, schmuthing, he said, squaring his shoulders. —I'm on to something very, very big at the moment. A ball-tearer that came to me on the slopes of Sasnak. An aching leviathan, part-Levertov, part Levi-Strauss, as if Lacan filled the dreams of Lauterberg.

Saying that, Parish moved even closer, pinning me to the washing machine, and adding in a stagey whisper, —You know how everyone's writing verse novels at the moment?

I shrugged.

—Sure you do. Murray, Porter, that local woman, Jacobsen.

—So you're writing a verse novel? I said, feigning feigned disinterest.

—What? Hell no, what a stupid idea. Why would I do that? I'm a leader not a follower. That's why I'm writing a ground-breaking theoretical text in verse. You wait. The French are going to absolutely shit themselves. Blanchot, Baudrillard, Derrida, diddley-doo-dah, and every other frog-loving, arse-gazer going around for that matter.

There was a silence in which I could feel my face performing a feckless grin. The idea of Parish was still arriving, yet here was Parish the thing.

—IN VERSE I TELL YOU! he roared, as though it had just occurred to him.

—On what? I asked, sliding along the edge of the Fischer&Paykel toploader.

—Aha! he said, poking a gnarly forefinger into my chest. —You won't catch me as easily as that, Wilson, you old shark.

Laughing at my cunning, he whacked me a couple of meaningful blows on the shoulder and alternately winked and nodded. —You old shark, he repeated, I should have known. Come on for christsake, let's eat.

And with that he led the way into my kitchen and proceeded to make two sandwiches from a bricolage of leftover items, many of which refused classification in an endlessly deferred sequence of slippery difference, or fridge condensation, for it was difficult to tell at that distance.

### *the rub*

That autumn was a bad time for me, hostwise. I had my own problems. It was only two weeks since I had returned from Africa and there was a travel book to be finished. The bay window of my Drummond Street terrace glowed with the white-blue radiance of a computer screen untrammelled by words. Six months in Africa for nothing. There were small Roman numerals for chapter numbers and that was it. I wrote the beginning of a sentence, *Along the hollowed snakeskin of the Gwaii riverbed, scarlet and purple leaves like fragments of dull fire stretched*, and then deleted it in disgust. Lush descriptive dross.

When I arrived at the Chimwara safari camp on the edge of Hwange National Park, near Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, everything seemed perfect. A two-finger clap for the people at Africalink in Melbourne. Here was the

writer's dream: a cast of queer individuals, roped together in a tight mesh of tensions, inhabiting easily penetrable buildings, in a harsh, elemental landscape.

The camp was run by the whitest woman I have ever seen. Jane Celia Beech was at the airstrip to meet my Fokker 50 in clinging khakis. Her perfume shimmered across the tarmac like oily plastic wrap.

—Mr Wilson, I'm wet with delight, she said. There were speckles of perspiration on her upper lip.

Standing alongside, a black fellow in ranger greens took my case. —I'm wet with delight, he said, less fervently.

—It's an old Kalahari saying, Ms Beech continued, —*Amwit wedi laat*. It means 'well here you are, and that's ok with us for the time being.'

—I'm delighted, I said, squinting through my obsidian sunglasses at the incandescence of Ms Beech's white, steep-cut blouse.

### *parish, meanwhile*

Was driving me around the twist. He was one of those rare poets who, along with a deep voice and mild alcoholism, actually appeared to write some of the time. You could watch him at it, standing at the laundry window bare-chested in the hot blast of the dryer's sirocco, herding a stubby pencil within the irregular confines of a paper scrap and mumbling synonyms and associative streams of god knows what.

—The falcon and the glove, the olive branch, the weary dove ... what presses down from above? God, gravity, time, death? ... hmmm? ... presses down, looms above, up above, from the heavens shove ... little dove, my little, my ...

Glove, dove, shove? The potted instructions of an avian fetishist? Anything was possible. What I knew of Parish was fashioned in the tepid forge of our mob drinking days and much altered by the intervening years—abraded, bronzed, creased, dimmed, embroidered—so that the him of now seemed a faded, ersatz him of then. When I first met Parish, movement was his mantra. He championed the life of the wandering soul, the heart of the sea-route, where long stints of steel-flecked ocean were tempered by the rare anchorage of a warm sea-bed—the blisters and barnacles of loneliness, a bargain price to pay for freedom. He worshipped RL Stevenson, whose dictum I heard him beerily quote in *The Black Prince* and *The Perseverance*: *Times are changed with him who marries; there are no more by-path meadows, where you may innocently linger, but the road lies long and straight and dusty to the grave ... to*

*marry is to domesticate the Recording Angel.* It puzzled me then, for I always thought we were the recording angels.

Now, in between bursts of egomaniacal verve, he seemed a maudlin, hulking figure, haunting the steamy recess of my laundry with his muttering. The old courage was gone and maybe the travelling act was wearing thin, but what else was missing?

### *dramatis personae*

The Chimwara camp was situated on the west bank of the River Gwaii. A dozen permanent tents surrounded the central dining hall, connected by a haphazard network of stone-edged paths through the dust and acacia scrub. My quarters consisted of an army-green tent big enough to stand in, a camp bed, desk, kerosene lamps, and two large, waterproof trunks for clothes, books, booze and other essentials. Attached by thick, centipede stitching, a small bathroom annex hung off the back of the tent like a spider's poison sac.

The first night, over dinner, I was introduced to the whole crew. Jane's husband, Ted, was a florid and corpulent pastiche of various skin diseases who spent all his time playing chess against a machine called Fritz. There was Vince, who I met at the airport, a black guide in his early sixties, with a penchant for watercolour. He asked me if I had packed any fruit. A banana, or a couple of apples? At that time of year he was reduced to Warholian renditions of tropical fruit cans or still life with onions.

Kurt Valdemeyer was a poster-boy guide from Johannesburg. Evidently his nerves were shot. His soup spoon made a plangent fluttering against his tin bowl at breakfast and he left suddenly, soon after I arrived. And then there were the twins, Sara and Sarah, coloured girls who worked in the kitchen. They were both blind, which was strange enough, but there was something even more bizarre about them—their voices were indistinguishable, identical in tone, timbre, lisp, pitch and plosive emphasis, dental and retroflexive peculiarity. They doted on old Vince and I wondered in the beginning if he was an uncle.

The river at that time of year was a bare channel of red dirt. A few photographic safaris trickled through as the dry season ground on, but the hunters had spent their last cartridges—the few unshot animals were now slow, listless, skin-draped skeletons. Containers waited on the docks at Capetown packed with skins and antlers, escutcheoned zebra heads,

floor-biting leopards, and the occasional bull elephant in its entirety, messy innards replaced with fibreglass, styrofoam, kevlar and silicon. At the camp a similar process was taking place. Machinery was oiled and wrapped and stored for next season, Vince put the spare jeep up on blocks, Sara and Sarah and I dismantled the clients' tents, pocketing several kilos of loose change as we went, Ted ordered extra batteries for Fritz, and Jane spent a week in Harare with the big boys, counting money no doubt.

When the first blood-black clouds appeared on the horizon, a dozen miles to the south, the drinking began in earnest, and I discovered there are insects that cry out in the African night very much like a woman ascending the rungs of sexual ecstasy, which was lucky if not a little disconcerting.

### *the oracle*

On a whim I went to the house of a friend, the poet Chris Wallace-Crabbe, to ask his advice. We sat at his blondwood table and he poured coffee. The fruitbowl was full of bananas and I couldn't resist a small act of homage.

—*Look how his nose is black*, I said, quoting from the poem 'Bits and Pieces', —*jetblack as lovebites that blotch the yellow hide of his throat, tropical patriarch knowing perhaps the new moon four days off.*

He smiled, the picture of the tropical patriarch himself, nut-brown and vigorous in his tennis shirt.

—I don't suppose you came here to talk fruit, he said.

—No, unfortunately not. I did want to ask though, the line about the new moon, is it the image of the crescent, like the curve of the banana, that you were aiming for, or something more esoteric? Quite clever really, a phallic image by way of a lunar metaphor.

He chuckled, showing off his remarkably youthful smile and wagging a tanned forefinger at me. —You know full well, a magician never reveals his tricks.

He poured more coffee and opened a biscuit tin. —Iced vo-vo?

—Thanks.

—Well?

—Chris, I don't want to alarm you, but Robert Parish turned up at my door a couple of days ago. He's staying in my laundry.

—Parish, eh? he said, instantly suspicious. —Back in town you say?

—I'm afraid so.

—Well now, that will hardly do. What does he want?

—He's working on a new book. Theory in verse.

—Inverse theory? You mean something that makes sense. Something readable.

—No, a theoretical text in the verse form.

—Ahh, he said, inclining his magnificent, snowy head and humming a wonderful, lulling drone to himself. —In your laundry, you say?

—That's right.

—Well I'm sure he's safe enough there for the time being. Don't worry, I'll think of something.

### *an encounter and a request*

A month into the rains I had filled seven notebooks with character sketches, flights of description, and local legends. One particularly wet and dark afternoon I returned from my customary walk, threw my oil-skin coat at the clothes horse and tossed my hat carelessly at the hook over the desk. A shape moved. I leapt into the elephant's foot wastebasket. My gun was on the other side of the bed. What species of neglected wildlife had come to claw its own episode in my narrative?

I realised it was Vince when he smiled, a black cheshire cat in the shadows, and said, —Please Mr Wilson, you have to help me out, eh chap?

—Jesus, Vince, you could have warned me. I'm stuck.

He pulled me free of the wastebasket. I poured tumblers of whiskey and handed him one.

—Help me out, eh Mr Wilson? he said again, slaking the liquor in one shaky draught.

—Help you with what? I asked, bemused, filling his glass.

—You know. The womenfolk.

—What about them?

—I'm tired, Mr Wilson, I'm dead tired. I'm not a young man no more.

He leant against the heavy canvas of the tent, legs shivering with exhaustion. Sloppily, he drank off the fumous spirit.

—Is it the jeep again? Do you need me to help you re-bore the cylinders?

He laughed, almost sobbing. —Not the jeep, he choked out.

I glugged another jolt into his mug. —I don't know how to help you, Vince.

He came nearer, sat on the edge of the bed and put a hand on my

shoulder. —At least take care of Miss Beech, he pleaded, winking both eyes. —She's making me crazy. I'll keep up with the twins, but you got to help me with Miss Beech, eh chap? Eh, Mr Wilson?

—I really don't know what you're talking about, Vince. I mean, Miss Beech, Jane ... she's her own woman. I can't just ... I mean, we're not talking about a game of totem-tennis here, are we? It's kind of outside my sphere of operation don't you think? I'm only a writer after all, trying to, you know, write.

We fell silent, staring into the gloom. I could smell kerosene from the dining hall lamps and a fork-tailed drongo struck up a melancholy, twilight song in the jacaranda outside. Tomorrow or the day after we ought to get the first tongues of water from upstream.

—That Kurt boy was no good either, Vince muttered to himself. —He tried, but he was no damn good either.

With all the kinetic energy of a pulped passionfruit, Vince picked up his hat and held it with both hands to his chest. Standing close to the bulb as he was, I noticed his face seemed noticeably grey. —Please Mr Wilson, eh chap? he said, his eyes watery with the booze.

Then the rain started again, thudding into the wet dust. —Viiiiinnnce. Vii-iinnce, called a voice across the camp.

—Is that Sara or Sarah? I asked.

Vince shrugged. —The Lord only knows, he said, lips hardly moving. —And it don't matter much as far as I'm concerned. Except maybe that Sarah don't bite. Not all the time she don't.

He shuffled to the furled doorflaps of my tent and paused, his whole body caught in a posture of profound inertia. Without turning, he said, —She'll have her way in the end, Mr Wilson, no matter what you or I say anyhow.

### *trouble in paradise*

One sharp morning Parish and I had a run-in. He had been scribbling away since a quarter-past five, disturbing my attempts to eke out a crucial passage of febrile hallucinations from the weeks when I was bed-ridden with malaria. It was so cold that my nose and fingers burned, making any descriptive prose on the subject of fever hard enough without Parish's rat-scratchings and cries of —Oh ... hummm? Maria, up here, appear, down there, derriere ... No, no, Maria, I fear, I peer, I perspire, oh dear.

Nevertheless, with a thermos gripped between my thighs I sipped scalding coffee from a stainless steel cup and wrote: *Skeins of evaporated synaptic brine cast filmy shadows on the canvas, or so it seemed in the burning eggskin tent, my head cushioned in a soak of perspiration and spilled rehydration fluid.*

Not bad, not too bad at all, I thought, forgetting the chill for a moment. Then from the rear of the house I heard Parish turn on my violently clamorous washing machine. I stormed down the hall and found him sitting cross-legged against the rattling white monolith.

—How's it going? I shouted over the vibration.

—I've finished the first third, he said. —Thought I better do some laundry while the muse sleeps.

—Perhaps you should bounce what you've got off a publisher. See what the market's like for that sort of stuff.

—Mate, there isn't anyone in this country who could handle it.

—What about Duffy&Snellgrove? They did a fantastic job with *Fredy Neptune*.

—Duffy&Snellgrove, he said sarcastically. —That's not even how you spell Freddy, is it for godsake?

—I could introduce you to Hugh Tolhurst at Black Pepper.

—Black Pepper? Black Pepper? Do you think they could handle something like *this*?

—Hugh's an interesting guy. He's done some out-there stuff.

—Yeah, Tolhurst's alright. But come on mate, do you think he could possibly be ready for *this*?

In truth, as much as I wanted a needle of editorial reality with which to prick Parish's bubble, I couldn't bring myself to inflict his opus on anyone I knew.

—I suppose not.

—Shit mate, I'm talking about the intersection of the lyrical with the deconstructed postcolonial ineffable. Why, for instance, do words rhyme with other words that don't make sense? Why Jabberwocky? What if the French were forced to pronounce the letter H? Why have they made the letter N virtually redundant? Is the fricative plosive truly a tool of oppression? Or only if you've got a cold? In which case there's the nasal to consider. Is postmodernism the triumph of the fractal or the dactyl? What if the unconscious is not structured like a language, but rather more like an Allen Ginsburg first draft? And, he said, eyes wide, —if the words occupy the centre of the page is it ok to doodle in the margins?

With that done he held his hands up like Moses waiting for the stone tablets from above.

—Rob, I don't know the answer to those questions. I look forward to your book on the subject. I was only trying to help.

—Mate, I know you were, and I appreciate it, he said, taking a pensive double-handed grip on his rufous beard. —You'll not be forgotten, my friend. Oh, no. No, when they carry me wrapped in silk and vine leaves to the holy holy bosom of the Sorbonne, all those who belong to book clubs in Greenwich Village, who walk wide-eyed and drunk with the fusty learning of Oxford and Cambridge, who stand up screaming in the night in San Francisco for culture and get only croissants, who wax and wane in Middle Eastern airport lounges dreaming of words more exotic than baklava, who shadowed by the ghost of Scheherazade come shuffling, shuffling to the supermarkets of the Sudan, who ...

As there was no end in sight to this peroration, I slunk towards the kitchen, carefully at first, and then simply turned my back and fled.

### *dampness follows*

The wet season was well-named, I decided. After a morning of leak repair, Vince showed me musk weavers' nests in the ironwood along the Gwaii, three yards above the ground. A sure sign of flood, he said. I gave him three fresh onions and a turnip from the food package my mother had sent.

—Thanks chap, he said quietly. —One day I'd like to paint mangoes. Even pineapple.

—You will, Vince, you will.

As the rain continued, the camp began to resemble a child's mudcake, and I was drawn deeper into the complicated, interstitial tissue of relationships binding the skeleton crew together. It became increasingly difficult to maintain my pose as disinterested scribe, and certainly no-one seemed inclined to pay that notion much lip-service anymore. Jane took to visiting my tent at all hours, often slick with rain and mud. Her usually immaculate khakis, de-created by the elements, melted to the contours of the flesh beneath.

—Mr Wilson, do you think my husband is a good man? she asked on one such an occasion.

—Jane, I'm really in no position to pass comment on Ted, you know that.

—A man who's best friend and constant companion is a plastic, electronic box called Fritz?

—That is a little strange, I admit.

—Especially for a man whose wife is hardly undeserving of some small kindnesses, she continued, drying her cleavage with my towel. —There's a damp spot I can't quite reach, she murmured, leaning over the bed and handing me a flannel.

Whiskey was my first line of defence to these sodden incursions, but it wouldn't work forever. And the turning, turning, tightening gyre that Jane wound around my tent was not the only problem. Perhaps it was my strained imagination but sometimes I woke to a liquid whispering that sounded like the twins eating tinned peaches close to my ear.

### *paperwork*

Just as I finished typing the word *scortation* on a morning of half-decent progress, a letter dropped through the slot and changed everything. It was from Africalink and it boded ill. They noted how the residency had been cut short. I thought I had already explained that—the bad dreams, the malaria medication. (I hadn't said the dreams were real.) There was also a veiled complaint about my failure to make lasting and substantial connections with the host organisation. Hell, I was being white-anted, and the gambit stank of Jane Celia Beech, the silly bitch.

My book—a blankish, papery thing—was going to make acquitting the grant money hard enough. Now my performance on location was being undermined. What did that woman want? I had done my time in the camp quietly, gathering tales, peeling potatoes, taking pictures. I had pitched in.

I knew what she wanted.

### *pressure, a mail metaphor, spirit*

Insistence comes in many colours.

—I've been looking at the terms of your engagement and I'm not sure you're cut out for this residency, Jane said one night, drying her inner thigh with a pair of my clean socks.

—What's that supposed to mean? I replied.

—I think we both know. Africalink was intended to facilitate cross-cul-

tural exchange, give-and-take, quid pro quo.

—And?

—Well so far it seems to have been all one-way traffic, if you'll forgive the vulgar Americanism. I'm sure you've strung us all together pretty well by now, our squabbles and our stories, knitted into a queer puppet-play from which you remain aloof. This is a community and we have needs too, you know.

—Jane, my book's nearly done. There's obviously been a misunderstanding along the way. About my role here, I mean.

—We'll see about that, she said. —The fact remains that a not unattractive woman is standing shivering in your tent. What are you going to do about it? she said, looking pointedly at the quilted envelope of my single cot.

—Whiskey? I said.

### *the idea of an idea*

Slowly I was getting wise to Parish. My latest telephone bill showed six calls to Montevideo. Who was this Maria I heard him moaning about? What else rhymed with dove? A pattern was emerging above the subterfuge. Theory in verse, my arse. The man was heartbroken, and in my laundry.

Pretending to turn in early one night, I reappeared on the pretext of cocoa to find Parish leaning against the kitchen wall, head and beard buried in the crook of one arm, telephone hanging limp in the other. The earpiece tolled a broken connection and his broad, Ulyssean back heaved with quiet sobbing.

—Rob, I said, patting him on the shoulder. He straightened in surprise and would have jabbered explanation, but I held my hand up for silence.

—Rob, I know what's going on.

He slumped a little and bunched his smeary eyebrows together in consternation. I took two brandy balloons from the dresser and ushered him to the table in my den. —Tell me all about Maria, I said.

The tale told to me by Robert Parish that night was one of ill-matched affections, wine-fuelled romantic set pieces, and angry in-laws. When he was done, and it took a while, I told him a story of my own. It was about a tight-knit community living in a stark, elemental landscape; a cast of quirky individuals, all characters in their own right; and at the heart of it all, something slippery and dark.

—The whitest woman you've ever seen? Rob said at the end. —Blind

nymphomaniacal twins, a long-suffering, sexually-exhausted black painter and an impotent, chess-playing fanatic?

—That's right.

—There has to be a book in that.

—Do you really think so?

### *welcome to the jungle*

In the end something had to give. We all stopped talking weeks before and Christmas was surreal to say the least. I gave Vince a book on Gauguin, and Jane, a compact umbrella. The twins served wild pig and we ate in silence, broken only by the bleeps from Fritz and his metallic declarations of 'check' and then 'checkmate' (at which Ted said the only human word spoken that day: —Fuck).

Night after night the stretched and rotting web tightened, swelled and promised to wreck itself as the rain tore strips from the mock-thatch roofs and the Gwaii slipped its banks, running and pooling over the camp as if animate. The tent canvas thrummed and sweated, from within or without who could say, and no-one went about other than by night, when all manner of intersections occurred, and those accidental meetings of flesh in the limbo-space between tents (a brushed shoulder, a collision) passed without a single word of apology or explanation. We went about our business like prey after the hunters. White on black, black on white, as a negative is to the world burnt upon its surface.

One dawn in January I tied a bundle of my things together with wire from Vince's shed, dragged them to the road and hitched to Bulawayo in a truck with a sodden corpse due for burial somewhere. Watching the rain fill and empty from the dead man's eyesockets, I slept. Of all my notebooks, only one survived. The first ten pages were reasonably useful. Then followed a series of disturbed erotic descriptions and stick-figure drawings as if Henry Miller had cut loose with a set of children's crayons and a copy of the Kama Sutra. These I tore out for fear of being stopped at customs. The last dozen pages gave me reason to hope, for they traced events at the very heart of the situation. I could pick out phrases like *saw Jane last night, panther-like (albino panther) entering Vince's tent*, and *the twins, always the twins, four legs and one voice, but what a voice*, and, towards the end, *stains stains everywhere ... not her fault, god there must be salt here somewhere*.

I pored over the sheets of scrawl hoping to salvage material to make

sense of the lost weeks, and to give me the substance of a book for which I had already been paid. Alas, most of it was waterlogged, washed beyond comprehension, and the last pages were covered in watercoloured onions.

### *the zero sum solution*

Any number multiplied by zero is zero and any number divided by zero is undefined. Let us suppose that you have two problems. First, you want to make something go away, a poet for example. Second, there is a lack that needs filling, an absence for which you are being held responsible—say a safari camp in Africa that is at least one sexually active man short of full satisfaction. If we substitute, in the first case, the storyless writer for the brokenhearted poet, and in the second, the writerless story for the voracious, dissatisfied safari camp we begin to see what happened next.

It took me a few days to arrange the necessary details, but arrange them I did. After a last visit to the travel agent in Carlton I caught the No. 22 tram home along Lygon street. Parish was sniffing against the warmth of my Westinghouse dryer when I found him.

—Rob, I said, holding up a sheaf comprised of several maps, two visa forms, and an air-ticket, —what do you know about Zimbabwe?

# SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM

---

## HOME

It is midnight. I wake up and listen.  
One is snoring next to me, heavy  
with sleep and middle-age. Downstairs, one  
is coughing and talking to the television.  
They are what I have. I dare not ask  
for more. Human love is what's at home,  
dazed and on edge. Listening at dusk  
to an unknown bird, learning the task  
of naming, one at a time, in a new  
country, I acknowledge humbly  
this is all I can ask for: proximity  
in a carriage carrying us forward  
as one through the short night hours,  
to disperse when the light breaks through.

## SWEETPEAS

I pick single sprays this morning,  
white, lilac, pink, and powder blue  
to form a handful of scent  
discreet as tears a grown woman  
does not shed before strangers.  
It is foolish to address you,  
sweetpeas, in the second person.  
Only sorrow leads to this fancy,  
these old-fashioned words coming  
from a different text than  
what I must read today.  
Yet I pick the sweetpeas, look  
for a long time at their frail  
blossoms, these with three fringy  
petals overlapping, like mother,  
father, child, a trinity  
that is broken. All August  
I've picked sweetpeas from the fence  
where the vines reach out to me.  
I'm told they must be picked  
if they are to bear more flowers.  
This is what ordinary people  
call nature, the integrity  
of a harvest for human culling,  
comfort from smells and colors,  
variety. It is our scabs  
we must not pick. They'll never heal,  
the doctor says. He knows  
the nature of our bodies.  
Both are nature, that which bears  
and that which never heals.  
We are broken by sorrow,  
something picks at us,  
like the woodpecker we hear,  
bang, bang, for the sustenance  
of the little woodworms

## THE SOURCE

China is the source I have not studied,  
although she, he has been a constant  
like mother, father in memory.  
China was the milk that was too heavy,  
that made one gag. Vomit. Like the scent  
of burned joss. Its insolent bonzes  
muttered no books or instruction.  
Women taught other women on what  
was right and wrong, and they were almost  
always wrong. Center of the world, great lump  
of decay where no one is happy,  
was China in Malacca, a misfit dumb  
country; and I its misfit child  
bastard and deaf, handicapped and wild.

# CARMEL MACDONALD GRAHAME

---

## ACTS OF NOTICING: A CONSIDERATION OF SOME RECENT AUSTRALIAN FICTION

### *A critical culture*

In a recent declaration of faith in Australian writing, Peter Craven claims enviable prescience:

it is generally true that the best Australian writing (which is all I am interested in reading) will hold its own with any kind of writing published anywhere.... It is quite difficult to believe in a world where publishing does not exhibit any marked literary knowledge, where the literary pages of the papers are hit and miss and have no bottom line and where the literature departments of our universities show no zeal in promoting any writing as better than any other, that the writing of your own country can maintain, at least at its upper levels, the highest standards.<sup>1</sup>

In this literary context, the escape of even the smallest creative spark must be regarded as miraculous. Such deft, self-serving appraisals are reductive, however, and do little for literary activity.

It is no small matter that an eminent critic espouses this view of literary studies. If universities seem not to be handing out cut-and-dried accounts of what makes some writing better than other writing, it is because such activity would be intellectually dishonest. Pedagogical zeal is evident in the exposure of students to divided opinion, among generations of eminent critics, about how to define best-writing. Receptiveness to diversity and willingness to speculate about strengths and weaknesses in authoritative practices of literary criticism are misinterpreted as the deliberate sabotage of aesthetic and literary judgment.

It is a tenacious view. Craven (*pace*) is more circumspect than some have been. In 1996, with a Miles Franklin Award for *Highway to a War* lending authority to his view, Christopher Koch imagined writing students in English departments face this: 'They are taught that there is no such thing as real worth in art, and no common values for art to reflect and draw on ....'<sup>2</sup> He charged that writing traditions are devalued in favour of experimentation:

Never has a word been so inflated, and the paradox is that its cult has produced only minor and trivial work. Very little that's original has been written to please these scholar-masters — and a writer who writes to please them is doomed. His words [sic] die on the page, since they are masters only of the sterile, the trivial and the second-hand, and they are abolishing the notion of beauty.

He enjoins writers to resist listening to any 'critic or pedagogue'. How did these become terms of abuse? Koch is a critic himself here, of course, and doing criticism's least valuable work, popularising a distorted view of complex issues. I am reminded of W.H. Auden's advice: 'The critical opinions of a writer should always be taken with a large grain of salt. For the most part, they are manifestations of his [sic] debate with himself as to what he should do next and what he should avoid'.<sup>3</sup> However, it is far from clear that fracturing the literary context in these ways has any value.

None of this reflects my literary training over the last decade. I have only been exposed to inclusiveness based on the possibility of finding value where we used not to look, even in texts formerly discounted in literary studies (for reasons which continue to be examined and some of which have proved indefensible, but I won't recycle the debates). The conscientiously examined proposition that all writing does cultural work has only broadened the range of texts on which critical judgments may be brought to bear and multiplied the criteria by which critics may make them. I was given more to notice, and more with which to notice it.

A decade has passed since David Boyd and Imré Salusinsky wrote their sceptical survey of 'deplorable developments' in English departments, which makes it clear that teacher-pleasing has a history not determined by course content:

... the one thing that students of literature at British, American and Australian universities didn't need ... was a theory. What they needed instead was a little knowledge (who wrote what when) and a lot of taste, sensibility, perception, responsiveness, or judgement (the ability, in other words, to convince their instructors that they shared their views).<sup>4</sup>

This is the context for which the nostalgia exists.

*'... all I'm interested in reading ...'*

The preemptive selectiveness, which Craven finds desirable and which critics often indicate, presumably depends on writers' reputations, or appraisal is an effect of a text's first few pages, or the 'insider trading', of which Mark Davis accused the Australian literary market and the view Craven is rejecting, does play a part in critical judgments.<sup>5</sup> How does one determine in advance that a book exemplifies best-writing? The prior question of how to define that has presumably been answered. The tossed-off assumption that it is a given, especially by senior critics and writers deploying their remarks as attacks on universities, is unlikely to settle a question which, let's face it, has occupied generations of senior critics and writers.

Insightful worriers about these questions offer alternative ways of thinking about value. In her essay collection, *The Red Heart* (Random House 1999), Rosie Scott addresses them in useful, writerly ways. In 'Fiction and Moral Imagination', for example, she links the concepts of consciousness and conscience to argue that 'rich, complex and satisfying work' is the product of a moral imagination and driven by generosity 'rather than retribution, despair or resignation'.<sup>6</sup> She is impressed when 'the artist's moral universe informs and irradiates his or her art'. To distance herself from sanctimonious prescriptiveness, Scott quotes Fellini: 'the lyrical quality of my inspiration is always an act of love'. Such gestures towards an apprehension of quality not only represent a positive impulse, they insist on their own openness to interpretation. They are themselves irradiated by generosity of vision. They are at least as convincing as bullying assertions, or assumptions that one's intuitively divined tastes easily eclipse the taste of others.

## *Matters of zeal*

Highlighting one agenda of cultural criticisms, Salusinsky and Boyd pointed to a factor which still haunts claims that literary judgment is defunct: 'the greatest challenge to established literary canons has ... come from feminist theorists'.<sup>7</sup> Despite persistent illustrations of its complexity by feminist and postcolonial writers, among others, the notion of 'political correctness' usually shadows concern for excellence and often springs from continuing resistance to cultural critique.

Interviewed about her anthology, *Australian Women's Stories* (Oxford University Press 1999), Kerryn Goldsworthy reports her response to the laudable invitation from OUP to put the collection together.

I looked around me and it seemed to me that things were as they had always been. Men were dominating the publishing lists, dominating the bookshelves. Since the golden decade of the 80s when women writers were proliferating in Australia, we have gone backwards, and we have gone quite a long way backwards. So it seemed to me that this was a kind of gesture against that.<sup>8</sup>

Goldsworthy regards the use of 'correct' as a term of abuse — to charge a speaker or writer with suspended judgment, or submissive indoctrination, rather than vigorously held opinion — as Orwellian and a mechanism by which the status quo reasserts itself. I agree. A timely reminder of how fruitful it is to take female authorship as a category for grouping texts, *Australian Women's Stories* exemplifies metamorphosis in literary tastes.

It also draws attention to a surge of short fiction anthologies; nowhere better to look for the intangibilities of quality. The re-release of Murray Bail's *The Drover's Wife and Other Stories* (Text Publishing 1975, 1998) points to a continuing market. Experimentation marks Bail's stories and the pressures he places on form still yield cerebral satisfactions. Anthologies recirculate significant fiction. This archival impulse makes Carmel Bird's edition, *Penguin Century of Australian Stories* (Viking 2000), an invaluable collection of texts for connoisseurs of the form. A criterion for inclusion was the three thousand word limit, a reminder that selectiveness includes factors other than literary discrimination. Always.

David Malouf's *Untold Tales* (Paper Bark Press 1999) and *Dream Stuff* (Chatto & Windus 2000) illustrate that definitions of excellence are elu-

sive among texts which come from the same pen. Malouf's prose is as consistent and compelling as plainsong. Counterpoints between form/content, prose/poetry exhibit unfussy skill: 'Easy reading is damned hard writing', as Nathanael West remarked.<sup>9</sup> Both collections contain writing infused with an affection for humanity. In *Untold Tales*, four narratives, Malouf writes marrow back into the bones of myth and legend, reminds you that existing stories are an opportunity for inventiveness. These are clever pleasures. *Dream Stuff* is a clutch of stories for the heart. They illuminate the ordinary nature of pain, pivoting on moments of sometimes terrible exigency. In one, a writer is forced to fight for his life: 'how close he had stood to an anguish so intense that the only escape from it was into self-extinction' (55). Malouf's stories stand close to anguish, quietly. They also celebrate masculinity, quietly.

Contrary to defensive currents of opinion, there is a flowering of this expression of identity. In *blue* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press 1999), a young adult novel the way *Catcher in the Rye* is – the market-driven category does not apply – Ken Spillman shifts perspectives to trace the vulnerabilities of a group of friends. His novel is wise: compulsory heterosexuality can cause despair, love can be truly selfless, being articulate beats being macho, and more. One of Spillman's themes, the socialisation of young men, is handled with the self-containment that comes of generous writing. There is no sense of *blue* being in covert tension with recent decades of feminist writing, tension which only contracts the vision and makes writing rattle with that 'spirit of retribution, or resignation'. *blue* takes its own interests to heart.

Nigel Krauth's *Freedom Highway* (Allen & Unwin 1999) is a detailed narrative about corruption in diplomatic and international aid circles in Thailand before the Vietnam War. It is incisive about political and cultural difference in ways informed by postcolonial debates and suggesting deliberate manoeuvring with these agendas. The climactic image of a mutilated butterfly might even be read as a devastating metaphor for self-interested interventions in Asia. However, tensions between the central American and Australian characters, anchored in their different ways of being men, are disconcertingly mapped on the body of an Asian woman. Billed as a political thriller, *Freedom Highway* has all the toughness and plot-oriented satisfactions of the genre, but read against it, Malouf and Spillman offer a vision utterly released from machismo.

Bruce Russell's *The Chelsea Manifesto* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press 1999) is explicitly an account of a man's search for himself through psychodrama. It takes him from Fremantle to New York on a journey full of

60s memorabilia. The focus on friendship between two men has Russell's writer-protagonist reflect on the expansion and contraction of things – time, relationships, identity, 'stuff'. He is in a cranky dialogue with feminism: 'I scan the news and remind myself that we're living through the last few years of the twentieth century. Men have served their purpose. Women have changed and men haven't. What few changes we have made don't get reported' (99). Such self-conscious sighs of resignation come across as more pique than quip, but the writing flickers with wit.

The subtleties of their engagements may vary, but each of these recent publications is invigorated by contemporary literary and cultural currents. And read in terms of them, they yield diverse aesthetic and intellectual pleasures.

Universities sustain fiction writers and poets, as creative writing courses proliferate, a fact to which many authors named here could attest. Scholarships can be won by writers whose excellence, established outside the academy, defies detractors. Often writers themselves, instructors in such courses accept responsibility for teaching writing, aware that the area is spiked with the difficulties of judgment. Contrary to what Koch described in the mid 90s, I have perceived chiefly a willingness to enter into students' creative endeavours and desire to wrestle with questions of confidence and competence from within them. This is demanding. It requires the combination of scholarship and insight which W.H. Auden links to the proper functions of a critic.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the success of university teachers in nurturing creativity is demonstrable.

Introducing *Painted Words* (Wakefield Press 1999), a collection of stories and poetry by postgraduate students in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide, Thomas Shapcott writes: 'What I hope the reader will come away with is a sense of the energy and liveliness in a group of writers in the process of flexing their creative muscles, and having fun doing so. This is, after all, a celebration.' Caught by the spirit of the collection which honours the work of South Australian artist, Dorrit Black 1891-1951, I emerge with precisely that sense. Shapcott describes the commitments of creative writing teachers in terms of pleasure: 'One of the joys, in fact, that a teacher of creative writing can experience is the emergence and development of each individual voice.' Clearly a vehicle for show-casing work written in the context, the creative energy in a vol-

ume like *Painted Words* bears him out. It exemplifies vital literary activity. Ranking such writing, which makes modest claims, against Malouf's, say, which represents 'upper levels' and 'highest standards', would be more pointless than zealous. Refusing to read it would be more a pity than clever. Its pleasures are many.

A significant flexing of creative strength occurs in Morgan Yasbincek's *Liv* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press 2000), a novel which demonstrates the permeability of literary contexts. Yasbincek acknowledges the work's origins as a PhD: 'I chose to test the fragment in some challenging ways.' She describes her supervision at Murdoch University in terms of 'radiance' and 'tireless generosity and enthusiasm', suggesting appreciation beyond routine academic protocols. *Liv*'s qualities exceed its value as a refutation of attacks on universities. Each fragment is a suspension over moments in a woman's history cast in terms of mother/daughter relationships and strung from Perth's contemporary suburbs to Yugoslavia before the Second World War. As Joyce Carol Oates has remarked, 'All writing is experimental', and *Liv* is, but there is nothing trivial or second-hand about it.<sup>11</sup> The vicissitudes some readers associate with experimental writing do not apply. As to the question of beauty, *Liv* offers a reading experience akin to telling light-reflecting beads.

Concern about excessive academic generosity towards experimental writing should be offset by academic receptiveness to popular genres, more likely now to be valued for their cultural interest, or read as frames over which writers drape their interpretive skills. Crime, horror, science and romance fiction are open to revisionary approaches from readers and writers. Yet, in a version of the rock/hard-place analogy, this expansion of literary purview is likely to be a target of assertions that university literary studies lack zeal in exercising literary judgment.

Author of *Superstructuralism* and *Beyond Superstructuralism*, Richard Harland exemplifies the new literary eclecticism. Genres have been described as 'apparatuses of capture' and in his novel, *Hidden From View* (Macmillan 1999), Harland exploits them that way.<sup>12</sup> He improvises like a jazz performer on genres as disparate as science fiction, thrillers, fantasy and crime fiction. Populated by Mad-Maxish characters and dominated by sheer intrigue, the novel also displays the kind of emancipated vision which suggests genre-writing has no necessary ideological entailments, sexual or otherwise.

## *Virtue in 'no bottom line'*

Susan Sontag offers clues to subtly different ways of exercising selectiveness. Sontag considers work which is eccentric, neglected, or comparatively unknown. Her emphasis is on what she will and will not write about: 'I am not at all interested in writing about work I don't admire.'<sup>13</sup> She applauds Canetti's 'cult of admiration and hatred of cruelty' and 'Roland Barthes' version of the aesthete's sensibility'. Such terms are no more excessive than those sprinkling attacks on contemporary critical training. Insofar as criticism compels a critic to take up an attitude, Sontag offers receptiveness as an alternative and anchors judgment in a critic's limitations:

It isn't that I like it and I don't like it: that's too simple. Or, if you will, it isn't 'both yes and no.' It's 'this but also that.' I'd love to settle on a strong feeling or reaction. But having seen whatever I see, my mind keeps going on and I see something else. It's that I see the limitations of whatever I say or whatever judgment I make about anything.<sup>14</sup>

'Scholarly humility', J.D. Salinger called it, suggesting that creative brilliance produces work of real value only when combined with it.<sup>15</sup> Good 'pedagogues and critics' foster Sontag's sense of scrupulous in(con)clusiveness. They carefully maintain distinctions between critical preferences and questions of quality. Far from being 'sloppy relativism', another phrase deployed on behalf of questionable certainties, such training offers enriched perspectives for responding to literary endeavour of most kinds.

Criticism open to speculative impulses is no sacrifice of judgment unless judgment is confused with dogmatism. Sontag's critical consciousness reveals none of that. For her, 'a novel worth reading is an education of the heart. It enlarges your sense of what human nature is, of what happens in the world. It's a creator of inwardness.'<sup>16</sup> Informed by this spirit, literary evaluation becomes an act of noticing less shackled to ideas about hierarchies and ranking.

## *Novels worth reading, then ...*

This year's Miles Franklin Award was jointly awarded to Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press 1999) and Thea

Astley's *Drylands* (Viking 1999). The prize insists on their quality and is better viewed as recognition than 'a win' in the competitive sense. Recognising Scott's novel as a tribute to Nyoongar people when it appeared, Jan Teagle Kapetas wrote: 'Benang is not strident in its telling – neither is it passive. Rather it has a resonating quality of generosity. This is a novel written *from the heart* which catches the heart.'<sup>17</sup> Astley's novel, concerned with a differently significant aspect of Australian culture, is also neither strident nor passive and has vision. *Benang* opens with an introduction to the first white man born, *Drylands* with a writer, Janet Deakin, considering the possibility that her audience may be the world's last reader, expansive gestures easily linked with a concept like the moral and generous imagination.

A proliferation of writer-protagonists enriches the debates. Embedded in *Drylands* is an informed commentary on writing and reading, and Janet Deakin's reflections are a reminder that the struggle to define best-writing has long been vociferous. A cluster of interlocking narratives, this novel exemplifies compassionate writing in each. For instance, Astley illuminates illiteracy, as a woman teaches a man she loves to read. The story of her tuition and his mastery elicits intense emotional investment. A complementary narrative depicts the efforts of a group of isolated women to write, providing another take on quality when their city tutor reflects: 'they read small pieces so polite, so tentative they became mounds of indistinguishable dullness – bushfires, floods, trips to the coast. Yet every now and again there would be a light, dry moment that hinted at cynicism, a humour, an eye for the odd' (85). This story's pungency, which lies in what is at stake in the women's attempts to write despite their husbands' resistance, is echoed in the threat Janet Deakin's writing represents to someone in the town. The novel honours the desire to write.

Astley contemplates the atrophy of small Australian towns here. Her austere prose is the perfect medium: 'The town, as a town, was being outmanoeuvred by weather. As simple as that. Drought. Dying stock. A hard sky across which white clouds massed, hovered, then rolled away to the coast. The small splatterings of rain were as offensive as spit' (287). Regretfully tracing this cultural shrinkage, she demonstrates that compassionate writing is not mawkish by glaring at 'other realities' of regional Australia: violence, nepotism, misogyny, racism.<sup>18</sup> Treading lightly along divides between rural and urban Australia, *Drylands* resists all glib oppositions and bears no trace of the caricaturing which curls the lip of some Australian writing.

For all its familiar Jolleyesque wit and astuteness, *An Accommodating Spouse* (Viking 1999) is a case in point. Elizabeth Jolley's narratives spring from a generous vision. She presses against narrow-mindedness of every kind. This novel, however, seems finally derisive of its fictional inhabitants. It considers love and the absence of love. A professor's tedious 'life of the imagination' traps him between plodding sexual fantasies and grotesque self-absorption in his relationships with the women who surround him. The familiar impulse of Jolley's characterisation is indicated in the epigraph, a quotation from Auden: 'Blame no one. Blame, if you must, the human situation.' Forgiving of all kinds of deviance, Jolley usually contrives to have quirkiness and idiosyncrasy illustrate human vulnerability. Here, I am left with a sense that this gardenful of flawed beings is more silly than fragile. However, as Auden also observed, a celebrated writer's progress is inevitably towards being jeopardised in the minds of readers by their own prior achievements, new work having 'historic interest for us as the act of a person in whom we have long been interested'.<sup>19</sup> *An Accommodating Spouse* decisively revisits features of the Jolley oeuvre and affords satisfying recognitions like those between works by the same composer. Perhaps this is a way of approaching art too seldom applied to writing. Sculthorpe is Sculthorpe. Jolley is Jolley.

Dorothy Hewett's *Neap Tide* (Penguin 1999) also offers pleasures of reconnection. *Neap Tide* concerns an academic's retreat to a coastal town to recover from a failed marriage and to write. She encounters her past and that of the artistic community there. Another writer, Jessica Sorenson is given related preoccupations as she reflects on her students. Her appraisal of universities locates the problems differently:

... perhaps they knew things she didn't know. They hadn't been brought up on Leavis or New Criticism, but on semiotics and feminist theory. Why was it necessary for them to know 'Jerusalem', except she couldn't help herself, in her heart she felt they were culturally deprived.

The university was no longer a place of learning, but a commercial enterprise, a degree shop run by soulless administrators who cut costs ruthlessly and overworked the shrinking numbers of their academic staff. (155)

Admirers of Hewett's writing will greet the liminal setting and sublime imagery; flirtations with the supernatural; her sexual assertiveness; the

gathering of eclectic, even unlikely characters; her social and political consciousness; and the sweeping themes, such as the philosophical poise of individuals towards death. Hewett's vision is generally encompassing and reading *Neap Tide* might be compared with passing through an elaborate hyperbole. *The Toucher* looms in the background.

*Isobel on the Way to the Corner Shop* (Penguin 1999), sequel to *I for Isobel* (1989), placed Amy Witting on the short-list for the Miles Franklin Award in a field which justifies faith in Australian writing. Recipient of the 1993 Patrick White Prize, Witting is another writer whose reputation precedes her into the pages. Isobel is a passionate writer and reader contending with how to love, so she can write about it. A sensitive enactment of the injunction to write what you know, the novel deals with her fundamental difficulty of learning self-love. Witting uses Isobel's confinement in a sanatorium to create a nest of compelling characters. This is a wry, unselfconscious account of artistic self-consciousness and, once again, a writer-protagonist articulates the struggle to make words work. A thread of speculation about writer/editor/critic relationships and the texture of literary interactions is drawn through the novel. Witting's gift for dialogue renders literary conversation interesting and funny. Her touch is always light: 'the art is to conceal art', as she has a character remark (240). The title signals another feature of Witting's work. *Everything* happens to Isobel on the way to the shop; it's simultaneously a joke and a pithy philosophical observation. Witting holds that balance perfectly. The novel's gentle resistance to anti-intellectualism is a pleasurable shock.

Erudition is differently employed, and similarly enjoyed, in Brenda Walker's *Poe's Cat* (Viking 1999). Walker cycles facts and imagined moments of Edgar Allen Poe's marriage to his cousin Virginia through a contemporary story of love between cousins. Given Virginia's death of consumption, and her young age when Poe married her, *Poe's Cat* engages with suffering and taboos, profound themes managed with philosophical understatement. Like Malouf, in *Untold Tales*, Walker draws on other stories, only more elaborately, winding them around each other. Walker's writing is uncompromisingly clever and graceful.

Expansive vision also marks work from new writers, as two first novels demonstrate. *Playing Madame Mao*, by Lau Siew Mei (Brandl & Schlesinger 2000), is a novel which confronts oppression and suffering, and in which the political erupts into the personal. Lau Siew Mei weaves the perspectives of an actor in Singapore celebrated for her portrayal of

Madame Mao with imagined perspectives of the woman herself, offsetting both with the sceptical voice of the actor's confidante. Shifting points of view and play with illusion and reality highlight the roles of performance and story in identity. Where the novel attends to Chinese history and culture it delivers information with elegance and generosity. It is enlightening, not only about its cultural canvas, but about the insight that oppression anywhere has implications for people everywhere.

*The Hunter*, by Julia Leigh (Penguin 1999), articulates an Inuit concept of Deep Patience. In the manner of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, this novel accumulates philosophical force and attaches metaphorical significance to its unnamed hunter as it takes us through his meticulous search for the extinct thylacine. The conclusion insists on inwardness. It forces us to consider the implications of knowledge, to question what it depends on and the uses to which it is put. It compels reflection.

Although both exemplify the moral imagination at work, these two novels are differently exceptional. The prose in one is ornate, intricate, even demanding. In the other it is lucid, concentrated. It's a contrast not confined to fiction. Michèle Drouart's *Into the Wadi* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press 2000) and Kerry McGinnis's *Pieces of Blue* (Viking 1999) peel away from each other in similar fashion. Drouart's memoir defies assertions that 'political correctness' depletes art. Exquisitely careful, it traces the unsuccessful attempt to sustain a marriage despite cultural difference. Drouart's recollections are scrupulous, the writing impeccable.

*Pieces of Blue* is the compelling account of Kerry McGinnis's picaresque upbringing as a drover's daughter in outback Queensland. At one level, it is a compendium of bush craft and horse sense. At another, it is pure adventure. At another, it recounts the realities of a rigorous life without a trace of self-indulgence. The absence of introspection is striking, given the place of solitude and isolation in the author's experience. *Pieces of Blue* induces reflection in the reader instead. McGinnis's pragmatic, even stern prose records the exceptional response of a family to loss. She converts deprivation into the unusual memories of a carefully observed life.

Simone Lazaroo's novel, *the australian fiancé* (Picador 2000) is enveloping. Also the story of a culturally complicated love affair, it sifts through optimism and resilience, ignorance and weakness, love and sacrifice until the novel's core of raw pain arrives and is not where you expect it to be. Lazaroo exposes the costs of exclusionary thinking. There

is an irresistible comparison here with *The Lover*, by Marguerite Duras — the timbre of the prose, even the cover, invites it — but this is not second-handness, it is an invocation, a continuity, the beginning of a tradition. As an education of the heart *the australian fiancé* is exemplary.

*re: 'promoting any writing as better than any other'*

Good criticism is more interested in what is there than what is not. It aims to detect merit rather than its absence. Far from being mealy-mouthed, good criticism celebrates literary and intellectual endeavours alike, rather than opposing them to each other. They amount to the same thing: passion for reading and writing. Good criticism is oriented towards inclusion rather than exclusion.

Australian writing flourishes and universities contribute to its abundance in complex ways. Contrary to their apparent intention, generalised attacks on universities only undermine the arts in a culture which seems increasingly unable to value them appropriately. In fact, universities nourish, perform and examine artistic labour, including literary criticism. What might improve things is greater rigour among critics who call for greater rigour.

The books named here have been plucked from a stream of writing which erodes slick definitions and sure hierarchies of value. In the end, my selection is accidental, as the pleasures of reading usually are. Roland Barthes (whose name would be on many a hit list, not least for his famous and widely misread — indeed, in this climate of pre-emptive rejection I suspect often *unread* — essay, 'The Death of the Author') positions pleasure as a proper basis for approaching texts. So did Auden, to invoke him again: 'Pleasure is by no means an infallible critical guide, but it is the least fallible.'<sup>20</sup> These books offer multiple, disparate and unpredictable pleasures. To do them justice, you would linger over them, commend them carefully, disentangle their qualities, quote them all, extravagantly. Certainly you would read them.

## Endnotes

- 1 Peter Craven, "Savage and Scarlet", La Trobe University Essay, *Australian Book Review* (May 2000): 37.
- 2 Christopher Koch, "Academics put the con in deconstruction", *The Australian* (Friday 14 June 1996): 15.

- 3 W.H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963): 1.
- 4 Imré Salusinsky and David Boyd, "Newer than new: Australian plain person's guide to literary criticism", *Australian Society* (Dec.1989/Jan.1990): 18-22.
- 5 Peter Craven, *Australian Book Review*, 38.
- 6 Rosie Scott, "Fiction and moral imagination", *The Red Heart* (Auckland: Vintage/Random House, 1999): 88.
- 7 Salusinsky and Boyd, 22.
- 8 Interview in *Australian Book Review* (May 2000): 43.
- 9 Quoted in Naomi Epel, ed., *Writers Dreaming* (Melbourne: Bookman Press, 1993): 29.
- 10 *The Dyer's Hand*, 8.
- 11 George Plimpton, ed., *Paris Review Interviews: Women Writers at Work* (London: The Harvill Press, 1998): 368.
- 12 Stephen Muecke, *No Road* (South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1997): 160.
- 13 *Paris Review Interviews*, 326-7.
- 14 *Paris Review Interviews*, 329.
- 15 J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951): 225.
- 16 *Paris Review Interviews*, 327.
- 17 Review in *Westerly* (Winter 1998): 130.
- 18 Rosie Scott raises this in "Fear and Loathing on the Queensland Writers' Train", *Red Heart*, 71.
- 19 *The Dyer's Hand*, 4.
- 20 *The Dyer's Hand*, 5.

# MARION CAMPBELL

---

## EVIL, TIME, REDEMPTION

### *Evil's guises*

The Disney machine is so successful partly because it feeds with colour-coded morality nostalgia for a world of simpler Manichean oppositions. It's also a relief I suppose, for people to see evil so manifest because in real life it is often not; it is a good method actor, a chameleon; more than that, it is naturalised as part of the climate, so that only occasionally where there's turbulence, do we remember there is an atmosphere, and it's there in it, all the time, refracting our light and inflecting the way we see. It is an acclimatisation. Banned as essentialist, chased from smart discourse, evil is happy to perform its endlessly protean incarnations insidiously, subtly, in broad daylight.

It seizes any tropes made available by new technologies and their associated cultures and pleasures. It works by telling us that the world is so complex, the machinations of international capitalism so mystifying there is nothing an individual can do. Evil inhabits the non-resistance to itself, and is enlarged by this. It is the unconscious or wilful forgetting that others are having their lives torn apart, the failure to put one's voice to collective denunciation of systematic or institutionally reproduced violence, whether this discriminates by gender, race, or class.

Evil is a failure to recognise the sacredness of alterity, that the other also is a subject, not an object to be incorporated into a cannibalistic, infantile self. Yet the swoons of religious or erotic transport, the giddy loss of self in the other, the veering away from such categories as subject and object in mutual infolding, are not necessarily distinguishable from the sly invasions of evil; if evil came fanged and snarling, spitting toxins, Mephisto as cane toad in a suit, it would be easy. But the problem is that

evil borrows all the guises of seduction. Mephisto is one cool dude who always makes himself attractive and is much more amusing than God. Evil offers transformation; evil comes marketing a plot. It's only Satan who can kick a narrative along. Evil seeks sweet revenge for damage long since done to its own moral being, it comes with flattery, a virus with a visa written in the language of generosity, wanting to infuse memory of its wound into the blood of the raw recruit. It's not for nothing that in the Judeo-Christian tradition Lucifer was God's favourite boy. Evil is always repetition of evil done. God gave no second chance to little Lucifer and Lucifer's pain is cosmically repercussive. Evil also can come coated as virtue wounded, as righteousness. It finds in a vulnerable candidate a site to displace the memory of its own wounding, for the infusion and relay of that venom. Evil needs a host already visited. The perpetrators of evil have suffered violence to their own beings, or been brought up in a climate where it is normalised, where sadistic acts pass without comment, habitual, casual, as a naturalised aspect of femininity (bitching) or masculinity (bullying, sledging).

### *Evil as cleverness*

*Ich bin der Geist der stets verneint*, I am the spirit who endlessly negates or denies, Goethe's Mephisto said. Negativity, denial, negation. Humour is fuelled by these; people count as wits perpetrating them; evil can happen with the instantaneity of a pun, in the unreflecting side-swipe of a joke; the devil of wisecrack skewers her victim for the sake of entertaining a third party. In love with its own velocity, cleverness forgets the other; alongside, devoutly defending the complex humanity of the joke's victim, Goodness is the party pooper, looking very dumb. (Saturnine, melancholy, Moliere's *Alceste* turns in despair from all the froth and casually cruel wit of the salons.) Still the spirit of perpetual denial is what is also known as critical thought.

One must not look stupid: therefore trust nothing, doubt everything. After many years of gape-mouthed gullibility, unable to see irony, I eventually woke up to the fact that that negation or universal scepticism was equivalent to critical intelligence. One must doubt everything. In a sense, though, the critical mind can be a rude negator, and a cruel one. It's the tradition the west is so proud of but often what counts as intelligent debate involves slashing through the other's discourse, puncturing their reasoning, demolishing as useless anecdote their insufficient-

ly examined premise, forgetting that this might be their heart's testimony, their authentic habitation – their true story.

The decades of so called postmodernity, from the sixties at least, have implied a difficulty in claiming anything beyond a local viability for any moral position because cultural relativism has prevailed. One of the great problems of postmodern consumerism, despite the apparent good in the levelling of cultural hierarchies, is that democracy implies choice only for the Happy Few; the levelling of high and low culture through the electronic marketplace of images screens us from the persistence of hierarchies of the most outrageously oppressive kind, ensuring the reproduction of pain and dispossession. Evil has happily pursued its course with genocidal wars in Rwanda, Somalia, the Balkans, Kosovo, Chechnia, while many intellectuals and artists were promoting the positivity of 'perversion' or sado-masochistic practices and babbling about semiospheres, talking down the essentialism of those who would bring notions of morality back into cultural analysis and production.

### *Evil as denial*

"Fuck me white", one of the Nyoongar characters jokes bitterly in Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart*.<sup>1</sup> In this beautiful, complex, and disturbing book, Kim Scott sets the imaginative reactivation of events alongside documents testifying to the genocidal impact in the south-west of Australia of a eugenicist dream: to breed out Aboriginality. Through the mutual imbrication of past and present, *Benang* shows how history denied is toxically active. Only when remembrance is allowed expression and confronted with clear-eyed recognition and apology can the massive abscess be lanced and society move on toward some health. Evil infects us all as long as we tacitly acquiesce to our leaders' denial of the Stolen Generations and promotion of a mythic version of the Anzac Generation. Policies which, in the name of 'protection', were conceived in a will to cultural genocide and were expressed in insidious forms of physical genocide, and often in outright massacre. Many non-indigenous Australians would prefer to agree with Howard that they shouldn't have to carry any guilt for policies they had nothing to do with. We non-indigenous Australians, who inherited from the invaders our privilege based on the expropriation of land and ensured by skin colour have everything to do with the past. We profited from the dispossession of Australia's indigenous people and are still profiting. Of course guilt

reduced to sentimentalised rhetoric is useless. Action is not.

Forgetting and denial are themes I've tried to explore in my novel, *Prowler*.<sup>2</sup> I try to show that in nursing one's own narcissistic wound and forgetting the pain of the other, one is condemned to a depressive repetition. Like Australia, itself. I have tried to show through a handful of characters that evil can be perpetrated through a romance of the other so sentimentalised and reductive that it entails oblivion.

### *Evil as passivity*

We prefer caricatures because the deep anxiety is that we participate in it more or less passively, in a banal way, all the time. Evil is an adjustment to the habitual denial of choice. *But what can you do? The case is closed.* I only have to cast an unsentimental eye on my own sloth, my moral pusillanimity, my failure to act politically, my deep laziness, my coddling of petty grief and wounds, my numbing out, and I see something like evil at work.

Insidious, evil moves through a slow narrative. It is the slow, festering accumulation of the undone, the putting off and putting off. Death in every medieval morality play finds its candidate a beggar for time. The evil is postponement, procrastination, or being in the thrall of any morbid idea or substance-enabled numbing, which ensures the paralysis of the will. It is there in Baudelaire and to a pathological degree in Mallarmé. It is one of the great themes of modernity, perhaps because of the alienation of consciousness from the forces of production, the severance of art from labour:

Can virginal, vivacious, resplendent Today  
Ever with one drunken wing blow break  
The haunting of old ice on that forgotten lake  
Transparent glacier of flights too long delayed?<sup>3</sup>

What interests me as a writer, and more particularly as a novelist, is this relationship of consciousness to time, to duration. What constitutes an act of negligence is not so much the dramatic moment of denial like Peter's of Christ but the gradual, ineluctable accretion of moments when one might have acted, when inertia, or moral sloth, become collusive with the forces of oppression and consign the other to oblivion.

Sartre said of Baudelaire that he chose to be at fault, a sinner. In his study of *Literature and Evil*,<sup>4</sup> Bataille asks if that isn't rather that he

chose poetry, which necessitates hard, cold self-reflexivity. "A man necessarily rises in judgement against himself and cannot recognise himself nor love himself to the end *unless he knows himself to be the object of a condemnation.*" Unless he figures he is at fault. Baudelaire watches himself watching; never loses self-consciousness in the act of seeing. It's this relentlessly unforgiving gaze he fixes on himself that on occasion makes his poetry rise to great emotion. "*Mere des souvenirs, Maitresse des Maitresses ... Mother of remembrance, mistress of mistresses/ To thee all my desire and all my distress.*" After all the exoticising and sadistic celebrations of his life's companion, Jeanne Duval, after all his dandified demonism and narcissistic exaltation of his wounds, this broken voice of syphilitic middle age addressing in the language of prayer the broken, also syphilitic wreck of the beauty Jeanne Duvall had been, makes it hard not to read "Le Balcon" ("The Balcony") without weeping. Cautionary notes against the waste of time and talent through indulgence and laziness appear again and again in Baudelaire's notebooks: "Hygiene. Work. Poetry. Do not go to the café."

But the poetry, when Baudelaire breaks from paralysing fascination and when, for a moment, will is wrested from its current snare (hashish, opium, wine, sex, or beauty) the voice carries the grain of authentic remorse and can attract some kind of grace. Remorse is the muse of so many of the *Flowers of Evil*. Remorse is the gnawing of conscience *through time*. It's time that makes sinners of us, the cumulative not-doing. It's recognising this *through time* that perhaps makes redemption also thinkable, and poetry, always retroactive, aware of its wake, kills time.

Most of us don't actively seek the pain of the other, to fill wells with the mutilated, to leave toxic sludge where once were lakes, to tear children from their families because they are ethnically "mixed". But most evil comes in the disguise of apathy or sentimental denial.

This might not be consciously intentional: one can dupe oneself, calling by the name of love the will to dominate and the pleasure in having one's ego played by the other, calling devotion this mad pursuit, this baiting of the other and then declaring 'it' over when one has exhausted her or him of their substance. The acts of seduction are heady, in the name of the seducer's self-improvisation, perhaps even in the name of experience garnered for art's sake, but looked at from the position of abandonment are frequently indistinguishable from acts of predatory cruelty.

Evil is not an absolute, of course; it is relative, all in inclination, in the insidious, asymptotic approach: to write about it I can simply magnify my own tendencies. Writing is an ethical laboratory, a rehearsal for a performance, where the *what-ifs* are tracked to their worst or best consequences: the notion of parallel lives, of literature as an imaginative ethical experiment, isn't new. Writers often wonder if their need for material doesn't plot their lives in certain directions. It's true that for the sake of their work writers are capable of stealing other people's stories and then out of shame forgetting that the person displaced and disguised and redistributed amongst characters might be still walking wounded outside their book. In a sense one always is at risk in writing because any representation will inevitably entail a reduction of complexity. Representing the other is perhaps always a matter of betrayal: does the pen always wound because representing always punctures the self-image of the other?

I once had a visit from Mephisto.

That first day of her stay she said, smiling, as if in admiration, "You don't understand evil, do you? Perhaps you need to, for your work. It lacks those shadows. Yes, that's what it is," she said, pleased to have identified the flaw. And she was launched into a torrent of denunciation. She was right. I hadn't really considered the question of its actually lodging in a being; that individuals might nurse deeply malicious intent. For a moment there was a Faustian quiver: should I lay myself bare to the wounds she wanted to inflict, let her infuse her venom and through this envenoming, this new knowledge, write with more *shadows*? All the while through the house while I made her meals and tried to work Mephisto's voice pursued me with its mellifluous eloquence.

At the worst of it, when she located the pathological moment on which she claimed I had elaborated my identity, and announced there was indeed something monstrous in me, probably madness to boot, I thought if I survived this at least I would know something I hadn't before. It was true I had been sentimental about women and had not explored in my writing how they can contrive to destroy one another, how their lust for gloating maternal power can subjugate in the name of love or friendship. I had forgotten about the way a certain slave mentality can turn into toxic jealousy. I'd been naive in my private snow-dome romance of the sisterhood. I thought, *Well, here we go and to think I invited her!* She came to stay! I detached myself in order to observe my own slow dismantling through the sustained lashings of her tongue.

Whether I wanted to or not, Mephisto found the lesion through an old

guilt to infuse the venom of self-doubt, undoing my composure, taking me back to schoolyard again where I was orphan, impostor, cheat; one whose desperate need to call her mother back from the wax and wire mannequin she'd become made me too hungry and sly. I was almost radiant with it, pregnant with it, the more she went on. Almost for the sake of my own wounding and thus my own propensity to wound, I was going to bring into my world the idea of evil. I was going to find a character and the character would be a wordsmith like her, and manic like her, and would systematically dismantle the woman he inveigled into his house, until the sight of her, utterly broken would offer her daughter, vicariously humiliated, the embryo scenario for revenge.

Thus is set the relay of evil, perhaps remorse, and later, some sort of recovery through redemptive recognition. She, my daughter character, will in turn seduce and betray. But what then will betrayal be, but a kind of slicing off of her own wounded self? This kind of story needs the thickness of simulated duration, that is, something like the novel.

### *Evil, time, redemption*

I would argue for a conservative function of the sustained narrative because it offers anachronistically a different kind of temporality from film, video, and television. The novel allows for the vicarious experience of duration: of evasion, forgetting, then jolting or shameful memory, and ultimately, perhaps, active remembrance. It can stretch its concertina miraculously to enfold landscapes within landscapes, or alternatively find shards of traumatic remembrance in its intimate tissue: thus offering away from the sped up e-world, a space for the anachronistic project of moral reflection. It engages us actively in the translation from the personal to the social dimensions of memory, a process essential to a healthy culture. To remember is only one step towards frustrating the repetition of evil. By dramatising individual acts of remembrance, and especially now in so-called postmodernity, writing can help. This is a necessary function: not to strive to rival the fast jump-cutting of video or the cinematic thrall of the visual. More importantly the novel can let readers into its imaginative cumulus, its slow spaces offering them the massive time of memory, in which there might be something like redemption.

*Different versions of this paper were given at the Perth 2000 Writers Festival and at the Queenscliffe 2000 Feast of Words.*

## Endnotes

- 1 Kim Scott, *Benang: From the Heart*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999.
- 2 Marion Campbell, *Prowler*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999.
- 3 Trans. mine.  
Le vierge, le vivace, et le bel aujourd'hui  
Va-t-il nous déchirer avec un coup d'aile ivre  
Ce lac dur, oublié, que hante sous le givre  
Le transparent glacier de vols qui n'ont pas fui.  
Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres Complètes* (1945, Paris: Gallimard, 1951): 61.
- 4 Georges Bataille, *La littérature et le Mal*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit.

# AMBER GENEVIEVE FLYNN

---

## ISAAC

It was gravity that broke our hearts  
our rustic love felled soundlessly  
by some brown man's axe

We'd gone up to the woods in dark  
my dress your boots  
our cool ears and fingers  
tasted there the moss and fog

But as the sun rose  
our bodies broke and splintered  
toppled to the leafy floor  
perished with the crisper light of sunrise

## MATTHEW 1:21

show me a star  
to twinkle louder than  
these eyes  
an atmosphere  
more bounty than  
this love

where were you when  
this wet red enigma  
was born

---

who can escape  
his eager heel

show me your colour  
corals next to  
this blood  
your rippling tempest  
of blues and greens  
to drown this  
luminous skin

where are you while  
this gift remains  
unopened?

## UNTITLED

my mother dreams  
in silver and turquoise  
of her astronaut lover

drinks tea  
chucks the leaves  
from our balcony

stares each night  
at an empty pillow

# BRUCE DAWE

---

## THE CHILD

This is the child who walks between us daily  
- still so very young - yet we both know  
that it must learn the lessons of all childhood,  
falter at times, look to us and recover,  
trust in our triune love, grow as we grow ...

All caring couples walk with similar children  
which, while being shaped, shape them in turn,  
reach out to them in love when least expected,  
extend endearing gestures to each parent,  
in time unfurling like a forest fern ...

This child of love is with us in our dreaming,  
and through our sleep plays its own hide-and-seek,  
runs away and laughs to tease us onward,  
and, just as lovers twine their hands together,  
its words are woven in the words we speak ...

## TWO BY TWO

If those two people whom we were  
should meet right now  
what would they say?  
Would they with later wisdom now concur  
and ratify every vow,  
or would they (as they might) shrink in dismay?

---

The one stands to me now  
as foreign as a one-time friend  
whom time has so estranged  
that even if we were to meet somehow  
our discourse would have an awkward end  
however pre-arranged.

And you ...? What talk  
would pass between you and  
that other earlier Liz?  
Would she, too, find it difficult not to baulk  
when asked to understand  
what since has happened and the way it is?

Perhaps, however, instead  
of alienation from ourselves as then  
we were (since that same history  
had its own part to play) it might be said  
that we should both dismiss such gravamen  
and past and present both agree

That we should always seek  
to reconcile, if possible, these two  
who peer across the table-top each day  
and listen when we speak  
- our closest friends, this other me, this other you,  
folding our hands in theirs even when we pray ...

# A. F. JOHNSON

---

## EUGEN'S FALL – Geburtstag, Vienna 1810

Eugen's birth coincided with the invention of the waltz. And the state bankruptcy.

Technically, the bankruptcy was not conceived in quite the same way as the child Eugen or the waltz. What could it possibly have had to do with the whirling and whorling of cells, splitting violently into four four at three quarter time; faster and faster, until the patterns of linking arms, pointed toes and radiant heat had become so giddy that the survival of the Viennese line was felt to be assured.

Eugen's mother had been the cynosure of the ballroom.

And now Eugen was the cynosure of his own gaslit interior, hooked up to a baroque column of flesh secreting food and drink at his remotest inclination.

*Left, close, forward, right, close, forward*

Ballroom or ballwomb. What was the difference? Neither he nor his mother understood that both were temporary comfort zones. The fact was that this crazy, unstoppable parthogenesis had to cease. Neither of them had a clue as to what would come after.

However, it *is* true to say that the state bankruptcy was given birth *to*. But it had only produced a dead thing, a vague but noticeable absence of things amongst those of a certain class. With a syphilitic treasury, twenty course suppers at the Allolsaal were now out of the question. Soft fabriano notepapers, heavier grades of red sealing wax and the little bottles of imported Indochine ink had completely disappeared. Some said they could no longer think straight without the special turquoise bottles standing thoughtless upon the *escritoire*. This ink had always looked so beautiful on the page that even lists of things seemed like strange new

poetry. These days, the mechanics of intrigue, and even the simplest communications were driven by thin floppy envelopes and matt, solid inks that failed completely in their objective of suggesting transparency, or the more cursive possibilities of social encounter.

But that was not the only thing. The absence of Dutch cinnamon and clove had made food bland and uninteresting. For the first time in Viennese history, shame-faced girls sold lifeless strudels from the tall cake trays of Demmels and Sachers. Batavian coffee failed to make its way through to the nostrils of landlocked Vienna. Not even the memory of the smell made its way through from the embattled ports of Hamburg and Victoria. Luxury had been stillborn, and the city glittered in withdrawal.

Motion and movement across the city had also been curtailed. There simply wasn't as much of it.

Creaseless toppers, coach and eight, and sometimes six and four, were rarely seen again after the bankruptcy of 1810. In this city of addictions, the wealthy turned as pale as baby veal; rocking themselves to and fro until they found themselves converting the rocking and the sweating and the anxiety into something formal and repeatable. Something almost useful.

It looked very much like the strange furling movements they had spied from closed carriages as they spun through the Stadt Park, *fiacres* whipped to a foaming speed in case they should be waylaid by shadowy figures hunting for dinners of bony pigeons, grasshoppers and fennel, growing unstripped along the licorice edge of the Donau. When the shadows did not find their dinner they danced the terror away.

At this time, fear reeked of aniseed and charred feather.

Since the collaborationist curse of Napoleon, the Viennese had been fortunate not to have seen their city streets run with blood. It had survived, as a little green eye in a European face pocked with the scars of invasion. But nonetheless, hardly any money fluttered in and around the grey colonnade of the Bourse. *Lebenskunst*, the gentle art of living, for which they had been justly famed, had become a thing of the past.

Capital was dead!

-Said one anonymous fellow on his box in the *Tiergarten*, but at that time, history did not choose to let him record it. That would be said much later. Some soldiers put him in a bag and threw him from the Prater bridge with him still calling out 'dead, dead, dead' as he drowned. As water filled his lungs the word sounded like a song.

*Deleddleddledeadleledle*

But to those listening above, the combination of water and words and death was forever fused with the sounds of gaiety. It was simply a mistake of history and locality, the poor man in the bag. His timing. The soldiers. The tragic confluence of water, lung and idea. The presence of those who listened, and heard, and passed the song on. The chance conflation of all of these things.

And all the while, the buildings standing silent, their dumb stone marzipan belying interiors painted with clouds, ceilings fashioned into endless vortical skies which now only seemed to amplify the loneliness of those who lived there. The absence of things. It was a terrible time for many of the locals. And now death itself sounded like a melody.

Capital was dead. If this was true then the only thing to do was to usher in a capital time in its wake.

\*\*\*\*\*

Eugen's birth came after a long swollen waiting time. His mother, J, was ten months pregnant. In the first month she had tried to waltz away his existence. He paid her back by hanging on even more tightly. She had tried to count her contractions faster, six-eight for the pain.

*Right, big left (spin 180 degrees on right), close, back, close, close*

But with every count she felt a twisting, spinning parquetry within her, felt them all, whoever they were, beat and tap an agony of time against the walls of her insides. Counting the house no longer seemed to matter. The building would surely crumble. She was the building, she was the floor, she was shoeless, sexless, ready for death.

She pushed the midwife away and shrieked for her lover to attend to the pain in her back with a tourniquet of oil de menthe and a pinch of snuff for what was left of her mind. But Karl wasn't there. There was only that bastard Bernard von Guerard, the sower, the husband, the painter of eyeless miniatures. He sat with his long nervous hands, holding his head like a broken lamp outside the flocked vestibule; a real bowling ball of a head that he seemed to want only to hold in a delicate concentration before abandoning it, pulling it off and throwing it down the corridor.

When Eugen finally came, it was in a rush of water and noise and

something less than three quarter time. This would predispose him to a certain slowness all his life. On the 1638th beat his mother suddenly dropped her head back, punchdrunk. Her nostrils were tipped red from laudanum and her mouth was fixed so wide as if to suggest another possible exit for the late-baked thing that tormented her so. She had been counting for forty-eight hours.

But after playing so hard to get, the baby sailed out, whooshed out, straight into the midwife's lap, where he sat, like a laundry parcel, compact and staring; hands still neatly packed in by his sides. Looking out towards his mother's womb expectantly and without making a sound. He (for indeed, it was a he) felt himself to be looking back at the architrave of a house once lived in. It was still his. He was silently confident. Until she said:

*Gott in Himmel. It has killed me! I am dead. Tot bin ich! Has it killed me? Nimm' die verdammte Kreatur weg! It is not mine It's his ... Give it to him ... I don't want to see it. Clean it up. Mach alles wieder sauber! Der Karl darf absolut nicht im Zimmer eintreten. Take it away! Give it back to the painter. The coward! Der Arschloch!*

Eugen heard this and understood perfectly well. He did not want to make a scene. He did not cry.

She could not take the baby to her breast. Her small bust would produce little milk. It had been pierced by too many camelias and nosegay pins and by the odd, daffy-blooded aristocrat who had lodged himself there, all toothy and curious.

The midwife, furious, jammed the courteously silent Eugen against her own copper coloured teat as if to remind him, violently, that motherhood could exist. And the milk drained over him and over his blood splattered face in a cool, pale waterfall so that eventually, he was able to detach tiny prosthetic arms from the ovoid shape that he had made upon arrival, and clutch up at something clothly, musliny and fleshy above him and feel that he was hanging on to the edge of the earth at least.

He felt sure he had arrived in *verdammte Nacht*. Not *stille*, or *heilige*. In this vast atrium of a place he felt all loose and heavy and dangerous. It was a place where he felt himself to be constantly falling toward something. Some object. Some landscape of some new terror. He did not yet know the difference between a river or a field, an arm or a leg, a body or bodies. The meaning of oxygen and water. It was terribly cold. But he had already worked out the difference between kindness and cruelty.

He missed his aqueous world. His float palace of all care and no responsibility.

He had never felt so unsure of anything in his life.

And so he decided then, at the age of two minutes, that, as they didn't seem to want to let him back, that that was the way things were. That he would in fact be in a state of constantly falling, falling towards something, questing for the fall. That the risking of this was the way things were.

He had been born in a shape to resist the world. Or at least to fall against it without the risk of any protuberances getting hooked or caught up in its spikes and nails and irregularities. He hadn't helped his mother by opening out his arms and swimming. In this, Eugen had been born wise.

He could not know then that he had been born without rhythm or schilling.

Milkless, he had no idea how he might fall into his own future.

*Colonial landscape painter Eugen von Guerard emigrated to Australia on the Lady Windermere in 1851. He was separated from his mother at an early age and his father, Bernard von Guerard, pre-deceased him in a cholera epidemic that toured through Naples in 1836.*

# MATT ROBINSON

---

## A GARDEN GLOSSARY

### *i. axil*

the corner formed between a leaf or a branch and a stem

all taped and bulbous, all bulky with the idea of support, there is a rush of green. a leaving

home: a ruckus of awkward stacking. and this turning, this departure, it is like a cardboard death

for the one; an engineered end. all dry and faded brown, there is a possibility of brittleness, of

a break. as for the other: it dreams of indeterminate things, of the possibility of rain for itself.

### *ii. runner*

a stem growing along the surface of the ground that often gives rise to new shoots, roots, or plants

a desperate escape, this  
mining disaster's logic

of tunnels and passages and  
connections. A trench's perverse

ecosystem: all topsy-turvy life  
and burial, death and earth.

### *iii. thatch*

a layer of organic material, between  
green grass blades and roots

this is the stuff of the process  
of remembering: the dust

on the lp you're trying to play  
on your father's circa 60's

rca with the broken needle. it  
is the jam on the pages of that

library book. these are the in-between  
bits of context and liquor and age

that scratch faces and colours  
and names off a list; these are

the mechanics of forgetting,  
the active ingredients of loss.

### *iv. stipling*

fine speckling caused by insect feeding

in retrospect, it could be seen as the beginning  
of it all; the freckle of a malignancy. it is the way

the sun dances off the face of a watch's wrist  
infirmity, and how that reflection of light is set off

by the skin's aging play, its loose brown juxtaposition.  
the one creates while the other illuminates.

the way the markings of a trout are most brilliant as  
it struggles with the mechanics of death, flailing

against the spurious buoyancy of science  
in the moist light of mid-morning or

afternoon. perhaps there is a longing for a cool fluid  
place, and a confusion simply as to how to get there.

*v. rhizome*

an underground stem

and in culmination, there is this  
secretive growth, a development of

something, hidden. a reversal, a movement  
backward, underneath - undoing all

the complication until it is reduced  
like long division or fractions or something

else that confounds the majority. this is the  
algebra; the inequation; the remainder.

# BRENDAN SOMES

---

## THERE IS A CAR TRAVELLING

There is a car travelling. Datsun 1600. Early 70's. The stereo is worth more than the car. There are four people in the car: James Flood, Anthea Wellman, Anthony Hopstapple and Bridget Stirling. James loves Anthea loves James. Anthony loves Bridget loves Anthony. That much I am sure of.

Now that I think about it, I am less sure. James loves Anthea loves James Anthony loves Bridget loves Anthony has the march of a sloganeering send the ambiguities off to the Gulag advertising totalitarianism. I am reminded of Bridget saying to Anthony, How I am supposed to know what your silence means? Anthony to Bridget: So what! when Bridget was jabbering on about something. Or Anthea not saying to James, This is so boring. More than once. Or James' taut okay. Okay! Does James loves Anthea loves James Anthony loves Bridget loves Anthony acknowledge these times? Everybody knows each relationship has its ups and downs but in the end. Does that little homily come free of charge with each James loves Anthea loves James Anthony loves Bridget loves Anthony?

James is Anthea's boyfriend. Anthea is James' girlfriend. Duration: 18 months. Anthony is Bridget's boyfriend. Bridget is Anthony's girlfriend. Duration: 12 months.

Anthony and James are close to best friends. Only close, for the time they spend with each other is more often than not spent in verbal guerilla war. James is the more verbal; the more bugger the silence, I know Anthony will tear me apart, but stuff it, he doesn't say anything. 'Shit a brick ya dopey bastard you could have got us all killed.' Anthony is to speak only after a five minute silence. Or so it seems. He jokes or not of strict border controls on the brain mouth crossing.

Best, for Anthony and James have simply spent so much time in the other's company. Not pretty to watch, but just the sheer amount of runs

demands his inclusion in the team, wrote the former Australian captain, Allan Border.

We should get on better but we just don't, Bridget says to Anthony as they do the dishes. Talking about Anthea. I don't think she likes me, Anthea says to James as they are having a Saturday post shopping coffee. I actually quite like her, Anthea adds to the zero of James' silent reply. Talking about Bridget.

This paragraph should contain how Bridget and James get on. Or Anthony and Anthea. But I couldn't be bothered: I see Anthea fuming after the two couples had gone to the movies together, God Bridget is a bitch. James didn't pick up the whole story; something about Bridget not telling her that Tricia was in town. And she knew we were good friends. I see Anthony talking non-stop with James as they walk into the city. Bridget and Anthea shopping. Laughing as Bridget tried on the thigh high boots.

For the purposes of this story, I will write that Anthony gets on fine with Anthea, an eight out of ten; whilst James and Bridget score a six and a half.

These four friends are travelling down the coast on a Friday afternoon for the weekend. Back Sunday night. This is the fourth time this year that sentence has been delivered to friends, family and house mates. 'Here have a sentence.' A complimentary pen. This time it is May 15.

Silence. Well not quite. Hear the car, the traffic, the gears change, the air conditioning, moving bodies and so on. A near enough silence. A no one is talking silence.

Jimi Hendrix Electric Ladyland. Portishead Dummy. Beatles Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. Radiohead OK Computer. These four tapes are all within the stretching distance of the four occupants of the car. James Jimi. Anthea Portishead. Bridget Beatles. Anthony Radiohead. There is one car stereo, there is one car, and the right now scene of road, traffic (that looks like Elly's car), trees stretching, Anthea rubbing her eyes, and Bridget moving Anthony's jumper from the back window to the middle back seat (James gets the shits), will never ever happen again. No (Rpt).

Now at the lights, James fills the stopped silence with, Shall we put some music on?

Yeh okay Whatever Yeh if you like overlap. Bridget Anthea Anthony. None particularly enthusiastic. A nothing else to do response. An okay let's get to the main questioning attraction of what music will it be

response. The ex-champion footballer may commentate, 'This question is bound to produce fireworks.' But that would be a stay tuned exaggeration; a more accurate comment would be, 'This question has the potential to produce fireworks.' For the history of this question, 'What music to put on?', is a history of unrealised fireworks potential. Bridget has not said, Who cares, it's music, music that's all, who cares what we listen to? Hence Bridget has chosen Sgt Pepper's (everyone likes the Beatles), hoping for a Sgt Pepper's Peace Accord. Anthony has not said, James have you realised that the calendar actually says 1998. 1998. Hendrix has been eating spew for nearly 30 years. Anthea has not said, Can't we just have silence? James has not said, No fuck it, I like Hendrix, it's my car, my stereo, I'll play what I bloody well like. At least not out loud. No that's not true. At least not within earshot.

What shall we listen to?

Whatever Who Cares The King's College Choir. Bridget Anthea Anthony. A dead balloon speaks. The directions of Whatever Who Cares The King's College Choir read not Whatever Who Cares The King's College Choir, they read stuff this music thing all together. Anthony's typical smart arse King's College Choir also has the directions, what is the point of the question if the answer is always Jimi Hendrix.

James sees a saw between silence and Hendrix. Hendrix to shit Anthony off; possibly also to shit the whole car off. Why say Whatever when it's not whatever? Why say Who cares when you care? Silence also would shit off the whole car. James is in a shit shit situation. He is tempted to blow the whole caboodle open with What the hell is wrong here? Aren't we friends? We can't even decide on what to listen to. But no. Not the best start to a weekend down the coast. An intra-car barney. Best leave all out on the table grenades for places compatible with quick getaways.

I'll put on Portishead if you're not going to play anything.

James replies, Yeh whatever.

Anthea reaches for her bag and the tape. James is probably heading for introspection. Anthony is thinking that this weekend best be spent drunk. Bridget is just sad.

## AUTHENTICITY IN BRIAN CASTRO'S *STEPPER*

So what is it to Stepper if I rewrite his texts? Collaborate with them ... to send multiple transmissions ... open the double-jeopardy of biographical lies and fictional truths?<sup>1</sup>

Castro's sixth novel *Stepper* is an examination of the fraudulent identity of the spy, and an inquiry into spying as a way of seeing, and thus composing, the world. It is predicated on unclear dichotomies: whose side is the spy on? what is true and what false? As is typical in a Castro novel, there are no straightforward answers to these questions; how you look at things will determine what sort of conclusions you reach. The simplicity of binaries – good/bad, East/West, honourable/dishonourable – is inadequate, and we are obliged to work in the spaces between the categories we seek to apply to the world. We are in the world of Escher, looking first from one viewpoint, then switching to the other side to see everything mirrored and prismatically split. The novel also draws parallels between spying and writing, raising questions of duplicity and authenticity.

Written with enormous flair, *Stepper* is an ambiguous and poetic novel, in which Castro often describes the action metaphorically and incompletely. Typically for Castro, this action takes place in the minds of the protagonists. The structure of the novel is non-linear: the main narrator is speaking about events that happened fifty years ago, and he shifts between eras to tell parts of the story. The written record is patently unreliable. So the reader becomes a 'player', with no privileged access to the events of the narrative, and must work out what is happening in this convoluted game of deception, dissembling and doubleness. Therefore it is not surprising that the reader will feel as if he/she is stumbling around in dark labyrinthine alleys, scared of missing a vital ('fatal') clue.

Castro got his lead into the spy world from Australian theatre director Jim Sharman:

... he mentioned in passing that when he was directing the musical *Hair* in Tokyo in the early seventies ... after one of the performances a beautiful Japanese woman, who must have been in her early sixties, approached and confided to the director that she was once the lover of a Soviet spy. Sharman suggested that I should make something of this story. Could I be trusted with it?<sup>2</sup>

Castro and Sharman set about tracking down the woman in Tokyo in 1994, to no avail. However, Castro found himself 'looking for models' to flesh out the story of spy-lover, and, in the process, himself 'spying'.

Graham Greene once said that writing novels was like espionage – violations of faith and trust. Spying was a familiar sensation. As a writer, one is a voyeur, an eavesdropper or gloriously, both. But while writing aims to sustain that imagined split between public and private, its very practice publicises the private. So to be a writer was simultaneously to conceal and reveal; to deny and to confess.<sup>3</sup>

This set Castro to thinking about the connections between spying and writing. Voyeurism and custodianship of another's (life-)story are familiar concerns of Castro's novels. 'Could I be trusted with it?', quoted above, is reflexive; not so much 'Could Sharman trust me?' as 'Could I trust myself as author?'

While researching *Stepper* Castro found himself emulating the role of a spy, living in cheap hotels in a foreign environment.

Japan became familiar and then at the same time, even stranger.<sup>4</sup> Anyone existing between several cultures was always a spy, a migrant in a space which could not exist, except as memory and as fiction. I was interested in the migrant-as-spy, in how this position simultaneously privileged the seer while it dispensed an indescribable loss. I was interested in characters who dissimulated their identity when faced with the impositions of loyalty and the crude practices of politics and nationalism. This counterfeit was a form of spying ...

The writer's role has always been to question, ironise, demythologise these issues. I wanted to place this notion of writing as dissimulation and authenticity alongside questions of patriotism, questions about the individual in relation to culture, questions of the public and the private.<sup>5</sup>

Thus on the surface level *Stepper* deals with the inauthentic world of the spy, who inhabits the interstices between competing 'truths', and only loosely occupies his/her mutable 'identity/ies'; at the same time this world provides an analogy for the writer, who inhabits a similarly interstitial world between the 'truths' of factual reality and the pseudo-truths of fiction.

The theme of writing is introduced early in the novel by the narrator, Isaku Ishigo. He himself is equivocal about writing, but the person whose story he is recording, Stepper, has been a master: '... but he, oh, *he* loved to write. Lived for it and knew he was living dangerously' (9). Writing becomes a central metaphor throughout the novel. It is linked with the notions of recording/encoding, of making stories out of what is going on around (summarising, ordering, contextualising, narrativising), and of the danger of committing oneself to paper, where others may discover the hidden self. Isaku possesses Stepper's 'memoirs or confession', but otherwise must rely on his own compromised memories. Stepper, on the other hand, is an excellent journalist (his public vocation), able to interpret world events and set them down in persuasive prose, and able to encode and decipher messages. He can compose convincing 'realities', for others and, for most of the time, for himself.

An author, likewise, 'spies' on the world around him/her, and gathers information that is worked into a story. The author has an ambivalent role in this process; at times he will use information that has come from his friends and acquaintances, perhaps 'betraying' their trust in him, and at times he will covertly 'spy' on people in his surroundings, listening to conversations, observing behaviour, imputing motives.

This information then becomes a story, in which the author controls the master narrative; only he determines how his information will be presented (though not necessarily how it is read/decoded). The author 'codes' his information into a system of symbols, not just the words he chooses but the tone and register of the prose, the amount of 'poetry' or connotative information that the work is imbued with. The final 'message' will invariably contain traces of the author, a characteristic signature.

Castro is also fascinated by the comparisons between the psychology of the spy, who must deny his inner being by concealing it and by adopting false personas, and the writer, who, similarly, dissembles.

To understand the psychology of the double-agent, the one who pushes the ineffability of language to the extent that it cannot be owned,

way beyond reasonable limits, one must understand the psychology of spying. Because a spy cannot reveal himself or herself, the consciousness and understanding of a hidden Being is vital. After all, revelation usually means death. It is not an understanding of who one is, or where one comes from, but how one cares for the self. As a purveyor of inauthenticity, such a measure of authentic being is one of the serious projects of the spy as well as of the postmodernist.<sup>6</sup>

In questioning the authenticity of the spy, and his ability to take care of his own ontological cohesiveness, Castro also questions the writer's position.

### *Writing Stepper's story – authentically?*

While Victor Stepper is the focus of the novel, the point of view is Isaku Ishigo's. Isaku, a Castroian doppelgänger, is an intentionally problematic character in terms of our reading of the novel. Isaku's complicates the novel by being an unreliable narrator. As well as being the 'author' of Stepper's story, Isaku also represents the (unreliable?) writer of novels.

Isaku is a typical Castro meta-narrator, not very firmly attached to the character in the novel. When he does take part directly in the action of the novel, he is often working as a rival to Stepper, jealous of Stepper's prowess, and therefore narratorially unreliable.

He is also a postmodern interpreter of events, who views life around him as unstable, and who is himself ontologically insecure and potentially unstable. Isaku admits early in the novel that he is aware of the impossibility of telling Stepper's story in an impartial manner.<sup>7</sup> It becomes increasingly apparent that Isaku is *actively* writing/rewriting the Stepper story in ways that suit his needs – 'collaborating' with reality, as he calls it.

As narrator, Isaku is an old man of seventy-five, recalling the story of Stepper and the spy ring of which he was a part. He is troubled by the story he is about to recount, and admits that as a writer or narrator his material will be unreliable.

I wrote some notes. These are but pasty words, a crumbling vellum, a degenerating cerebellum. I'd made a practice of never writing. Dirty business really. Difficult to destroy once down. I thought I'd coded it ... I pencilled some notes in the margins ... (9)

He is clearly ambivalent about his task, but, like the Ancient Mariner, obsessed by the need to tell, and to set down the competing narrative of his own involvement as a spy against Stepper's narrative.

But the reader can never get much purchase on the character of Isaku. As a spy he is, generally, incompetent. (He loses the radio transmitter while staying at Reiko's inn, he transmits jumbled messages, he is inclined to blab to friends, and he is often referred to by the others as 'the kid'.) Although he is narrating the story, he tells us very little of his own actions, seeing everything through Stepper's eyes.

He sees all narratives as problematic, and is actively involved in *interpreting* the life of Stepper, to the point that he is mythologising it and thereby fictionalising it. In this way Isaku opens up the novel to a discussion of linguistic concerns, which are tied into the spy theme: how can we rely on words, interpret codes, piece together consistent information/narratives?

Isaku draws attention to the similarities between spying and writing. He tries to rationalise Stepper's callousness, and in doing so draws parallels between the two vocations:

They said he would use anyone providing they served his purpose. That, I know for sure. It's the writer's motive. And the writer's callousness. Shoot the muse when it doesn't come across. But he loved her [Reiko]. Isn't that enough? Not for a writer ... love is never enough. Not for a spy ... love is always too much. At least that's the way I saw it. (180)

Losing his faith in writing as an authentic mode, Isaku takes an aleatory approach, and as the spy ring's coder is soon disinterestedly transmitting nonsense.

He decides at random what he will send. Skims the information Stepper has so resolutely and assiduously gathered which warns of an imminent German invasion of Russia. Rewrites it as though it were a fire-drill. So what. Condenses forty pages into half a paragraph. Good editing practice ... And so he taps out the least amount of information, infusing it with sub-texts, innuendoes, metaphors to liven it up. (198-199)

At a metaphorical level Castro implies that language is potentially 'betraying' us at all times: it is hard to assemble meaning in a text; it is always open to corruption or slippage in the transfer into codes and sub-

sequent transmission. 'Betrayal' is a natural part of the world. As Isaku rationalises:

So what is it to Stepper if I rewrite his texts? Collaborate with them in a way which defuses and diffuses their meaning to spread multiple transmissions across the airwaves, render secret knowledge public, open the double-jeopardy of biographical lies and fictional truths? (218)<sup>8</sup>

Literature itself becomes implicated. The Russian spymasters insist on being given photographic evidence because their field spies by nature turn 'literary', and start 'encoding' their reports in literary language:

... no matter how learned and trained and politicised, they soon returned narcissistic reports, couched in literary language, sometimes playing with codes, the first four notes of *Madama Butterfly*, for example, which you then had to decode, and after four hours realise you were the butt of some ciphered foreplay. (124)<sup>9</sup>

In this way Castro draws literature and all art into his nexus of instability of meaning.

### *Stepper and Sorge: authentic doubles?*

Like Castro's novels *Double-Wolf* and *Drift*, *Stepper* is highly intertextual. Although the fact is concealed from the reader, *Stepper* consciously interprets the story of the real life spy, Richard Sorge.<sup>10</sup> But *Stepper* occupies an interesting position on the fact/fiction divide. *Double-Wolf* and *Drift* draw attention to the works they are counter-writing: *Stepper* does not. At face value *Stepper* could be seen to be relying on the base material of Richard Sorge's life in the way that *Birds of Passage* used the history of the Australian gold rush era to provide its setting. But Castro is prepared to blur the lines between art and history. His retelling of the Sorge story is, for him, as valid an interpretation of the real events as the historical chronicles.

The Sorge case offers a temptingly open paradigm with which to work. As a real character, Richard Sorge left his mark on the public record. When captured, his interrogation and 'confession' were recorded at length. But Sorge was a spy – he promulgated several identities over his career, and effaced 'identities' as and when required. None of the

bureaucratic files on him can be trusted. Towards the end of the War, much of the Japanese case material on Sorge was destroyed by bombing, and the last direct record of his career is also now incomplete.

The Sorge case was reconstructed by Gordon Prange during the 1960s, using both traditional research methods and interviews with survivors of the period. Ironically, Prange died before *Target Tokyo* was published, and the book was posthumously completed by colleagues. As if this does not already offer enough leeway for Castro to re-interpret the case, *Target Tokyo* is written in a curious style that often deviates across genres from 'history book' into 'thriller' mode, and is itself questionable in its authenticity/reliability.

But even granting Castro this room to manoeuvre, what he has not done is set out to relate 'the Sorge story'. His *Stepper* is a spy thriller that often runs parallel to the Sorge story, but *is not that story*. As his career has progressed, Castro has moved closer towards the use of biography in his writing. The reason is given in his essay, 'Dangerous Dancing: Autobiography and Disinheritance',<sup>11</sup> where he speaks of moving away from the novel form as it is traditionally construed, and adapting it to deal with real events. The result is a hybrid of fact and fiction. This is the form he is using for his forthcoming work *Shanghai-Dancing*.

I began to write what I called an 'autobiography'. I didn't call it that to impress anyone. I wasn't making any claims about truth and lies and real events. I knew that the word autobiography carried a freight of meaning it didn't really deserve: real life; true stories; family secrets ... why not write a novel instead?

I think I would have ... if it hadn't been for one thing ... the element of risk. A novel usually risks one thing: its form ... An 'autobiography' however, does make some claims. Claims about oneself, one's family, lineage, history.<sup>12</sup>

What Castro is elaborating is his ongoing argument on behalf of the novel, that it is only a form and needs constant re-imagining and risk-taking. *Stepper* is a novel that reinterprets history, but which veers between recording 'accurately' the facts of a given story and adding to them, via imaginative fictionalising, to suit the author's requirements.

Thus *Stepper* follows the Sorge story in great detail at times, and creates new lines of action at others. In most respects Victor Stepper is a realistic simulacrum of Richard Sorge.<sup>13</sup> Stepper is only slightly romanticised for narrative purposes.

Reiko as a character is not filled out in great detail: she remains a figure of erotic allure, slightly naive honesty combined with honour, and mystery. This suits Castro's purposes, but it seems consistent with Sorge's girlfriend Hanako Ishii as portrayed in *Target Tokyo*. Both heroines speak about their spy lover, but rarely about themselves or their feelings.

Castro's master stroke is to invent the character of Isaku Ishigo, who is only loosely based on the real Miyagi Yotoku. In the Sorge story, Miyagi remains loyal to the end, and is a valuable member of the intelligence gathering mechanism. But Castro's figure, Isaku, is ambivalent towards Stepper. Although on the surface *Stepper* relies dramatically on the attraction – and tensions – between Stepper and Reiko (the 'love story' component), it is the subliminal tension between Stepper and Isaku, or, at the literary level, their competing narratives, that drives the deeper drama. Castro points out that 'It is very important that one makes the connection between [Isaku] "Ishigo" and Shakespeare's "Iago".'<sup>14</sup> This may not be immediately obvious to readers, but it is typical of Castro's novels that the reader can read deeper and deeper levels of symbolism into the text with each re-reading.

In fact there is a still deeper level of symbolism in the novel. The *critical* word in *Stepper* is withheld until late in the novel. It will not be obvious to the average reader that Stepper is modelled on Richard Sorge, nor is this connection necessary. But the important clue to understanding the novel is the German word *Sorge*. The hint to its significance is given on page 298. Isaku has asked Reiko

whether [Stepper] wrestled with his existence, whether he had a concern for it, for surely it was care which made existence meaningful? Care? he had said to her, using the German word ... *Sorge* ... which also meant anxiety ... and he flicked his thumbnail at the sky. He never did take care, always standing at the blind spot between delusion and ambition. (298)

This makes manifest the central concern (as opposed to the central metaphor, spying) of the novel – an investigation of existential care, literally caring for one's self or identity. Some readers may make the further connection that *Sorge* was given a specific, philosophical/psychological meaning by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. In Heidegger's ontology, *Sorge* is explained as follows.

What is the organic relation between the necessary inauthenticity of being-in-the-world and the equally necessary striving for authentic

Dasein? The answer, given in ... *Sein und Zeit*, is *Sorge*.

This arch-Kierkegaardian term is translated by 'care', 'concern', 'apprehension'. Heidegger invests it with great positive value and range.

... As we flail about emptily, the familiarity of the everyday shatters. It is as if we had been caught, all of a sudden, in the interstices of the busy mesh of being, and stood face to face with the ontological, with *Daseinsfrage*. It is striking how closely Heidegger's evocation of the uncanny resembles Freud's famous use of the term.<sup>15</sup>

Hence this key word evokes Castro's perpetual concern, ontology, and connects it very closely with his view that life is renewed or given meaning by engaging with the strange, or the uncanny (*Unheimlich*).<sup>16</sup> Thus Stepper is a vehicle for investigating a person who does not take 'care' of his 'being'. Steiner's exposition of Heidegger continues:

*Sorge*, signifying 'care-for', 'concern-for and -with' ... can and must take myriad forms: care for the ready-to-hand, for the tools and materials of our practice; a concern for others which can be defined as 'solicitude'. But principally, ... *Sorge* is a concern with, a caring for, an answerability to, the presentness and mystery of Being itself, of Being as it transfigures beings. And it is from this existential ethic of concernedness that derives Heidegger's subsequent definition of man as the shepherd and custodian of Being.<sup>17</sup>

The real German's surname provides the retrospective clue to Castro's underlying 'message' in his novel.

The interesting thing about Stepper is of course ... 'the care of being'. [Heidegger] said that we can only understand our notion of being when we take care of it, in other words, we are conscious of it. In our day-to-day affairs, our day-to-day lives, we are so busy we don't even notice our being. He says when you step back a little bit – this whole Existentialist thing – and take care, have some consciousness of your being, it's quite an uncanny notion: 'I'm alive. Why am I here? I'm alive.' This notion for which Heidegger used the German word '*Sorge*' ... that's the spy's name! And this whole play on the idea of the word *Sorge* meaning 'care, of your being' and a spy who has to completely and utterly travesty that word by taking on different identities ... [parallels the contemporary writer who is] hiding, concealing, waiting for your reader to find out about you ... <sup>18</sup>

To simplify Heidegger's ontology, the crux of our living comfortably with ourselves and operating successfully is to live 'authentically', that is to be aware of what is happening in our own being and in the world around us and to respond openly and honestly. Any blocking of our expression of ourselves, or any dishonest approach to living (such as 'living a lie'), results in 'inauthentic' existence, which is unfulfilling and potentially pathological.

So *Stepper* is 'about' the protagonist's inability to lead an authentic life because his *chosen* vocation is that of being a spy: a dissimulator, a shifter inhabiting multiple existences which he changes at the slightest outside cue. Unable to inhabit a stable 'authenticity', or in everyday terms 'identity', Stepper is doomed to an uncaring existence. And being yoked to his vocation for ideological reasons he does not make the effort to 'care' for his own 'being'.<sup>19</sup>

But Castro is also working on a self-referential level, equating the business of spying with the business of writing. Writing is the vocation of dissimulation, and Castro is quietly questioning the position of the writer. Is he being/can he be authentic? Once again, Castro has written a novel that not only investigates the existential possibilities available to its central characters, but reflexively questions the processes of writing (and reading) that author and reader are involved in.

## Endnotes

- 1 Brian Castro, *Stepper* (Sydney: Random House, 1997): 281.
- 2 "Brian Castro discusses *Stepper*", *Australian Humanities Review*, <http://www.australis.org/castro/s.extract.html>.
- 3 "Brian Castro discusses *Stepper*", *AHR*.
- 4 The familiar Castro paradox of strangeness-in-familiarity, the uncanny.
- 5 "Brian Castro discusses *Stepper*", *AHR*.
- 6 "Just Flirting", *Australian Book Review* 171 (June 1995): 39-40.
- 7 Like Seamus in Castro's *Birds of Passage*, or Catacomb in *Double-Wolf*.
- 8 Castro is deliberately playing on the autobiography/fact/fiction divide.
- 9 In fact, Castro uses lines from Modernist poets as examples of the coded messages: e.g. "The gilded phaloi of the crocuses/Are thrusting at the spring air", the opening lines of Pound's 'Coitus'; "I read much of the night, and go south in the winter" taken from Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Artists such as Magritte and Hokusai are also drawn into the game of coding.

- 10 Or more accurately, the story as it is given in Gordon W. Prange's *Target Tokyo: The Story of the Sorge Spy Ring* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984). At the time Castro was researching, this appears to have been the only commercially available publication on Sorge's exploits.
- 11 "Dangerous Dancing: Autobiography and Disinheritance", *Australian Humanities Review*, March 1999,  
<http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-December-1998/castro.html>
- 12 "Dangerous Dancing: Autobiography and Disinheritance", *AHR*.
- 13 I have dealt with this in more detail elsewhere: see "Apart from the Expected': The Novels of Brian Castro", PhD thesis, Flinders University, 2000. I also comment on Castro's symbolic use of names.
- 14 Letter to MD (16 February 1999).
- 15 George Steiner, *Heidegger* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1978): 96-98.
- 16 A key term in Freudian as well as existential psychology.
- 17 George Steiner, *Heidegger* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1978): 96-98.
- 18 Interview MD (29 November 1997). See Michael Deves "Apart from the Expected': The Novels of Brian Castro", PhD thesis, Flinders University, 2000.
- 19 The theme of the 'empty centre' that permeates *Stepper* is ably discussed by Bernadette Brennan in "Brian Castro's Tokyo: Schizophrenic Semiotic", Fran de Groen and Ken Stewart, eds., *Australian Writing and the City, Proceedings of the 1999 Conference* (ASAL, 2000).

# BRENDAN RYAN

---

## THE BIG HOLE

Bottomless, dark, so cold  
we fill it with stories  
the outflow from dairies,  
Pat Kelly raking his fingers  
through the mud, telling us  
he has seen  
the bottom of the world.

On the strength of a dare  
I was dog-paddling toward friends  
drying off on the other side.  
Their conversation out of reach  
of the chill beneath my legs,  
the relaxed Sunday calm  
I perfected through gritted teeth  
as I groped against the thought  
of how simple it might be  
to drop away from their voices,  
below the warm patches of water  
down past reeds  
rocky outcrops  
into the quiet  
depths of memory  
where the darkness  
is kept alive  
with the bones of bullock drays  
tanker drivers missing the turn,  
farmers skinny-dipping after Cabaret Balls

children shivering into the stare  
from the diving board.

## CHOPPERS

Skin and bone cows  
cast out from the herd

lame, slack-bellied and undershot  
they get head-butted into gateposts

and put in a paddock of thistles  
to raise abandoned calves.

Between April and May  
the chopper season begins.

herds are cleaned up  
any mongrel not pulling her weight

is sent up the road.  
For two hundred bucks

they might be worth the gamble  
to young farmers hungry for a quick grand,

but who wants a barren cow  
even the bulls have lost interest in.

You know what a chopper is worth  
by the way she carries her head,

how she walks into the sale ring.  
If nobody raises a finger

she is knocked down  
to the Abs and knackery buyers,  
always in the bidding.

# KNUTE SKINNER

---

## THE CRYSTAL CLOCK

Someone came in the back door  
at seven to three.  
I heard it open and close,  
and I heard Randolph say "Good Lord"  
in his usual stentorian tone.  
Then there was only a sound  
that was near to silence,  
a sound that could have been whispers.

In one hand I held the crystal clock  
that Randolph's mother, after she left his father  
and after the first of her trips abroad,  
had given to Randolph.  
In the other I held the cloth  
with which I was dusting the shelf.  
I stared at the bright swipe  
where the grain in the wood shone clean.

Then I edged closer to the door,  
but nothing, I heard nothing more, until  
"Goodbye then" was said.  
By a voice that was anyone's voice  
but was not Randolph's.  
I listened hard as the door  
opened and closed,  
and I stared hard at the clock.

Then I dusted the rest of the shelf  
and with infinite care  
I placed the crystal clock back  
in the precise spot on the shelf  
in which it had stood.

# RYAN G. VAN CLEAVE

---

## POETRY JAIL

*for Campbell McGrath*

They lock you up in pantoum chains  
and feed you, one fingernail at  
a time to old Walt Whitman's ghost,  
that mean red specter with black teeth.

Everyone worth a plugged quarter  
is there, having confused trochee  
with spondee, or iambed once too  
much; BLAMO, the jail door banged shut.

James Tate's there, regretting it all.  
Don Justice, too - no one knows why.  
Martín Espada (politics?),  
his words like stars into our eyes.

William Carlos sits on his hands,  
mumbling it wasn't his fault.  
Pound's lost there somewhere, that old curr.  
Shakespeare? Third cell from the corner.

The Sheriff of Poetry Jail  
could be anyone, - Robert Bly,  
the hawk-beaked postal carrier,  
your father, who says, "Dactyl *who?*"

Be careless and mix metaphors  
or blow a high-power line break  
and you'll be banging out metrics  
all night, wanting your sole phone call.

## NO CAMPS OR MOVEMENTS: RECENT POETRY

Despite the much-lamented decrease over the years of space-in-print for Australian poets (publishers closing lists, or reduction in output from those publishers who do persist), the number of books emerging here in any given year or two is still too great to permit anything like an in-depth survey here. Neither can those books that are discussed be grouped into anything like “camps” or “movements”. You might note that, across a sample of what 1999 and the beginning of 2000 brought us, there are generic tendencies — a revived interest in narrative poems and the verse novel (though not restricted to this period by any means) perhaps riding on the back of the earlier success of *The Monkey’s Mask*, a recurrent interest in the long poem or long sequence of poems on “big” issues, what I tend to think of as the “Newcastle prize attempt”... if that doesn’t sound ungenerous. These tendencies might be linked in a crude and obvious way to the need to earn: too little analytical attention is usually paid to the real-world constraints that make all our writing a “trade-off”, to a greater or lesser degree, between what we wanted to do and what we *had* to do (assuming a basic purity of intention on the individual poet’s part, which isn’t necessarily the case).

But you don’t get outside genre anyway, so it’s more instructive to ask what is being done with it, and how. Dorothy Porter’s recent offering, *what a piece of work*, is every bit as competent and confident as her previous big seller in the genre, but something has clearly happened in between. When *The Monkey’s Mask* was attacked for its non-PC quality by Finola Moorhead, there was a rather puritanical and aesthetically naive agenda behind the criticism, which I thought quite unjustified; here I am some years later asking myself if this new work, basically a bleak sketch of the insides of a warped psychiatrist, doesn’t rather wallow in sex and perversion! It’s not that I’ve become a puritan in the inter-

im; it's more that, where the detective-story impulse of *The Monkey's Mask* provided a rationale for its gore and darkness, here the darkness seems there for its own sake. Reviewers probably ought not to use words like "coarse" (think back to accusations levelled at the Brontës, and how silly they sound now), but that is what springs to mind. It's very hard, of course, to pull off a book without an endearing character, but it can be done without repelling the reader entirely.

Geoff Page's offering for 1999, also a verse novel, is a case in point. Written in more traditional metrics, which you might think at first threaten to make it monotonous, but which are soon rendered "organic" by the narrative pull, *The Scarring* looks at the mores of a generation (and a class) through the story of a married couple on the land, "the stockbook at the core of all they do". Peter Goldsworthy's blurb says "I read it in one compulsive sitting", and there's no doubt that it does compel – partly, for a feminist reader, because the issues are such that you want to see how the text will come down in its judgement, partly because Page simply knows how to tell a story.

In fact the text attempts to remain neutral toward what it depicts, though at every point it is subtly rescoring the connective lines between the personal and the political. I am reluctant to go into the plot for fear of spoiling the experience, as with those who tell the end of a movie! *The Scarring* raises concerns of a previous era that still resonate in ours, and achieves that difficult thing, the portrayal of a mindset that no longer prevails, with a fairness to the protagonists that yet doesn't balk at showing their tragedy warts-and-all. Readers looking for poetic experiment and linguistic innovation may look elsewhere; but those are not absolute values, and it would be shortsighted not to spot that there is much to learn from *The Scarring*.

Without wishing to class all this last year's output along gender lines, as is often done when all "women poets" are reviewed together, and only that way, there is nonetheless to my eye a clear set of preoccupations among many of the male poets who published volumes in 1999. Just as Page's book is preeminently about the relationship between a man and a woman, and the needless tragedies it can entail, so too others dwell on the position and condition of the heterosexual male at the end of the nineties; but also on what you might call the need for fathering. It is remarkable how many poems have appeared on that subject – as if this generation is not simply having a kneejerk reaction to the concerns of feminism, but even genuinely engaging with it – whether for or against. The fathering note, both that received and that given, crops up in Mark

Reid's *Parochial*, more generally about Fremantle life and death and the observation of sufferings in between, particularly in the poems drawn from work in a hospital. And in *Every night they dance*, Andy Kissane expands on the father theme

"Please find enclosed" is how my father usually starts his letters ...

or in "For My Father's 70th Birthday", with its opening line:

Remember when I hit you? I was sixteen.

Kissane too is big on storytelling; as I think I've said in print before, there are echoes of Anthony Lawrence in his easy facility with character voices, though I don't mean "echoes" in any negative or direct sense. The phrase "no stone unturned" might best describe this book — it is wide-ranging and energetic, it doesn't see anything as closed to poetry. I am not sure that his Arthur Streeton voice is entirely successful — it is tricky to project a voice backward in time like this — but the choice of persona in this instance indicates one of Kissane's aims — he is keen to deal with the culture of "the people". The poem was also a runner-up in a major prize, so the reader may well beg to differ with my opinion. As in Reid's book, the world of work is a primary source, as seen in an engaging set of poems, "The Ghosts of Marrickville Metro", though it had me asking myself half-consciously whether work wasn't also being a little romanticised here (is it pre-high-tech nostalgia?). Nevertheless, the doubts are in this sequence overpowered by the writer's infectious interest in everything; it's as if Kissane has a project to fill in the chinks, to imagine his way into the stories that haven't yet been fully explored.

If I feel the urge to argue with a lot of what is in the book, it's more a sign of the poems provoking and holding interest than of any aesthetic failure. Kissane, among the poets I mentioned as clearly having engaged for better or worse with feminism, is probably one of the more overt at this, as poems with titles like "Jean Devanny Writes", "Arrest of a Suffragette, 1912", "For my Sister", "Breast Triptych", "Miscarriages" and "Birth" might suggest. This runs of course the risk of being taken for bluster or special pleading; but we women have been asking so long for dialogue, I wouldn't easily sniff at it when it's given, even where I disagree. "Breast Triptych" is very moving, because there is no attempt to make cheap drama out of the material, but a respect for the suffering

laid on others (in this case the speaker's mother and Fanny Burney).

I would have liked to see, in poems like "Birth", some interrogation of the myth, birth being every bit as "cerebral" as any other human experience or activity, that is to say, as cerebral as we make it, despite the obstetrician's near-sigh to the contrary, "demonstrating the sort of solidarity/that only men can share with men". This is not to miss the possible subtle irony in the way the obstetrician is quoted, of course. It's just that Kissane often treads an edge that makes you wince, laying his poems open to directly contrasted readings — as in "The Station Owner's Daughter, Narrandera". Apparently based on the true account of a young woman helping an Aboriginal man, you could read it as either an attempt to tell an affirmative, "reconciliation"-driven story, or as a sop to consciences (we know that evidently not enough whites cared, or perhaps even now care, in the way this woman does). Kissane constructs the daughter's act against the context of her father's domination — is this insightful, or again too easy? — there were/are plenty of women supportive both of male power and of the oppression of Aboriginal people. But all these comments are in one sense quibbles: the questions are raised because the poems are bothering to deal with the subject matter, rather than comfortably avoiding them as other poets might.

Kissane doesn't avoid the relationship theme either, plunging right in there with "Tristan and Isolde", the long, Plath-headed sequence that ends the book's first section, and is deftly balanced (tight ordering and construction are apparent throughout the volume) by the Hass-headed "The Separation Sonnets" that end the book. Now these were a Newcastle-prize runner-up, but I don't want to be facetious about that context: they are well-crafted and coherent, and as a feminist I would be the last person to object that strong bitterness can't make good poetry (we know what it feels like to be accused of self-pity and have the whole point missed). There's that uneasy edge again, though: how responsible is it, no matter how based in "true" experience, to let stand a poem like "Apprehended Violence"?:

You start shouting at me in the supermarket  
and the manager calls the police. I tell  
the sergeant that I haven't punched anyone  
since that fight with Len Smith in grade five.  
He doesn't believe me. Stubble stains my cheeks.  
Your suit, your stockings, your lipstick smile.  
I need an AVO, officer ...

Okay, yes, poetry is perhaps best made out of the things we don't expect – or necessarily like – to hear, and the manipulations of some women against some men are an untold side to the progress that has been made (I hope) on the issue of domestic violence – but decontextualised, like this, the portrayal sails close to a poetic and more sensitive version of the ranting man in my district who stands in a sandwich board outside the Child Support office every day. In a world where our state newspaper reports a survey showing a majority of men still think violence against female partners is justifiable under some circumstances, this poem needs more context to shore it up if it is not to be mis-taken.

Kissane's book is not only about these issues, of course, and there is a fascinating obsession with *breath* as image and its attendant opposite, the death wish. If he is primarily an experiential "poem-maker" rather than an abstract, intellectualising poet, there is no less of the spiritual dimension to Kissane's poems than you might hope for.

Spiritual things of a more concrete nature underpin two other books of this period, first Kevin Murray's *Jaywalking Blues*. I mean the underpinning in the sense that the poet's Catholic childhood, however intellectually distanced, informs the work not only literally in some instances, but in its constant approach to the fact of mortality. The book is described by the publishers as a "début collection", but Murray is no beginner-poet: his work is already known through fairly wide publication in periodicals, and the poems already "know" what it is they want to do. The measured, muted style might at first suggest the book's title as a misnomer – is it a blues wail? – but a closer read reveals, despite the controlled tone, much sadness and disappointment playing as a kind of steady low-note through the collection.

The "jaywalking" too is appropriate, not only for its sense of the poet at cross-purposes (though it might throw down the gauntlet to the word "pedestrian" in a mean reviewer!) but really for the book's near-obsession with spatiality. You have the feeling not so much that the poems were written with an eye to extending and making variations on this central idea, but that they can't help repeating it – that movement through space is part of Murray's way of building the world. In the title poem, the speaker in the second half acknowledges

Bifocals and a cooling heart bring me to  
the crossing lights, trading the poetry of the old passages  
for this flat prose ...

and this points up the collection's other motif, whence its lament: ageing, with its no-longer-deniable sense of an ending. The poems are not striving to accept that state; they are recording its onset and casting a gaze backward to try to make meaning out of what has been. Murray too is much taken up with estrangement between men and women, with abandonment – and this again is embodied spatially: the amplified noise of an empty house, the alteration in the physical that follows on being alone. There is much imagery of undoing, of the house, with all its connotations, being demolished, dismantled, of the tree that loses its limb.

If sometimes there are easy effects – an obvious last line pulling a poem up short, as in “Family Group, 1891”, or “Tree” – the poems are more often neatly crafted to the end (“Getting On”, “School Closures”). The “gaze” I mentioned is not always a backward one, and sometimes it is distinctly uncomfortable for the reader: “an old god-Swan//come dripping, sag-winged, from the lake/who pads hot-eyed to his Leda/and is refused” (hard to do this image after Carter’s “Magic Toyshop” has wrung the last say from it, though that’s not poetry of course) or in the poem “In High Street”, which is spoken by the “Bald Man With Newspaper And Long Black” whose gaze is met first fleetingly and then confidently by a schoolgirl; the poem ends

Honoured to be her trial-horse  
I raised my coffee in salute  
as she moved on with style.

This is one of those edge-treading poems I mentioned in discussing Kissane: we may read it as the unusual giving-of-a-perspective, that of the harmless man acknowledging the girl’s right to freedom and safety (again conceived of in spatial terms, a kind of Reclaim the Streets or demolition of the nun-cherished injunction to keep “custody of the eyes”), and that would seem to be the surface intent; yet finally the girl-character *is* possessed and *is* broken in by the man’s gaze, for it is his implied benignity that grants her safe passage. Nonetheless, this kind of risk is going to arise in any poetry subtle enough not to close down its own possibilities of interpretation. Murray is not always so subtle; where he deals directly with Irish-diaspora content he gets too sweet for me (“The Rose of Tralee”), despite its attempt to distance itself from the sweetness.

Cath Kenneally shares some of that heritage, but her approach to it and to poetry is loudly different. *Around Here* is the sort of book you read in one sitting, not because it is in any way flimsy, but because it is as colourful and inviting as the jokey cover suggests. It's been a long time since I read poems that were so *apparently* easy, so colloquial and casual, but *actually* minutely textured and informed. And what's more: moving, without a trace of sentimentality. Sentimentality, in fact, is precisely what won't wash with Kenneally. The flippancy with which she trashes its pretensions springs from an underlying toughness, a poetic spirit that seems to have survived much while losing neither its detachment nor its ability to feel, such that she can place "Don't Look Down":

nostalgia is something  
incapacitating, like  
rheumatic fever  
must have  
been

it weakens the heart.

...

Even flashbacks are  
mutinous in that old  
friends or enemies  
play them  
selves

while you're a revenant ...

...

left to itself, the mind  
scabs over. Don't  
video the kids  
with your  
fuckwit

first husband on  
lawns or beaches...

with its lively and typical mix of register, in the same volume as the tersely poignant "Patrick: in memoriam".

The fact that *Around Here* will have particular points of identification for those raised as Catholics should not lead anyone to think it is one more post-Catholic lament or satire upon roots. Kenneally is clear-sighted here as elsewhere: the sillinesses and incongruities of her experiences with the nuns are laid alongside a maturer scrutiny well able to name what was also useful and positive in these experiences.

But setting aside those experiences, which are only the “evident” thrust of the poems, together with family life, social and physical environments, even and especially television (!), it is fruitful to read this book in terms of craft, in terms of its whole view of, and approach to, poetry. Consider for a moment Ken Bolton’s comment on the book’s back cover:

What is most valuable in these poems, and what is rare, is Kenneally’s avoidance of metaphor and of the conventionally poetic in favour of intelligence and educated plain-speak — a plain-speak that, of course, isn’t so plain, so unitary.

This final qualification of Bolton’s is important: as I’ve said above, the poems are only *apparently* simple. While it isn’t strictly true to say that Kenneally avoids metaphor (indeed, unforced metaphors are strikingly in evidence!) Bolton’s point about the “conventionally poetic” remains relevant.

What *is* the “conventionally poetic” for Australians now? Too various to pin down, of course; but we know when we see something different. Kenneally’s book is fully *au fait* with theoretical concerns, but not driven by them. Its self-consciousness is not of a kind submissive to fashions in thought — but analytical, fastidious, tongue-in-cheek. Poems like “Mayday” and “Mother Bear” accomplish what no labouring and earnest feminist theorist could quite convey; Kenneally inscribes within the actual writing the condition and *relative* value of its making. She plays with “real time” and with literary precedent in order, finally, to put things in their places. Sometimes this is outright, as when she goes over the top to take to task a whole tradition in “The Art of Poetry”; do not suppose for a minute that the “clarity” of Kenneally’s style indicates a naive position *vis à vis* language. She outdoes any single position.

One of her poems re-examines Anne Sexton (small cries of disapproval? — it’s in vogue currently in many quarters to ignore Sexton altogether as too loose, too blathering, too “uncrafted”, which despite her flaws does her work a disservice); Kenneally comments here though on

the life and perhaps only by our extrapolation on the work, with a telling empathy:

Trapper Kayo

broke Anne with  
the necessary force

lovers she loved and left  
laid at his feet

house-cat's gift-mice  
on the back step ...

With all respect to Sexton's gifts and her limitations, that very exact "house-cat" seems to me an entirely apt image. But if Kenneally is able to point out the Kayos of the world, she has no illusions about the Annes either, as in "Persons on the Verge":

Women lay cards on the table straight off  
the awful things there've been in our lives

as a kind of propitiatory offering, Barbara Pym  
would say, if she was watching us

trying to placate each other  
or some presiding angel.

I can do it sometimes and sometimes I can't.  
At George's today I got through my story

in two minutes flat. By now I handle  
raised eyebrows and double-takes okay

preserving a cavalier manner through  
the startling parts of the account

until the talk flows on  
and I go with it

I'm just congratulating myself on my sang-  
froid when I start to feel like I'm haemorrhaging

from a major artery ...

Kenneally can be deeply serious too, though, as in the poems "Lumen" and "Comeback". Possibly an underestimated poet, she is, in this latest volume, one to read more closely than her initial "vivacity" might suggest.

Entirely different in tone, but equally unsentimental, is Deb Westbury's *Surface Tension*. Dedicated to a deceased teenaged son, the book deals not only with this subject matter — handled with grace and poignancy in a poem like "Wrapt", or more directly confronted in "Reading the Signs": "... I wonder when I gave up the fight/against talking about him in the past tense" — but also with a broad range of human experiences and aspects of the natural world. Birds, trees, the ocean — all are sensuously present in themselves, but apprehended too as part of a larger meaningful process: the "flashing yes/no" and "life/death" of "Reading the Signs" repeating as a motif through the collection. In "Homing", the "nameless bird is dead", but the minute life that feeds on it

bristles with the half-formed  
wings and claws  
of dreams that want  
to fly

— in "Food", we have that interface between the human and the bird, the transmutation of a banal moment into something more, pigeons

settling around the boy's feet  
like a wishing pool.

He throws them hot chips  
that steam like manna  
in the frozen morning.

— so too in "Birdwatching at Coledale", with its woman who leaves out "a strawberry and cream layercake/for the black and white birds".

Westbury's poems evoke the people around her as vividly as they do the natural world — she is a close observer who is nonetheless aware of illusion and the transitory nature of physical presence:

... the awkward angles,  
the false solidarity  
of my body

which, they say, is no more  
than water and stardust  
held  
in a pattern of light  
("Door")

though we should note that subtle, qualifying "they say" and the weight it carries throughout the collection. This sensitive and responsive poetry, though, is done something of an injustice by the physical quality of the book's production: while the cover is clean, and well if blandly designed, the interior is all buckled pages and accidental changes in typeface.

There's a slight injustice done too, to Jennifer Harrison's accomplished volume, *Dear B*, though the physical problem here, aside from the appalling cover, is an apparent carelessness in proofreading and copy-editing which no publisher should let slip by if it can be helped. We all get typos, and we all know how easy it is to swear they weren't there at the time, but a special signed edition somehow seems to invite greater care.

This minor point cannot destroy the work, however; the poems themselves are interesting and deftly handled. The sequence "Boston Poems" deals with breast cancer, but where Kissane spoke of it inevitably from the outside, this is the insider's view:

you wrap-around smile  
everything I hate

control-freak machine  
you radiotherapy

don't forget  
everyday I walk out on you ...

There is rarely anything obvious about where Harrison's poems are taking you. They can range from the quietly understated diction of "Doubtful Sound" to the sudden manic quality of "Lot's Wife":

I've been ambiguous  
I've lied about my motives  
I've smoked a cigarette  
I've burned my palms  
with the well bucket  
I've sorted olives  
and scented men  
You might say I'm not so different  
from other women  
I've looked into puddles  
and seen my face shatter  
and reform ...

There is the odd poem that falls a bit flat, like "The Society of Psychotherapist's [sic] Fantasy Ball", being little more than an extended joke — but generally the poems, typically short and well-shaped lyrics, or pieces in sequence, do not disappoint. Harrison's humour works best when it is wry and implied, as in "Ceremony", which describes the taking of Australian citizenship, with participants each given "a native plant, a plastic bag of roots":

... I overheard a Malaysian  
woman say that she would like to plant  
her tree in the bush somewhere  
so that, if she moved house, her gift  
would be safe — and then somebody asked  
how she knew which part of the bush would be safe  
from fire or development and did that mean  
she would be needing advice concerning Australian  
property law ...

Christopher Kelen in *Republics* takes up the topic of Australia and Australians more explicitly and extensively: his is in one sense the book that had-to-happen given the topic — it is passionately concerned with politics and, though there will always be those who maintain that poetry is no place for that, or not overtly anyway, its very rough colloquial

insistence makes for a refreshing change from what Dransfield designated “genteel iambs”. The most impressive poem in the collection for me is the near-title poem, “Republic”, with its long lines and structural repetition – Kelen’s poetry is not just intensely felt, but can suit its form to its impulses:

Republic of uncontrollable nights, thighs danced till dawn  
without fear or favour or memory either. Of the world’s weary  
paws come to rest here at last. Of the happy-go-lucky sat up like  
Jackie ...

... Republic of gullet,  
of gulping it down. Of half-pissed regrets for same follies  
repeated. Republic of not knowing how it got home  
or forgetting to go or wherever it came from.

Not all the poems, though, manage the persuasive rhythms of this one. Some of the work falls into what seem to me prose patterns, though of course such judgements are to some degree idiosyncratic. When the poems slow down to abstraction and questioning, they seem to lose the verve of the more declamatory pieces. Lines like these from “Treaty” seem to wander into another kind of diction where the poet is less sure of his expression:

in those forevers I have fled  
faith holds me down  
faith finds willing

yet I will  
and I will  
what will I honour  
the way I was, or I forgot,  
the way I wanted then to be?

Nevertheless, all the myths of “Australianness” are addressed with a critical but fair eye, and the relation to colonial “centers” examined; in “America” (“everyone says you’re so friendly at home”) and at greater length in poems like “rules the waves”, which gives an Australian view of living in Britain, from “the Tory bus seat which cannot be lain down upon” to the “careless lyric calling trees convincingly gone”. It’s a hard-headed book that is capable of affection for its subjects but not indulgence.

Equally hard-headed, but in an entirely different vein, is the long-awaited new collection from Wendy Jenkins. The drive behind *Rogue Equations* is primarily language, and specifically metaphor and image, with a precision that you would expect from someone who has spent so many years as an editor, fostering and developing a sense of discipline in other people's poetry and fiction. The book begins with a selection of poems from Jenkins's much earlier collection published in 1979, *Out of Water Into Light*, which both provides a link across the years and underscores how little the essence of her approach has dated; the older poems sit well alongside the more recent. To say that the poems generally are sparse ought not to suggest there is little to them – it's the concentration of the work that jolts the reader, on practically every page, into perception:

The bandage  
unwound  
released a line  
of tiny suns  
equidistant  
repeated  
each perceptibly  
larger and brighter  
than the last

You don't want that  
the nurse said  
gathering it away  
but she did  
see it as proto film  
with the title Sunburst  
the action quite reversible –  
a star having winked out  
or exploded  
against her knee.  
(from "Bandages")

It's not a case of visual gimmickry, but a detailed exploration of the operations of poetic language ("to find a way/into a said geography") that is serious yet often witty, and also erotically and emotionally charged. Best of all are the poems that apprehend and create landscape,

as in "Imaging the Nullarbor" – "shapes take hold select/themselves through repetition" – in the poems as much as in the place; or in "Caddy in Antarctica", where the connections with poetry and the human are just as explicit:

... does memory still feed the reds  
that swept your land those years ago  
'Fire 1' 'Fire 2' you salvaged back  
as if poems could be  
    lines of fire  
        and back  
burn in the positive

The last section of the book, "Three Into Four", is more spatially and conceptually playful, laid out like prose or prose poems with empty numbered frames that imply the photographs referred to in the accompanying text. It follows four shots taken by the familiar passport-picture booth and the relation or non-relation between them and the "self"-concept ("My dialogue with the machines ..."), as well as questions of artistic balance, texture and process:

*She has become fascinated with threeness, seeing it everywhere ...  
three trees suddenly moved together when a turn in the road  
changed the perspective. She has started to see threeness in people ...  
Beyond these signs, she senses the larger forms; past-present-future  
time/my mother-myself-the child I do not have.*

Form and strategy may be different from that of the material earlier in the book, but concerns are linked throughout. It's a volume, to pinch a phrase from the work itself, "of such keen weather/such clean lines", that you are immediately aware of the prolixity and self-indulgence of much other writing, and recalled, finally, to a sense of how acute and startling poetry can actually be.

# MAGGIE JOEL

---

## A MILE FROM GRAPPLE X

Five young men frolic in the blood-warm water of the lagoon, splashing each other, jumping on and ducking one another like zoo animals dropped unexpectedly into an unfamiliar habitat. Already their flesh is beginning to burn under the unfamiliar sky. Soon it will peel.

*-Get off, I carn swim, y'bugger!*

*-Pansy!*

*-I ain't no -*

*-'Ere, look at this! Looks like a bloody sea monster!*

*-Give us a look. Sea monster, ya daft bugger! It's a, y'know, one of them sea urchin-wotsits.*

*-Reckon that'd be reet tasty wi'a bag o'chips an' some vinegar.*

A few months ago they were working in butcher's shops and driving coal lorries, one worked down a tin mine, one in an iron ore foundry. One built ships on the Tyne and expects one day to return there. But by the time he returns there will no more ships to build.

The coral lagoon they play in teems with fish - bonefish and trevally and a thousand smaller varieties they've never seen before and will never learn the names of. At the shallow northwestern entrance to the lagoon the coconut groves begin, home to vast sea bird colonies of petrels, boobies, frigates and terns. Enormous land crabs, eyes on stalks, stand guard over the roadway like sentries at a barracks.

We are on an island in the Pacific some 1300 miles south of Hawaii, the oldest coral atoll in the world, uninhabited and undiscovered. Until Captain James Cook sailed into its lagoon on Christmas Eve, 1777 and named the atoll for the festive season. Now, exactly 180 years later, the island is about to be made uninhabitable once more. At 17.47 hours on the evening of 8th November, 1957, a hydrogen bomb will be dropped

into the ocean from an aircraft. The first of six over the next ten months.

But that's tomorrow. Today the air is still and in the late afternoon heat the five young servicemen run along the beach tearing off their boots and leaving them in the sand where the surf won't reach them.

The shipbuilder lies in a large double bed, a shaft of early morning sunlight parting the blinds and softening his features. His daughter, Julianne, watches him for a moment then leans over and smooths out the bedspread. The scene on the island is only in her mind. It may never have happened, yet it's as vivid as a memory.

Her father is already dead, his skin translucent so that in the dawn light the body's skeletal frame shows through, more clearly than a skeleton ought. Soon she will identify his body for the ambulancemen and remake the bed after he is gone. Ought she to change the sheets or leave them for her mother?

Already there is a smell in the room like disinfectant.

She remembers conversations from her childhood

*-What was it like Dad, was it hot?*

She remembers his laugh, his laconic replies.

*-Hot? Course it were hot, Pet. Still, never too hot for a bit o' a dance.*

And he would leap up and grab Mum's hand and twirl her towards and then away from him and croon some line from Elvis or Duane Eddy or The Everlys until Mum brushed him off.

*-And, Dad, when the bomb went off, did they make you wear shiny suits and big shiny crash helmets?*

She sees him smile. Years later, when he can no longer leap up and grab or dance, she sees his eyes follow the trajectory of a football on the television screen.

*-What for, Pet? They just told us to look away, like, to shield our eyes with our hands.*

Even after so many years in a new country his Tyneside accent is still there, she can hear it now after he's gone, hear him saying -

*-Ay, but they did hose us all down, afterwards. An' they give us a postcard, like, of a mushroom cloud.*

He'd said this in the way of someone who's received a gift when he's expected nothing.

Julianne has seen that postcard, it's mounted between the thick, cardboard pages of an old photograph album, held in place by three yellowing corner mounts, the fourth one missing so that the black and white postcard juts out when the page is turned. A vast white cloud billows

over a fat greyish stalk, the cloud held for an instant within the frame of the postcard, caught mid-billow.

-Pontoon!

Two cards, an ace and a jack, are slapped down on the long wooden trestle table. A loose pile of coins is swept up into a single pile.

-Bloody 'ell!

-Ah, yer jammy bugger!

-That's me out then.

-Jackie, me boy, you in or out?

The shipbuilder hasn't looked at his cards. The mail has arrived, off a troop ship that morning. He glances at the handwriting on the pale blue airmail letter he has just been handed. The letters have been stamped B.F.P.O. in black ink. British Forces Post Office. He slides a thumb nail beneath the fold, slits the letter open and begins to read. The card game has ended without him. The winner skims coins into his pocket counting as he goes. A chair is scraped back with a mutter. Someone reaches for a discarded newspaper, five days old.

-'Ere look, *"Japanese Protests at nuclear tests ... More than 5,000 Japanese students, some carrying effigies of the British Prime Minister, last night clashed with police who intervened to stop the demonstration against hydrogen bomb tests."*

There is a shuffling of chairs, a shrug. No one looks up.

-Yeah, well, stands to reason, dunnit? Japs got more reason 'n most to fear it, int they?

-Ain't you got anything else in that paper, 'Arry?

-*"President Eisenhower's Republican party needs to win senate elections - nah!... Colombo: British Airbase handed over to Ceylon Government"* -

-Bloody 'ell! Anuver one! Where's it gonna end, ay? We'll 'ave nuffink left at this rate.

-Alright, settle down. Wos on the box, 'Arry?

-BBC ya got *"What's My Line"*, ITV *"Abbot and Costello"*, *"Wyatt Earp"*, *"Highway Patrol"* ... 'Ere ya go lads, *"Sat'dee Night at the London Pally"* starring the luvly Diana Dors.

-S'more like it!

-Sat'dee? How's about the football, then?

There is a flurry of pages and everyone leans closer.

-Wolves hope to increase their lead over West Brom at the top ... 'Ere y'are, Spurs playin' away to Sunderland, Chelsea at Blackpool.

*-Well, it's already 'appened, innit? Five flippin' days ago. Wonder 'oo won?*

*-'Ere ya, Jack, Newcastle playin' away to Leicester.*

The shipbuilder sits reading his airmail letter, its flimsy single sheet hanging limply between his fingers in the moist atmosphere. Behind him someone flicks on the television set. There is a burst of static. He frowns, leans forward and reads the words again

*-Alright, Jackie lad?*

At that moment an officer enters the hut in impossible creases and gleaming boots carrying clipboard and attache case, a sergeant at his elbow.

*-Right then men, this is it. Zero hour minus 45 minutes. Take your positions at the Drop Zone.*

*-You 'eard the officer! Move yerselves, quick smart!* screams the sergeant.

A ripple runs through the mess hut like wind across the surface of a lake. It's lost almost immediately in the scraping of chairs, the thud of boots on the hard ground, the murmur of voices growing louder then fading as the hall empties.

The black and white television set, mounted in a wooden box, continues to crackle away to itself. Harold MacMillan, dark suited like an undertaker, stands at the doorway of Number Ten, Downing Street, and speaks in measured tones to the microphones of waiting reporters: *"When the nuclear tests are complete, as they soon will be, we shall be in the same position as the United States or Soviet Russia"*, he says. *"We shall have made and tested the massive weapons. It will be possible then, to discuss on equal terms."* A flash-bulb explodes and his face vanishes in a flash of white.

The mess hall is empty now, rows of wooden tables and benches deserted, a few items of kit strewn on the floor, an airmail letter lying opened on the table. The ceiling fan hangs motionless as though the heaviness of the evening is too much for it. An orderly comes in from the kitchen, face shiny from the ovens and the tropical heat, and turns off the television, replacing it with the forces radio station. There's a burst of static high up where the speakers are positioned.

*-Wake up little Susie, wake up, we gotta go home -*

The orderly wanders back into the kitchen. Everyone's outside piling into trucks, line after line of servicemen taking up positions, waiting for the fireworks to start. It's evening, that tropical sort of evening when day plummets from the sky and tumbles over the horizon in an instant.

The mosquitos are biting, the giant land crabs shuffle across the tracks away from the troops in a slow but ordered evacuation.

Standing on the beach, about half a mile from where the bomb will drop, the five young men wait, fiddling with sticky clothing, slapping at mosquitos, wondering whether they can light a cigarette. On the sand are a pile of cigarette ends where yesterday they were swimming.

Julianne has read reports in newspapers, articles in magazines. There's even a support group but it's in England. There's no support here – the Australian Government has its own victims to ignore. While her mother made trips to the hospital and learnt about home-nursing, Julianne was busy, gathering statistics, reading medical reports about radiation-related birth defects in grandchildren, about skin defects, miscarriages, still births, birth deformities, thyroid cancer.

She touches her throat. Where exactly is the thyroid? She lays a hand on her stomach and she wonders. The British Government has never released figures for the hydrogen bombs tested in the Pacific.

She would tell others but who is there to tell?

Her mother is away, down the coast, visiting Auntie Joy who's sick. Sickness follows her mother, it seems. In a moment Julianne will telephone her mother but bad news can wait. Instead, she wonders about the ambulance, about whether they will cover his face with a blanket – or is that something they only do in hospital dramas? Her father always hated to be the centre of attention. Almost as much as he hated the beach. This room, his final resting place, was chosen because it faced onto the street and not on to the crashing surf and smooth sands of the bay behind the house.

There have been 2057 known nuclear tests in the world. Julianne reads in the newspaper that the British Government is to scrap a quarter of its nuclear defence force. The Ministry of Defence says that all RAF freefall nuclear bombs will be removed at midnight. Which is forty years too late, she thinks.

The airforce gives them names. The first one, Grapple X, will be dropped from an RAF carrier. The men stand in rows, half a mile, a mile, two miles from the drop zone. It's a quarter to six, dinner time. The ship-builder hears his stomach grumble but he doesn't feel like eating. Moisture runs down the middle of his back, collecting at the waist band of his fatigues. November, he thinks, and still a bugger of a hot day. Bit like standing in the engine room of a steam ship – except for these

bloody huge mosquitos. He splats one on his forehead and feels the blood mingle with his sweat. On either side of him, the others are horsing about.

-Ere, look at Bill's boots, call that a shine?

-Ah, give it a rest!

-'Ee ain't got no time for shining, ee's too busy -

-Wotchit! I ain't tellin'ya -

-Yer wot? I ain't doin' nothin' -

-Leave orf, will ya?

They wrestle for a moment in the growing darkness, falling over on the white hot sand, a hat is knocked to the ground until a sergeant, somewhere in the trees barks an admonishment. They fall silent. The hat is retrieved.

The shipbuilder stands very still and wonders whether his boots are still attached to his feet, are still touching the sand. Jenny, his girl, is getting married today ... yesterday ... The dateline confuses him. Anyway, she's getting married, to a bloke from the Co-op. An assistant manager. She's waited nearly two years and now, with less than two months to go, she's marrying some other bloke. He should have requested special leave, made something up, told 'em his girl was pregnant. Fat chance, now. Could have been with her right now instead of -

Far above in the Southern sky a buzz of engines heralds the approaching aircraft. Heads go up, hands shielding eyes from the last rays of sunlight. There it is, a vast bomber, fuselage glinting silver in the dusk, propellers whining then roaring as the aircraft veers eastwards. The men stiffen as one, muscles tensing, voices dying away. The shipbuilder feels a mosquito stinging his ear but he doesn't brush it away. The aircraft is distant now, nearly at the dropzone.

Silence. Is it there yet? Now? Surely -

There is nothing, no command, no gunfire warning, just the opening of the bomb hatch. A cheer goes up from the watching troops.

*"At the end of the countdown, there was a blinding electric blue light, of such an intensity I had not seen before or ever since. I pressed my hands hard to my eyes, then, realised my hands were covering my eyes. This terrific light power, or rays, were actually passing through the tarpaulin, through the towel, and through my head and body, for what seemed like ten to twelve seconds, it may have been longer. After that, the pressure wave, which gave a feeling such as when one is deep under-*

*water. This was followed by a sort of vacuum suction wave, to give a feeling of one's whole body billowing out like a balloon."*

Observer, Monte Bello Test Site, 16 MAY 1956.

The scream of an ambulance shatters the suburban illusion. That was quick. It seems like only moments ago that she rang. Julianne stands at the bedroom window and looks over the red roofs of a Brisbane street, cars parked in driveways, jacarandas littering the pavement in mauve blossoms. Mrs Szrecki next door, wheeling her garbage onto the roadside, stopping now and looking blankly at the ambulance coming towards her.

On the dressing table, almost hidden by a jumble of pills and medicines, is a small framed photograph. It shows five young men, pale skinned, sunken chested, jug eared - typical English lads on National Service, knobbly-kneed in loose khaki shorts. One gives a thumbs-up sign, another bares buck teeth, the third holds up two fingers in a victory salute, the fourth looks off to one side, pointing. In the middle stands the shipbuilder, slightly side-on, round-shouldered, squinting, one hand raised to his forehead as though in nonchalant salute. Or perhaps to shield his eyes from the sun.

The ambulance has driven up onto the curb, dismissive of neat lawns and flowerbeds. Doors are flung open, a stretcher slides to the ground, chrome gleaming in the midday sun. Two ambulance men - no, a man and a woman, both in shirt sleeves - push and slide and open and close doors and handles with the silence of expertise. She must let them in.

She turns slowly, holding her swollen stomach, pausing for a moment until the baby gives a feeble kick. She breathes outwards then, and goes to open the front door.

# MAGGIE JOEL

---

## IN SEARCH OF LOST ANGELS

She lives on one side of a hill that has, on its other side, the word "Hollywood" in large white letters. People come here from all over, drawn like Christians to a hanging. I came here, though I was neither Christian nor condemned prisoner. When I left I was both.

She takes me to the top of the hill where the city is spread out below us, bigger than some nations. She points - "This place was used as a location in a movie once." But I soon learn most of this city was used as a location in a movie once. I learn not to be amazed.

She knows this city well, too well for someone who is here temporarily. She acts as though she belongs here, as though this were a place where normal people could live. "I'm popping out," she says, "to get pop tarts and oreos," but it takes an hour to drive to the store. This city has 2,400 kms of freeway. I wait for her and 295 TV channels clamour for my attention until she returns. Did I explain I came here to take her back with me?

She has a day job working for a theme park. She has a night job too, but I find that out later. So, we drive to the theme park along the Santa Ana Freeway passing the billboards that are marked as landmarks on her street directory and she tells me about her work -

"We have an ideology," she says which means she has learnt how to smile for eight hours a day. When she lived with me she didn't smile for eight minutes a day. Perhaps I didn't pay her enough. At the theme park the parking stations are colour coded which discriminates against people who are colour challenged. "One man," she tells me, "parked in the green section and roamed the brown section for four days until someone rescued him." It's an urban myth. They're making a movie about it. She parks her orange car in the orange section, collects an orange ticket and boards a bus driven by a character from a cartoon. Inside the theme park

everyone smiles and she smiles too because this is her domain. Her teeth are whiter than I remember them being, her hair blonder. She glows with healthy vitality and wholesomeness. One of the children she fondles might be a talent scout in disguise and she smiles while she waits to be discovered.

We join a queue and each ride that we go on has a theme, and each ride is faster and scarier than the last.

“Could we not”, I suggest, “start with the last ride and work backwards so that each ride will become progressively slower and more friendly?”

She stares at me and I realise this is not an option. I am sitting in a hollowed out log as I say this – not a real log, I mean not a timber log, a reinforced plastic and fibreglass log, which here, is real. As the log tips over the brim of a twenty metre vertical drop I remember that this is a love story. We are riding Death Canyon and my stomach leaps out of my mouth, my eyeballs pop out of my head, my hair turns white and there is a click as an automated camera records this profound moment forever. It’s ok though, we are all animated cartoon characters and we snap instantly back to our original form.

“Life,” she says afterwards, “is a metaphor for Death Canyon.”

“Don’t you mean, *Death Canyon* is a metaphor for *life*?” I say.

She stares at me and says: “No.”

We find her orange car in its orange stable and join the freeway. On my left are a cluster of tall, shining buildings like those at the start of a soap opera or a cop show or a sit com. Am I looking at a film set or is this really the city? Where *is* the city? There are no landmarks to tell me where I am.

“This is the spot,” she says, “where James Dean’s car crashed.”

She looks up expectantly, proud of her city and I remember why it is I lost my head over her. I remember that James Dean was decapitated.

Did I mention she works for a theme park? Her home is a theme park, each room faster and scarier than the last. I’m afraid to go to the bathroom in case someone tries to sell me a souvenir of my visit. Inside the bathroom cabinet is the healthy vitality and wholesomeness that she buys from a store downtown.

“Do you always travel by car?” I ask her but in this city such a question is like asking “Are you alive?” Some people live their entire lives in their cars – and not because they don’t have five bedroom homes and a Mexican maid in some distant suburb.

“We *could* take a bus ...” she concedes. “It might be cool.”

Outside the rain falls in crisp bursts like soda on bourbon, falling on those who don't have cars. The bus arrives.

"Can I getta transfer?" she asks the bus driver and when he nods she dips her ticket into his machine. Where I come from, a transfer is a fake tattoo. She sits holding tightly onto the handrail, waiting for the bus to hurtle into the Tunnel of Death, spin on its wheels and splash into a waterslide. When the bus trundles to the next stop she looks vaguely disconcerted.

In the street outside the drains overflow and a river surges along the gutter.

She takes me to a theme cafe where the decor is neon and over burritos and chilli dogs she offers me post-romantic love – it is flexible and hygienic, it comes in many colours and sizes, I can use latex and pay for it with plastic. Above her head is a gold plated toilet seat from Gracelands. We are served theme food with sour cream and in my glass of soda I can see the future, fizzing and popping in a billion tiny bubbles winking into life then exploding into oblivion. The future is here in this diner in this city. I ask for the bill but all I get is a check. This is not my future.

Outside the streets flow like rivers, washing the city into the bay and young hopefuls from midwestern farms wait to be rescued by emergency crews with TV cameras and on-the-spot news reporters. She watches and I might as well not be here.

At night she locks her doors because cosmetically perfect people with chemically induced personalities roam the suburbs committing ugly crimes with semi-automatics. In the morning these same people queue for screen tests at Universal Studios. In this city you don't watch the sunset, you walk on it and the footprints are set in concrete. In this city streets are called boulevards and are lined with used-car lots. If you're lucky you can get arrested picking up a hooker. If you're luckier still, you can be the hooker that gets picked up.

But I forgot – this is a love story.

She locks her doors at night but now I realise she is not inside when the locks are turned. She is out in the night waiting to make her fortune, waiting to be discovered, waiting to be arrested and photographed. She locks her doors at night but it is to keep me in, not the night out.

On my last day she finds a suburb far up in the hills, she points and says, "this place has never been used as a location in a movie" and I stare around me in wonder. They should turn this place into a theme park.

Tomorrow there are two seats booked on an airline to take us home, one in my name, one in hers. When I tell her she smiles a smile that tells me I can buy her seat not her. I remember her telling me once that she was homesick, homesick for places she'd never been. I practise smiling but I haven't had her training, all I can see is the mist on the distant freeway and I wonder if I'll find my way back.

# ANDREW SNEDDON

---

## BRAMBLES

The brambles are returning,  
They're creeping up the steep slope below the house,  
Reclaiming old terraces,  
Starving the wildflowers  
And choking the boles of stunted Tuscan olive trees.  
I fought them back one hot summer  
With leather gloves and a cane-cutter's blade,  
As barbed purple stems snagged my clothing  
In a kind of urgent supplication.  
A thousand little stings  
For each ten by ten foot cleared,  
And at the end,  
My forearms bloodied with welts.

The brambles are returning,  
And in dark, steamy holes beneath their cover  
Fat wild pigs drop blind, pink litters.  
The local dogs tense suddenly at their fringes -  
Every muscle quivering to the scent -  
And bark at night at the misty ghosts  
That eddy coolly through our dreams.

When I had cut back the worst of them that summer  
I found a fine stone wall  
Taller than a man,  
And ancient revetments  
So old that even the stooped matriarchs of the village  
Couldn't name the owners -

---

Though there was talk of little Narciso,  
The deaf mute,  
Who loved the girl from Ponte di Sorana  
But never married,  
And who died in a fig tree alone,  
Near the village square.  
(The details about him were a little hazy.  
If he beat his dog, no-one remembered.  
Only the poetry of him has survived our wonderful, wasteful memories  
And the brambles.)

And so the brambles are returning.  
In spite of old scars  
I welcome them this time.  
We have forfeited our tenancy  
And slowly  
They're coming back to take what was theirs.  
The wall will be obscured.  
The terraces will disappear.  
An old discarded glove  
That a young man toiled in one summer  
Will be consumed,  
And years from now  
We will all seem a little less clear.  
Old men -  
Still children when the smoke from our bramble fires  
Sullied their grandmother's washing -  
Will recall us only dimly,  
And stripped of our worst features  
By the rasping vines of the brambles  
We may even - like Narciso - seem a little better for it:  
Joanna who took them on a little at a time,  
Robin who used the herbicide neat  
And wiped out a hillside,  
And the skinny young man  
Who would lean against the wall of prickles  
With a raised left forearm  
Like Achilles with a shield,  
Swinging the blade like a weapon

At the exposed green root stems.  
All that railing!

The brambles are returning.  
We are ready for them.  
Calmly waiting.  
This time they will meet no resistance.

# JUDY JOHNSON

---

## GIRL ON A PALING FENCE

It's a trick the seven year old has been practising all morning;  
spacewalking around  
the palings with the balance bar of her arms outstretched. Her sandals  
are blue, the blue

of her mother's plastic necklace the girl once broke, then hid,  
piling its kaleidoscope  
of planets into a box under her bed. Now she threads herself  
along the string of the fence

looking down to two striped feet with their strapped-in cargo of toes.  
Her father lies in the house behind, his limbs aligned for visitors.  
His polished shoes

rest exactly on one horizontal line of the chenille bedspread.  
In her pockets are  
the two things she has stolen from his bedside table. No one  
has noticed. All morning her mother's

eyes have been brown stones sinking beneath the weight of water.  
The girl does not touch the heaviness of the objects she has taken  
for fear of a similar drowning. Still she knows

their dimensions; the tin that becomes the words 'cool' and 'slick'  
when held in the palm of the hand, the sailor's face riding the crest  
of a wave, and the name Dr Pat. Her father

once taught her how to open the lid without spilling the contents.  
He let her twist it back and forth while pressing down until  
she felt the seal give up its aromatic splinters.

In her other pocket is a hard black stem with a chewed end.  
She keeps the two apart by the  
warmth of a body-width. She measures their coldness this way,  
as she measures the fence

by the flat spaces where she can place her feet and not by the spikes  
that divide them.  
For months her dreams will be filled with impaled things, landlocked  
sailors buried above  
ground, bushfires, but for now she remains balanced – the pipe  
on one side, tobacco tin  
on the other and in the middle, her unlit heart.

## STONE

The dreamtime Numbakulla took their knives to its formless shape,  
imagining transparencies of the first Arunda tribe below the surface.

It seemed simple enough, to carve away all that wasn't human,  
the miracle of toes, fingers and eyes appearing as if they'd been

imprisoned, and now were free. They didn't know that Stone  
had drawn them to it,

yearning for their transformations.  
Enormous stone figures once shook the earth with their movements.

In Penzance there's a footprint that belonged to a Cornish giant.  
In Iceland  
too, the hoofmark of an eight-legged horse who's gallop spanned  
territories.

Runes mourn the passing of such heroic fictions. They sulk inside  
the soft  
confines of their task, having no patience with the ambiguity  
of symbol, nor

with painless pasts and futures tattooed with a feather on their surface.  
Stone predicts in its own way and time. Suicides who jump  
come closest

to knowing this, as they turn in air to see a ravaged cliff-face move up  
to meet their expectations. There is a calm fatality to it, as if Stone

is practising its shapechanging. The faster they fall, the smoother  
and more impassive the face, until those who go this way are  
so reminded

of their own elusive god, that in the end the brokenness  
barely surprises them.

# DAVID COOKSON

---

## BEYOND PIMBA

Nothing here is tall enough  
to give the wind voice  
or, excepting day's edge,  
throw shadows to modulate the sun  
over a plainsong of saltbush  
unharrid by track or pole  
which distances could clutch  
for degrees of scale.  
Only the heat haze moves.  
In mockery of rain on glass  
wavers against hulks of mesas  
moored on an horizon  
antique before time became a thought.  
I shy a stone at silence  
cast about for a phrase to encompass this place  
but like a leap to see over a wall too high  
my lexicon falls away.

The road north a scrap of black thread.

## INTERSTITIAL NARRATIVES: ITALO CALVINO AND GERALD MURNANE

### *Introduction*

The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines an “interstice” as “a small or narrow space between things or parts; small chink, crevice, or opening” (915). A similar definition is found in the book *Sociologia degli Interstizi* (*Sociology of the Interstices* [1998]) by the Italian sociologist Giovanni Gasparini. He argues that an “interstice” is first of all “a narrow space separating two different bodies or two parts of the same body: therefore it refers primarily to the experience of being in-between two things or objects” (1. My translation). Gasparini offers a second reading of “interstice” which coincides with an extreme situation, an exceptional event in relation to the ordinary and the normal. Thus the “interstitial” experience is defined as something marginal and peculiar, outside the expectations one may have of day-to-day life (171).

My study, although basing its central argument on the first definition of “interstice”, also makes use of the second to enter a comparative analysis of two authors, Italo Calvino and Gerald Murnane, whose narratives can be defined as “interstitial”. This is by no means a characteristic peculiar to Calvino’s and Murnane’s fiction, and in fact one could well argue that most of contemporary fiction, especially in recognition of its strong metafictional thrust, might be called “interstitial”. Let us take an author like Murray Bail, for instance, whose narrative, especially *Eucalyptus* (1998), could be fruitfully interpreted by applying the “interstitial” framework. In *Eucalyptus* the act of story telling woven by the mysterious young man opens an interesting “interstitial” space between the enclosed garden of native eucalypts wrought by the pro-

tagonist, Holland, and the outside world impersonated by the many suitors of his daughter. It is the in-betweenness of the story telling that in the end breaks the imprisoning enclosure detaining Holland's daughter. The Italian author Antonio Tabucchi, to name one more example, devoted a whole collection of short stories, *I volatili del Beato Angelico* (1987), to narrativizing what, in the "Preface" to his book, he calls "the interstitial spaces of our quotidian reality" (9. My translation).

The middle, the hybrid, this timeless zone in which the self can lose (but also find) itself in an endless mental and physical wandering has indeed fascinated many contemporary authors. And yet it is rare to find the same degree of attention and consistency that Calvino and Murnane have applied over the years to the discussion and fictionalization of the "interstice" and the attendant zones enveloping or bordering it.

*"There is another world but it is in this one"*

On page 100 of Murnane's novel *Inland* (1988) we read the sentence "*There is another world but it is in this one.*" The sentence is in italics because it is borrowed from the French poet Paul Eluard. The narrator of *Inland* finds himself drawn to that sentence in which he recognizes preoccupations similar to his own in that he himself believes in the existence of another world – "there is another world, and I have seen parts of that world on most days of my life. But the parts of that world are drifting past and cannot be lived in" (100) – and in the inductive assumption that "*this one*" coincides with fiction itself:

But what place exactly do the words *this one* refer to? They cannot refer to the space between the covers of the book where I found them. I have never yet found a book whose preliminary pages and whose inner pages belong together. And in any case, the name of the author in front of my book is not Paul Eluard but Patrick White. The words *this one* can only refer to the so-called world between the covers of a book I have never seen: a book whose author is a man named Paul Eluard. (101)

The collapsing of the "another world" into the world of reality is discouraged by Murnane's narrator who explicitly says that this other world "cannot be lived in". The reader is left guessing what this third and undefined dimension might be and the relationships that it has with reality and fiction. In fact a relationship between fiction, within

which the “another world” resides, and reality, from which parts of this other world can be seen drifting past, becomes apparent. In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988), Calvino operates a distinction between three worlds which can simultaneously provide a key for the interpretation of Murnane’s three-dimensional juxtaposition, an insight into Calvino’s narrative world and an initial poetic connection between the two authors. He says that:

The artist’s imagination is a world of potentialities that no work will succeed in realizing. What we experience by living is another world, answering to other forms of order and disorder. The layers of words that accumulate on the page, like the layers of colors on the canvas, are yet another world, also infinite but more easily controlled, less refractory to formulation. The link between the three worlds is the *indefinable* spoken of by Balzac: or, rather, I would call it the *undecidable*, the paradox of an infinite whole that contains other infinite wholes. (97)

In Calvino the separation and qualification of the three worlds is apparent; “imagination”, “reality” and “writing” have their own rules and functions. They are different and yet connected, but it is precisely this connection, the place where they meet or interact, and the “how” this connection is brought about that Calvino defines as “undecidable”. Taken separately they make sense and one can nominate them and analyse them, but as soon as they mix the study becomes fuzzy, undecided, blurred. We can gaze on and possess them as individual entities but not as a unit.

It could safely be argued that for Murnane the “another world” coincides with “imagination” as well, or, as Murnane would probably prefer, “pure thought”. In an interview with Ludmilla Forsyth, Murnane stated that:

Somewhere under the Red Sea, I believe, are places where the magma from inside the earth rises up through cracks and turns into beads of metal when it meets the water of the ocean. This tremendously hot stuff pours into the water and suddenly it’s beads or pellets of gold and zinc and whatever. I think of my thoughts as bursting out from some unfathomable place and then turning into all these funny, lumpy little things called words. And the words are valuable, which is nice to know; but the hot stuff, that’s something of a mystery. (45)

Murnane’s thoughts come from “some unfathomable place” and are

“something of a mystery”. What is left of them, their visible and interpretable shell, is made of words. In Murnane fiction becomes a sort of translation where “thought” is translated into words which, although carrying a resonance and echo of the original, have lost its essence. The “other world” is in “this one”, but it is hidden, confused, hardly distinguishable between the folds of language. As imagination encounters language, as both Calvino and Murnane appear to believe, it undergoes a process of transformation which ultimately fails to render it in its elemental form.

One could be brought to infer that for Calvino and Murnane fiction has the function of giving some tangible form, however inadequate this might be, to the world of imagination and pure thought. This is partly correct, especially in relation to the all-encompassing cognitive push that writing acquires in Calvino’s and Murnane’s writing. “Murnane”, argues Don Anderson, “has always been concerned with the impossibility of representation, and with the necessity of hermeneutics” (3). As for Calvino, his later fiction, as JoAnn Cannon has remarked, “seems increasingly to be inspired by a *spinta conoscitiva* (cognitive thrust): indeed the author believed that such a cognitive impulse must animate any valid work of fiction” (52). They are both writers interested in using fiction to know better the world inside and outside them. And yet, ironically, their quest for knowledge achieved through fiction invariably becomes stuck in fiction itself as if language, although striving to represent and give form to something else, ends up reflecting and talking about itself. As a result Calvino’s and Murnane’s books, despite having as their primary purpose the arrival into the world of imagination and reality, continue to travel endlessly in the “interstitial” space of fiction. Recasting Peter Beilharz’s summary of Bernard Smith’s work, one could say that their “work seem to invest with new meaning Montaigne’s wisdom: that not the arrival but the journey matters” (150).

Their fiction does not lift the veil placed over imagination and reality, whatever their meanings might be, but probes and explores the space in-between from which glimpses of both bordering zones may be commanded from time to time. Calvino’s and Murnane’s books are not so much about presenting and describing arrivals as mapping the uninterrupted journey towards those invisible and never-to-be-reached arrivals. What we are reading and confronting are not therefore definitions and ultimate or definitive insights into imagination and reality but profound and detailed introspections into a liminal zone which is a mixture and a combination, a fusion, a translation in which the original

constantly resonates but never discloses itself entirely. Borrowing a sentence from Paul Carter's *Living in a New Country*, a study of Calvino's and Murnane's work ought to preoccupy itself not with the question of "how to arrive" but on that of "how to move, how to identify convergent and divergent movements; and the challenge would be how to notate such events." (101) It is the encounter between language, imagination and reality, which in turn brings about fiction and its interstitial function, that interests me here.

### *Fiction as an extreme experience*

Fiction as interpreted and practised by Calvino and Murnane is not only in-between imagination and reality, it is also an extreme experience, an act that requires rigour, devotion and a degree of spiritual and also physical detachment from the quotidian world. It thus becomes a process leading to some kind of marginalisation and isolation. This is somewhat corroborated by the original personalities of both Calvino and Murnane but also by their unique and highly individual styles and approaches to fiction. Their attention to, even obsession with, language is notorious. In many of his theoretical essays Calvino reiterates the need to be linguistically precise. In a sense his ideal of language was silence, but it is a silence resonating with and punctuated by words. In his later fiction, *Mr Palomar* (first published in Italian, 1983. English translation, 1986), Calvino puts these thoughts in the mind of the protagonist:

In fact, silence can also be considered a kind of speech, since it is a rejection of the use to which others put words; but the meaning of this silent speech lies in its interruptions, in what is, from time to time, actually said, giving a meaning to what is unsaid. (94)

For Calvino the written and spoken language were a pragmatic and commercial necessity that, given a workable alternative, he would have happily done without.

Murnane's discussion of "true fiction", his famous refusal to conform to conventional narratives by insisting on stripping his fiction of names, dialogues and clear plots, even in the face of commercial unpopularity, testify to an uncompromised search for a medium through which metaphysical and philosophical preoccupations can be firmly engaged. In an article explaining his role as narrative consultant for the literary journal *Meanjin*, Murnane stated that:

An interesting story convinces me from the first few sentences that the author has written the story in order to discover the meaning of some part of his or her experience. (If any person concludes from this that I prefer to read stories written in the first person or stories that are obviously autobiographical, then that person has not begun to understand what I am saying here.) A boring story usually puts me in mind of an author who is confused or vain or anxious to impress or who thinks that *Meanjin* stories have to be about the things that some journalists call issues or have to have characters who talk about ideas. (1989: 193-194)

If on the one side Murnane's uncompromising poetic stance has gained him the respect of many critics, on the other it has alienated many readers.

It is not that Murnane's characters do not talk about ideas, they obviously do, but they do not flaunt their knowledge or their existentialist drama on a theatrical set with lights trained at them. They are not heroes directly confronting, and as such suffering or conquering, big issues. On the contrary, they are ordinary people who go about their life. They circumnavigate ideas and issues rather than plunging into them with their hand posed dramatically on their forehead. Theirs is a journey toward but never "in" the "other world" and as such the latter is experienced not as a full blown picture but rather as metaphors, snippets, sketches, glimpses which are always in need of interpretation. Besides, this is the only possible function that writing can have; it cannot pretend to be the "other world" or to offer a faithful representation of it. It can only, in Murnane's words, "reproduces the contour of our thoughts" (1986: 516).

Calvino's characters are more daring and sometimes find themselves uttering the thoughts and the ideas that their narratives set out to investigate. Yet they do it almost inadvertently, as if stumbling onto something or as if being struck by a sudden illumination. However, these are not ever-lasting events or apparitions and they disappear as quickly as they came leaving the character as mystified as before if not even more confused. In this sense Palomar, the protagonist of the eponymous novel, represents the quintessential Calvinian character. He is a befuddled ordinary man in search of answers to his many metaphysical and existential questions. But his innumerable attempts to learn more about the "other world" invariably disappoint him: "Only if he manages to bear all the aspects in mind at once can he begin the second phase of

the operation: extending his knowledge to the entire universe. It would suffice not to lose patience, as he soon does. Mr Palomar goes off along the beach, tense and nervous as when he came, and even more unsure about everything" (7).

Palomar's continuous and uninterrupted attempt at naming, cataloguing and ordering the chaotic nature of life and imagination is reminiscent of Bouvard and Pécuchet, Flaubert's characters in the eponymous novel, but as opposed to them Palomar lacks the arrogance, and of course the naivety, afforded to Flaubert's characters by the alleged power of science. Whereas Bouvard and Pécuchet were convinced that one could make sense of the world through a sound scientific knowledge, Palomar no longer has a solid basis on which to read and study life. Even his language is inadequate and always struggling to arrive at conclusive and satisfying arguments; continuously contradicting itself by changing and readjusting its vocabulary. The incapacity of science to offer definitive answers to the conundrums of life is emphasised by Calvino's decision to name his character after a famous American observatory. Palomar is thus the man who looks at the world through the "objective" lenses of a powerful telescope, and yet his reading remains fragmented, subjective and ultimately inconclusive. While Flaubert in *Bouvard and Pécuchet* represented the limitations, indeed the failure of positivism, Calvino's *Mr Palomar* is a convincing portrayal of the post-modern condition.

Palomar and Murnane's characters have many things in common. Like Palomar, Murnane's characters are the postmodern equivalent of Bouvard and Pécuchet. They have replaced the comical assertiveness of Flaubert's characters with a comical clumsiness arising from their attempts to enter into a realm, the "other world", which is also the world of the definitive and unquestionable "Truth", the ur-text of pure thought, or as Imre Saluszinsky has called it, the "paradise-lost" (3). Their failure is not determined by their individual inadequacy but rather by the insufficient tools afforded to them by language and by a tentative self which has irreparably lost a sense of unity and harmony in relation to itself and the world surrounding it. In Calvino and Murnane the fragmentation of the self is indistinguishable from the fragmentation of language. The former has indeed transformed language from a faithful referential instrument into an insidious companion whose voice cannot be trusted. It is in this sense that in Calvino and Murnane the struggle of the self is inevitably linked to the struggle of language.

*Mr Palomar*, as Francesca Serra has noted (1996), is narrativized on a

constant renegotiation of language where the text is propelled by dubitative signals such as “but”, “perhaps”, “or”, “instead”, “maybe” and so on. Their purpose is to contradict or question the preceding statement in a kind of cannibalistic act where in order to survive language must first negate, annihilate, itself. Hence the digressive and fragmented narrative structuration of *Mr Palomar*, a feature which characterized many of Murnane’s fictions as well where the narrative follows a zig-zagging and sometimes backward line rather than the traditional linear and forward trajectory.

Digressions and detours testify to the arduous journey from the point of departure to the point of arrival. They do not negate these points, but rather than nominating them they allude to them via their in-betweenness. The narrative focus is necessarily away from the static points of the journey and firmly placed on the always changing and moving middle trait. It is this movement that counts, it is this approach that is narrativized, and it is this interstice that is brought into the foreground of the text. Further, it is “this world”, this interstitial fiction, that we, as readers, are called on to interpret and reckon with.

### *The Plains and Mr Palomar*

In Murnane’s fiction the interstice, this journey in-between, is magisterially represented in *The Plains*.

*The Plains* is narrated by a nameless “I” who takes the reader into a realm whose connotational elements are experienced as if enveloped in an oneiric film which simultaneously reconnects with and removes us from the landscape we usually associate with everyday life. Images of what we are used to calling reality provide Murnane with the stepping stones by which his narrative enters more volatile, diaphanous, gaseous territories whose visibility is refracted, as if seen from within a prism. Commenting on Murnane’s books, Imre Salusinszky has used the visual notion of the “ghosting effect”, of that instance which “sometimes blurs a television image” and whose effect “show[s], fleetingly, how something would appear if it could be seen from two positions at once” (11).

*The Plains* appears as an intricate dream or wrapping device enveloping and muffling, veiling and obscuring its central kernel, qua the objective, apparently undisputed and non-fictional dimension. Yet Murnane is not so much interested in articulating a polarising context between two highly problematic and controversial realms as in illus-

trating the now painful, now comical, attempts by the individual to come to terms with life and with the unintelligibility of the original ur-text. And so is Calvino who clearly positions Palomar within that interstitial zone from which reality and imagination are continuously negotiated. *Mr Palomar* was published in 1983, four years after *If on a Winter Night a Traveler*. It is also the last book that Calvino wrote before he suddenly died in September 1985. Both the strong autobiographical elements of the novel and its essayistic style make of *Mr Palomar* a literary testament as well as poetic manifesto comprising most of Calvino's poetic and stylistic preoccupations. The continuity with his previous work, especially *If on a Winter Night a Traveler* (1979), *Invisible Cities* (1972) and the *Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973), is emphasised by the privileging of sight over other senses. Palomar is a powerful eye who constantly watches and observes the world outside him and the world within him in the attempt to either match them or to make sense of their irreconcilability. And it is precisely this irreconcilability that ends up rendering imagination and reality so chaotic and unspeakable, so out of reach.

Sight has always been one of Calvino's main themes and literary tools. It propelled the narrative of Calvino's first book of fiction, *Il nido dei sentieri di ragno* (1947), and offered *The Barons in the Trees* (1957) the paradigmatic foundation on which to base an individual's reflection on nature and the cultural and moral values of a whole society. But whereas in the first period of Calvino's production, let us say until but excluding the *Cosmicomics* (1965), sight enveloped the outside and the inside as a whole, in the subsequent production the world is divided into minimal segments which Calvino's protagonists proceed to analyze fastidiously in the hope that the micro will disclose a readable image of the macro. This process of segmentation, of obsessive dissection of the phenomenological and imaginative worlds is never so apparent as in *Mr Palomar*. If sight is the scalpel in the hands of the protagonist, language, the fissure, the interstitial zone par excellence, is the medium through which the narrator translates for us, the reader, Palomar's discoveries.

But as in Murnane's novels, Palomar's discoveries are also and invariably coloured by the sense of negativity; by the feeling that the result they set up to achieve has not yet been grasped. The intriguing insight brought forward by Calvino and Murnane in their work is that what we have been given to believe as real, unquestionable, matter-of-fact, in other words reality, is in fact absent, and that the ur-text of imagination is utterly unspeakable. What renders this poetic position innovative is

that the absence of reality is not supplemented by an alternative reality to be found in fiction, which may offer comfort and a sense of security and cosiness. On the contrary, as a metaphor and dream, fiction has the ability to remind us that we are eternal travellers lost in a middle way between the “absence” of reality and the undecidability of the ur-text.

Murnane understands literature not so much as representation but as exploration, for its supposed object of representation, qua the ur-text, is not a given, undisputable truth, the reality we inhabit, but rather a chaos of meanings and signs. Similarly, Calvino understands literature as a knowledge-making process shedding light on the fragmented (Calvino uses the word *pulviscolo*) condition of the contemporary self.

*The Plains* opens with the account of a journey which, twenty years before, brought the narrator from Australia (the apparently solid image of actuality) to the plains (the shimmering, multilayered, metamorphic, wrapping-like landscape of mental experience). Yet this trip is only alluded to, never described in detail. The result is that in the first section of the book the reader is not given factual insights into either the coastal zone from where the narrator comes or the plains to which he travels. The reader is immersed instead in a kind of zone in-between which divides two dimensions whose traits are disclosed to the reader by means of theoretical digressions. Even the boundaries between coast and plains are not clearly definable: “And I cannot even say that at a certain hour I knew I had left Australia” (3).

The second part of *The Plains* describes the protagonist’s long sojourn in the plains. They are years spent in endless conjectures about the plains, other people’s feelings and thoughts, the act of watching and that of translating mental images and feelings into a film or a book. These are years spent in an interstitial time; in a time marked by waiting and long periods of silence.

Clearly the plains, although given as the point of arrival, are never reached by the protagonist. Their essence will continue to escape him and their imprescrutability will keep pushing him into a vorticious mental journey which defies the very notion of arrival. Not only are the plains a mirage, they are also defined as the extreme outpost, as a zone at the margins, far away and estranged from quotidian reality. They combine thus both meanings of “interstice”: the in-betweenness and the peripheric.

Palomar, like the protagonist in *The Plains*, does not stop travelling, either mentally or physically. And like the protagonist in *The Plains*, he spends his life waiting in silence and thinking about his state of waiting

and what might put an end to this time which ticks away in a space in-between actions. But unlike the protagonist in Murnane's book, Palomar does not have a set destination in mind, or rather, this destination keeps on moving away from him or otherwise changes altogether, forcing the character to reappraise his journey. There is something though that never changes in Palomar's travelling, and that is the means of transport: it is always the sense of sight. It is his eyes that take him around and nudge him forward and backward and side-ways in a constant movement made up of images. In *Mr Palomar* there are no trains or airplanes or cars or boats to speak of but only places where Palomar finds himself as if his eyes have conjured them up:

"All this is happening not on the sea, not in the sun," the swimmer Palomar thinks, "but inside my head, in the circuits between eyes and brain. I am swimming in my mind; this sword of light exists only there; and this is precisely what attracts me. This is my element, the only one I can know in some way." (12)

And yet, like in Murnane, the meaning of the world arrived at through a profound, almost osmotic, understanding of "pure thought" is impeded by the filter of language. As soon as the imaginings projected onto the retina are expressed into words they become uncertain and imprecise. How can I be sure, Palomar seems to ask to himself, that a given sentence or set of words can effectively translate the original image? Could it not be better conveyed by using this word rather than that? The problem of translation is compounded by the continuous readjustment of Palomar's perception of the world and the fact that even his viewing is never certain but always susceptible to changes:

So then: there is a window that looks out on the world. The world is out there; and in here, what is there? The world still – what else could there be? With a little effort of concentration Palomar manages to shift the world from in front of him and set it on the sill, looking out. The world is also there, and for the occasion has been split into a looking world and a world looked at. And what about him, also known as "I", namely Mr Palomar? (102)

In the end it is the richness and the multifariousness of Palomar's perception and imagination, his inability to reconcile the many different and divergent views he has of the world into a cohesive and fixed structure that refuses a comfortable and safe point of arrival. If the self is

fragmented so is its language and the world it is plunged into. This determines a condition of vagrancy which in turn brings about the existential and postmodern experience of being in-between, inescapably locked in a frantic, timeless and boundless waiting room.

Palomar travels and waits, waits to be served at a cheese shop, at a butcher shop, in a deli, waits for somebody to tell him the truth about a Mexican temple, waits to make some sense of the sky and the many constellations, of waves and animal life. At first he is patient and determined to get to the solution. But as his imagination multiplies the possible answers and his language collapses into a heap of alternatives, Palomar gets increasingly nervous and anxious. Yet he knows that there is no way out of this interstitial condition since its origin is firmly grounded in himself. That is why we find him waiting still in the next chapter of the book as if nothing had happened. Palomar and vagrancy are bound together indissolubly until the end, that is Palomar's death. In the last paragraph of *Mr Palomar* we read:

"If time has to end, it can be described, instant by instant," Palomar thinks, "and each instant, when described, expands so that its end can no longer be seen." He decides that he will set himself to describing every instant of his life, and until he has described them all he will no longer think of being dead. At that moment he dies. (113)

## Conclusion

If it is correct to assume that Calvino and Murnane are two of the most representative commentators of the postmodern condition, it follows that the notion of "interstitiality" is one of the prominent characteristics of postmodernism. There is not doubt that the fragmentation of the self and the attendant problematization of language, although experienced and to a certain extent narrativized in modern fiction as well, are paradigmatic to postmodern fiction, simultaneously propelling the narrative proper and the poetic and theoretical preoccupations of postmodern authors. As a result notions such as time, space, landscape and its apperception, on which until last century some claims to transparency could be made, become increasingly blurred. Their reappraisal, together with that of the self and language, has determined a renegotiation of a set of cultural and philosophical values that in turn has chal-

lenged our position of beings in the world. One of the results of this debate is to be found in the gradual disappearance of tangible points of arrivals, be they master narratives or universally accepted truths. This has also made a vast zone, until recently unseen or unexplored, emerge in-between those almost taken for granted truths. I have called this zone "interstitial" and through the discussion of Calvino's and Murnane's fiction I have attempted to describe it and some of the ways in which the postmodern self negotiates and deals with it. It is not a comfortable zone to find oneself in but perhaps the thought that it is better to search and question than be under the illusion of being satisfied and cosy in a home that no longer exists could make it more bearable. As Murnane says in *Inland*: "Do not merely suppose, reader. Look with your eyes at what is in front of you" (64).

### Works cited

- Anderson, Don. "Wrestling with the Angel". *The Age Monthly Review* (July 1988): 3-5.
- Bail, Murray. *Eucalyptus*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1998.
- Behilarz, Peter. *Imagining the Antipodes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Calvino, Italo. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Trans. Patrick Creagh. New York: Vintage Books, 1988.
- Calvino, Italo. *Mr Palomar*. Trans. William Weaver, 1983. London: Picador, 1986.
- Cannon, JoAnn. "Italo Calvino: The Last Two Decades". Ed. Franco Ricci. *Calvino Revisited*. Toronto: Dovehouse Editions, 1989: 51-64.
- Carter, Paul. *Living in a New Country*. London: Faber & Faber, 1992.
- Forsyth, Ludmilla. "An interview with Gerald Murnane". Eds, Gerald Murnane & John Hanrahan. *Footprint New Writer 2*. Melbourne: Footscray Foundation for Australian Studies, 1987: 42-68.
- Gasparini, Giovanni. *Sociologia degli Interstizi*. Milan: Bruno Mondadori Editore, 1998.
- Murnane, Gerald. *Inland*. 1988. London: Faber & Faber, 1989.
- "The Typscript Stops Here". *Meanjin* 48 (1989): 190-194.
- "Why I Write What I Write". *Meanjin* 45 (1986): 514-517.
- *The Plains*. 1982. Ringwood: McPhee Gribble, 1984.
- Salusinszky, Imre. *Gerald Murnane*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press Australia, 1993.

- Serra, Francesca. *Calvino e il pulviscolo di Palomar*. Florence: Le Lettere, 1996.
- Tabucchi, Antonio. *I volatili del Beato Angelico*. Palermo: Sellerio, 1987.
- The Macquarie Dictionary*. Sydney: The Macquarie Library, 1987.

# MAYA LINDEN

---

## THE MIRROR GAME

“... You are suspended in me  
beautiful and frozen, I  
preserve you, in me you are safe.”

Margaret Atwood  
‘Tricks with Mirrors’

And now there seems no escape. So quickly my world has changed into a vast emptiness, endless stretches of creamy whiteness continue unplundered and unmarked. Where I walk, I leave no footprints. My feet hover on this soft carpeted air and trace careful circles around now inverted lamp shades which open up like exotic glowing flowers on their taut electrical stalks. I trace the dry white plaster of a ceiling rose with my bare toes. Flakes of crisp paint splinters split and drift upward, away from me. The bare light bulbs are so close to me now, everything glows a fresh yellow gold.

I can see nothing of myself, only where I walk, following this unfamiliar trail across ceiling arches into the darkened dip of an arched hallway roof. I step up into a doorway – below me, emptiness – the chill whiteness of smooth plaster beckons from the spread of my bedroom ceiling. I step down into it and begin to walk the peripheries of the roof – the sharply angled corners, the spiderwebs and dust which have only ever been above me, threatening to fall. Now I conquer them, now the walls are close and silent. I cannot feel them but I sense the smooth echo of their mute paleness, their blank politeness. I am trying to find a way out of this suddenly inverted world – running across sparse ornamental plaster, through a maze of light fittings – I cannot seem to find a place where I will cease to suspend in this horrifying limbo. Frustrated and becoming slightly scared by this subtle incarceration, I drop the mirror down onto the crumpled whiteness of my bed. From where I stand now,

firmly on the soft, bumpy wool of the rug, I can watch my silent reflective world coexist within the finite glass of the square mirror. It does not seem as threatening now as it had when I was within it, seeing my breath gradually form a sheet of sweeping cloudy frost across the trembling fragility of that ivory vision.

There is something so addictive about walking in the ceiling's reflection and my fear. Shifting softly across that virgin whiteness unscuffed by the tread of countless feet, and the sensation of being so close to the unfathomable brightness of the sky, always just below, and swirling with clouds and unwalked paths of mystery.

My sisters and I amuse ourselves like this for hours on some days, each of us, holding the silver lake of rectangular mirror before us. We walk, not seeking our own reflection, but, waiting for the moment when our regular grounded world of dusty furniture and dirty carpets is dissolved into the palace of the ceiling, of the sky. Up there, the light takes on a different dimension – the uncarpeted radiance of pure sun seeps through sky-lights and air vents to hover on the ceiling before being lost in our dark, furnished world below. We absorb it all, ravenously, scaling the cavernous heights between arched doorway and ceiling of room, overhanging rafters on which we hesitate before becoming engulfed in the electrical glow concealed within the curved structure of lamp shades.

I am so high up, so invincible, like light myself. There is an ominous feeling of detachment and distance from which there is no avenue of escape. Once you are inside the second maze-like house that the mirror holds before you, latches and locks on doors become purely ornamental. You cannot leave a reflected world, so how can you prevent an escape for which there is no opportunity?

Trance-like, I relax into an aimless drift, exploring areas of the house never touched before except, at night, when, lying in bed, I stare at the ceiling with a sleepless desire to feel its chill, absent surface on the soles of my feet. It is a solitary journey.

There are accidents. Sometimes, forgetting my real whereabouts and tracing the angle of where a pressed ceiling becomes wall, I will walk into the edge of my bed or into bookshelves and tables. There are times when, all three of us lost in the milky brightness of our ceiling world will collide, and, mirrors dropped or broken, come face to face with each other. Then, we reflect each other's bewildered expressions of shock and disappointment at the discovery that we have somehow fallen back down to earth from our triple navigation of these urban heavens.

Like the recurring dream of a stranger, each of our experiences of this place are unique, our fascination with walking these unstratified surfaces is lost in the confusion of others who attempt to understand what it reveals. How can we explain to them that it is not what you see, it is what you make of it that fulfils.

This habit of mirror-walking gradually becomes a kind of shared obsession. At home, my hands feel empty without the familiar rough edge of cut glass resting solidly between them. I develop a vague fear of the cluttered darkness which pervades my daily life, yearning instead for the pure expanse of that weightless air above. We each take to frequenting glass supply stores where, giving precise instructions on size and shape, we have our own mirrors cut from river-sheets of rippling silver. I imagine a house where all the floors and walls are mirror so that my entire consciousness is consumed by reflections echoing off the glare of each other's brightness. And I build it in my mind.

Somehow this mirror phase passes without us consciously realising we have forgotten to do it anymore. Then we begin to seek our own reflections rather than that of another reality. I become accustomed to exploring the undiscovered surface of my own skin, breathing pores gaping like tiny mouths, my own lips, pulling taut to reveal my teeth, my tongue, the endless dark hollow of my throat. The internal landscape takes hold and bids me enter.

I can't remember what ceased our exploration of the ceiling. Perhaps it happened because the secrets of those territories were exhausted or because, one day, thinking that perhaps escape resided behind the heavy dark wood of the front door, I stepped up and out of it, falling into the sky, its swirling galaxies drowning out my curiosity. The flash of mid-afternoon sun, caught in the mirror, white-blinded me for what seemed like an age. I was wrong, there is no escape.

Now my own face in reflection holds eternities. All of history can be seen if you look long enough and deep enough below the surface. The face is like a lake. Its surface too can be broken. If I relax the muscles holding my eyes, my vision blurs into a cloudy fog of face and hair softly hanging in the hard silver of the mirror. Have you ever noticed that the mirror holds no colour, no form, except that which is lent to it by us? It wears its silver sheen over everything like a mask of armour.

My blurred reflection shows me endless shifting visions which follow a slow amorphous progression. Features blend into blankness and emerge in different constellations from their muffled evolution, bringing with them fragments of memory, fragments of recognition.

My face becomes a magician's illusion, continuously constructing and deconstructing – the effortless way in which I become the pointed, furred muzzle of a bear or the chiselled circular O held in the mouth of a grey and wrinkled woman, is fascinating. My different incarnations hang before me on the wall. My body has become blurred, sensation and solidity flowing into the racing passage of reflection. Sometimes I become a skull, as if, stripped of curved flesh, the white tomb of my bone speaks clearly in the glass. 'Here, this is what you are, under this cloak of life's protection, this is what you and all you have known will become. See how your eyes have gathered into pools of blackness, teeth clenched below a hollow nose?' I can no longer hear – the movement from the mirror is deafening and the sides of this smooth bony skull are flat – in death there is no voice, there is no sound. I turn away from the mirror to the basin below and, switching on the tap, let the cold water hiss and bubble over my hands. I cup them, squeezing my fingers together tightly and splashing my face with the chilly wetness. Above me, my features silently return.

Together, my two sisters and I devise another game. This time we are the mirrors. One of us lies flat on our back, the others, sitting above and behind her, observe her inverted face. From this angle, the sister's features are comically jumbled, her mouth breathes warm air from where, to us, her forehead should appear. Her eyebrows grow like a hideous moustache above her forehead, now a mouthless, voiceless chin. We can play this game over and over, staring at each others inverted faces until, in one terrible moment which we both desperately desire and fear, the face becomes another entity, so unfamiliar that we have been known to scream and cry out, running from the room and begging from our hiding places behind the door for the transformed sister to stand up and revert back to her normal self, the self we find comforting in its known warmth and speech. We catch glimpses of otherness and flee.

I have a recurring dream. Mostly it is a fever-dream but sometimes it surfaces in peaceful sleep. It is a dusky night, the air is chilly but when a breeze blows it is warm as if from a forest fire burning somewhere in the distance. I stand alone on a wide wooden bridge, gently arched over rough black stone and mounded soil below. Somewhere there is a trickle and flow of water. On either side of the bridge, dense forest rises up like dark clouds on the horizon. The bruised sky is a purple-blue. Everything glows dull with it.

A young girl walks toward me, she is fragile and pale, blowing across the wooden slats of the bridge, weightless. The gaps in between reveal

steep rubble. I lean against the damp railing of the bridge, the horizon is all around me. The girl reaches toward me, holding out one hand. Her eyes are large and wet, they glisten darkly. She knows more than she ever reveals. Her wavy hair tosses in our silence. The translucent hand she extends holds a tiny white flower, its perfectly smooth petals curving away from its dark centre. I take the flower from her, holding the succulent green of its stalk, supporting its delicate petals in the smouldering breeze. Then it falls from my hands. I find myself voiceless, the landscape drowns me in sound. The flower has fallen onto the jagged black rocks below and as I watch, the darkness seeps through, bruised black ridges swelling across the minute white petals until they are all grey and broken. A dark cloud of foreboding storms the sky and I wake. Even now, if I see a smooth white piece of paper being crushed or pale flower petals trod into asphalt, I am clenched with a terrible gut-deep horror. The dream rests now somewhere there inside of me, waiting, below the surface of the lake.

Between the smooth whiteness of my sheets once, at night, after studying my face for too long in the mirror, I wake up crying and run to my mother. I am eleven or twelve. I sit in her big wide, warm bed which is wrinkled with blankets and feels like sleep on my skin. I am crying because I don't want my face to alter, I don't want the tiny spiderweb capillaries in my cheeks to become more visible, my skin to wrinkle in diagonals from the corners of my eyes. I don't want my mouth to show the repetition of its smile in folds of flesh. She cannot understand. She, warm and curved, holds me and takes me back to my own bed which has become cold now. I lie awake for a long while, trying to smother the fear of a changing reflection, of time invading the smooth, white perfection of my skin.

My other muffled reflections, and those of my softly sleeping sisters, find their voices in the darkness. Above me, the ceiling calls out, its unplundered surface pristine and ageless.

## X

*Being the tenth part of a minor verse epic in progress.*

Kayslerling came  
and did not want cake,  
although I quickly cooked coffeedustsoup  
when his horse blackened the hilltop.  
He wanted to see pastor:  
everybody knows, pastor is civilising thursdays,  
which is always done outside  
when Sun is drunk and careless,  
and its gumtrees imitate pastorpostures  
with scornmock and rustlegiggle,  
until gumnuts roll about the ground,  
bellyclutched with laughing.  
So I brushed sugarcrumbs, cockroaches and fruitpickles  
onto cakeplattering sticky with cream,  
and held it between Kayslerling and me.  
He was not shy today,  
instead brought wurst from wife and pearwater,  
of the special, notforpastor kind.  
I looked at thickthighs, and thought  
why not.  
Of course, it is harder;  
we had to sit at kitchentable,  
him complain about farmbankdroughtwife,  
me about sandysoap, potatorot and pastorgrump;  
Kayslerling looking into apron,  
me at bigneck sticking out of collardust

like the figtree outside from his dead leaves,  
wondering whether possums run up those sinews  
and teethbats and screechbirds live there.

As Dark sweeps up  
the last sun crumbs around the house,  
we eat wurst and open pearwater,  
until mossbranches press apronflowers into hips.  
Something silly said, as I think  
Kayslering, for a big man  
you need lots of chattering.  
But we must pearwater wife away.  
So the fig moved slowly,  
hardly stirring bats  
(just one screamflapped into stars)  
while possums keep scurrying,  
until I'm kept in airroots  
and breathe black treeair,  
blindlooking into branchpits  
- nobody lives there not even possums  
only trapped leaves rotting.  
But then I forgot smellpondering,  
and welcomed stickydark and boughs  
so moths and moonbreeze  
crossed me like sleeping air.

When birds woke screaming and flighted away  
I filled the iron with embers to re-press his shirt,  
figleaves stuck to my thighapricots,  
watching my sweat dropping  
dark rounds on yellow dirt:  
not a good housefrau, Frau Kayslering.  
As the tired horse clumpered into Dark,  
I ate the wursttail,  
arranged bread, butter and milk for pastor,  
so he not need to go to bed hungry.

# KATERI AKIWENZIE-DAMM

---

## I CAN'T STOP THINKING ABOUT THE WAY THE SKY TOUCHES THE EARTH

and how the whole world is wet and lush and alive and my heart is pounding like i am walking through boreal forest. your tongue a fish jumping in my mouth. i wait awestruck on the edge of sleep's escarpment. dive into cold sky. tossing and turning. spinning in sheet-white clouds. remembering what you said. every word entangled around my arms and legs and hips. man of letters pulsating words streaming sentences. i am dreaming consonance. dreaming my body a question mark. if you were here with me now where would i put fingertips, tonguetip, dark red lips? man of illumination talk to me of volcanoes. hot lava erupting. flowing to the sea. talk to me of stars shooting across the dark belly of sky. of roots pushing and straining into black loam. the thick damp smell of muskeg. the meaning of these open mouths. oh dark sky covering this rich red earth. speak my name.

# CORAL HULL

---

## THE DROWNED WHORE

It was as if the tide had dragged me here, but it was him.  
There was something different about the day,  
I was not of it.

The angel took my heart and lifted it up through  
my throat to heaven, I cried like pigeons, softly.

My mouth on his nipple, now motherless.  
It was the mouth of the wind that rested there.

He was the only one who had ever loved me.  
I never lived to see this moment.

The grass departs beneath my feet, flowers diminish.  
But he has lifted me higher and cannot put me back.

I've been lost.  
There is no climate.

My swollen cheek rested in the cup of his silken feet.  
Even in this distant way, it was as if he would bring me  
back.

The cosmos had entered my body, its immense peace.

The world and all its history resided in my skin.  
Was I really touching him?

He is my chrysalis, whilst torn asunder, I am now released.

My hair is tangled weed, which he parts and strokes.  
My mouth is damp, a shut moat, mud lives inside it.

Yet he brings me close to him, and he is wonderment.

My arms around his shoulders as he lifted me, the humped wings,  
his pale blue face, he's golden silver, like sunlit water.

Folded in, how I have tried to return with him,  
To the city of angels, but I was faint and undecided.

Beneath the bridge, my dress faded in the water.  
I was invisible, joyful.  
Take me into your dreams, I slept in his cloth.

I kissed his palms, like he was the messenger.  
I heard the music, my clouded senses, this path was intimate.  
The river brought me to this moment.  
I have waited for it.

# OUYANG YU

---

## UNTIL THE WALL BROKE

I wanted to tell you that one of the main characters in my novel is no different from the other twenty thousand who came swooping down on this continent before the June 4th Incident in Tiananmen Square and who came with no intention other than to learn English and then make money. He is perhaps a little different in that he intends to do a bit more than just learn English and make money. Once he attempted suicide in China while a university student. That is recorded in a full length novel that remains as yet unpublished in Chinese. His surname is Wu. The surname of an ancient Chinese king. And the surname of many unknown Chinese people, too, throughout centuries. It is formed of the two Chinese radicals of “mouth” and “sky” with the mouth over the sky. To distinguish it from other Chinese names that sound exactly like “wu”, one would say, “oh, my name is the Wu with the mouth over the sky.” In Chinese, it sounds exactly like the word for “nothing”. Even when formed with new word-combinations, it retains its sense of being nothing, with added meanings of “anonymous”, “empty”, “nothing to do”, “nowhere to hide”, even “wu liao”, a word-combination that defies translation. And, as a matter of fact, his name is Wu Liao.

He was lucky for being selected to come to Australia to study its history for a year on an exchange program, himself being a student of Chinese history at Wuhan University. When the decision was made, it was in the early spring of 1989 when things were very quiet, signifying nothing that was about to erupt. He was told to stay on school campus around the Spring Festival to wait for the visa because as soon as it came, he would have to pack up and go. There was no time for reunion at the Spring Festival with his family members in the small village on the Yangtse River that was called Ba Wan. The school authorities said that he would better stay until the visa arrived so that he would not miss

out on this once-in-a-lifetime chance because of the festive occasion and he did as he was told, feeling so anxious that he would go to the school mail office on a daily basis to check if there was anything bearing the name of Australian Embassy in Beijing for him. He felt as if the name on the visa would change into someone else's if he was not there to actually see it himself. He had heard stories that a train had got derailed somewhere on its way from Beijing to Shanghai, scattering the mail containing visa documents and passports all over the place with human limbs. As a result, many people forfeited their chance of going abroad because they had missed out on the deadlines. He dreaded such possibilities.

The campus was quite deserted on school holidays and it was terribly cold in the dormitory where there was no central heating. To keep warm at night, he had to cover his quilt with all his clothes and put down the mosquito net to prevent the chill from coming in. And, of course, he had to soak his feet in hot water until his feet became red before he went to bed. Each morning, his window was dripping with riverlets of the steam from the night, the result of the difference in temperature between the inside and outside. The tall plane trees lining the avenue winding down the Luoia Hill were bare of leaves, their branches skeletal against the sky. He had just had his lunch and was taking a walk up the avenue towards his dormitory, his mind occupied with something he would later call a historical moment, when the thought struck him again that he had somehow come to the end of Chinese history. Whether this was because he was going to Australia or that he had come to the end of the tree-lined avenue where he could see a full grey sky, he could not say. But it was a feeling that he had had ever since he started planning his suicide in that piece of unpublished fiction. He had not realised what that was. He only vaguely sensed something approaching, like the stink on the wind of a distant toilet that stayed for a brief second and was gone. There was a hatred in him that went deeper than words. His going to Australia was ostensibly for the study of the history of that country but secretly he knew that there was nothing much there for him to study. It was not based on any book knowledge. It was only an instinct, an instinct akin to a woman's, that informed him that, of all the places in the world people went these days, Australia was probably the bleakest that flapped like a piece of blank paper somewhere down there. He knew from his reading that this was untrue but he liked to indulge in this sort of day-dreaming simply because he thought that, if there was nowhere to go, Australia might be somewhere to go. Better still if it was

a blank spot. If only for the purpose of putting words down on that blank piece of paper. What they termed history in a mere two hundred years is a miscellany of crammed indiscriminate and uninspired facts that in Chinese terms could mostly be pared away. It was not important. What was important to him though was the solution that he thought he had found to all the problems that were present in China, whose history was sometimes just too long for him to bear. The historical facts that he had to stuff his head with filled the notebooks so that wherever he went he smelled the death: death of thousands of years gone by, with its billions of famous and infamous people, death of tons of thoughts and emotions that once stirred this ancient nation and plunged it to cyclic destruction and renewal, death even of the sky overlooking a constantly changing landscape. That is it, he thought to himself. I am going there, to Australia, a country that originated in convicts, a country that rode on the sheep's back, a country that few gave a damn about. Am I not a convict myself? He thought of the gay teacher he once knew. His name was Li. He used to be a famous conductor in a state orchestra but was expelled from it for sodomy, thus starting a succession of expulsions from everywhere he stayed until he was a village school teacher, only for a short while. He was ugly, to be frank, but a very interesting man to talk to because he knew so much about music and other things. At school, he only taught revolutionary songs like "The East is Red" but outside the school, he would tell him fascinating stories of how he conducted Beethoven's *Eroica* and works by such strange names as Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov. He did not remember those things he had told him about but those evening walks with him on the riverbank and the way in which he grew romantic at the mention of those strange names were still fresh in his memory. This went on until his father stopped him, saying, "Be careful with that man! He used to be conductor of a national orchestra but he is now a village teacher. You know why? Because he liked the boys, which is a hideous crime they called 'sodomy' or 'chicken rape'. Avoid him, son."

He still thought of him fondly because the village teacher had never ever touched him whenever they were out together so that the image of a sodomite did not seem to fit in the picture. Later, around the end of the Cultural Revolution, he disappeared. It was said that he had gone overseas to Australia to join his relatives. As to where in Australia, no-one knew.

This historical moment was the realisation that he was no longer here in Wuhan despite his physical presence. It resembled a dream in which

one's body was lying in bed but his mind soared or wandered elsewhere, miles away, indeed a thousand miles away. It was more real than a dream, though, because he found that he had reached a stage where he would be talking and laughing with people, making people feel his reality, while scarcely making any mental connection with them at all. He had basically gone to Australia, the blankness, in spirit. He had thought himself incapable of doing such things before, being a creature of comforts and a Chinese at that, the latter a thing that he thought from time to time that he would eradicate like a disease. Indeed, he had secretly harboured desires to completely re-write the history of China and had said so in a class meeting. His voice was soon jeered and drowned by his classmates who held that such a deed would be tantamount to committing a suicide, a historical suicide on a national scale. So what? He thought to himself. If I thought so, there must be a reason for the existence of such a thought. Right? Like if a child was born, whether in or out of wedlock, it has a right to exist no matter what. He wasn't one to openly confront his classmates, knowing well that there wasn't any point trying to convince them. All he needed to do was carry on with his own secret thoughts until one day when he might be able to get them into a book. Who knows that this may not happen in that blankness, Australia?

That moment soon went past, like all the other moments, small or big. He came to Australia, smoothly, in the spring of 1989, before anything happened, before anything had had time to happen. He was to consider himself lucky for having escaped possible involvement in the student demonstrations, thus avoiding forfeiting the chance to go abroad in the aftermath of the June 4th Massacre in which nearly all the programs with overseas universities were cut short. He was all the more happy for this because, being the kind of person he was, he felt that he could see through the history. Everything that was going to happen, he realised, seemed to have happened already. It is not just history repeating itself. It is history reneging itself and renewing itself in an attempt to avoid imminent death. Chinese history had degenerated to such a degree that the cycles of its renewal were considerably shortened. Every ten years or so, the nation will go into this death struggle causing millions to die, people who disappear without a trace. No-one to mourn them. No use mourning them for even the mourners do not know when it would be their own turn to die. The dead are a necessity for the rebirth of the nation on a short lease.

But he was in Australia now. He shared an office with Professor Sean

Dredge, whose name at first puzzled him because he could not pronounce it properly, calling him "Sea En", as in the Chinese translation of the Irish writer, Sean O'Casey, pronounced in Chinese as "Sea En, Ao Kai Sea", and because he could not understand why the Australian's surname was such - dredge, dredging up, dredger, as he found out in a dictionary in the library. He dared not ask the question about his name for fear of breaking the etiquette but was soon put right by Professor Dredge that he should pronounce it as "she-ong", which puzzled him further until he found an equivalent in Chinese, "xiong", a common Chinese surname that is exactly the same as "bear" the animal or "ferocious" depending on what tone the character fell on. Professor Dredge's task was to supervise him in his research leading to the completion of his M.A. thesis for final submission in China. The thesis was to be written in Chinese but the research had to be done in English because of a lack of adequate Australian material in China. He hardly had any ideas what to write about. The first few months he spent like a tourist. Philip Island. Great Ocean Road. Twelve Apostles. The Grampians. Until he narrowed his circles and settled for less. His roommate, a language student who came from a coastal province in China, told him one day that he should go and visit one of those places where girls danced naked, emphasising that it was very expensive. "Ten dollars," Jia said. "But if you produced your student card, you might get some discount." He never knew his real Chinese name although the name Jia sounds exactly like the word for "fake". He came in one day in response to an ad one of his roommates who was studying in the same university as him had put up on the campus and told them that he would like to stay in the lounge room for A\$25.00 a week. After negotiation, the price went up to A\$32.00 and the deal was closed. There was no bed but a mattress picked up from across the street and a wardrobe used as partition. The guy known as Jia or Jack, an English name that he gave himself, lived an anonymous life going to work somewhere in Epping early every morning and coming back very late at night. He spent the weekends sleeping until lunchtime wrapped in his dirty quilt that never got washed for the duration of his stay and making phone calls to his "friends" in his local dialect, which to Wu was totally unintelligible. Even if he was calling him names or making unpleasant comments, he would have no way of knowing.

Wu visited one of those "shops" one day. He did not go in. He was invited in with open arms; nowhere in Australia would Chinese be extended such welcome, he later noted, only in brothels and casinos. The man who stood guard was all smiles and made obscene gestures indicating

the roundness and bigness of a woman's breasts and said in broad English, "plying all dye all ni'." He heard his own voice within warning him against such wrong doing. He felt his blood rushing up to the temple, blinding his eyes momentarily but his feet were irresistibly drawn to the sinister opening in the shape of a window that resembled the vagina which he had only seen in pornographic magazines. He handed his ten-dollar note obediently, forgetting to ask about the discount, which he remembered later in the show, belatedly.

It was something that Wu found hard to forget: a naked girl wagged her bum as she walked along the aisle, stopping next to an old man sitting right in the front seat where he could look up right into the crotches of the dancing girls, and she took off his glasses and putting them between her legs. When she came down again, she put the smeared - Wu thought it must be smeared with the liquid oozing from between her legs - glasses underneath the man's nose for him to smell, and, possibly, to lick. He noticed that girls never looked his way although many had gone passing by and never even attempted to touch him with their white slabs of flesh that set him afire sexually. He attributed this to his ugliness or racial difference that might turn girls of other nationalities, particularly Caucasian origins, off, for in the first few months in Melbourne, he often found his eyes wandering in the direction of Asian women's faces as he walked down Bourke Street or Swantson Street, window-shopping. Then he dismissed the idea as unthinkable because the old man was not only ugly but old and near-sighted, who had nothing to recommend himself except perhaps wisdom, which at this moment was all smeared with the oozing vaginal liquid. Wu moved to the seat next to the aisle in the hope that the passing girls might perchance touch him with their twisting and turning buttocks or even hold his face up and print their red lips on his face. As his desire grew stronger, he became bolder but no girls seemed to show the least interest in him whatsoever.

It was a night of disappointment and also restless excitement. He had to quench that excitement by masturbating himself again and again with the imagined red liquid oozing out of the vagina hole of the passing girls until he was totally exhausted after he came home. It felt worse afterwards. He wondered why Jia said that he had spent all day, over ten hours, there, to make up for the ten dollars he had to pay for the show. For him, two hours were more than enough. If he had stayed longer, he would have gone limp and totally lost the interest. Besides, he began to notice that the intervals between two girls were too long, there were too

many repeats of the same love-making scene on the wall screen and the time in which the girls performed was too short although he was unaware of this capitalist trick. He had to leave because he realised that he might miss the last bus.

*A History of Australia* by Manning Clark was lying on his desk hardly touched for weeks and weeks while the number of pornographic magazines was growing in his leather suitcase brought from China. This new-found freedom, hitherto unavailable in China, put him in touch with women of all nationalities and sizes, on paper, so that he could indulge in his wildest dreams making love to them while gazing at them making love to their men in most unlikely ways. The cover of *A History of Australia* bore convincing witness to this for, in one of his wildest moments, he spread all the pornographic magazines open, fifty or so of them, all around his little room, covering up the wooden desk, his mattress, the floor, and the place where the walls joined the floor, on the window seal, so that his little bungalow room literally became a sex dungeon where he was masturbating himself vigorously, looking at men and women fucking each other on the coloured pages and cuming and organs in and out and cuming until he could no longer control himself. When he woke up from his entrancing indulgence, he found, to his horror, *A History of Australia* was partly covered in his semen, white Chinese semen. My God! Startled, he uttered a cry, because this was a book Professor Dredge had lent him. What if he detected the traces of dried semen on the cover? Worse still, what if the implication struck him as portentous and possibly destructive, prompting him to take some sort of legal action? Would he be accused of soiling the history? Would Australians come and burn his bungalow down? This troubled him a lot even though he tried hard to wipe it clean, with the Chinese toothpaste he had brought with him.

History had now ceased to mean anything to him. It turned into a blank page in which he daily performed an exercise that was both necessary and forgettable. At least he thought so although future historians might argue that what had happened with Wu Liao could be added as an appendage to a contemporary history of Chinese in Australia or some such things. Indeed, if Australians borrow the terminology, "wild history", from Chinese, they might find this an apt instance to be written about. Unfortunately, their English is still not flexible enough to take in such new elements.

Meanwhile, our hero or anti-hero continued his existence in Reservoir, sharing accommodation but not anything else with two other room-

mates from China, going about his research haphazardly, reporting to his supervisor that things were going well, that there was nothing to worry about and that he had done quite a lot of reading in Australian history, and he might have added physical Australian history. His supervisor, Professor Sean Dredge, was a historian who knew little about the Chinese and what they thought. The only reason he accepted Wu was because he thought Wu was useful to him as he was researching for a book he was going to write on the recent Chinese experience in Australia, particularly after the June 4th, 1989. He was no Chinese, of course, but he was intensely intrigued by the Chinese and their way of life which he found unique by comparison with other nationalities. In a climate where all things Asian were good, the Chinese were quite a commodity to market. As a historian, and one with a business mind, Sean was quick to seize the opportunity while others were still debating whether the option was viable. He knew he had made a fine choice because the first time he saw Wu he realised that there was a lot to get out of him in terms of raw information. The short, thin, black-haired Chinese wearing jeans and a pair of China-made fake Nike runners seemed a man affable enough and malleable enough for his own use. Soon, he found that his was not the case, for Wu seemed a very mysterious person by Australian standards. You never really knew what he was thinking about. While he was talking to him, his mind seemed miles away. He asked if he missed home but Wu said "No, not at all." He was concerned that Wu was not making any progress. This would seriously reflect on Professor Dredge for it was him who had made the recommendation about Wu among a dozen contenders a few years back. He had read a couple of essays that Wu wrote in class and was impressed. Although they were written in poor English, they revealed a mature mind with penetrating insight that was matched by few of his classmates. One argument that was particularly impressive was that Wu seemed to think highly of Australia as an island continent that, like Japan and Great Britain, previously two very aggressive nations in the world, might play an important role in forging a cultural link with the rest of the world, particularly Asia, by the kind of drive that typified the island people despite their insularity and exclusiveness. The argument was not well sustained with supportive evidence but Professor Dredge saw something intuitive that echoed his own inner thoughts and the fact that a Chinese student who had never been to Australia could have thought so was reason enough for him to make the decision. However, he did not understand why he didn't seem to make any progress after a

few months in the country. A recent essay that he handed in showed that he was still in two minds about what to write: the discovery of Australia by Chinese or Chinese interactions with white people and Aboriginals. In some way he thought he was responsible for this because he had asked him to read too much without showing him the correct way, the liberal Australian way disciplined and tempered by the century-old European intellectual and humanist tradition of free thinking. The ways in which Chinese students were taught seemed quite mechanical and unimaginative, slavishly sticking to the factual and empirical evidence, and smacking of mere undigested book knowledge. There was a lack of theoretical grounding as well. Yes, that was what it was. He needed theories.

Then he found Wu quite a stubborn student, for he insisted on researching in his own way despite the warnings against relying too much on empirical evidence. After a while, he began to wonder whether this clinging to the true historical facts, this slavish thinking in regard to the historical position of Chinese in Australia and this inflexible attitude towards change might not be a product of the educational system under the present communist regime. Nothing could be worse than to train a scholar who refused to take fresh views of a history, or, for that matter, any history that can be revised. After an argument with Wu, in which Wu said that Australian history was not something to be seriously reckoned with, that it was simply a blank page compared with Chinese history of five thousand years, that just because it was so short a history the Australian historian had a tendency to cram all the trivialities and inflate the pages, many of which could be simply omitted, he decided that he wouldn't give a damn about the slavish and recalcitrant Chinese and now all he was concerned with was that Mr Wu do his work so that he could finish it in time for submission to the Chinese Examination Panel when he went back to Wuhan, thus putting an end to it all.

Wu, on his part, simply ignored the professor's concerns about his academic progress. He had read about the student unrest in China after the death of Hu Yaobang in the newspapers and on T.V. and heard from his room-mate Jia that this may be of benefit to them. "You see," Jia said one day, "if they continue to demonstrate, it may get to a stage where we won't have to go back but just stay here as political refugees or illegal immigrants." It sounded unbelievable, but Jia firmly believed in it, perhaps because he came from Fujian, a place traditionally known as a source of illegal immigrants? He did not know. For him, the kind of vac-

uum-like situation continued in which he went from bad to worse until he hit the Men's Gallery. This time, Jia again initiated him and was kind enough to take him there on the condition that he paid the bill, which he duly did at the entrance guarded by a tall man who stared at him for a second and waved him in after deciding that he did wear a collared T-shirt. He still remembered that date because it was June 4th, 1989. For students occupying Tiananmen Square, this was the most intense moment, akin to an orgasm, a mass political orgasm, and for him, too, it was an equally, if not more, intense moment. For the first time, he was literally surrounded by white female flesh dancing in all stages of undress on spiky shoes. He bought a Carlton Cold for Jia and a Coke for himself and stood watching. The girl in front of him was twisting her body this way and that, her hands reaching over her head to touch the ceiling from time to time where a big coloured lamp resembling a terrestrial globe was turning round and round casting coloured lights all around. Men were loitering around tables with glasses in their hands or smoking, talking to each other or just looking. He saw an Indian man sitting against the wall with his head lowered in a half-dreamy state where one did not know whether he was looking at the girls dancing or was just thinking to himself. A guy went to a white girl wearing black high heels and talked to her in an intimate fashion, the girl whispering something into his ears. Jia said, "See that? They are discussing the money because the man wants to see her naked before his eyes."

"Have you ever done this before?" Wu wondered aloud. "How much is it?"

"Of course I have. It's only ten bucks," Jia said proudly and added, "the only trouble is that you can't touch her genitals even when you most want to because it is against the law to do so."

With a glance, Wu noticed that the girl took a ten-dollar note and tucked it under the rubber band around her thigh and started undressing until she was a rippling white shining meat, spread open right under the man's nose, feeding, almost feeding him. Strangely, Wu found himself not moved in the least. In fact, he did not even have an erection as he would be most likely to have when watching a sex video quietly in his room all by himself. He thought that might be related to the openness of the situation where it was so transparently open that one had the feeling that he could not even hide his erection because he felt as if everything was exposed to the eye, male and female. He told Jia so, who laughed at him, saying "You think too much. People who come here don't think. If they do, they only think with their private parts. Just con-

centrate on the woman's hole and you will feel like bursting out any moment."

Wu had a look around but did not see any man feeling like bursting. He didn't like to burst with his seeds so openly, either. That would be so embarrassing. Wu remained unconvinced until a short lady walked by wearing a silvery badge sort of thing on her left arm, whom he immediately recognised as Asian and was instantly turned on. His eyes followed her accompanied by an Australian man who walked her to a dark corner where she began performing a dance that Jia told him was a "Lap Dance". He watched other girls performing indecent acts with self-indulgence, half expecting the Asian girl to come back. As if reading his mind, Jia said, "You want to try the Asian chicken? She is nice, you know. Australian men like Asian girls." Wu said he didn't know how to but Jia had already started walking towards the girl who had just put on her scanty garments consisting of only a bra, a G-string and knee-high boots. He heard his heart racing fast, his eyes avoiding looking their way. Then he heard, "How are you?" and turned to look into a pair of black eyes in an oblong face with very red lips. The girl held out her hand and he gave his hand for her to take, despite his initial unwillingness, and heard the girl commenting, "What a nice warm hand." That drew his attention to his own hands, which were indeed "nice and warm." The first thing the girl asked him was where he came from. He said China and asked the same question to the girl, who said Japan and China because her mother was Japanese and her father Chinese, adding that she had never been to China although she would like to go there one day. He had another look at her whose face bore no Chinese or Japanese features whatsoever but an olive skin that was very Thai. So he said but you do not look like a Japanese at all to me. The girl shrugged her shoulders and spread her hands in a manner that suggested that there was nothing she could do about it. While he was still hesitant, the girl had already taken his "nice and warm" hand in hand and led him to the corner in which she had done the lap dance to the Australian guy. He didn't know what to do but followed everything the girl said: move that sofa there, put it in front of this sofa, sit down, spread your legs wide open, no, like this, spread open, yes, that's right, how much money? Give me twenty bucks, not ten, ten was only an introduction, the girl's mouth was on his ear, at least twenty if you wanted to see anything at all. He had lost control of himself and followed the girl's instructions obediently, producing the twenty-dollar note from his trousers pocket where he could feel his own half erection through the cloth. What followed was a series of acts that

the girl performed probably to what only in retrospect he realised was a formula in which she turned from a clothed woman into a total dancing machine of flesh except her high-heeled boots which was the only thing that he had ever dared to ask to have a touch at. The patent leather felt quite warm on the outside as if it was paper-thin. The girl, whose name was Japana, a name that Wu had adopted for her after learning about her origins, spread her legs open like all the other white girls, her boots resting on his thighs. He could unmistakably see the entrance to her vagina shaped like a wall with a vertical slit on it and no hair. He admitted to himself that he had never seen anything like this before, even that window that resembled a vagina was nothing like this, because the top of the wall was so straight and level that it looked sharp like the blade of a knife. When the girl finished her performance, she was actually sitting naked in his arms and said in his left ear that she was now finished, signifying the completion of her task by printing a kiss on his left cheek.

In an instant, she was gone.

When they arrived home late at night, Jia switched on the television and, instantly, they learnt that PLA soldiers had broken into the Square and were firing indiscriminately at the students. But Wu was so exhausted that all he could see in front of his eyes was the wall of the girl that stood inviting entry. In his sleep that night, he dreamt that he entered the girl like a bullet, deep into her until the wall broke.

# ROLAND LEACH

---

## MISCELLANEOUS DETAILS ON DARWIN BEFORE HE BECAME FAMOUS

### *1. The Soldier*

Soon after his mother's death  
he had seen a horse led to an open grave,  
boots & carbine hanging from the empty saddle.  
It was years later before he learnt that a good pair  
of boots and gun could save you from the grave,  
at the time he had just felt his loss,  
death opening before him  
as a hole in the ground,  
a place where we were all heading  
as warned by scriptures.

Eight years old when the cavalryman  
from the 15th Hussars stepped into the silence  
and raised his rifle, and the boy wondered  
why he was aiming into an empty sky.

### *2. Taxidermy & Dreams*

He learnt how to stuff animals  
from a freed black slave  
who had come from Guyana  
and as he learnt the tricks of stuffing  
Darwin listened to his stories

---

of South America and rain forests,

dreaming macaws and waking hot  
in his cold Edinburgh room,  
writing home to his sisters that he was learning  
to stuff birds & dream from a blackamoor.

### *3. Advice*

He often thought about home  
but Fitzroy told him to forget visions  
of green fields & nice little wives  
or else you would go mad  
like the previous captain of the Beagle.

### *4. Cigar*

He was a man who liked his cigar,  
liked to ride and hunt  
and at night crouched around the fire  
he felt what it was like to be a gaucho.  
In his later years sitting in his chair  
with a shawl across him  
he remembered these nights  
when he ate roasted game and drank mattee  
lying beneath the stars  
blowing lassoes of smoke-rings into the darkness.

### *5. Tapadas*

In Lima he couldn't keep his eyes off the tapadas,  
young women of elegance in tight gowns,  
a sight better than a hundred old churches,  
who took small white steps in their silk stockings,  
and wore a black silk veil fixed behind the waist  
so that when it was swept over their heads  
and held by the hands before the face,  
it allowed only one eye to remain uncovered,  
so dark and glittering that it was enough.

## 6. *Flowers*

On his return he remembered  
his old love, Fanny,  
now married (unhappily he heard)  
and pregnant with a third  
in a castle on the Welsh Hills  
and sent her flowers.

### THE WOMAN IN JOHN STREET

She loved walking up john street  
on hot days after the beach.  
A shadowed street of norfolk pines,  
ten degrees cooler than the glaring beachfront  
and she would go barefoot  
smiling at the young girls who always sat  
out the front of the rented cottage  
drinking beers and watching boys  
in their hard bodies & boardshorts,  
thinking she should have lived here when she was twenty,  
walking on, sometimes chatting with acquaintances,  
who drank coffee at outdoor tables at the cafe,  
as people streamed down from their homes  
with towels draped like laurels,  
seeing the glassed ocean at the end of the street  
and sometimes if she had timed the walk  
she would hear the rainbow lorikeets at the corner,  
larrikin birds bullying the evening light into darkness  
as if it would stay day eternally without their screeching,  
arriving home in her little cottage to put on the kettle  
as if there was no greater pleasure on earth  
than drinking a cup of tea on her porch.

# BILL FEWER

---

## IN SEASON

Why a man, mature in years,  
would choose to purge himself  
through the inconsequence of poetry,  
is as incomprehensible for others  
as for me why a mature man  
would choose barrel and bullets,  
blasting apart a flapping duck  
he's startled from the reeds.

I would be wings and quiet water,  
drift on web and feather,  
bob for food,  
and never know, let alone suspect  
if today was my season,  
only if the sun was short or long.

## GIVING A WORD TO THE SAND

This paper compares the poetics of three Australian poets: James McAuley (1917-76), Francis Webb (1925-73), and Vincent Buckley (1925-88). Each was officially Catholic and each was writing at the time of Vatican II, when verticalism and horizontalism crossed words over who would have control of God. Each of the three poets went into the vast storehouse of Catholic metaphor, myth and dogma and came away with something different. In each case it was something their poetry picked for them. McAuley's poetry was first and forever tempted by the myth of the Fall. Webb's poetry yielded to the image of the stigmata. Buckley's poetry incorporated the metaphor of the Incarnation. And in each case, what the poetry picked had an iconoclastic or atheological or kenotic capacity that the poets themselves might not have realised, might not have wanted.

When James McAuley converted to Catholicism in 1952, he turned to what he called a vision of ceremony, though it might also be called a philosophy of natural law perfected by a theology of divine ends. In this Catholicism McAuley learned that faith was not irrational and that grace perfected nature. He also (re)learned how to imagine poetry according to a vertical hierarchy, giving supreme authority to the light of reason over the dark wisdom of the heart and certainly over the maze of nightmare. His resistance to modernism found an ally in Thomism, with its doctrines on the realism of knowledge and the metaphysical nature of truth. In *The End of Modernity* (1959) McAuley argued that the culture of Western modernity was anti-poetic because it was anti-realist and anti-metaphysical. Moreover, he declared that "The number, weight and measure of verse bear a kind of sacred character by reason of their analogy with the divine ordering."<sup>1</sup>

This belief in a natural law for poetry encourages, in the period imme-

diately after McAuley's conversion, a poetry of natural law. Some, but not all, of the important poems of *A Vision of Ceremony* (1956)<sup>2</sup> convey McAuley's desire for a poetry obedient to the 'grammar of existence'. 'Celebration of Divine Love' speaks of 'secret patterns printed in our being', patterns perfected in Christ who is 'the bond and stay of his creation'. 'New Guinea' describes a society where 'Life holds its shape in the modes of dance and music' and prays that such a life may be 'Configured henceforth in eternal mode'. 'An Art of Poetry' scorns individual, arbitrary and self-expressive art in favour of art which traces its 'secret springs' to the Word, and venerates the 'universal meanings' which are revealed to its formal, lucid contemplation.

Needless to say, such a poetry and such a poetic earned McAuley a reputation as a conservative, even a reactionary. This reputation has, in its turn, led most critics to ignore the possibility that McAuley's poetics of ceremony is connected to an aesthetics of loss, sometimes close to despair. McAuley's is a writing where the desire for order and ceremony, whether Christian and/or natural, evokes a sense of separation. His speakers are almost always falling back from social and political ideals, from natural scenes and landscapes, into their own awareness of imperfection. Their time is very often 'too late': too late to write the kind of poetry John Dryden wrote, too late to love the father, too late to justify the ways of God. This suggests that McAuley's poetry was from the first rewriting the myth of the Fall. And if so, it is a happy fault, since this is what saves the poetry from the poetics. McAuley's work is a reminder that the will of the poem is not always in line with the will of the poet, a signal that perhaps poetics is located in the space between what is declared and what is undeclared.

I can only afford one example, and it is 'An Art of Poetry'.<sup>3</sup> The poem ends 'impatient for that loss/ By which the spirit gains'. This can be interpreted as a use of theological paradox to support the poem's anti-modernist agenda (evident in the association of 'individual' with 'arbitrary' and 'self-expressive' and in the hierarchical positioning of 'intellectual love' above 'carnal maze') and place its argument beyond the reach of knowledge (and language). Yet the poem's desire that 'speech be ordered wholly' has already been questioned:

Let your literal figures shine  
With pure transparency:  
Not in opaque but limpid wells  
Lie truth and mystery.

And universal meanings spring  
From what the proud pass by:  
Only the simplest forms can hold  
A vast complexity.

This does more than declare belief in 'universal meanings'. It attempts a most uneasy equation of 'truth' and 'mystery', but instead distances 'mystery' from 'truth'. In its longing for pure figuration, it equates the pure with the clear, drawing a line from 'literal' through 'transparency' through 'limpid' to 'truth and mystery', then looping back, by the half-rhyme, to 'pure transparency', and so to an alliance of mystery with epistemological and representational purity. But this is to risk reducing mystery to a literal and transparent truth. One reading is to say that this is exactly what the poem does: it reduces mystery to its own images of Christ and the real. Another is to say that 'mystery' begins to pull away from the rule of 'truth', just as 'vast complexity' begins to pull away from 'simplest forms'. I do not see the need to decide between these two readings: taken together, they show a faultline opening in the surface of certitude. Here, as with the other 'Catholic' poems, the discourse of the *via negativa* cannot be simply made obedient to theological propriety. It resists such an imperium; it is a language of (spiritual) poverty, not of (theological) power. So McAuley's use of the *via negativa* encourages instead those activities by which his poetry participates in uncertainty, qualification, deflation, and rupture in order to save its desire for the Word.

While Christ and the Catholic Church feature prominently in Vincent Buckley's early poetry and prose, his later work barely recognises them, and then as sites of cultural memory rather than personal belief. This development might be seen as evidence of a shift from transcendent to immanent models of the sacred, or even of some failure of belief. I want to suggest another possibility, the possibility that it represents an unexpected realisation of Buckley's primary religious metaphor of incarnation. In this reading, the Divine Word is subjected to a fraction rite, distributed to history, time, and death, and disappears, leaving the believer only the empty tabernacle of the Holy Thursday liturgy.

It is possible to trace a development in Buckley's writing. The early poetry and prose are high on creed, confidence and cadence. Then in the mid-60s, Buckley writes *Poetry and the Sacred*, shifting from a theological to an anthropological approach to the sacred, and 'Stroke', the sequence dealing with the death of his father (and perhaps the death of

God) and signalling a separation of the doctrinal and sensual registers in his speech.<sup>4</sup> 'Golden Builders', the sequence that follows 'Stroke', is the poem that tests Melbourne for sacredness, finds a hollowed church and remembers the empty tabernacle, but cannot find the grave of Christ.<sup>5</sup> Once the father is written as dead and Christ as not risen, an interesting transfer begins in Buckley's poetry: the father is replaced by land, particularly by Ireland, the land of forefathers and, correlative to this, the theological imagination is replaced by the mythic imagination, which now stands in for the mediatory process of Incarnation. By the time Buckley's writing, after his death, arrives at *Last Poems*<sup>6</sup> the meditation is no longer of divine and human, but of soul and body, and it is performed, if at all, by poetry:

Then poetry  
will be your body's line  
to what the soul can't remember.<sup>7</sup>

Which is to say, perhaps, that Buckley's poetry has abandoned religion and become religious.

In one of these late poems, 'Seeing Romsey',<sup>8</sup> the great Eucharist hymn, 'O Salutaris Hostia', is made a broken piece of memory and Buckley's incarnational poetics persists, if at all, as a poetics of liminal sensation:

I see Romsey through a hole in the wind  
as I used to in late autumn, in the southern gales,  
just there, not vibrating with changes  
but like a model that has grown to its full height.  
The timber houses have roofs of painted iron,  
the brick ones are lowering with warm tiles.  
The tree near me is the one I climbed  
fifty-three years ago. I smell roses on the fence  
where once the whole air was brushed with cypress.  
Proust's madeleine, nothing. Even the smell  
of trains that haven't run here  
for forty years. Smelling strong as they slow down.  
Smell of the comics they brought each Saturday.  
Proust's madeleine was nothing to this,  
or Eliot's hyacinths and lilacs  
or that great heap of blossom in Yeats's window.  
Nothing to this. To the firesmell of the forge,

squeezing into the smell of burning hoof. Incense  
through the voices singing O Salutaris hostia  
that never sing Latin any more.  
I smell the printer's ink, and books,  
and dust that flashes when the raindrops hit it  
as it takes the rain into itself.

This poem engages in something like an Ignatian 'composition of place', intended to bring the (older) speaker back into communion with his first home, and to do this by way of the senses, particularly the sense of smell. It is smell that, by way of incense, introduces the memory of 'voices singing O Salutaris hostia'. But these sacred words are incorporated without privilege. They are at once remembered and displaced by the text: they are included among the other pieces of the past, then judged by a present, critical intelligence, then sealed under the silence of Latin. The final image is a very understated, almost unwritten 'version' of what might once have been called Incarnation. It concentrates images used in these late poems, images of water and earth, cool and heat, and, if I can be permitted to stretch the pattern towards a theological perimeter, spirit and flesh. This late poem does not sing Latin either. It has forgotten its language of high sacrality, in order to 'use all the processes of language to create either the depth and intensity, or the transparency, of experience'.<sup>9</sup> In so forgetting, it writes the incarnation into dust, even though the dust 'flashes', ruptures, when it receives the blessing of rain, the mystery of water. The Incarnation, that is, is merely a ghost of its former self; it has entered a mortal text and not escaped that mortality.

In this way Buckley's incarnational poetics ends the Incarnation. As Mark C. Taylor remarks:

The main contours of deconstructive a/theology begin to emerge with the realization of the necessary interrelation between the death of God and radical christology. Radical christology is thoroughly incarnational – the divine "is" the incarnate word. Furthermore, this embodiment of the divine is the death of God. With the appearance of the divine that is not only itself but is at the same time other, the God who alone is God disappears. The death of God is the sacrifice of the transcendent Author/Creator/Master who governs from afar. Incarnation irrevocably erases the disembodied logos and inscribes a word that becomes the script enacted in the infinite play of interpretation. To understand incarnation as inscription is to discover the word.<sup>10</sup>

Francis Webb's poetry is a writing of desolation: it envisages the absence of God, and this to a degree and in a manner more complex and uncomfortable than Buckley's fading metaphor of Incarnation or McAuley's determinedly believing work. The religiopoetic character of Webb's writing derives from its involvement in empty, stigmatic, stigmatised spaces. If one wanted to view this in slightly more theological terms, one might say that the poetry, evading both belief and scepticism, puts its hand into the wounded side of meaning, that even as it writes its theology of crucifixion it engages in a crucifixion of theology. Carl Raschke, trying to establish a rapport between deconstruction and postmodern theology, could be describing the way Webb's poetry fractures its belief:

deconstruction is the death of God put into writing. In that respect the movement of deconstruction within theology rounds out the enigmatic anticipation of the end-times. But it is theology's 'ending' not in glory, but forsakenness. The *theologia crucis*, the 'theology of the cross', is at last translated from a style of intellectual voyeurism into an evident ordeal: it becomes the *crux theologiae*.<sup>11</sup>

This crucifixion of the Word, I would argue, continues throughout Webb's writing. It is there, for instance, in the poetry's attraction to empty centres, its belief in truth as 'a mass of stops and gaps',<sup>12</sup> and its use of suffering servant theology. For the moment, however, I have to reduce this complex poet to one poem, and it is 'Poet'.<sup>13</sup>

At first reading the poem seems to confirm that theology of compassion which many identify in Webb's poetry. But this is, I suspect, largely an effect of reading habits. We see that it is employing the story of Christ and the woman taken in the act of adultery (John 8:2-11), a story about healing love, we privilege the gospel, and so we assume the poem is also about healing love. At one level it is. It creates a confrontation between two languages: the language of 'lawless words' associated with the desert and the language of 'thick grey loam' with which the Pharisees construct their 'unshakable houses', defend their sacred order, and deploy shrewd words in the house of God. The desert provides an image of reconciliation, which is also an image of poetry, as camels become words moving between horizon and sky. This image is then confirmed and completed in the vision of Christ and the woman 'strangely together' as his sky bends to her bent earth. But there is another adulterer here: the poet-speaker. He is the one who is tempted to judge the sinner, and, in a related act, to betray the 'uneasy connubial whiteness' with which desert words bring together horizon and sky. The betrayal of

compassion and the betrayal of poetry are the one act.

The poem develops as a series of margins or 'choices' between 'lawless' and 'orderly' language, and the more it develops these choices the more it reveals that it is 'orderly' language which is adulterous. At first the poet's words seem wedded to the desert; language and landscape are 'holy' and 'stinging'. From the desert, from the void, come the camels, come the words, comes the unknown, comes the wound at the heart and origin of writing (so death does, indeed, hurt the hand of the poet). Even though he is confessing to the Pharisees and seeking their approval, the poet-speaker cannot quite control the image of the desert, which begins to move away from him. So, he has to begin the second stanza with a forceful denial. It is basically a denial of figurative speech. To the pharisaic mind, figurative speech is at best a means of illustrating dogma, at worst an enemy to the orderly signification by which God is known. Accordingly, the speaker adopts a strategy that mirrors the pharisaic prejudice: he diminishes the status of metaphor, even as he exalts that of law.

By the third stanza the poet is part of the plan to destroy Christ:

And this One you speak of as the enemy of order,  
As the wilful floating daze of refractory sunlight:  
I do know that we could never exchange words  
(But the tinkle and psalm of rubbing harness sometimes  
Upon my word and image blowing drowsily ...?)  
Vah! You are the law, my masters, the thick grey loam.  
I shall go to the temple with you, take Him in the act;  
From the bed of the sick child He comes, from alleyways of the possessed,  
And with this woman He shall speak His public perverseness.

The reference to Christ as the 'the enemy of order' is double-edged: while it mimics the pharisaic judgment that Christ was undermining the Law, it also subtly acknowledges that Christ is the iconoclastic metaphor of God. Nor is the poet as law-abiding as he pretends: his memory of the camels, his own metaphor for poetic speech, makes another breach. So that when, in the fourth stanza, he thinks he holds a word big enough to execute Christ, he falls victim to the lawlessness of metaphor:

The big stone in my hand will fly shrewdly, I assure you,  
As your words, in the house of God.

When the comma creates a slight, ungrammatical, pause before 'in the house of God', the comparison rebounds, exposing the calculated and self-serving power play which motivates the masters' external order. For the comparison admits that, as well as stones, it is their prayers which are 'shrewdly aimed', and so places 'God' within their 'house' as the victim of their 'words'.

When the poet then 'sees' Christ, he rediscovers his poetic words. He also finds that the stone has reversed the direction of death, becoming like stigmata:

He stands confronting the woman and death in my hand.  
No words between us, I say, for You are the loneliness,  
My home, You are the broad light all about me:  
You are the train of camels within that light.  
Speak up, my masters, quickly, for death hurts my hand.

The main activity of this stanza is to redeem the forsaken implications of earlier fragments. 'No words between us' returns to 'I do know that we could never exchange words' and makes words unnecessary. The conjunction of 'loneliness' and 'home' reinstates the desert of the first stanza. The 'broad light' breaks open the constrictions of 'houses', 'law', and 'loam', returning through 'refractory sunlight' and 'haze' to the 'conubial whiteness'. Christ, because he effects the return, the redemption, of these words, is then identified with the camels, and so poetry. Within this return, notions of marriage and adultery are also being turned around. It is the desert that represents 'marriage': because its 'whiteness' is uneasy. It is the town that represents 'adultery': because, for all its black and white intentions, it is 'grey' (perhaps because its words are constrictive).

When, in the final stanza, the 'first stone' is ordered thrown, it too rebounds, breaking the language of 'grey loam' and freeing the poet for a word that belongs with wind and sand:

Cast the first stone. And the grey loam is scattered,  
And we slink out one by one. But my narrow clever desert eyes  
Peer back over my shoulder. They are strangely together,  
A grave broad light in the temple. Breast upon knees,  
The woman crouches beside Him: I have seen the sky at midday  
Bent earthward. From the two together a train of camels.

She has given her love – but Paradise, what is his love? –  
To a hundred of us. Again she will love, may tempt me;  
But can ever this stone fly into the face of beauty  
While the wind, as his delicate burning finger,  
Gives a Word to the Sand?

The only time Christ speaks in the poem is to say 'Cast the first stone', but this line is so altered that the words can barely be recognised as Christ's. In the gospel story Christ says to the woman's accusers, 'Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.' By forgetting the first part, the poem takes a significant turn in meaning. In the gospel no stone is thrown. Christ's words arrest the action. In the poem Christ's words themselves become the stone hurled at the pharisaic vocabulary in which the subject has tried to house himself. The result is that the house crumbles before the desert and the subject becomes the broad light and temple where Christ and the woman meet to redeem the desert's 'sky at midday/ Bent earthward' (which might encode the image and process of kenosis, even crucifixion). This saving sign seems to centre the poem, but is not itself a centre: it addresses the space between the woman and Christ. Christ is, in fact, never a direct presence in the poem. He appears only as himself something of a 'haze and quandary', an effect of differently angled reflections: signs hidden in the desert, enemy of order, refractory sunlight, perverse healer, adulterer, train of camels, sky bending earthward, love, delicate burning finger, and Word. The poem, in accordance with the uneasy shifts that constitute its own subjectivity, has so refracted its Christ, that it denies itself an easy reconciliation. The last two lines are very troubling. The 'wind' is likely to represent the Holy Spirit, source of inspiration. The Word is Christ, and, just as the desert has 'humming stinging virtues', Christ has a 'delicate burning finger'. But why 'Sand'? It may incarnate Christ in the desert, the loneliness which is also home, but such a reading has to exist beside another which says that wind and sand will see the Word itself 'scattered'. At the risk of being obvious, I would point out that the last line does not state 'Gives to the Sand a Word', which would be quite a different ending.

While writing this paper, I have had in mind something Kevin Hart said in a recent interview. I have been trying to say how writing that wants God is writing that recognises want as both absence and desire. Hart says:

There's a sense in which poetry answers to the absence of the Word, the unique master word that underwrites all other words. Not even the word 'God' can do that, for as soon as you pronounce the divine name it divides like spilt mercury. As soon as it enters the world, the Word is lost. Writing poems is a search for that Word ... But any recovery is partial: you come up with words, not the Word.<sup>14</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 James McAuley, "From A Poet's Notebook", *Quadrant* 11 (1958): 49. This essay is included in J. McAuley, *The End of Modernity* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1959): 160-180.
- 2 James McAuley, *A Vision of Ceremony* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1956).
- 3 James McAuley, "An Art of Poetry", in L. Kramer, ed. *James McAuley: Poetry, essays and personal commentary* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1988): 150-51.
- 4 Vincent Buckley, *Poetry and the Sacred* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968). "Stroke" is in *Arcady and Other Places* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1966).
- 5 Vincent Buckley, *'Golden Builders' and Other Poems* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1976).
- 6 Vincent Buckley, *Last Poems* (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1991).
- 7 "Arrival", *Last Poems*, 81.
- 8 *Last Poems*, 145.
- 9 See P. Kavanagh and P. Kuch, "Scored for the Voice: An Interview with Vincent Buckley", *Southerly* 3 (1987): 265.
- 10 M. C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984): 103.
- 11 C. Raschke, "The Deconstruction of God", in T.J. Altizer et al, eds. *Deconstruction and Theology* (New York: Crossroads, 1982): 27.
- 12 Francis Webb, "A Drum For Ben Boyd", *Collected Poems* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1977): 21.
- 13 *Collected Poems*, 152-53.
- 14 J. Kinsella, "Interview with Kevin Hart", *SALT* 10 (1997): 260.

# jennifer wawrzinek

---

## DEAR CIRCUS AERIALIST

The light in my room is only very small. In my light I can see my fingers crawl up the walls. In my light I cannot see my hands, as you do. This is what you said. You said that your hands climb the ropes and that your body floats out there, in the light. You said it floats like a streak of coloured light and the colour changes depending on your costume. And sometimes your body as a streak of coloured light might be silver.

I know this because the words say so – here, on the slip of paper I carried away with me all those years ago. The paper with your photo on it in silvery white and black which I keep hidden away in my carved timber locked-box together with the tattered photo of my father, the one from the newspaper all torn around the edges and crumpled over the face. Oscar Seeigel, it says, winner of the prestigious Nortinger Mathematics Pri- and then the rest is gone, torn away by careless fingers. Not my fingers. Oh no, certainly not. I found that photo, one morning, thrown in the rubbish bin, Oscar's face smiling up at me from potato peels and snotty, crumpled tissues. There's a grease stain spreading out from the tip of the nose, but I keep it still. Just to remember.

You see, dear Circus Aerialist, my father always said that one day there would be no bodies. That one day we would be free of these cumbersome prisons that only serve to tie us down and keep us bound to one linear trajectory. Without our bodies we could be like light, diffuse and random, dancing through moments of time as though we were everything and yet nothing. My father tried to explain this to me using long sequences of numbers and a strange hieroglyphic language of dashes and strokes which he would sketch out in chalk on the cliff-faces staring out across the infinity of the ocean. He was always up there, my father, sitting on the rocks above that cliff with the wind streaking his hair across his face in long dark waves. He'd push his hair away and curl it

around the back of his ears, smoothing out the papers of his sketchbook and readjusting the bulldog clips at the corners. But he wasn't sketching the ocean. Oh no. There were no realist or magical-realist or impressionist or abstract drawings of the rough grey-tinted blue with seagulls and albatrosses dipping over the waves. Certainly not, for my father was sketching the wind with his long, drawn-out hieroglyphic strokes and dashes. He was analysing air velocity, tracking thermals, air flows and slip streams with his aerometer, barometer and barograph. He was collecting the traces of wind movement so that we might understand how it could be possible to turn a body into light and streak out above the ocean with only the hands crawling over the smooth chalky surface of the cliff-face.

I would scramble down the rough-cut steps hewn into the cliff-face and play on the sand while my father sat up there against the blue sky, his arm moving this way and that, eyes squinting against the late afternoon sun. He made wind equations and I stacked lumps of wet sand one upon the other, decorating the edges with broken seashells and strips of seaweed, while the foam-fringed waves pushed themselves higher and higher up the beach until they lapped at my seashell house to reclaim their treasure, grain by grain. I would stretch out my legs on a blanket of hot sand watching the waves dissolve my house, watching its walls slide down in miniature avalanches until all that was left were a few seashells rolling back along the sand into a temporary valley of water.

That's the way it is. That's life, my father would say when I asked him why the seashell house always had to go back into the water, grain by grain. You stick the grains together, he'd say, and then they disperse, floating around then colliding again with each other until maybe someone else, on another beach somewhere, maybe faraway in another land, also builds a seashell house only to have it reclaimed by the tide.

Nothing is ever permanent, Eunice. That's what my father would tell me. We are always burning ourselves into rock or metal, building great mausoleums of stone and glass where we collect remnants of our existence on canvases and books and rolls of film. We store and catalogue and list and then display so that we can force remembrance. And in the end, when we become like light, just colour and movement, we will have no need of those great and complicated tombstones because every thing and every one will just be.

Did you also have a daughter, dear Circus Aerialist? And did you also take her to the cliffs overlooking a soft white beach every Saturday afternoon and talk to her about becoming like light, about the necessity of

dissolving into the ocean like the grains of a seashell house? Did you show her how to fly a kite across the dunes, running, skating, sliding down the collapsing feathery slope with the string growing evermore taught as the kite flew higher and higher into the blue? And did you one day fill a balloon with helium and wrap the string around your daughter's fingers so that the balloon could float up towards the cashmere clouds, the string quivering in the wind as it swept over the dunes and then the saltbushes and Teatree? Did you lean in close and whisper in your daughter's ear, so close she could smell the peppermint on your breath, did you whisper that even small round things could float in a bubble of light?

Did you do these things? Because I've seen you float through the air, arms and legs squashed up to your body and your back curled so tight you were just a golden ball floating through the air from swing to swing. And then your legs and arms sprung out into a long long line and you shot through the air, streaking past as a golden ray of light, smooth and fast. This is what I know. I know because I have seen you. I have seen your body merge so completely into light that it refracts off everything around it.

In the circus tent I watched you and I marvelled at how all that my father told me could be true, for the seashell house and the kite and the balloon – they were just toys, children's playthings to make me understand something which I thought I could never know. In the circus tent I sat with my father in the front row as the rain dripped through a hole high above and splashed into a rusty tin bucket sitting in the sawdust by my father's plastic seat. We'd skirted our way around the tightly packed cars in the field outside, our shoes sinking deeper into the mud with each step. My father held his umbrella in close to our bodies, shielding us from the rain which slashed the floodlight beams in heavy streaks. We'd shouldered our way past wet bodies steaming in the foyer tent to the knobbly-kneed programme seller who stood on a raised box and called out, Programmes, two dollars, programmes, programmes, Ladies n' Genlm'n, get ya programmes heah! My father pulled a crumpled two dollar note from his pocket and the knobbly-kneed programme seller waved a shiny little booklet through the air like a flag flying towards my father. He pressed his lips to my forehead and placed the shiny little booklet in my hands. On the shiny little booklet, emblazoned there on the front page in violet, cobalt blue and silver, yes silver – there you were, dear Circus Aerialist, spinning in a whirl of colour as you somersaulted through the air. And there below, neck arching in the light, sil-

ver mane rippling back into the breeze, was a silver-grey Arab trotting freely around the ring as it waited for you to alight momentarily on its back before you somersaulted up into the air again.

I sat there, in the front row next to my father, I sat there all evening with that programme laid out on my knees, with your somersault ball of colour springing from the page and your words, printed there inside the booklet on the centrespread. Your words said that you can only see your hands as they clutch at a rope, brush at the neck of your horse, finger the slender wooden rod of the trapeze swing. They said that when you fly through the air your body becomes like light streaming out from your hands and that sometimes your body as a ray of light might be silver.

I know that this is what you said because I have those words, that page before me now. I have that shiny little booklet opened out on the chenille bedspread as I write these words to you, dear Circus Aerialist, in the small light of my room. Small so that my mother can't see the strip of yellow light which might otherwise peep out from under my bedroom door, giving her a clue as to the paper scratchings coming out from the half-light in my room. She's scraping away pieces of sausage, mashed potato and peas leftover on the milky white china plates from dinner. She's clanging pots and clinking cutlery as she tidies the kitchen, spic and span, wiping those shiny blue tiles so clean you can watch your reflection in them as you walk past.

You see, my mother has an imaginary button in her mouth which she tightens whenever I ask her about my father. She screws up her lips and makes twisting motions with her fingers and she pierces me right through with her hard blue eyes. Her stare is so cold it turns me to ice. And then she spins on her heel, apron flying out in a whirl, and she plunges her elbows into the sink, scrub scrubbing and scraping and scratching hard at that grime and grease with her ajax and the thin green scouring sponge.

After that night at the circus, when circus performers turned into dancing fire and spinning lights and bubbles of colour which floated through the air colliding, turning, bouncing and sparkling – after that night, on Saturday morning at 10am, I waited on the front steps in my shorts and sandals, with my beach-bag slung over my shoulder. I waited for my father's rust-tinged Holden to come farting up the rise of the hill. I waited while Mr and Mrs Flanagan reversed from their driveway with Sally all dolled up in the back of the car, her pink tutu spraying up from the back seat like a toilet-roll cover. I waited while the Papos boys scam-

bled around the corner on their bikes, dropping them in a heap by their front door as they ran inside, slamming the heavy wooden door behind. I waited while the Flanagans bumped over the ditch in their driveway, easing to halt so that Sally could re-emerge from her limousine and pirouette down the pathway, disappearing behind the wisteria covered lattice. After that night at the circus, I sat on the front steps until the crickets began making their crrrrrkkk crrrrkkk noises and the hill on the horizon was dotted with little lights. My mother took my hand in hers and led me back inside. She sat me down on that old floral couch in the lounge room and she said, Your father's not coming any more - he's got a grant from the government.

So I watched from the window, next Saturday and the Saturday after that. I waited by the window each Saturday until the postman brought to the door a parcel wrapped up in plain brown paper with German stamps and my name on it. It was him, I knew, I knew. And folded up inside was a letter. And in that letter were my father's words saying that he was sorry he couldn't take me to the cliffs any more, that he was busy working on equations in a land far away and that for now he would write and he would send me parcels. That's the way it is. Nothing is ever permanent, Eunice. That's what my father said.

In the parcel was a kaleidoscope. I keep it still, there in the drawer beside my bed. I still hold the circular glass disc up to my eye and stretch out the long plastic cylinder to the light, let it refract through those coloured crystals sliding around each other until they fall into vibrating lace-frilled star shapes, or curly spirals and waves. I keep it there in the drawer even though my father's letters became shorter and sketchier with each delivery. Even though the postman slipped less and less frequently into our mailbox those German postmarked airmail envelopes. Even though it was not long until the letters stopped altogether.

Did you ever sit around a fire late at night, dear Circus Aerialist, drinking beer over a fold-up table with a man who claimed to be a mathematician of bodies as light? Perhaps you told him how it was to leap from a horse in a streak of colour and then catch a rope with those disembodied hands and then string your whole being out in a whirling line as it spun in circles around a rope. And perhaps your mathematician friend leaned forward into the firelight and curled his long black hair behind his ears. And perhaps he made notes in a sketchbook using a strange hieroglyphic language which spoke of dissolving the container walls of our bodies so that we could fly through the air like sea eagles. And perhaps he told you then, dear Circus Aerialist, that he had a daugh-

ter who was small and round and had eyes like her mother's eyes, deep blue like the ocean - a daughter who would one day become a helium balloon and float away in a bubble of light across the wide expanse of blue, trailing a long thin line across the surface of the earth.

Eunice Seeigel.

# LAISHA ROSNAU

---

## NIGHT SWIMMING

When the lake pulled us  
from the dock,  
swift-bodied and drunk,  
we already knew

how it would feel  
when weeds wound slick  
around our ankles, tugged  
us farther into water  
which had no depth  
only layers of darkness,

knew how it would feel  
when, one by one, we jerked  
our ankles free, split  
the lake's surface  
our mouths gaping.

What we didn't know was this:  
that Christine would sell sex in Germany,  
that Jen would waitress until the day  
her tongue twisted over the specials,  
struck dumb with monotony,  
that Tanya would love women  
and be hated for it,

that we would each forget  
how the air would dry the flat, smooth  
skin first - how we could harbour  
lake water in our hair, beneath  
our breasts, between each toe.

We crawled back to the dock,  
cuffs of imagined green  
staining our ankles and we knew  
how it felt to lie open to the night,  
nothing holding us under.

# MAL MCKIMMIE

---

## SEIZURE - AN EPITAPH

no words

no thoughts no feeling

just the animal past keening

kicking dumbly at the page

no image no lyric

no incisive wit no rage

but blurred spoor

spilled ink white noise

in this unpoem of death

that is

by life made strange.

## STORIES ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE: RECENT NON-FICTION

Writing in *The Australian Review of Books*, the writer and critic Drusilla Modjeska recently addressed the use by a number of Australian authors of autobiography as a narrative device. Modjeska argues that while some are "using" it within the traditional constraints of the form, others deploy it much more subtly, though not necessarily as successfully. Focusing specifically on Robert Drewe's latest work, *The Shark Net* (Viking, 2000), she notes that reliance on autobiography allows the writer a greater degree of intimacy with the reader than is usually the case with Drewe's writing. Modjeska then follows up her discussion with a reading of various other works, often returning to *Shark Net* as a sort of template against which other writers employing autobiography as a means of telling a story might be judged. Hers is an interesting thesis, though I wonder if perhaps a little too kind to Drewe.

Autobiography, life/self-writing, memoir, testimony, are some of the ways in which the self seeks to make sense of its place in the world. Sidonie Smith has long argued that these are genres most suited to self-invention, to the reinscription of otherness within the self. In writing down one's recollections one engages in a process of memorialisation that is at once profoundly emancipatory and intrinsically flawed. The process of (re)remembering implicit in the form is almost always also, perhaps inevitably, a one-sided view of the world. Indeed, Suzette Henke (*Shattered Beings*, 1998) recently reminded us of Freud's view that "it takes two to witness the unconscious". In other words, autobiography is a process of self-analysis that needs to be framed within specific critical and conceptual discourses. Truth has a peculiar tendency to appear to its maker in rather minimalist ways. *Sharknet* seems to me such a sleek piece of story-telling that I wonder if autobiographical detail in any way provides the decisive, or even a significant impetus to the narrative. This

---

is a gripping, utterly controlled and stylishly written account of the crimes that sent shock waves through Perth's lushest streets in the 1950s and 60s. In tight, elegant and chilling prose, Drewe's telling of the story of the boy parallels that of the city's own loss of innocence. *Shark Net* is "a vibrant and haunting memoir that reaches beyond the dark recesses of murder and chaos ... charting new and exciting territory", the blurb tells us. An interesting read, perhaps. But haunting is not a word that I would use to describe this work. Drewe's ability to make us see the intruder at the window, and with his mother frantically rushing for the telephone reveals the sort of craftsmanship we have come to expect from him. But there is ultimately little sense of Drewe the man, and of the boy we learn only what the man allows us to glimpse. In an interview she recently conducted with Helen Garner, Margaret Simons cited Janet Malcolm's view that "the important power journalists have is the power over how their subjects are represented to the public".<sup>1</sup> She might have been talking about *Shark Net*. Drewe plays his cards too closely to his chest, and although the relationship between father and son is on occasion mildly frank, on the whole there are few gaps through which we might see into the mind of the man.

Kim Mahood's *Craft for a Dry Lake* (Anchor, 2000) is another work journeying close to the autobiographical coast. Setting out in the footsteps of her father, Mahood, a visual artist, travels through outback Australia in a quest that is both personal and political. Her desire to (re)visit the places her father walked, and to encounter the space of the father, provides her with an opportunity to explore race relations in Australia in a way that historical or sociological texts do not always succeed in doing. For Mahood herself occupies a number of ideological spaces, from the defenceless woman to the adventurer in the mould of the Nineteenth-century woman traveller. She is in turn historian and story-teller, at one with and Other to the world she enters. Recalling the journal of Allan Davidson, "the only official documentation of a previous traverse of the Tanami region", she writes:

But now, persevering, I find myself slowly drawn in, because I can imagine how it was for him to see the country for the first time, this country that I am travelling through, remembering my own experience of seeing it for the first time, remembering my father's description of seeing it for the first time. (50)

The colonial(ist) fantasy, the emphasis on the primacy of inscription on

a land presumed *tabula rasa*, resonates with the way counter-Mabo and Wik discourses operate, but Mahood is in no way an ingénue. Although her style often shifts between the lyrical and the banal, she is a perceptive and sophisticated reader — of the land, of people, of herself. Particularly fascinating is Mahood's own implication in the process of land inscription, dispossession and occupation that is at the heart of settler-postcolonial Australia. The daughter of an Afghan Australian, Kim Mahood spent part of her formative years in the Northern Territory, where her father worked as a stock inspector. She recounts his increasing uneasiness with his role as a member of a brutal and uncaring system, and his resignation to set up Mongrel Downs. Although the station got its name in a rather mundane manner, the ironies the name evokes could not be richer. In these days of hybridity and interstitial spaces, Mahood's description of her return to the land her father once "owned" is typical of the situation faced by settler colonies, as the recent upheavals in Zimbabwe and South Africa show. Mahood's moving account of a quest for the traces of her father frames what is ultimately a profound meditation on the nature of place and self, especially as it is seen from the perspective of settler-Australians: "If you can't locate yourself in some in some sort of narrative or myth, you can't survive for too long in this country. It needs to be a strong story to take its place out here, and it needs to be something that comes from the country itself" (203). If at times there are hints of a Rousseauesque view of Indigenous Australia, Mahood's remains a powerful text, one where intimate spaces merge with the public domain.

For Modjeska texts such as Drewe's and Mahood's reflect a newly discovered passion for the story of the self, minus the couch, and relate in part to the way postmodernism has persuaded us of our fragmented multiplicity. We are "shattered beings", to borrow Rainer Maria Rilke's words, in search of a bit of tea and sympathy. But in the postmodern moment we have rediscovered an ethical dimension to our reading, and writers have had to accommodate us. Stories of self are multiple, and they disseminate themselves in a variety of sub-genre that, if Modjeska is right, is a reflection of the new *Zeitgeist*. Form becomes in fact an apt mirror for the performances of the work's content — the "self-in-progress". To the reader, who approaches the autobiographical text very much in the way of a voyeur, the desire to know about the other's self is enhanced when political, social and environmental conditions provide more than a theatre of action: they, too, are the subject of analysis. Perhaps Drewe's work will prove unputdownable reading for Perth resi-

dents. But what of “straightforward” autobiography, such as Anne Summers’ *Ducks on the Pond* (Viking, 2000) and Margaret Scott’s *Changing Countries* (ABC Books, 2000)?

Anne Summers’ book provides an account of her activism in the women’s movement in Australia, and to that extent it cannot but be political. Summers’ move from Adelaide to Sydney in turn represents also an intellectual transformation. She writes of her time at university, and of tentative discoveries of a degree of agency that she had presumed was denied her as a woman. Her involvement in the Women’s Electoral Lobby, her work with women’s refuges, and her participation in the ideological conflicts that assailed women’s movements at the time are dealt with meticulously, if also a little tediously. Perhaps because so much of what she writes about is such an intrinsic part of our cultural baggage in the Australia at the end of the 20th century, at times Summers’ endless listing of boyfriends, meetings, exciting sexual encounters (then perhaps, but now a little like braggadocio), ensure that this work is twice as long as it should be. Perhaps if she had strayed a little from the truth, Summers might have sounded less falsely modest about her achievements, remarkable by any measure. One of the most disturbing aspects of the work relates to its focus on a troubled, painful relationship with an alcoholic father. Ultimately, though, this is very much a product of a sensibility such as Summers’. Writing out of, and about the second wave of Feminism, Summers produces in 2000 a book in which whiteness, of a kind disturbingly normative in its echoes of the White Australia of the middle of the century, is paramount. There are no non-White participants in this struggle for women’s rights, though the ethnicity of the Irish or Scottish women accepted in the refuge figures prominently. Perhaps it was always so; perhaps non-White women were that much oppressed that they lacked the time, and the means to take part in the struggle for change and reform. A reference to Bobby Sykes and Charles Perkins, both at the time young Indigenous Australian activists, is incidental, casually inserted in a comparative setting of a radicalisation of the women’s movement. The account Summers offers in *Ducks on the Pond* is undermined by its White, middle-class women politics, not because there is anything intrinsically wrong with such focus, but rather because there is no recognition of it.

Margaret Scott’s *Changing Countries*, while also very much autobiographical, clearly exists in a space of its own. Scott is described on the back cover as “one of Australia’s wittiest writers”, a view which, though subjective, the work on occasion does confirm. As a writer, Scott is at all

times intensely conscious of the slipperiness of the genre she has engaged, and of the fraught relationship between writer and text. Her preoccupation with disclosing her awareness of the limitations of self-analysis (she might have cited Freud ...) reveals itself in the fragmented narrative structure she adopts. In *Changing Countries* "Clare and Lizzie and 'I'" function as three separate yet intrinsically symbiotic narrators, each telling a story that is recognisably Scott's own. Whether the different versions are all true to fact becomes almost irrelevant here, for Scott is so disarmingly honest about the fictions of self-making that we simply give up trying to pin her down. "Is she fact or is she fiction?" Does it really matter? Like another migrant in another land, Salman Rushdie in his beloved London, Scott knows that migration is too tempting a homeland not to buy oneself a new set of frocks. "In Australia we are busily reinventing ourselves", Peter Carey once told an appreciative audience in London. Appreciative because in the land of Tradition his audience probably felt that such trickster ways would be better suited to poor colonials. Scott is an Englishwoman who recognises that her subject-position in her new country was always determined by her ethnicity, by her gender and by her class. Her reading of her own position, even when at its most naive (and but does Scott know how to be naive ...?), offers a fascinating portrait of the complexity of self-making.

### *Stories about ourselves*

Peter Read's *Belonging* (CUP, 2000) deals with White Australia's engagement, or lack of it, with Indigenous Australia. Written in a style that might best be described as "dead-pan larrikinism", Read's work is an eclectic rummaging through Australian culture, borrowing for the purposes of his quest from a diverse assemblage of poetry, country music lyrics, interviews with "ordinary Australians" (my phrase), both Indigenous, White and other more recent arrivals, specifically of Asian and South American descent. Read is interested in the echoes that arise when we juxtapose different voices, and the title of one of the book's chapters, "Voices in the River", conveys in some sense the underlying mood of *Belonging*. Focusing on the present, Read sifts through it in order to uncover ways in which the past might begin to feel to all Australians like a space from which new articulations of Australian place and identity may be made real. "The past is never simple" (28), he tells us. No. Or silent. Ours, in contemporary Australia, must be shared

in turn between Indigenous, White and migrant Australians. Interestingly, Read's "Voices in the river" would seem the equivalent in settler Australia to the Caribbean emphasis on "noises in the blood". There as here, the past remains a much visited space, but largely we tend to take away from it only what suits our own specific interests. Witness Gerard Henderson's rather agitated reaction to Robert Hughes's piece in the *Olympic Souvenir Edition*, and his accusation that factual error should not have been allowed to appear as official discourse. Call me poststructuralist avant la lettre, but "factual error" has never seemed to me as transparent as Henderson believes it. That Hughes's view of Australia is an antiquated one, that of the anguished expatriate to whom "Ostraylia" will always be home from afar, does not preclude the validity of some of his interpretations. Sometimes there is nothing like a little distance to make us see the forest *and* the trees. Peter Read, too, is selective in his choice of quotations, but that is his right. Reading what he cites of Les Murray's bitter rantings against Indigenous Australians and "multi-Ethnics", I knew his was a skewed reading of Murray's verse (not unlike mine, either), but I found myself recalling a number of other, equally unimaginative "you big ugly Australia" pieces by Indigenous and migrant Australians. But Read is an optimist, and addressing in his concluding words the "shadow brother" whom he invited on a journey "to explore together our own proper country and our separate griefs" (29), Indigenous Australian Dennis Foley, he remarks: "Yes, Dennis, our griefs are different, but your dreamtime is not dead. Neither we or our peoples are dying. The deep future lies within us" (224). A cynic, and in the mould of Manik Datar, "a global nomad" (158), I waver(ed) between "hear, hear", and "good on ya', mate".

In *Through Silent Country* (FRAP, 2000), Carolyn Wadley Dowley adopts an approach not unlike Read's, but her stance is much more closely that of the listener. While Read is at his best when on the offensive, showering his interviewees with what must feel like a barrage of questions, she has few to ask those whom she encounters. Mostly, Dowley listens, and lets others speak. She appears overwhelmed by the profound truth of the responses she receives. Occasionally she remarks on how (dis)similar they are to others she has heard elsewhere, as she moves among the various Indigenous Australians in Western Australia, thus establishing a sense of contiguity in the experiences of Indigenous Australia. Dowley too is an historian, and with Read she relies on stories, only in her case oral ones, to construct an alternative Australian history. She differs from Read in that she is less intent on analysing than she is

on giving voice to stories rarely circulated in mainstream Australia. The journey she undertakes in, and *Through Silent Country*, however, is anything but silent, and here too the voices in the river — the noises in the blood — that individual stories represent resonate loudly against “factual accuracy” as it is recorded in the books sold in bookshops, taught in schools and universities. For as she notes in the Introduction to the work, of “the story of exile and escape” told in this book she “couldn’t find any mention ... in other history books I looked into” (14). “Factual” has hardly ever been sufficient criteria for inclusion in history books. Dowley’s work constitutes one of those rare moments when academic authors manage to resist the urge to do what is in their blood: question, challenge, overwhelm with detail and information. Commenting on one of the many encounters with the Wongutha people, she notes the variations in their stories. Sometimes each new version of the same events takes a different shape:

The story is less vividly told [now], some details are omitted. I don’t mind, I am happy with for Auntie Rosie to tell whichever version she likes, it is her choice, she can freely construct the story and the telling of it for the wider, unknown audience. It is right that she should modify the telling if she wants to (62).

In that cantankerous-Father Christmassy style that he has made his trademark, Humphrey McQueen once remarked on the “adoption of the [Indigenous Australian] Dreaming by settler Australians ...” as “less challenging than Country with its implied claim for Land Rights”. “Country” and “Dreaming”, without capitals, are words Read and Dowley too like to use in this sense.

In *ReEnchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* (Harper Collins, 2000), on the other hand, David Tacey seems to have set out to prove McQueen right. Tacey approvingly quotes Robert Dessaix’s suggestion that it is possible for Australians to reinvent themselves “through reimmersion in untransformed landscape and in listening to what our indigenous Australians find magic in” (248). It is indicative of the level at which this work operates that neither the essentially banal notion of an “untransformed landscape” (no potatoes, perhaps?) nor the deeply offensive notion of possession implicit in the pronoun “our” when applied by White Australians to Indigenous Australians are addressed by Tacey. Indeed, if at any time there is an awareness of the need to, at the very least, set out a recognition of one’s own position when speaking of

environment, place or people, it is largely articulated through the slippery assertions such as "It is my firm belief", or "I sincerely believe". No one doubts his feelings, sincerity and commitment to his work or his cause, but as a reader I felt that much the same is available in any of Mr. Packer's women's or men's magazines, and for a lot less money. Tacey's manifesto for a more spiritual Australia might have made more of an impact if it were not so obsessed with White (my qualification) Australia's supposedly inveterate secular nature. Ironically, his own work begins thus: "Australian attitudes towards spirituality appear to be undergoing a profound and dramatic change" (1). I wondered if Tacey knew that Billy Graham too said much the same thing during his visit to Australia a few decades ago. As Drewe remarks in *Shark Net*, "Billy Graham was declaring there was a spiritual flame sweeping Australia" (160).

### *Hip critics catch up with the times*

The last set of texts I want to address consist of literary and cultural criticism, and include both a number of essay collections and a couple of works devoted to single authors. Edited by Sue Hosking and Dianne Schwerdt, *eXtensions*, is a collection of essays which cover a wide range of topics, and seek to capture "the diversity of subject matter and the variety of critical approaches now used in English Studies". While the essays go some way towards doing so, one wonders if the enormous unrest currently being experienced by all disciplines in the Humanities is in any way reflected in the sort of ad hoc series of writings collected in *eXtensions*. In spite of all the best intentions, one is left with a rather unsettling experience of a trip to a Benetton store, or to McDonald's in Paris, where Le Big Mac is, well ... actually, a hamburger. Precisely one of the things that departments of English have been attempting in the last few years, has been to reflect a greater balance between inclusiveness and contextuality, a tolerance and enthusiasm for Otherness tempered by respect for the specificities of difference. There is in *eXtensions* just a little too simplistic a sense of "culture-culture" practices that might seem perfectly in place in Mr. Murdoch's *Australian Magazine*, but a little contentious in a collection of this nature.

Clearly less ambitious in its scope, *Australian Nationalism Reconsidered*, edited by Adi Wimmer, nevertheless offers a significant contribution to an assessment of the ways in which national considerations have made a comeback into the Australian (un)consciousness in

the years since Pauline Hanson. Presented at the European Australian Studies Association, held at Klagenfurt University in 1999, the essays bring together some of the most influential names working in Australian Studies. Indeed, I feel almost as if I am nit-picking as I point out that I found it odd that the only voices asked to comment on the residual influences of Hansonism in contemporary Australia are those (Anglo-Celtic ones) less likely to have been psychologically or physically confronted by it. A pity, as the contributions collected in *Australian Nationalism Reconsidered* would have been greatly enhanced if "framed" (yes, I'll happily echo Sneja Gunew) by the words of Other Australians. *Interlogue* (Ethos Books, 1999), a new text in the Studies in Singapore Literature Series, consists of a number of commissioned works written by scholars from Australia, Singapore and the UK. Edited by Kirpal Singh, Volume Two of this series focuses essentially on Singaporean poetry, though on occasion read comparatively, or cross-culturally. While it is impossible in a work of this nature to do justice to such a complex and diverse range of critical approaches, a number of essays are particularly insightful. Written by scholars working across a number of cultural and linguistic registers, the essays frequently reflect a profound awareness of the subtleties of difference and / in culture. *Interlogue's* focus on Singaporean writing, one of the minor literatures in English currently experiencing a boom in terms of literary and critical production, makes this an important research tool within postcolonial studies.

*Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand* (UNSW Press, 2000) is edited by John Docker and Gerhard Fischer. This is a timely contribution to the area of race criticism. In common with Kirpal's work, *Race, Colour and Identity* reveals a truly admirable attempt at reflecting both the diversity of critical approaches in discussions of race and the labyrinthine notion of critical positioning in multicultural Australia (problematic though it may be, I am not persuaded that the term has lost its usefulness in contemporary Australia). Indeed, as Docker and Fischer point out, via Charles Taylor, "the discourse of identity is as old as modernity itself" (4). The hipness of the new has of late become one of the crucial markers of value in cultural studies, with each new published work purporting to be at the cutting edge of one discourse or another. The point Taylor makes, and one Docker and Fischer endorse, is that so often what appears to us as yet another earth-shattering step in the march of Modernity to overthrow Tradition, has really been dealt with by others before us. Citing the reception accorded Taylor's piece

worldwide, the editors argue that while such issues are not in any way endemic to “the multi-cultural, settler-colonial nations like Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand [...] it seems as if these societies allow the peculiar problems of the contemporary identity discourse to be presented in sharper focus” (6). Quite; and only distance makes me want to overlook the fact that once again the comparison between settler colonies and somewhere like the Caribbean islands is overlooked, for some of the finest treatments of issues of race and identity are at present to be found in the work of writers of that region. Such a comparison might have tempered the suggestion that the “[t]he fashionable discourse on multiculturalism and identity seems to be a characteristic feature of what is described as the post-modern and post-colonial condition” (3). Fashionable ...? We are getting there now, but others have come and gone. W.E.B. DuBois over 100 years ago. Nevertheless, *Race, Colour and Identity* manages to convey some of the contentious debates in contemporary criticism in Australia and New Zealand. The decision to divide the book into sections, each addressing a separate range of issues, works particularly well: in addition to an Introduction, there are chapters on “Aboriginal Identity”, “Asians in Australia/Australians in Asia”, “Biculturalism and Multiculturalism in New Zealand” and “Whiteness”. Ensuring extra points in terms of hip value, the latter section is only just beginning to be explored in Australia. In Australia we are still more likely to acknowledge racial difference by looking out, rather than in. *Maman, un Blanc*.

In his introduction to *The Model: Selected Writings of Kenneth Searfth Mackenzie* (UWA Press, 2000), Richard Rossiter cites from Mackenzie’s unpublished work, “Frontispiece”, the views of its main character, Heron. In one of the many games Mackenzie plays with his readers, Heron notes that what he writes “isn’t ordinary autobiography, because for one thing, it’s properly honest, and for another I’m mixing past and present according to a recipe I’ve thought out” (36). It is a passage worth quoting for the insight it offers into Mackenzie’s writing techniques, and aesthetic politics. In “Frontispiece” more than elsewhere, Mackenzie reveals an unusual self-consciousness, in Australian writing of the Thirties and Forties, of the nature of his craft in a quasi-postmodernist way. It is a point Rossiter pursues in his “Introduction” with specific reference to the intricate game of *mise en abyme* of “Frontispiece”, of which an excerpt appears in *The Model*. That Mackenzie’s fictional work is now recognised as strongly resembling his personal life, as Rossiter underlines, should perhaps not surprise us

inordinately. But his stories seem to me to prove Modjeska's case in a way that Drewe's book does not. Autobiography is about making sense of the self for the self; memory, even if freed of the cloudy veils Mackenzie's alcoholic passions induced, is a fickle friend. Richard Rossiter's selections of Mackenzie's published and unpublished works, both fiction and poetry and his examination of the background of their production make this book an important contribution to Australian, and more pointedly, Western Australian literary historiography. Of all the books reviewed here, *The Model* has by far the most stunning cover, though *Race, Colour and Identity* comes a close second.

Ann Blake's *Christina Stead's Politics of Place* (UWA, 1999) sets out to re-examine of Stead's "major post-war novels, *Cotters' England* and *Miss Herbert* (Suburban Wife)" (12). To this extent Blake's work would seem to constitute an important addition to criticism of Stead's writing. For although notions of place in Stead's work are frequently dealt with, the novels Blake addresses have attracted scant critical attention. Unfortunately, there is a sense in which the work becomes little more than an interminable listing of Stead's vertigo inducing itineraries (eg., 67-70), the implications of these dislocations ultimately left unclear. At the risk of repeating an oft-quoted mantra, I could not help wondering to what extent a little more theory (of cultural translation; of gender; of place; even of race and empire, given the reference to the Barbadian writer George Lamming) might have made this a more exciting work.

An example of a lively close reading of Australian texts, including Stead's *Cotters' England*, is found in *Real Relations: The Feminist Politics of form in Australian Fiction* (Halstead Press, with ASAL, 2000). Susan Lever's decision to base her study on such a broad set of texts makes her enterprise a tricky one, as there is a clear risk that each reading will be necessarily short and limited. However, her ability to draw on a theoretically informed reading framework ensures that each chapter constitutes an illuminating re-reading of some of the most widely read and taught works in Australian studies. Moving between Ada Cambridge and contemporary experimental feminist writing, Lever treats with great energy and originality also the work of influential male writers such as Joseph Furphy, Vance Palmer and David Foster.

In *The Stranger from Melbourne* (UWA Press, 1999), Paul Adams undertakes a comprehensive literary biography of Frank Hardy, possibly one of Australia's "least read best-known" writers. Adams discusses the general background of the scandal following the appearance of *Power Without Glory*, arguing that "[t]he conditions which had made *Power Without*

*Glory* possible were about to disappear as Australia entered a new phase of modernisation” (67). Adams’ text conveys the zeal with which Hardy constructed his work, writing and rewriting four successive versions of *The Outcasts of Folgarch* (1956; 1959; 1965; 1968). One of the book’s most fascinating aspects relates to a discussion of Hardy’s complex and conflictual relationship with the Australian Communist Party. In his assessment of Hardy’s idiosyncrasies, Adams points out that he repeatedly refused to obey the party line. On the issue of Indigenous Australia, Adams notes that Hardy’s stance caused much friction and discomfort within the ACP, for calls supported by Hardy for an end to discrimination against Indigenous peoples were perceived to distract from a wider concern with the struggle for the rights of (White) Australian workers. Adams’ painstaking scholarship, and his infectious enthusiasm for his subject, make the encounter with *The Stranger from Melbourne* an extremely rewarding one.

Equally committed to his subject, John Miles in *Lost Angry Penguins* (Crawford House Publishing, 2000) considers the literary movement named in the title of his book by looking specifically at the work of Douglas Kerr and Paul Pfeiffer. This is truly a labour of love, as the acknowledgments already foretell. Miles, like Adams, has long and tirelessly researched his material. Unlike Adams, however, he remains simply too reverential towards the subjects of his research to allow *Lost Angry Penguins* to offer any real sense of literary historiography. The most valuable contribution this text makes is that it brings together the most significant works of Douglas Kerr and Paul Pfeiffer. But I suspect that Miles would be quite pleased with such a limited outcome. He concludes his study thus: “Again, then, may the offer of memory and two poets’ work please some understanders” (178).

The last work I want to refer to is neither an autobiography (though one might feel tempted to trace the self’s marks on the page), nor a collection of critical essays. Neither is it literary biography, though, again, an argument might be made along those lines. *Depth of Translation/The Book of Raft* (NMA Publications, 2000) is a collaborative effort between Paul Carter and Ruark Lewis. Both authors well-known writers and visual artists, they produce in this work a fascinating account of the act of translation, both literal and metaphorical, literary and cultural. Using words and images, and resorting in their meaning-making journey to a range of Australian and foreign languages, the authors propose ways to imagine a new relationship to, and of place. Carter’s contribution consists of a rambling but engaging disquisition on the nature of writing

and translation, of self (and) Other(ing), of truth and fiction. An erudite examination of the work of T.G.H. Strehlow, and particularly of his “half-forgotten autobiographical lament for his father and his own lost childhood” (18), *The Book of Raft* moves seductively and dazzlingly between genre, languages and linguistic registers. But as with Art capital A, which in its self-consciousness it seems to be crying out to be, this is a text that remains, when all is said and translated, a (pre)text for adumbrating Strehlow himself in ways that are not always particularly illuminating. They reveal much of Carter’s interests, but less of those of his subject. Lewis’ visual montage complements Carter’s work to an extent that the latter’s might have done to Strehlow’s. Perhaps that was not the point. Besides, *Depth of Translation/The Book of Raft*’s most certainly is cross-genre in the act of performance.

### Endnote

- 1 Margaret Simons, “Crossing the Line”, interview with Helen Garner. *The Australian Magazine*, August 5-6, 2000: 27.

# DAVID MCCOOEY

---

## AFTER A LINE ABANDONED BY CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE

The world is full of little animals –  
the cats with measured steps  
perform their scholarly enquiries  
to chairs and doors; the legs  
of squid are really lips (with thanks to time

Which frees the doodling gene ‘Mutation’).

Small birds trace maps like battle lines across  
the sky; and possums stare  
away the blessed emptiness of night,  
while underneath a star  
you call to moths, these creeping things, and whales:

‘Release the tiny hamster of desire.’

# MIKE WILLIAMS

---

## BOY IN SUFFOLK 1962/63

(1)

see the boy as quiet fire  
across the summer fields

to the owled wood  
moss cool & dank shadow

splashes through brook  
that stones its way to river

night read journeys  
ache behind his eyes

looks back across the barley  
as he sinks into the trees

(2)

fishes the stream  
his bike leans against oak

alone in the dappled shade  
of the kingfisher day

in these holy hours of boy & river  
light leaf bark sky

---

listens through the bell-tracked hours  
where monks walk cloistered lives

he sees them medieval through the trees  
boy & monk in their quiet worlds

(3)

in the night from his window  
he sees the first snow of January

the house is adrift  
& the moon when it comes

rising over the woods in the hard air  
grins like the fool of winter

awake at this deep hour  
in wonder at this frozen place

# JORDIE ALBISTON

---

## NAKED WOMAN AND MIRROR

*for Jennifer Harrison*

I am balancing bare before the glass.  
Whose is this breast I hold in front of me?  
Standing, staring at all my nakedness:  
Of course, the more you look, the less you see.

Is this your breast I hold in front of me?  
My heart locks on a weird kick of time.  
The less you feel, the more you will feel free,  
Your deep self shocked by the beautiful crime.

My heart has locked, again. It is the times.  
Look through the wrong end of the telescope:  
You will see beauty, and you will see crime,  
This type of development being no trope.

Look through the wrong end of your wildest hopes.  
Let all of us just get naked, and die.  
So much new development. Who could cope?  
Parts of us are called before others. Why?

Yes, let us all just get naked and die.  
Cheap estate, strange garden, and all this mess.  
It happens, I guess. One never asks why:  
The silk gown you gave me now holds my breasts.

Strange garden, silk nightgown, and all that mess.  
Staring, and staring. At my nakedness.  
And there, by some grace, go my beating breasts,  
Before the glass, balancing. More or less.

## WHAT FALLS

Morning never falls. It is the night that comes down, demoted angels and disposable stars in the pall of its formal descent. The dollar on Wall Street often falls, along with spirits when things get depressed, ideals at conferences, tears in bed, the mighty on whom we so blindly depend. The temperature falls at the end

of the day, like clockwork, for certain, eventually returning on the warm upward thermals of dawn. Faces fall at all the wrong moments – as do families, empires, whole civilisations – while final curtain calls at the close of the show seem right. Less so, fall-out on foreign nations, incomplete cadences in late Bach

or Beethoven, kids in playgrounds, ideas in infancy: cite Newton, Genesis chapters II and III. Some marks fall in a pleasant fashion – birthdays, bar mitzvahs, those celebrations – whereas fines, unwed mothers, hail and radiation make hell. Waves fall, for every good reason (see dominoes, periods, tourism industry)

and autumn leaves do it, if only to tell us the season. But what worries me here is the rate at which they all fall. Yesterday was slowly, today is quickly, tomorrow may not occur. It is no longer relevant to follow the trend of What Goes Up Must Come Down. It has stalled on this: a simple matter of what, and who, falls when.

# WAYNE MACAULEY

---

## A SHORT REPORT FROM HAPPY VALLEY

I got back yesterday and I'm writing quickly because tonight I have to go to Brisbane to see about that bovine-fever business. I haven't even bothered to unpack my bags. Yes, you were right. Strange goings-on, and I've seen some strange goings-on of late. The strangest thing of all was when I first arrived (Wednesday was it?) and dropped in to see that Dr Andrews you told me about. (Are you sure he's a doctor?) Very helpful, very polite; put on his coat and took me straight away to a house at the end of the main street (that's all Happy Valley is really, a main street with thirty or so houses, a general store in the middle and a petrol station at the end). But we weren't allowed to go inside. So Dr Andrews stands at the front gate, calls out, picks up a stone, throws it at the window and calls out again. The front door opens and out comes a bed with an old man lying in it, about eighty-odd I suppose; dead to the world. Two men are carrying it, one on either end, and they put it down on the front lawn. Before I know it half the town is there, all lined up along the fence. It seems this old man is some sort of 'village elder', has been asleep longer than anyone else (thirty years, says Dr Andrews) and commands great respect from the people in the town. Because this is the strange thing, I mean what puts it beyond just another outbreak of a previously unrecorded disease that I seem to be criss-crossing the country like some kind of mad tourist these days to look at, and that is that for them this sleepiness is not new at all, has been part of the town, has almost *defined* the town for years and is now worn proudly, like a badge of honour. So I stood beside the bed and looked down at the old man; one hand in my pocket fiddling with my keys, one hand stroking my chin. You can speak to him, says Dr Andrews, standing behind me - and he gives me a little push. I lean forward - what do you say? How are you feeling? I ask. The old man kind of squirms inside, as if a thought is moving through him;

---

his eyelids flutter, though they still don't open; he runs a fat worm tongue across his bottom lip. A sound comes out of his mouth, but if it's speech I can't catch the meaning. Dr Andrews puts a hand on the small of my back and moves me forward again. I lean down with one ear turned towards the old man's face. Slugs and snails, he says. Slugs and snails? – and I hear a low murmur in the crowd behind me. All right, I think, slugs and snails it is. I stand up straight and nod my head. Dr Andrews catches my eye and nods his head too. (Slugs and snails, Pete, did you get that?)

That man's name, the old man, is Sanderson. He was the first to come down with it, and for a long time he was the only one affected. (I'm back in Dr Andrews's office now – are you *sure* he's a doctor? – with the jars of pickles along the wall.) Then all of a sudden, about ten years ago apparently, it swept through the town like the plague, affecting everyone in it in some way or other, and to varying degrees. Some, like Sanderson, are out to it completely, some hover more precariously between sleep and wakefulness, others, like those lining the fence when I first arrived just have a certain vacancy about them that is difficult to describe. Even Dr Andrews, as we talked back in his office, would every now and then sort of lean back in his chair, let out a yawn and sit staring vacantly into space for a few seconds as if trying to find his way back to the waking world.

The phenomenon is not new, of course; as recently as the 1960's there was that case in Belorussia where a whole village fell asleep for over a year until on the second Sunday after Pentecost they just as mysteriously woke up again. The recorder in that case, a Dr Shinovski, made particular mention of the fact that during the course of the year the Town Hall clock had *actually run fast*, gaining in total almost three and a half days. There was a woman recently in Minnesota who gave birth to what was thought to be stillborn baby but which just prior to its cremation suddenly woke up. The woman went on to explain to the specialists who then hungrily fell upon her that she was the descendent of a 'village elder' (similar to Sanderson) who in the 1920's along with one hundred and thirty five other people in the mid-western town of Wendover slept without interruption for almost five and a half years. There have been sporadic outbreaks since – some recorded, some apocryphal – and as you yourself mentioned, Pete, there was that case in Melbourne just a few years ago where for about twenty four hours no-one seemed to care.

The following morning Dr Andrews took me around to see some of the more severe cases; one of them, a woman, is probably worth a mention. She was young, early twenties I suppose, laid out on the bed with the most serene expression on her face. I leant over and pulled the covers back (discreetly, you understand) and touched her here and there. It's difficult to describe what I felt, there was this kind of radiance coming from her, of warmth I suppose, a milky-white kind of radiance, the kind you get from sleeping babies, though you'd know nothing about that of course. I looked at Dr Andrews - I was touched by it, I admit - and he just looked back at me with that familiar hazy-eyed smile. How is she fed? I asked, putting the covers back again. (She wasn't skinny, you understand, she was if anything well-proportioned: discreet, discreet; yes, I know.) She's not always asleep, said Dr Andrews, adjusting the covers; even the worst cases aren't always asleep. They wake up at meal-times, and at other times too; it's just that when there's no real reason to be awake they lapse back into sleep again. And let's face it, Mr Stevens, he said, getting all serious all of a sudden, who hasn't at least occasionally yearned to live their life like that? (Well no, Doctor, I thought, if doctor you are; I'm a busy man, six hours a night is enough for me.) I pulled back an eyelid, the one furthest from me, and looked into the pupil. An indescribable sensation, like falling into a deep blue lake, as if the eye were suddenly somehow bigger than me and that I was floundering in it.

The rest of the afternoon I spent exploring the town on my own, despite 'Dr Andrews' almost badgering attempts to join me. I didn't need him anyway, there was always someone waiting outside the next front gate willing to take me dreamily by the hand and lead me down another front path through another front doorway into another dark shaded room where another person lay sleeping. I managed to have a few conversations (by timing some visits with meal-times): the people were happy to talk to me, as curious about me, in a way, as I was about them. But the general mood was one of an all-pervasive serenity and over the next few days I found myself falling into step with it, this strange, irresistible quiescence, like when on a tram going home at the end of a long hard day someone yawns and without knowing it you find yourself yawning too. The sleep I slept on my third night, though still only my customary six hours, was as deep and as tranquil a sleep as I think I have ever had.

I spent the last day with Dr Andrews, in his office with the pickles on the wall. I was tired now, and anxious to leave. But I'd gone this far *on my good friend Pete's account* that I thought I'd better finish the job. (My invoice will follow shortly, by the way.) He asked me what I thought, or if I had any theory at all. I ventured to him that it may be a pathogen, but that I couldn't be absolutely sure. I would discuss it with my colleagues, I said, when I got back to the city. He suddenly spun around in his chair and pinned me with his gaze. You know as well as I do it's not biological, he said, if it were just a case of diagnose and prescribe I would have fixed it years ago. Its cause runs deep, much deeper than that: you won't find it in your lists. A crack has opened up in the spiritual life of the people here and their *élan vital* has dribbled out. They are dead inside, each day they die a little more; don't be fooled by this facade of contentment, it is an act they have put on for you. At this point Dr Andrews leant down into the bottom drawer of his filing cabinet and took out a sleeping baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes. He held it out for me to hold, the way supplicants hold out their offerings. It's the child of the young woman you saw yesterday, he said, she's already forgotten she had it. I admit I went a little weak at this point, having not held a newborn baby since Sophie, nearly six years ago now. And will this child live its life in somnolence too, he continued, never having really been born? When you went to university and did your medicine is this what your lecturers called life? I couldn't answer him, it would have started an argument, and I would have woken the child. Besides, hadn't Dr Andrews himself already pointed out the envy that was at the heart of all this, that we would all like to sleep like this baby slept, not for a night but forever? I handed it back and he returned it to the drawer. When Mr Sanderson first started nodding off, he said, turning around to face me again, he was the laughing stock of the town; a lazy good-for-nothing leech who was better off out of the way. But it didn't take long for them to all figure out that Mr Sanderson was one to be envied. That's how it starts, Mr Stevens, and it's all downhill from there. You only need to recite the Litany so many times - Why Not? So What? Who Cares? - before it drains all living from you. In the case of Happy Valley, this is exactly what's happened. And already in its infantile dreams that baby too is reciting the Litany and drifting away from itself.

Well that was Dr Andrews, and his views are worth recording. But they are by no means definitive. They've all got their own theories, Pete, credible and incredible, and hardly need a trouble-shooting pathologist to tell them what makes them tick. Some say it's something in the water

(pumped from a bore on the north edge of town); some that it's a pollen that is blown in off the acacia bushes peculiar to this area; the garage attendant, a very weird-looking young man who filled my tank when I left, tried to tell me that it's a soporific made from dandelion seeds that they gather out on the paddocks each spring and smoke communally throughout the year in weekly meetings in the old school hall. The local storekeeper thinks it's a brainworm, a theory that speaks for itself.

But whatever the cause (does there *have* to be a cause?) the fact is that these people have made a virtue of it anyway. Even if I had an antidote I doubt I would offer it to them. Leave them alone! Let them rest in peace! (And this is a man with three years post-grad immunology speaking!) And anyway, Pete, you know what I *really* think? (and I know you'll love this): Happy Valley is nothing more than God's little joke, and like all the best jokes it is one designed to point us in the direction of the ineffable, the profound. So there. Write your article. I'm sure you'll make a meal of it. As for me, there's a sick cow waiting up in Brisbane somewhere, and I've got a plane to catch.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JORDIE ALBISTON has published three collections of poems. Jordie received the Dinny O'Hearn Memorial Fellowship in 1997, and was original editor of the poetry e-zine *Divan*. She holds a PhD in literature, and has two teenage children.

KATERI AKIWENZIE-DAMM is a writer and spoken word artist of mixed ancestry from the Chippewas of Nawash First Nation, and lives and works at Neyaashiinigmiing, Cape Croker Reserve on the Saugeen Peninsula in southwestern Ontario, Canada. Kateri's writing has been published in various anthologies, journals, and magazines in Canada, the USA, Aotearoa, Australia, and Germany.

PAOLO BARTOLONI lectures in Italian and Comparative Literature at the University of Sydney. He is the editor of *Re-Claiming Diversity: Essays on Comparative Literature* (Melbourne, 1996) and *Intellectuals and Publics: Essays on Cultural Theory and Practice* (Melbourne, 1997).

MARION CAMPBELL's novels are *Lines of Flight* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1985), *Not Being Miriam* (FACP, 1988) and *Prowler* (FACP, 1999). She currently teaches at the University of Melbourne.

DAVID COOKSON lives in South Australia. He has been writing poetry for several years, and is a member of Friendly Street Poets in Adelaide. He tries to reflect the loneliness of the Australian landscape through imagery.

BRUCE DAWE is a well known Australian poet whose work is set at secondary and tertiary levels. His collected edition, *Sometimes Gladness*, is now in its fifth edition.

MICHAEL DEVES works as a freelance editor and publisher in Adelaide. In 1999 he completed a doctorate on Brian Castro's novels at Flinders University.

BILL FEWER is a librarian who lives in the Blue Mountains, using the daily six-hour commute to Sydney to write. His poems have been published in Australian and overseas journals for the past twenty years and he has performed them in many local venues.

AMBER GENEVIEVE FLYNN is currently studying at the University of Western Australia, but often returns to her real home at Goode Beach, in the beautiful South-West.

THOMAS HOAREAU is a Perth artist whose work has been shown in numerous group and solo exhibitions. It is held in the National Gallery as well as the Art Gallery of Western Australia, and the galleries of the University of Western Australia, Curtin University and Edith Cowan University. His painting has received several art awards and Hoareau has won two national travel grants.

CORAL HULL is a full time writer and visual artist specialising in poetry, experimental prose fiction, prose poetry, literary articles and digital photography. Her work has been published extensively in literary magazines in the USA, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom.

MAGGIE JOEL is a Sydney-based public servant by day, studying for a Masters in Creative Writing by night, and a staff writer for *Campaign* magazine on the weekends. Her short stories have been published and read on radio, she has written one full length work and is working on her second.

JUDY JOHNSON's first collection *Wing Corrections* was published by Five Islands Press in 1998. It came second in the Anne Elder Awards, and is on the Year 10 Literature List in Western Australia. Her new project is a verse novel concerned with pearl diving in the Torres Strait.

A.F. JOHNSON is a writer and painter from Melbourne. She tutors in creative writing at the English Department of the University of Melbourne. 'Eugen's Fall' is one of many stories that are gathering together to form a retelling of the life of the colonial painter, Eugen von Guerard.

---

ULI KRAHN chose to come to Australia when young. Once almost a scientist, nearly in business, she finishes an Auslit degree, writes her second novel, and is grumpy.

ROLAND LEACH travelled recently to the Galapagos Islands and Peru on a poetry grant. He has just started Sunline Press, a new publishing outlet for poets.

SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM is Chair Professor of English at the University of Hong Kong, and Professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her first collection of poems, *Crossing the Peninsula* (1980), received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, and she has published subsequently four more books of poetry. In addition, she has three books of short stories, a memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces* (Feminist Press, 1996), which received the 1997 American Book Award, two critical studies on Southeast-Asian literature, and many edited and co-edited volumes on Asian American and Asia-Pacific writing and cultural studies.

MAYA LINDEN is currently studying for a Bachelor of Creative Arts at the Victorian College of the Arts. She has had her work published in various journals and magazines and is presently co-editing *VIVID*, the VCA creative writing journal.

WAYNE MCCAULEY is a Melbourne writer. He has been published in various literary magazines and was the winner of the 1995 *The Age* Short Story Competition.

DAVID MCCOOEY is a poet and critic. He is author of the 'Contemporary Poetry' chapter in the recent *Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*.

CARMEL MACDONALD GRAHAME first studied literature in the 1960s. Recent literary studies, for an MA from the University of Western Australia and a PhD from Edith Cowan University, have been a rich and invigorating experience. She has taught literature, literary theory and creative writing in universities for ten years.

MAL MCKIMMIE is a poet writing in Perth, Western Australia. His poems have appeared in various literary publications in Australia over the last ten years.

OUYANG YU is a Melbourne-based poet, critic and translator.

MATT ROBINSON, winner of the 1999 Petra Kenney Memorial International Poetry Competition, lives and writes in Fredericton, Canada. His first collection, forthcoming in late 2000, is 'a ruckus of awkward stacking,' from Insomniac Press.

LAISHA ROSNAU is a Canadian writer and snowboarder based in Vancouver. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies in Canada and the USA. This is her first Australian publication. She is currently finishing her first novel just in time to visit Australia to learn to surf.

NOEL ROWE is a Sydney critic, poet and co-editor of *Southerly*. He teaches at the University of Sydney and has a research interest in modern Australian poetry and theology.

BRENDAN RYAN grew up on a dairy farm at Panmure in Victoria and lives in Melbourne. In 1998 Soup Publications published a chapbook of his, *Mungo Poems*, and in July 2000, Fives Islands Press published *Why I Am Not a Farmer*.

TRACY RYAN was born in Western Australia but has been living for the past four years in Cambridge, England. Her most recent book of poems is *The Willing Eye* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press / Bloodaxe) and a short work, *blocknotes*, is forthcoming with Potes and Poets in the USA in 2001.

TONY SIMOES DA SILVA completed a PhD in English at the University of Western Australia in 1996. He teaches in the School of English at the University of Exeter.

KNUTE SKINNER lives in County Clare, Ireland. His latest collections are *The Cold Irish Earth: New and Selected Poems of Ireland (1965-1995)* (Salmon Publishing, 1996) and *An Afternoon Quiet* (Pudding House Publications, 1998).

ANDREW SNEDDON is a part-time writer currently studying for his PhD in archaeology at La Trobe University, Melbourne. His poetry has been published in a number of Australian journals.

BRENDAN SOMES was born in Canberra and now lives near Canberra. His short stories are soon to appear in *Overland* and *Island*.

RYAN G. VAN CLEAVE is a freelance photographer originally from Chicago. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in a number of international journals. He is the editor of *Sundog: The Southeast Review*, and also serves as coordinator for the annual 'World's Best Short Story' competition. His first book, *American Diaspora*, is forthcoming from the University of Iowa Press.

JENNIFER WAWRZINEK is a Melbourne writer who has had short fiction published in *Gathering Force*, *Redoubt* and *Overland Express*, and who performs spoken word with the group 'The Skywriters', at various venues around Melbourne. She is currently researching her PhD at Melbourne University and is completing her first novel.

MIKE WILLIAMS writes poetry when the 'mood' strikes; he also edits and produces *Navigations*, an occasional broadsheet publication for Western Australian poets. His paid work is for a bookshop in Perth; he lives with his partner, also a poet, her two sons, and a disturbing number of animals.

JOSHUA WILSON is a writer of peripatetic ficto-criticism and the Editor-in-Chief at In Emergency Press.



# Canadian Literature

A QUARTERLY OF CRITICISM AND REVIEW

## RATES FOR 2000

### CANADIAN ORDERS

1 year  
4 issues

INDIVIDUALS  
\$40 + \$2.80 GST  
= \$42.80

INSTITUTIONS  
\$55 + \$3.85 GST  
= \$58.85

### OUTSIDE CANADA

1 year  
4 issues

INDIVIDUALS  
\$40 + \$15 POSTAGE  
= \$55

INSTITUTIONS  
\$55 + \$15 POSTAGE  
= \$70

*Canadian Literature*, published quarterly at the University of British Columbia, explores and celebrates the best Canadian writers and writing.

Each issue contains articles on writers and books—with some issues devoted entirely to special topics—together with new poems and an extensive section reviewing recent and current books.

We hope that your interest in traditional and contemporary Canadian literature, in both French and English, will convince you to subscribe to the most respected source—*Canadian Literature*.

### Canadian Literature

The University of British Columbia  
167-1855 West Mall  
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2  
Canada

telephone  
604 822-2780

fax  
604 822-5504

e-mail  
can.lit@ubc.ca

website  
<http://www.cdn-lit.ubc.ca>



The Association of



Commonwealth Literature and

Language Studies 12th Triennial Conference

RESISTANCE AND RECONCILIATION WRITING  
IN THE COMMONWEALTH

Monday 9 — Saturday 14 July 2001  
Rydges Canberra Hotel (Lakeside)

Call for Papers

As issues of resistance and reconciliation between indigenous, settler and diasporic communities become increasingly urgent in countries of the Commonwealth, writers of literature, journalism, plays and films have provided a variety of ways to perceive and understand such issues.

Paper-givers are invited to consider questions including the following:

- In what ways can writing constitute forms of resistance? or reconciliation?
- How do affinities to place, community, region, race, religion or nation emerge? How are they represented in Commonwealth writing?
- How do certain kinds of authority engender acquiescence? complicity? violence? rebellion?
- How have postcolonial studies or other theoretical perspectives confirmed or challenged notions of a Commonwealth, and Commonwealth writing?

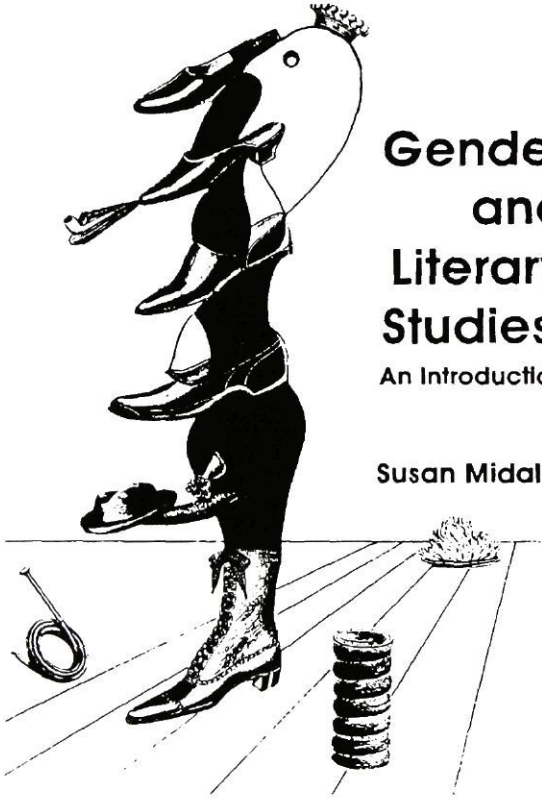
Abstracts for papers of 20 minutes duration which engage with these and other relevant questions are invited. 'Writing' should be taken here to include literature, performance, media, electronic and cyber-texts, film, television and other forms of popular culture.

Deadline for abstracts of 200 words, short bio-note (50 words) and contact address by 30 October 2000

to  
Jacqueline Lo  
ACLALS Secretary  
Old Canberra House  
Australian National University  
Canberra ACT 0200  
Australia

For further information, see ACLALS website: <http://www.aclals.com>  
or contact [Jacqueline.Lo@anu.edu.au](mailto:Jacqueline.Lo@anu.edu.au)

Executive Committee: Satendra Nandan, Chair, ACLALS, Canberra Centre for Writing, Media and Cultural Studies, UC, Canberra, ACT 2601. Bruce Bennett, Vice-Chair & Director, ACLALS 2001, School of Language, Literature and Communication, UNSW, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra ACT 2600. Jacqueline Lo, Vice-Chair & Secretary, ACLALS, Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, Old Canberra House, ANU, Canberra ACT 0200. Jennifer Webb, Treasurer, Division of Communication and Education, UC, Canberra, ACT 2601.



# Gender and Literary Studies:

An Introduction

Susan Midalia

Available from Sue Lewis,  
Department of English,  
The University of Western Australia.  
Telephone: 08 9380 2116  
Fax: 08 9380 1030  
\$10.00





## STORIES

Maggie Joel  
Amanda Johnson  
Maya Linden  
Wayne Macauley  
Brendan Some  
jennifer wawrzinek  
Joshua Wilson  
Ouyang Yu

## POETRY

Jordie Albiston  
Kateri Akiwenzie-damm  
David Cookson  
Bruce Dawe  
Bill Fewer  
Amber Flynn  
Coral Hull  
Judy Johnston  
Uli Krahn  
Roland Leach  
Shirley Lim  
David McCooley  
Mal McKimmie  
Matt Robinson  
Laisha Rosnau  
Brendan Ryan  
Knut Skinner  
Andrew Sneddon  
Ryan Van Cleave  
Mike Williams

## ARTICLES

Paolo Bartoloni on  
Interstitial Narratives  
  
Marion Campbell on Evil,  
Time, Redemption  
  
Michael Deves on  
Authenticity in Brian Castro  
  
Noel Rowe on Giving a  
Word to the Sand

## REVIEW ESSAYS

Carmel Macdonald Grahame  
on recent fiction  
  
Tracy Ryan on the year's  
work in Australian and  
Asian poetry  
  
Tony Simoes da Silva on  
recent non-fiction

ISSN 0043-342X



Single copies of *Westerly* including postage:

|       |         |    |        |
|-------|---------|----|--------|
| Aust. | \$22.95 | UK | £11.00 |
| NZ    | \$34.00 | DM | 34.00  |
| USA   | \$16.00 | FF | 112.00 |