

The background of the cover is a complex, layered composition. The top half is dominated by a dense, textured pattern of blue and green, resembling a microscopic view of a material or a dense forest of thin, vertical structures. A prominent, bright red, wavy line cuts across this pattern from the top left towards the middle right. Below this, a horizontal band of a similar blue-green texture is visible. The bottom half of the cover features a dark blue background with a series of horizontal, wavy lines that resemble a musical staff or a topographical map. A small red circle is located on the right side of this lower section.

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*the best in writing from the West*

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Department of **Culture and the Arts**

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## PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE

The editors have pleasure in announcing  
the joint winners of the Patricia Hackett Prize  
for the best contributions to *Westerly* in 2010.

### **JUDY JOHNSON**

For her poem  
'The Navigations of Rose de Freycinet'  
*Westerly* 55:1, 2010

and

### **MARCELLA POLAIN**

For her story  
'Sleep without Cameras'  
*Westerly* 55:2, 2010

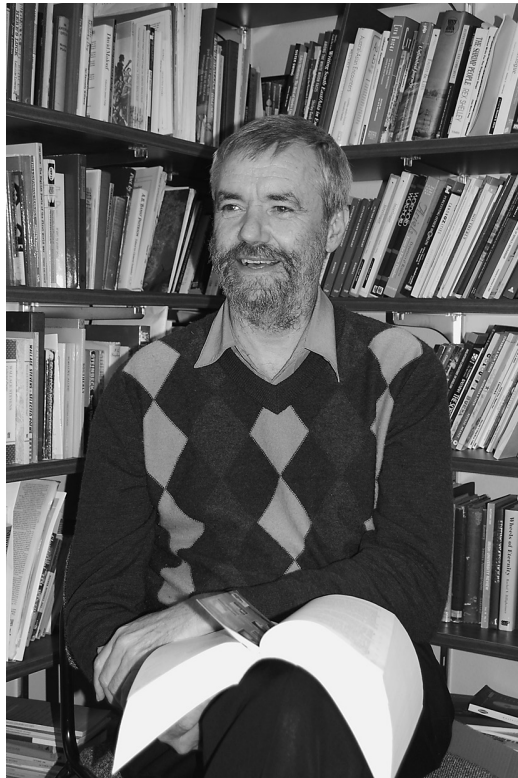
## Editorial

### Delys Bird and Tony Hughes-d'Aeth

In February 2011 the Westerly Centre hosted a symposium, 'Creative Writing and its Contexts' to mark Professor Dennis Haskell's (Winthrop Professor of English, UWA and former editor of *Westerly*) forthcoming retirement from his academic life and to celebrate the contribution he has made to West Australian and Australian literary culture through his teaching and scholarship, his own poetry and his mentoring of others. The work in this section of *Westerly* comes from some of those who spoke about an aspect of Dennis's work at the symposium or (in the case of Bruce Dawe) who sent a poem honouring Dennis. The symposium programme was divided into four sections, 'Australia and Asia', 'Creative Writing: Theory and Practice', 'Poetry and Poetics' and 'Australian Literary Culture' to broadly reflect Dennis's interests and the areas in which he has been most influential. Each of the essays that follow comes from one of those sections. Shirley Lim was the keynote speaker; her paper was not available for republication but she has sent us two new poems which are included here. Similarly, Geoff Page and Miriam Lo have contributed poems in place of the papers they presented.

We are delighted to be able to offer this reflection on Dennis and the interests that have animated his career as teacher, poet and scholar. Very

few in the communities of Australian and Asian writing, and especially those working at the interface between these two, have not been touched in some way by his work. Dennis remains an unreconstructed humanist in a field whose contemporary relevance coincided with the emergence of postcolonialism as the pre-eminent theory of globalised culture. His generosity speaks from older values and he holds onto the unfashionable idea that certain key elements of human experience, the very most intimate reaches in fact, are universal. Never one to slavishly follow fashion, with his trademark Lawrentian beard, and fondness for batik prints, we have all valued Dennis for his unswerving integrity. We hope that this is the beginning of a broader re-evaluation of his life and work, even as it continues into a no doubt productive retirement.



Professor Dennis Haskell

## To a Notable Literary Archaeologist

*For Dennis, after re-reading Attuned to Alien Moonlight*

### **Bruce Dawe**

You have given me back my poetry.  
As the BBC's *Time Team* puts together  
Roman mosaics lost under some English field,  
so, with your trowel, pick and shovel,  
and (most of all) careful final brushwork,  
You bring me again (as I read) those possibilities  
I had forgotten...Thank you for returning to me, as well,  
their history and context, both of which I,  
(being an ahistorical Iron Age survivor)  
had no idea still slept there under the green grass.

## The Civilising Value of the Humanities

### Bruce Bennett

As an Australian poet, and a writer about poetry, Dennis Haskell has never resiled from use of the Australian vernacular. In fact, he has used and extended the vernacular—past and present—to entertaining and illuminating effect. So it is not surprising to find Les Murray and Bruce Dawe among his favourite poets. That these two, together with Kenneth Slessor, are seen as major figures on the Australian literary landscape is due in no small measure to Dennis's intelligent, readable assessments of their work. His own poetry reflects the pleasure he finds in the witty, inventive re-imagining of people and places, as in the opening stanzas of his poem 'Sydney or the Bush' (2006: 54–55):

I walked the wide streets of Billabigola seeking an ATM;  
I'd as well have searched for a whale in cola spouting hysterical  
    phlegm, a  
cappuccino strip, boutiques or a sale of vertical rhyme,  
a kibbutz, a blitz, or a train arriving on time.

But only crows now stalk the old captain's walk,  
 the bowling greens are brown,  
 the pavement's splitting, and the train's a bus  
 that lurches from a distant town.

Here, the rhythmic and tonal variations are beautifully calibrated—from playful humour to pathos and back again. Characteristically, the poem expresses sentiment without sentimentality.

A sense of humour is one of the most necessary characteristics of the successful teacher, administrator, critic and creative writer, all those areas in which Dennis has excelled. In an essay titled 'The Heroism of Comedy' (1992: 107–119), Dennis Haskell asserts that 'Comedy like death and golf, is a great leveller. In Australia it goes hand in hand with the tall poppy syndrome, which discourages a cult of heroism and encourages a down to earth humour'. He provides as collateral evidence a cartoon from *Smith's Weekly* in 1939 showing a slouch-hatted soldier being reprimanded by a monocled officer. The caption reads:

One Digger (pulling up a lax Digger): 'I say, my man! Do you know  
 anything about saluting?'  
 To which the Digger replies: 'Too right; what d'yer want to know?'

This larrikin humour appeals especially to someone like me who moved Eastwards, to the other side, to the UNSW campus of the Australian Defence Force Academy, to try to educate Army, Navy and Air Force officers as well as civilian students. But it has a broader appeal that expresses Dennis's democratic instincts.

Poetry, indeed most creative writing, must also nail moments of wonder and plumb depths of feeling. In Dennis's poetry, such moments emerge from a general tone of reasonableness. The point is made in the title poem of his fifth volume, *Samuel Johnson in Marrickville* (2001), which humanises Johnson, the great master of English literary learning and reason, 'the great emissary of sensibleness', by linking

him to the ordinary lives of suburban Sydney-siders. Staving off depression, and even madness, as Johnson did, involves both rational thought and an ability to connect with a childhood self. The poem suggests that even reason, the great avatar we traditionally invoke to justify our role in a university, has its limits. But there is something heroic in its pursuit. In commenting on Dennis Haskell's most recent collection of new and selected poems, *Acts of Defiance* (2010), Canberra poet Geoff Page remarks that, along with the humour and satire in Dennis's work is an essentially serious poetry in which elegies play an important part, with their 'powerful sense of life's fragility' (2011: 26).

As we struggle to give the humanities an important role in contemporary university studies, we must offer both a skills education—literacy writ large, if you like—and ways of gaining self-knowledge and knowledge of others. A sub-theme of this is that a knowledge of literature, past and present, from both Western and Eastern, Northern and Southern traditions can contribute to these goals. Let me conclude with a poem that questions the place and value of the humanities in our lives in a way that perhaps only poetry—'language under pressure'—is equipped to do. The poem's title is 'What Use are the Humanities?' Its author is of course, Dennis Haskell. To me, this poem is a marvellous encapsulation of a skilled writer's ability to inquire into mysteries beyond conventional understanding and rational thought and to graphically reveal both the deep uncertainties of our existence and our restless grasping after meaning. The poem's arrival is at a moment of wonder in the midst of apparent ordinariness—and that may be the point of it all.

Sunday looms like a day at the beach,  
the pleasures of more being than being conscious.  
Imagine: to stand at the shore of Sunday  
and gaze at wave upon  
bending wave of days,

their curl and thump  
and the splattering taste of salt  
so perfectly repeated, so patterned  
that their movement could seem  
constant, absolute.

A physicist would walk along such a shore  
Murmuring about gravity waves,  
Those long elongations of air  
that might exist  
only in imagination, but  
that might measure out  
A time before time began

while we merely look forward to Sunday.  
How we got here and why  
put behind us. Hours spent  
treading down the uncountable, fibrous sand  
will pass like no time at all  
into the urgencies of measurement,  
cling to the sight of curling salt.  
Yet on the packed granules of uncertainty  
Sunday's meaning shines, inconstant,  
immeasurable, on the waving beach of ourselves  
almost numb with light.

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## The Mouse

Shirley Geok-lin Lim

A hot September Wednesday I'd left  
The back door to the bird-seeded  
Tomato, crow-hollowed-figgy yard  
Open, and of course some deft

And furry something must have zipped,  
Drawn to the snug plenty, in.  
That afternoon, plenty of rustlings  
Among the plastics, papers, and clipped

Herbs drying. I figured immediately  
We were sharing with some small beast  
Our larder of lentils, basmati rice, chickpeas,  
Lima and pigeon beans, blackeyed, kidney:

It must have thought it'd died and gone  
To bean heaven, and no dint of clean  
And search would flush it into the open.  
Until a day later, barefooted and alone,

Moving to light the evening with the reading lamp,  
My calloused sole on the Berber stepped  
On a baby softness. Both leapt,  
And I, nerves sinking, looked for what had jumped

Besides me, reminded of my own soft breast  
Pressed hard between glass, its cowering  
Crushed, and the small afrighted thing  
The knife had taken out, but still living beast

Licking late at night the crumbs of chocolate.  
It wasn't until Friday vacuuming the carpet  
I found the grey and white furry tuft  
Under the chair where it had sought

Shelter from the giant shadow's tread, safety  
And the chocolate crumb its last memory.

## Picasso

(At the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, after lunch,  
September 2010)

### Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Falling asleep in a room full of Picassos,  
Stomach filled with Ethiopian spices,  
Stewed corn, lentils, and sour injera,  
Achilles heels aching from the pressure  
Of mass-produced sneakers, I acknowledge

I am in the presence of genius.  
Evident in women's flat images,  
One iris bobbing above the other,  
Breasts askew or unmatched, gnarly fingers  
Like fat tube worms crawling over  
Flapping open mouths.

How did he know  
What I looked like?

Pablo, you'd fucked  
So many beauties, and seen them slack-  
Jawed, drooling after sleep or sex,  
Or grinding teeth like engines,  
Gears gnashing despite gorgeous  
Bodies, spluttering motors  
Broken, desirables who'd covered  
Your canvasses with hardly a border  
To waste. You'd revenged yourself on those  
Ideals, thighs splayed, hair frayed. Beauty  
Is ever the lover of art, and ever  
Disappointed, if art is to imitate  
Beauty. Which lives in distance, and dies  
Lanced. Shaken to keep awake  
Where you pitch the ugly as beauty's art.

The Lyric Impulse in Dennis Haskell's  
*All the Time in the World*

**Page Richards**

The roots of lyric poems, or what C. Day Lewis called the 'lyric impulse' (25) in his well-known study, include folk and liturgical song, the epic, the pastoral, the panegyric, and what is called 'grave verse' (Lerer 147). As we now gain a wider historic understanding of early poems, it is especially helpful to look to the development of grave verse, within the larger scope of lyric or 'poetic will' (Stewart 34),<sup>1</sup> for the emergence of the lyric 'I' in English. This emergence has importance too that is far-reaching. Seth Lerer and a group of scholars have studied fragments and form, following the transitions from Anglo-Saxon and Old English verse to first person, post-Conquest poems (Lerer 128–132). The eleventh and twelfth centuries may seem like quite a distance from building an understanding of the poetry of Dennis Haskell, but they offer a particularly good vantage point for apprehending Haskell's extraordinary vision. The beginning of my study, then, will take a moment to look at Lerer's historical work on the early stirrings of the lyric 'I'.

Originating in sites of the Norman Conquest, the poems Lerer examines present a 'cultural obituary for the Anglo-Saxon landscape'

(135), a landscape that was physically being razed and developed simultaneously. In the English countryside, stone, for example, began to replace the familiar local timber structures. In the following example, William the Conqueror compels dislocation on local soil:

He had castles built  
 and poor men terribly oppressed.  
 The king was very severe,  
 and he took from his underlings many marks  
 of gold and hundreds of pounds of silver.  
 All this he took from the people,  
 and with great injustice...

(excerpt from 'The Rime of King William,'  
 from *The Peterborough Chronicle* 1070–1154, cited by Lerer 134)

Not only concerned with displacement-in-place, this account is preoccupied, as Lerer points out, with an already 'pervasive elegiac cast' (133). The self-conscious experience of what might be called 'pastness' is integral; the very condition of 'coming after' ultimately will provoke, as Lerer argues, the lyric first person, as we have come to know it in English. From this period the lyric speaker begins to irrupt from the once familiar, but now alien, home and landscape:

Now your hall shall be built with the spade,  
 And you, wretch, shall be brought inside it;  
 Now all your garments shall be sought out,  
 Your house be swept and all the sweepings thrown out.

(cited by Lerer 143)

In the post-Conquest impulse of the early English lyric speaker, therefore, as Lerer points out, we hear not only the standard trope of grave, body and soul, but also evidence of a social life at work. In these lyrics of intrusion and dislocation at home—dislocation both from Old English writings and Anglo-Saxon landscapes<sup>2</sup>—the lyric

'I' emerges from within the trope of the grave as a self-conscious state of retrospective loss. The familiar 'hall', 'garments', and 'house' are no longer familiar. The displacement of the recognisable body and now building materials includes dislocation of the language itself, as Lerer explains, including 'an increasing use of end rhyme' from Continental influences, interrupting old patterns of alliteration, and revealing even 'occasional bursts of personal feeling' (143).

Thus, from the margins of late twelfth-century theological writing, Lerer suggests that an emergent lyric 'I', experiencing alienation, tried to fashion an 'architectural' control for the disrupted English voice: 'I have been neither whole nor happy,/nor a thriving man./There is not a man alive who does not advise me/to wait and be happy' (128). In this 'exile-in-place', the first-person lyric, as such, draws its origins from a cry, an emerging 'I' whose very appearance originates in an act of self-review upon dislocation: a perspective that Lerer sees as a born 'retrospection' (154). We need to pause over the important idea of born retrospection. It means that upon arriving, the lyric 'I' is born, so to speak, from 'backward-looking elegiacs' (143).

These moments of emergence and birth of the English-language lyric speak in remarkable ways to Dennis Haskell's collection of poems *All the Time in the World*. We see revealed in this work an elegist with an acute awareness of the condition of 'coming after', an awareness that lies directly along the continuum of the fundamental lyric impulse in first person. While I am not pointing to influence, of course, or the path of every poem, we can see in this volume especially how the historical archeology of lyric in Lerer and the scholars of grave verse is now opening new lines into Haskell's own experiments and evolutions of lyric. We see how the lyric 'I', originating in born retrospection, remains attached to questions of land. For Haskell, though, 'land' is increasingly and modernly transposed to a verb and movement; it is now connected to the exile of human beings *landing* in the eternal world of timelessness, in which they are (brutally) out of place: 'the beating and the battery/that the body was built for,/gravity's brutal reward' ('After Hong Kong'). The

irony of the oxymoron ('brutal reward') is tied to the land ('gravity') and time; it is part of an urgent continuum in lyric evolution of post-Conquest poems founded in self-exile from conditions that are at once familiar and at the same time alien to the body. Haskell's voice transforms this original impulse of the lyric 'I' to control the dislocated physical landscape into architecture of time. The exile-in-place of post-Conquest lyric has become in Haskell's poems a matter of time. This lyric 'I' is now born the moment that it awakens and conceives its human body as perpetually 'coming after': alien, here, to the condition of time that is forever independent of human presence. The lyric first person ('I' and 'We') comes into itself only on retrospective regarding of its place as an exile in time: '...I want time to steal./We don't belong to it now, and never will' ('The Last of England' 36). Here, too, the human condition of the exile in time looms: '...No sign of people/busy at their lives. Only the nests/tilting and rettiling in the shuddering/wind, like urgent scraps of Spring' ('In Churchill College Library' 33).

As the Anglo-Saxon world was emptied of its familiar timber, its poetic ring structure, or its diction, so Haskell's scenes in airports, on planes, even at home in Australia, are shorn of everything human, except for the speaker provoked by such exile into retrospective self-regard. Ghost-like Australia is a vision of this renewed lyric impulse: in 'scenic Australian towns/...the streets are hysterically quiet; the scones are staling, the few shops failing,/and all the present is memory' ('Sydney or the Bush' 54). In 'Constancy', we hear flat out how the speaker is dislocated into a time that is of no human kind: 'it's what Australians like to say about it—out of time/and stuck in a world of no human's making' (77). The 'midnight streets' of Canberra, for example, are also 'frozen in time' ('Constancy' 77); in the 'sunburnt country', the speaker speeds 'past towns where absences had had to happen' ('In a Sunburnt Country' 50). One cannot miss the focus on time, displacement, and birth, through the very exile within it (in the Australian descriptions of country, in the frozen streets of Canberra, in the towns with absences, or memory of 'scenic Australian towns').

The lyric impulse of being born from an act of retrospection (what Lerer calls the present and familiar place scripted by others, 152–3) extends globally, past Australian boundaries and back again. In old Netherlands ‘there are no clocks to tick time away/when a track is a line in God’s hand, the light tipping everyone’s fingers/where the days end, and return,/and nothing happens, forever’ (‘Two Landscapes’ 69); in ‘Sydney and the Bush’, ‘The Bank is gone, the church is dead, the only/things buzzing are flies/that flap and flop, too tired to fly/through country and western skies’ (55).

As in the earliest emergence of the lyric first person in history, Haskell’s speaker is born aware of exile. Again, though, this ‘I’ is primarily exiled into time; ‘landing’ or touching down, the speaker is aware of the existence of time without itself. This contemporary lyric first person continues to be carried into existence by the very desire, that is, to be *able*. *Able* leans etymologically, as we know, into holding, touching, recognizing (whether with words, with body, with any human gesture) what otherwise is absent. This moving word permeates Haskell’s awareness of coming-after: how can we be *able*, his poems ask, to exist and function in time (and that is far different from being capable or proficient). Using the trope of the inexpressible, he writes, ‘...Nothing/will be *able* until/the unsaid/becomes the unsayable’ (‘Still Life’ emphasis added 19).

In Haskell’s world, the ‘unsayable’ intrudes into the more rigid ‘unsaid’; it suggests the potential for each of us to find ways to be *able* to say or to act. This act of interruption is a lyric act of provocation: the ‘I’ interrupts its self-exile to momentarily take stock of its own afterlife: ‘...To be alive/is to be moving/away from where we are...’ (‘Constancy’ 77). As the speaker ‘I’ travels on a French landscape, dislocated by ‘every *troisième* word’, each one a ‘mystery’, he finds his *unsayable* experience interrupted by a moment of potential ‘meaning’ or existence; inside a layered pause of incomprehensibility lies his own provocation of presence of time on an ancient aimless landscape: ‘Part of an ancient tower/stands aimlessly in a field,/the stalks of powerlines, rich red/upturned soil, runnelled tiles/on

sharply pitched roofs' ('Understandings' 26). Next to a sky that shifts every human utterance into nonhuman, nonnational temporality, the speaker's words briefly shape born retrospection and the very theft of existence: 'The small dark shapes of birds/flutter like syllables/ in a sky now sun-struck/and every nation, because it is none.' The 'I' is still the natural and perpetual latecomer to time, but one that momentarily pauses, taking near control, almost, of presence: 'Eight-hundred-years-old, peaked-roof villages/ rendered tiny by distance and time...stand beside the mythologised Rhine.../And on the river's/slate surface, on a road/not a road, certainly not taken,/in a land that is not ours,/I could almost discern/something, like our names, writ in water,/and almost begin to read its meaning' ('Writ in Water' 28–9).

This act of lyric 'interruption' brings forth *carpe diem*, or *seize the day*; but Haskell's lyric, rather than shoring against our uncertain futures, already looks backward at the very moment of becoming—in the very act of appearing, the speaker is consciously aware of a past before the now: 'How to seize something/as abstract as the day?/... and *already* the day/has her rattling in its grasp' ('Doubt and Trembling' emphasis added 39–41). In Haskell's poems, we neither seize the day nor time itself; time, he says, 'is only a window' that the 'I' is able to climb through in an act of interrupting timelessness, an act, say, of 'touch' ('Constancy' 77).

Where we are *able*, we touch, we say, we pick up a pen ('like picking up stone' he says)—we interrupt the absence of ourselves, we 'remove', as he says, the 'presence of absence' ('Still Life, 2001' 19), whether of our touch or words. This is not the same as seizing the day or exploiting language (even the unsaid). We make ourselves, instead, *able*; we make the unsaid more humanely unsayable by interrupting our own exile, touching our *dislocation* of time and place, born of our own retrospection and distance from ourselves.

The initial journey into the early English lyric 'I' and in particular the history of lyric that Lerer unearths help us to see both a fundamental lyric impulse in English as well as the developments

along the continuum of lyric evolution: between the 'exile-in-place' and Haskell's 'exile-in-time'. The two lyric 'I's' go over the same ground, and the post-Conquest 'I', exiled on its own land, prepares us for Haskell's journey of exile in time. For the earliest lyric 'I' or Haskell's 'I,' the act of self-identification begins with a recognition not just of 'losing' or having lost, but at the moment we are born with the fierce self-consciousness of *already* looking back at ourselves. Each 'I' is an exile: 'Life is a game in which/we are all given/the role of losers/eventually' ('An Act of Defiance' 97–8). Yet in the same moment that we are briefly exiled into the longer continuity of time, we can take hold; we are *able*, as Haskell says, to interrupt that eternal incompleteness, 'like a burglar' ('Ars Poetica' 5) and land in time, also incompletely. In doing so, we touch the lyric ground of born retrospection with our fellow first-person travelers, 'as though' together, 'we had/all the time in the world' ('An Act of Defiance' 98).

## Notes

- 1 Following a major resurgence of interest in lyric in the mid-nineties, William Waters chaired Special Sessions on poetry for three years straight at the MLA convention, beginning in 1999. Many important books and articles on poetry, and in particular lyric, have appeared by scholars such as Eva Müller-Zettelmann, Jacob Blevins, Herbert Tucker, Jane Hedley, Virginia Jackson, Charles Altieri, and Sarah Zimmerman. Other wide angles on the development of lyric include: *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, eds. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker, Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1985; Andrew Walsh, *Roots of Lyric: Primitive Poetry and Modern Poetics*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987; and William Waters, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address*, Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2003.
- 2 See, for example, Derek Pearsall, *Old English and Middle English Poetry*, London: Routledge, 1977; Carol Braun Pasternack, *The Textuality of Old English Poetry*, Cambridge: CUP, 1995; Alvin A. Lee, *The Guest-Hall of Eden: Four Essays on the Design of Old English Poetry*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1972; H. Momma, *The Composition of Old English Poetry*, Cambridge: CUP, 2006.

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An uncertain smile: humour in the poetry of  
Dennis Haskell

Chris Wortham

A *Certain Smile* was the name of a wonderfully fresh novel by a very youthful Françoise Sagan. More famous than the novel itself, in the popular culture of the time, was the film made from it. And in that film Johnny Mathis even more famously sang the title theme song 'A certain smile'. The main problem with the song is the very certainty of the smile, which to our contemporary ear is full of excruciating clichés. I have chosen to allude to this song in my title partly because I can't help holding it in great affection, despite what I should think about it critically, but more because it sums up to me the antithesis of what Dennis Haskell writes about. For a start, Dennis has declared eternal war upon the cliché, in his own work and that of others. What Dennis the poet writes is also hauntingly beautiful, and often with a smile, but it's an uncertain smile and its attractiveness is in that very uncertainty.

Humour has long been part and parcel of Australian poetry, probably more distinctively so than that in the oeuvre of any other national poetry written in the English language. What I understand as humour also seems to be more prevalent in the male poets than in many of the distinguished female poets. It would be interesting

to speculate on possible reasons for the pervasiveness of masculine humour and also on apparent differences on gender lines. However, these thoughts will have to wait for another day. For the present moment I shall only go so far as to suggest a developmental process in humour as a characteristic attribute of Australian poetry. There is a discernible line from Banjo Paterson, through A. D. Hope, Bruce Dawe and Les Murray to Dennis Haskell but since there is no time to do it justice, so it is better not to do it at all. I simply ask you to accept that the work of Dennis Haskell is distinctive but also that it arises out of a recognisable tradition.

Four of my favourite Dennis Haskell poems will illustrate this contention. 'Ars Poetica' is the opening poem in the volume entitled *All the Time in the World* (2006), and it makes its intentions very clear from the first line: it is a declaration of open war on the cliché! All of us who ever learned touch typing started with tedious exercises, among which is the inane one that uses all of the letter keys: 'The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.' Refusing cliché and its attendant tedium, Dennis attacks his own keyboard in exasperation, but his mood doesn't stay there. The poem begins: 'The quick brown fox fucks the lazy metaphor/stressed that anything from the keyboard is absurd.'

This particular quick brown fox, reminiscent no doubt of Ted Hughes's masterly poem 'The Thought-Fox', does not jump but alliteratively fucks up by becoming part of the lazy metaphor, or cliché, that the f-word has in itself become. Circling in on itself, language becomes 'stressed' and 'depressed', like the keys exercised in the very act of writing such banalities. 'Even the keys are depressed. Hoarse and vexed/from thinking "*Il n'y a pas de hors texte*". Almost as overworked as 'the quick brown fox' is that oft-quoted and even more often misunderstood aphorism from the great theorist of language, Jacques Derrida, '*Il n'y a pas de hors texte*', which itself becomes hoarse and vexed in being parroted yet again. All the scholarly argument about what Derrida actually meant by that phrase has only resulted in what is 'hopeless incompleteness'.

The second section expands on the triteness of critical vocabulary, trotting out some of the words that are like to come out of any student's keyboard in approaching any poem that the said student doesn't really understand: 'Inveigled, intrigued, liminal, disguised' will all sound good in an essay! These are 'words seductions of sound': poetry thus prostituted becomes its own seducer, with sounds that sound good but don't mean much.

However, with a wry humour that won't laugh only at cliché or dodgy interpretation, the short final section takes the uncertain smile back to mock the efforts of the poet himself: he readily concedes that 'writing is incomplete'. All the while, nevertheless, 'meaning arrives' mysteriously in those very inadequate words that have become broken shards in the using. In the end, the poem refutes Wittgenstein's proposition that 'whereof we cannot speak, we must remain silent', and it does so by insisting that language is a shining torch and that writing is, after all, worthwhile. So a poem that began in negation concludes in affirmation, moving from exasperation to something approaching exultation. The 'hologram torch of language' has the power to reconstitute recognisable shape from scattered light, just as the laser does. In writing, in reading and in interpreting we are not wasting our time.

In a very different mood, 'Still Life, 2001' is concerned with the experience of air travel and the sense of being a world citizen as well as an Australian. 'Still Life, 2001' comes from the same volume as 'Ars Poetica', in a section of travel poems grouped under the heading of 'Belongings'. The poems as a set reflect the internationalism of the modern world with reference to a number of countries in Europe and Asia.

For an academic a seat that is 'paid-for' (not, presumably, by oneself) and 'comfortable' and where there is champagne that 'appears' simply has to be in Business Class! But Dennis, though comfortable, is 'stuck', a prisoner to luxury. However, to be in a plane is to be suspended literally between two worlds, in a capsule that is deprived of such familiarising co-ordinates for human existence as

height above sea level and temperature: '11,800 metres' and '-53°' are meaningless and that 'Bandung/lies below' says nothing about the reality of that exotically beautiful and vibrant centre of Indonesian cultural life. The 'snoring' engines contribute to an illusion of stillness in a situation where reading about silence while travelling at great speed provides an ironic contextual commentary on our capacity for living our speculative thoughts in a bubble.

With a wry comparison, Haskell turns in the second part of the poem to draw in the paintings of empty jars and bottles so characteristic in the art of Giorgio Morandi. Those empty jars that 'contained more than this whole plane' bear out what Morandi once said paradoxically: 'Nothing is more abstract than reality'. Haskell's take on this paradox is that nothing is emptier of meaning than the elegant cabin of an aircraft full of the trappings of luxury. At a preliminary reading these two poems from *All the Time in the World* may seem to share a self-ironising boredom, but this attribute is in tension with an engaging zest for life, and that speaks more of energy than ennui.

And now for something completely different. Dennis, the academic sophisticate of many plane journeys and sojourns in far countries, is never ashamed to acknowledge his working-class origins. Unlike some, however, he is affectionate towards his past without falsifying, without being sentimentally reverent in his recollections of childhood. I am particularly drawn to a poem in his third volume, *The Ghost Names Sing* (1997), in remembrance of a small man, his vertically challenged uncle. Most of us, from Dennis Haskell to John Betjeman, have a funny uncle or aunt to remember, someone who was one of the tribe, without being one of those who conformed to an agreed family norm. This poem, simply entitled 'In the 1950s' recaptures treasured moments remembered from the life of a young child. Postwar childhood in the 'forties and early 'fifties, during the slow and hard economic recovery, could be a pretty drab affair. Dennis's uncle encapsulates the possibility of exuberant difference in a dully conformist world.

For all its immediate charm, this poem resonates with the hopes and anxieties of a generation now long past. These are symbolised in two contrasting images of female presence. For one there's 'The sepia smile/of cheerful Deanna Durbin': that's the way film star photos appeared in those days and so much of those faded relics is captured in so few words. Beyond the visual encapsulation of nostalgia that in retrospect seems to have been past even in the moment of its presence, there's the sometime meaning of Deanna Durbin herself. A great country-style singer, who had the potential in her voice to become an opera star, Deanna Durbin played many wholesome girl-next-door parts in her early movies. But her meaning for a generation tumbling into global catastrophe went way beyond that: though to some extent she was marketed as a typical Hollywood 'product' of the nineteen thirties and 'forties, she came to symbolise much more than mere glitz. She had a purity of voice and a kind of beauty that spoke to many who desired and dreamed of a better world. One was Anne Frank, who had a photo of Deanna Durbin pasted on the wall of her bedroom hideout during the Nazi occupation, a fact strongly noted in the documentary film *Anne Frank Remembered* (released about a year before this poem was published). And in far away Russia the young Mstislav Rostropovich idolised Deanna Durbin too and claimed her as a source of inspiration for much of his own career as a musician.

Thus a seemingly slight reference in the poem speaks across the decades to us in two ways: it recaptures the glossy artifice of that post-war world of Hollywood stardom and also points to the ephemeral nature of fame in popular consciousness. Immediately before the recollection of Deanna Durbin, a reference to the short uncle's 'cool, steel, curving/ash tray, whose stem was a naked silver woman' juxtaposes a very different masculine construction of female attractiveness. In these few lines Dennis compresses so much of the complexities and contradictions in sexual attitudes of the time.

In the second section of the poem Dennis recalls himself as the little tacker strapped to the back of his short uncle's motorbike, roaring

around the block to rock him to sleep. The immediate transition to 'When I had stiches in my head' suggests a dangerous contiguity between his uncle's care and his unintended dangerousness. Pubs in the day of Dennis's short uncle were rough, tough and rather unsavoury places: the fact that the uncle did not so much 'split his time' but 'spilt his time' between church and pub reinforces the duality we have already noticed in relation to Deanna Durbin and the ash tray. There is much more one could say about this evocative poem, but for me, much of its charm inheres in its gentle and rather uncertain smile: the past is seen simultaneously through the immediate experience of an innocent child and the more measured gaze of adult retrospection.

My favourite Dennis Haskell poem, is 'Whatever Happened'. Unusually for Dennis it takes the form of a monologue given by a fictive persona, not unlike T. S. Eliot's Prufrock poem. It is an account of the way in which some of us who have been on the planet a fairly long time wake up suddenly to discover that we have been mugged by time. Here, the poet, 'young, fresh, energetic' suddenly finds himself 'surrounded by/flab, aching-boned, some/hair gone ...'

The poem's idea of death as 'the flatfoot in charge'; that is, a member of the constabulary who is bored and unconcerned by the outraged victim's account of his misfortune seems to derive from a wry tweaking of the words of Hamlet, who in dying says to Horatio:

Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, death,  
Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you—  
But let it be. Horatio, I am dead;  
Thou livest...

In any event, Death warns of the futility of fighting back: 'chasing the bastard/would be like chasing/our own tales.' Here, with characteristic aphoristic adroitness, Dennis plays aptly on the word 'tales' or 'tails'. As a scholar and a writer, and more particularly as a poet, he has long considered the point and purpose of literature. And

his overwhelming question is this: what is it that gives our lives a sense of identity and meaning but a succession of our ever-repeated narratives, going around in circles, like a dog chasing its tail? That question is asked with a tentative smile and perhaps the answer is its very uncertainty.

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# The Journal

for Alison

## Geoff Page

9 a.m., the dew still fresh,  
it's autumn at Kurnell,  
the slopes well-mown, the parkland trees

an eighteenth century scene almost  
as long white planes come slanting in  
from southwards and the east.

The skyline is refineries  
and cranes across the water.  
Two centuries and forty years

have slipped away since Cook.  
We glimpse his Journal here and there,  
sampled in the signage;

The Dharawal, too, will get their mention.  
*I thought that they beckon'd to us,  
to come ashore,* wrote Cook,

*but in this we were mistaken,  
for as soon as we put the boat in  
they again came to oppose us,*

*upon which I fir'd a musquet  
between the 2.*

We hear another century's syntax

stiffening the prose.

*They throw'd 2 darts at us;  
this obliged me to fire a third shott.*

Walking on, we find (restored)  
the *Small stream* that the journal speaks of,  
*sufficient to Water the Ship;*

then watch the high container vessels  
moving on the channel,  
bulky as apartment blocks,

serenely over windless water.  
Nothing comes to spoil the silence;  
the planes make just the slightest sound,

tilting slowly down;  
the ships make even less.  
This Friday, at the end of autumn,

we have it to ourselves.  
Surrounded by what seems to work,  
this sprawled and intricate machine

that politics and public service  
strive to keep well-oiled,  
the morning here is neatly balanced,

a beautiful ambivalence,  
the what-was-gained, the what-was-lost.  
The wind for Cook was *Southerly*,

the weather *Clear*. All empires fade,  
at last, beyond reproach.  
Across the bay and to the west,

there is a hum we don't quite hear.  
Back home, we google up the text  
to check it for ourselves.

*I went myself in the Pinnacle  
to sound and explore the Bay,  
in the doing of which I saw*

*some of the Natives;  
but they all (he is compelled to note)  
fled at my Approach.*

## Writing the Ordinary: Poets in Conversation

Isabela Banzon

My introduction to Dennis Haskell's poems came by way of *The Oxford Book of Modern Australian Verse* edited by Peter Porter. I had bought the book in Malaysia prior to my one visit to Perth in 2006, thinking I ought to know something literary and contemporary about Australia. Haskell has two poems in the anthology: 'No One Ever Found You' and 'One Clear Call'. 'No One Ever Found You' (190–191) tells of the poem's speaker's wife preparing the next meal, and 'One Clear Call' (191–192) concerns a phone call about a friend's father's death. More profoundly, the poems are about the experience of love and loss, respectively, and my reaction was to start writing poems in response to his. 'One Clear Call', for example, prompted me to write 'Nineteen Years Later' (*Lola* 10–11), a recollection of a deathbed scene, its epigraph taken from 'Flowers' (*Ghost Names* 43–44), another Haskell poem on death.

My attempt at writing poems in response to Haskell's is neither new nor innovative. All writing depends on other writing, all poems are somehow connected to the other, but there are times when a poem seems to demand or insist on an answer and a poet will venture to write a poem in direct response to it, ones that may 'answer, argue

with, update, elaborate on, mock, interrogate, pay tribute' to the poem spoken to (Lucas). More than this, Haskell's poems enable a connection which encourages the reader to closely participate in the experience of the ordinary and consequently in the discovery of the poetic. While many of his poems appeal to the intellect, I have connected more closely with those that are about the emotions. The poems of mine I refer to here serve only to highlight Haskell's way with words, his poetic subject and craft.

A critical consensus exists regarding Haskell's choice and range of subject—that his poems deal with the ordinary, or as he says, they are poems of 'lived experience' ('In the Dean's office'). The Singapore poet Aaron Lee describes Haskell's *The Ghost Names Sing* as 'on the surface a mosaic of experiences as diverse as domestic politics, family, social commentary, love, travel, and reminiscence' ('The Poetry Billboard'). Haskell's poems do focus on such familiar things; there are also poems that revolve around writing. There are times when he chooses to reveal himself as Dennis Haskell, as in 'Natural Piety' (*Ghost Names* 74); in a poem about his son who is off to a bad taste party, 'Chilihohism' (*Ghost Names* 55); one about his misadventures with chili in Singapore, and in 'Letter to Rhonda' (*All the Time* 83) and 'Reality's Crow' (*Ghost Names* 35–36), for and about his wife. At other times, he stays hidden, or as Kristen Lang says, he will 'relinquish ownership of the experiences for the sake of the poem... Rather than nurturing a single way of speaking, Haskell adopts various shapes and tones and allows each poem its own evolution' ('the big idea').

Reading Haskell's poems I realized that his sense of the ordinary is not quite like mine. For one, his domestic love poems speak of tenderness and affection. Looking among my already-written poems for one that might parallel his, I came up with 'Done' (*Lola* 14–15), which Haskell describes as 'a fierce, feminist protest, with religious imagery used to represent oppression' (*Lola* xi). For another, as I said, as a non-Australian reader with little exposure to things Australian, I was interested—when I bought the Porter anthology—in anything that suggested or indicated national preoccupations. I was curious

about what Haskell had to say, directly or indirectly, about Australia, a subject well within his sense of the ordinary, notwithstanding that the relation between a poem and its historical context can be complicated, that a poem 'refracts, transforms and reinvents its world' (Ferguson et al).

A poem that at first seems not about Australia is 'Globalisation' (*All the Time* 52–53). Haskell begins by setting it 'In the corridors of plush hotels' and then points out details like the hotel walls, doors, the carpet on the floor, the air-conditioning, how much to stay in one and how you can demand service accordingly. He proposes that the qualities of 'silence', the 'singularity/of being', 'sameness' and 'blandness'—summed up in the word 'vacancy'—are consequences of globalisation. Then he states that 'money's anonymity' and 'muscle' makes Australia tick and makes 'everywhere a little room'. Inversely, he suggests that it has a hand in Australia being or becoming insular 'as though the continent itself had come indoors'.

My initial reaction to this poem was that it was rather short on images, and that, well, that's Australia, but those are not the effects of globalisation on a country with a perpetually troubled economy like the Philippines. In argument, I wrote 'Globalization on a Budget' (*Lola* 33–34). I set it 'In the corridors of cheap hotels', made the place as noisy and rundown as possible, and supplied it with many images, since in this rather uncomfortable situation, you're bound to notice things. I borrowed Haskell's use of the couplet, all his rhyming end words, and a few other words and phrases to indicate that the poem is written as a reply. Of these, I liked 'as though the continent itself had come indoors' because the Philippines is not a continent but an archipelago, so that's absurd wishful thinking to me and my poem's speaker. And I suppose that seeing the world from a continent is not quite the same as seeing it from a scatter of islands. I also played around with 'everywhere is a little room', where a little room is a tiny cramped space for those without money.

On more than one occasion, Haskell has remarked that he is 'more concerned with creating a poetry that is central rather than marginal

to people's lives' (Haskell, 'Introduction'), that 'remains accessible to people, to anyone' ('In the Dean's office'). He also once said that he is 'little concerned with landscape' (Haskell, 'Introduction') but where this has made an appearance, it is incidental. His poem 'That World Whose Sanity We Know' (*All the Time* 56–57) is about travel within Australia, in particular, flying above 'sun-bright South Australian farms' on the way to Adelaide. Not a bush landscape, true, but landscape nonetheless of 'patterned trees' bearing the message: 'Jesus Lives'. Then Haskell is off thinking about God and the certainty of His existence in nature, the Bible, and the news. He mentions the poet Derek Mahon 'who has hardly grasped what life is about', which complements his way of thinking about life in general. He is skeptical about certainty in the world, describing it as 'the atrophy of doubt' and that which 'carve(s) all surprise/out of our lives'. He also gives an existential twist to 'the single I' of the cricket pitch and 'all lying-in-wait questions' as the plane descends.

My poem 'Final Approach to Manila' (*Lola* 54–55) is also about flying and about the certainty of uncertainty in relation to volcanic terrain and 'the state of the nation', but its writing was instigated by Haskell's suppositions about God and doubt, which might be familiar and even commonplace to Australians but can be problematic to Filipinos who take for granted God's existence and plan. This poem took longest to write since borrowing the first word rather than the last from Haskell's lines proved quite challenging.

John Kinsella says about *The Ghost Names Sing* that Haskell's poems may seem 'almost too available at first reading, but on further investigation the reader realises that the "I" is much more fluid than at first thought, that it is positioning itself against our prescribed reading and experiential practices; that there is a constant ironising at work, a self-mocking humour' (251). This is evident in 'On Hearing that an Apparently Prudent Friend has Left his Wife and Kids for a Younger Woman' (*All the Time* 81). I found the poem's title catchy because it is unusually long and it already announces the poem's event. Then, the first line echoes W. H. Auden's 'About suffering, they were never

wrong,/The Old Masters...’ Since there are a few poems that take off from this line, I was curious about Haskell’s version, especially that his is ‘About sex’. One thing I like about the poem is the absence of bias as Haskell looks for answers to why we—‘the old masters’ and ‘the new’—do ‘pretty odd’ things because of lust, which we tend to confuse with love. Then, there are little surprises effected by enjambed lines and oxymorons, such as ‘or who’s since run off with who/is always, predictably, a surprise’ and ‘You’ll find/sex the child in us seriously at play’. And I like the poem’s noise and contorted rhythm that correspond to the poem’s persona’s struggle to come to grips with news of his friend’s imprudent behaviour. The final surprise is the last line, written in iambic pentameter, which works really well in sealing the poem’s argument: ‘An age which sees God improbable can pray/salvation lies in keen, ecstatic flesh, find/a kiss at the ready, able to betray/perhaps the heart, and certainly the mind.’

My poem ‘A Friend Falls in Love’ (*Lola* 38) borrows the word ‘friend’ from Haskell’s title and also expresses uncertainties about love and lust: ‘Perhaps this is faith, our likeness to God not undone/by suspicion or boredom with ourselves. Surely/there’s more to this body...’ But as it is the first poem I wrote in response to his, I was bent on simply giving the quatrain and end rhyme a try.

While, indeed, many of Haskell’s poems engage in self-questioning, make accusations and ironise, he has poems that do not expect or insist on dialogue. These poems are about the emotion and thus tend toward the personal and intimate. One such poem, ‘Counting the Days’ (*All the Time* 89), caught my attention because I find it difficult to turn an ordinary expression like ‘I miss you’ into a poem. I have no quarrel with the poem, since counting days – how ‘each day is a month,/each month a year’ in the absence of the beloved – is a situation we might all have experienced. I really like the sense of time progressing from the familiar to the less familiar, from the seemingly finite to the infinite, which correspondingly and increasingly intensifies the poem’s emotion. By the time Haskell makes his point that ‘there is no reality on the clock/of the heart’s grief’, he is focusing less on ‘the

seas of absence' than that love is a 'collapsing star,/(that) spins in its black dwarf density of affection'.

My poem in response is really a tribute, since I don't think anyone could have done better than Haskell. I wrote 'I Could Say', (*Lola* 41–42) as a kind of sequel to his narrative, making it about impossible love: 'neither tide/nor climate nor sense can to the unknown/that is the heart's grief assign/finiteness of meaning'. It is a palimpsest, evident in many details borrowed from his. This poem is memorable to me because of the line 'we are love's collision in that alternative universe'. When I sent the poem to Haskell, with the original line 'we are stardust after love's collision in that/alternative universe', he commented: doesn't that sound Disney?

Haskell says that his poems are 'deeply concerned with human relationships' and that in writing poems, he tries 'to wed emotion with intellect, and to portray the discovery of the poetic, even the transcendental, in the ordinary' (Haskell, 'Introduction'). 'After Chemo' (*Acts* 133–134), a deeply personal poem, best illustrates this. The poem's event is stated in the title, and it begins with the all-too-familiar effect of chemotherapy: 'Your hair is falling'. Hair is the poem's pivotal image. Haskell as the poem's speaker describes his wife's hair, how it falls, and that it is found 'In each corner of each room' especially in the bedroom. Diction, in particular the emotional value of key words and surrounding words—hair is compared to 'thin rain', 'mizzle', and 'long, silent, lightening snow', hair fall to 'gossamer' that 'lifts away from you' and 'like an inkbrush/gifting new patterns to the floors'; line length that enables yet controls the poem's movement—'furring our mouths, our thickening thoughts,/our almost said words'; line breaks that tend to isolate yet unify thoughts—'And our lives are fastened/by more shadows/than we cast'; the presence of the ellipsis in 'these fine threads of you,/drifting away...'; 'breath' as the poem's final word, all work to create tension in impending loss while seeking release in the expression and consolation of love: 'we are as we are/together, alone, as you can see,/with elusive memories for company,/with your wisps of hair/disappearing as gently as breath'.

My poem in response is 'Kapok', which is about the cotton tree, hair, and my memory of Perth, but is also a personal poem written in empathy with Haskell's. I begin with 'Your email message yesterday/ is like kapok bursting from/its pod in late summer', then to the message itself: 'probable/as her hair grown back after chemo,/the return of your wife's cancer.' I go on to borrow words, phrases and lines from 'After Chemo' and from another poem 'An Act of Defiance' (*All the Time* 97–98), sparingly at first—'I imagine her hair:/.../thick as waves/but petal to your touch, real/as the sun's resumption on your fastened/lives or the afternoon's wildflowers/at King Park where you two are/taking all the time in the world', and then profusely—'her hair/is furring your mouth, your thickening thoughts, your almost-said/words. The fine threads of herself/tangle in every room, every corner/inside you...' I end in recognition of a shared emotion: 'Grief makes you, dear moth,/write me who am virtual/yet real as rain/falling like slashes of invisible hair'.

I think it is true that writing is 'less in reaction to a lived life than in reaction to the poet's prior discoveries, or the discoveries of others', as the American poet Louise Glück says (92). For me, it is this discovery or 'insight' or 'truth' (33–45) of the poetic that we respond to ultimately in a poem. 'After Chemo' is one of the most moving poems I have read, but more importantly for me it demonstrates Haskell's great achievement: that authentic articulation in his poems of his approach to art, and his valuing of life.

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## Paradigms of Identity/Jumbles of Words: Travels with Dennis Haskell

**Megan McKinlay**

When I met Dennis, I was at the beginning of my PhD studies at UWA, in contemporary Japanese Literature. I'd been enrolled for at least a year at that time and was still 'at the beginning'. My simple, readily containable topic had somehow morphed into a nightmarish beast. I had no idea how to bring it back to something manageable. My supervisor had decided to return to Japan. I may or may not have been to blame. I was casting around for another Japanese Literature specialist to get me back on the straight and narrow path, without much luck.

It was at this point that someone mentioned Dennis' name. 'Talk to him,' they said. 'He knows everything about Asia.' I had never heard of this Dennis person, so I did a little background checking. What I found left me sceptical. There was Austlit, there was poetry, there was Irish Literature, something about Italy. Here and there were references to India, Southeast Asia, China. Asia, yes. But these places were not Japan. 'Asia', of course, was not 'Asia'. It put me in mind of an employment advertisement I'd seen once in *The West Australian*, which called optimistically for an 'Asian-speaking person'. But I was desperate. So I went to see Dennis, and he got me back on track. He

helped me construct a track. He knew a little about Japan and a lot about supervision.

Along the way I like to think he learnt a few things about Japan. But at the same time, he opened Asia up for me in a broader sense. He would say things like—*ah, that's interesting, Meg, because in India, there's a similar world view, or well that's very much like the Chinese tradition; do you think that comes originally from a Buddhist sensibility?* And once I got past my frustration with all the extra reading these lines of enquiry were having me do, I grew interested. I realised that I'd been seeing Japan in isolation. Now there are some very salient historical and cultural reasons why you might do that, but for me it was more circumstantial. I'd studied Japanese at high school. I'd lived in Japan as an exchange student. Flew there, flew out. Came back and continued studying Japanese. Came to UWA and broadened my horizons beyond the language itself by picking up 'Japanese Studies', going back and forth to Japan a few times during the process. Direct flights. Closed experiences. Japan as a kind of island nation unto itself, context-free, geographically, culturally, historically disconnected from everything and everywhere. Somehow, Dennis contextualised Japan for me. He returned it to Asia. He drew it into the complex web of associations and interrelationships that make up that continent. And he drew me there along with it.

At some point during my studies, Dennis asked if I'd be interested in working as a research assistant on a project he was trying to 'finish up'. I was a PhD student. I'd do anything for \$24.15 an hour. So I began the task of sorting through a mountain of files Dennis handed me in a box labelled 'South-east Asian anthology'. What a box that turned out to be! That project is where the title of this talk comes from. I chose it for two reasons. Firstly because even though I've been a lapsed academic for some years now, I remember one key element—that it's important to always have a two-part title with a portentous colon in the middle. But secondly and more significantly I chose this title because it reflects some important things about the project, about our relationship to it, as Australians working on a project about Asia.

When I took the project on, it had the working title of ‘Paradigms of Identity: A Critical Anthology of Southeast Asian Literature’, with a colon and everything: we were well on our way. In simple terms, the goal was to include a sampling of poetry and fiction from each country in South-east Asia, with a critical commentary on the history and literature of the region to introduce each section. We aimed to produce a volume that, among other things, might be used in international schools and universities across the region.

As I started working my way through the box, I discovered something odd. Tim Winton. Joan London. Adam Aitken. Oh, yes, Dennis said. That’s part of what we’re doing—we’re making a claim for Australian literature to be seen as a Southeast Asian Literature. Whoa, I thought. I’ve only just got used to the idea that *Japan* is part of Asia and now you want to throw Australia in there as well? It’s a claim that’s still somewhat provocative, but which was more so when the project first began some fifteen years ago

We were Australians, editing (Dennis quickly and deftly managed to move me from research assistant to co-editor) an anthology of literatures from other cultures, inserting ourselves into their midst. In doing so, we had lots of issues to contend with. Many of our struggles—both practical and theoretical—with the project have had to do with concerns about authenticity and authority to speak, with sensitivities and hedging about our own positioning. To address some of these very real concerns, in each region we sought to appoint a local editor, someone with whom we could collaborate, someone who could help us negotiate the local creative and, in some cases, political landscape, who could work with us on translation where necessary, on whose judgement we could rely. This was an easy decision in principle, but finding, retaining, and working effectively with the editors was another matter. Communications in places such as Laos, Cambodia and Burma posed logistical problems. In some regions, we had to balance the competing interests of different interest groups, political factions, work out how to represent the cultural and linguistic diversity that was present, convince the literary

vanguard of certain nations that women writers most likely did exist somewhere amongst them, and other related challenges.

Somewhere along the way, we changed our title to 'Islands of Words'. We told ourselves it was because it had more shelf appeal, was more likely to catch the eye of a publisher, a marketplace. That was probably true. But it was also true that the authoritative certainty implied by 'Paradigms of Identity' had come to seem a little ridiculous. There was no paradigm here, only shifting sand—editors disappearing, new nations being formed, old regimes crumbling, new orders emerging. At one point, I was taken to task by a correspondent for adding, in an informal email, an apostrophe in the name of the newly formed 'Timor Leste'. Such things, I was told, are important. Good grief, I thought. What's more important is that we track down some literature, find some writers in the midst of the political manoeuvring, negotiate our way carefully through the various factions so as to avoid repercussions for our local collaborators. Nomenclature seemed the least of our concerns, and yet it was real. Burma/Myanmar, East Timor/Timor Leste—oh and by the way does Southeast Asia really exist anyway? What does it mean to talk about 'identity' in a linguistically, socially and culturally diverse region bound together by geographical proximity and in contemporary times a kind of utilitarianism, a nod to political and economic expediency?

The project continues. We often talk about the need to chronicle our many editorial adventures. The latest official output from it was a paper Dennis delivered at a recent symposium, which he aptly entitled 'A Jumble of Words'. This is where we have ended up in our travels across Southeast Asia—from paradigms to islands to jumbles, a movement away from certainty, from the initial conceptualisation of the project as a relatively simple one, to, in fact, the kind of amorphous beast I was in flight from when we first met. The difficulties we've had have something to say about the nature of the region, in all its complexity. But ultimately, the fact that the project simply refuses to roll over and die also says a lot about those relationships, I think, about an enduring faith in the importance of the arts in developing and sustaining them, and perhaps, too, something about Dennis himself.

We've had other journeys through Asia, Dennis and I—hosting a symposium on 'Literature and Culture in the Asia Pacific Region', co-editing a volume of essays from that symposium, *Beyond Good and Evil* (2005), developing and teaching a transnational course in Australian Literature for Chinese postgraduate students. And I hasten to add that Dennis was central to all these projects, along with others, while my role was often tangential.

And one day he said to me, you know, Meg, I think we should do something about Japan. Japan and Australia—a comparative study of contemporary literature. These are two countries, of course, with very different histories and cultures, and a violent opposition during World War II, and they are usually viewed in contrast with each other. But actually, Dennis said, I think they have a lot in common these days—they're highly interactive in tourism and trade, both geographically located in Asia, with complex relations of the present to their histories; both are modern, affluent, technologised nations; both are island nations participating in an internationalised economy; both have ageing societies, falling birthrates and fast-changing conceptions of sexuality, family and gender roles; both deeply concerned with nation-building, with changing conceptions of national identity—the list went on and on. Dennis said why don't we see what happens when we position Australia alongside Japan? Let's call our project 'From Yackandandah to Yokohama'.

But Dennis, I said, I thought Australia was in Southeast Asia?

The Asian/Australian work that Dennis and I have been involved in has had public outcomes—publications, symposia, academic courses and so on. But it's also had important personal outcomes as well, at the level of the individual. I don't know that I've ever met someone busier than Dennis, and I doubt that will change even in retirement. But he always has time for the personal. He's as likely to be rushing off to a policy meeting as he is to be replying to an email from an Indian student someone suggested get in touch with him about Austlit, or taking a Chinese student on a drive to the beach, just because he thinks they should see it before they go home. These connections, this time taken, it seems to me, is as important as any of it.

Last year I was in Japan on an Asialink Literature Residency, working on a novel set in the World War II period. During my stay it was reported to me that an Australian Japanologist, learning of my work, had responded, 'Why is she writing about the war? I thought we'd moved on from all that.' As if the complicated history between our two nations had somehow now been settled, fixed in place. But these negotiations, of course, continue—in the production of academic papers, in political exchange, in a casual conversation with a Japanese war veteran on a Sendai railway platform. In literature, as the saying goes, we take the temperature of a culture and a history and its response to that history, which is ongoing and never static and I would argue that the moment it becomes fixed and decided upon—the moment we decide we have a paradigm and not a jumble—that's when we know we have a problem.

And this has something to do with our jumbled island paradigms, with the changes we've seen in Southeast Asia through the lens of our anthology project—the circumstances of our editors, shifting political, social and economic climates and what they've meant for us in both practical and intellectual terms. These are large movements, visible to the contemporary eye. But what's less visible is also important, perhaps more so. And that's something literature is adept at taking the measure of. It's what's driven Dennis and me from Yackandandah to Yokohama and back again.

And thank you, Dennis, it's been an excellent journey.

Last year I found myself in a Kyoto bar after a reading, along with some other poetry groupies, among them a drunk and disenchanted Japanese English teacher. He wanted my help.

I want to do my PhD, he said. I want to go to Australia. I want to study Asian and Australian Literature. I am very interested in indigenously literatures. And—he was quite drunk at this point—I also like Irish literature. I don't have a good idea, but somehow I think I would like to do something.

I looked him in the eye. 'Talk to Dennis Haskell,' I said. 'He knows everything.'

## Ars Poetica

### Miriam Wei Wei Lo

Without the woman at the kitchen sink, nothing is possible.

The Filipino maid with bare hands in the black marble-tiled condominium.  
The Australian housewife in pink cotton-lined gloves in her suburban 4x2.  
Over a tub of river water in a Mumbai slum.  
Bent over a Blanco dishwasher in Berlin.  
Even the male kitchen hand at the back of a Perth cafe.

Without the toilet-cleaning, clothes-washing, food-cooking, child-minding  
kitchen sink woman—nothing.

Not the exalted professor writing dense LANGUAGE poems,  
Not the angry diatribe of an alienated neo-Beat, trying to resurrect Ginsberg,  
Not the sensitive haiku of a lover contemplating loss,  
Not the erudition of metaphor, not the surprise of simile,  
Not even the closing jaws of a perfect couplet.

Only the exponential curve of dirty dishes, pile after unwashed pile.

What then of the Art of Poetry?

Begin with her.

She is your mother, your sister, your girlfriend, your wife. She is yourself.

Listen. The sluice of water over cups and glasses, the light thwack of plastic,  
the thud of good china (for goodness sake, pick up a tea towel! Start drying).  
Listen. She sings as she washes. Remember her song.

## Sometimes Difficult, Always Diverse: Aspects of contemporary Australian Poetry 2010–11

**Paul Hetherington**

In commercial publishing terms, Australian poetry is failing to thrive. Poetry collections are not widely reviewed in Australian newspapers and even many literary periodicals only review a handful of poetry books every year. The poetry collections themselves, even those by well-known poets, are usually published by small presses and typically sell a few hundred copies. Literature Board subsidies—thank goodness for them—only make some poetry volumes barely viable.

Put simply, contemporary Australian poetry does not have many readers. What's more, this situation has prevailed for decades and is no secret. The bigger commercial publishers pulled out of publishing volumes of poetry in the 1980s and '90s and although some have published occasional poetry books since, this has usually reflected their investment in a writer of fiction or popular non-fiction who also happens to be a poet.

The 'Best of' poetry anthologies published by Black Inc. and University of Queensland Press have better sales figures than almost all volumes written by individual poets and they should be praised for putting serious and interesting contemporary poetry before the

general reader. I won't be reviewing these 'Best of' anthologies—they haven't been included among the volumes I've received and, in any case, I will mainly focus on full-length individual collections. The only problem with such anthologising is that poets in Australia—those fortunate enough to be anthologised—are becoming known by readers for a handful of poems rather than for their work as a whole. This suits some poets better than others.

The anthologising process tends to favour some writers' styles while other writers—who are perhaps quieter of voice, less fashionable or less demonstrative—are more often passed over by anthology editors. This situation reminds me of two of China's most famous poets, Li Bai and Du Fu in what was arguably the country's most significant period of cultural rebirth—the High T'ang. They were contemporaries and during their lifetime Li Bai was probably more famous than any other poet in the world. He has subsequently been one of the darlings of Chinese and Western anthologists. Du Fu was largely ignored by contemporary taste makers. Today, on the basis of perhaps one-tenth of his total output, Du Fu is widely recognised as one of China's greatest poets. So much for the vicissitudes of anthologising and literary fashion.

Given the issues I have sketched above, why are so many books of Australian poetry being published (this review will consider about 30 books, mainly from the second half of 2010 and the first half of 2011, and others were also published in this period)? I can think of no good answer unless it is that a minority of people believe that even in our globalised and materialist culture poetry amounts to a good deal more than sales returns—that it offers rewards that even 'poetic' works of fiction do not always offer. If this is true, it is despite the fact that a great deal of contemporary Australian poetry is relatively prosaic. Contemporary Australian poets have largely abandoned song—the basis of the ancient lyric tradition in countries as diverse as China and Greece—even more determinedly than their peers in the United Kingdom and America. The majority of Australian poets write poetry for the eye (or page) rather than the ear.

I suppose this is fair enough because we rarely sing poetry these days—or not modern poetry at any rate. Even the superb Elizabethan lyricists have largely fallen out of favour now that Shakespeare has been recast by many critics (and film directors) as a proto-modernist writer and as the pre-eminent Elizabethan (who last encountered Ben Johnson or John Dowland outside of a university or concert hall?). But, as has been observed before, the contemporary prevalence of ‘prosaic’ poetry is surely one reason why many people don’t buy much of it. Once poetry becomes, at least to the untrained eye, largely indistinguishable from prose—except that it is often more dense, oblique and in shorter lines—why would a notional ‘general’ reader prefer it to the latest novel?

If the books I am reviewing are any indication, contemporary Australian poetry has qualities that are always going to be hard to market. These include a persistent attentiveness to language and thought and ways of making telling cross-cultural connections. Poetry also speaks persistently of the past which, as these volumes demonstrate, is not a foreign country after all, even if some poets mine the experience of travelling to and from other countries in creating their work. And poetry is capable of an extraordinary variousness.

Most contemporary Australian poetry suits people who wish to work relatively hard at their reading and who enjoy encountering various and sometimes wayward forms of inventiveness as they do so. Poets from John Tranter to Emma Rooksby are trying things out; making and remaking their poetic voices in fresh and refreshing ways. The old-fashioned, rather masculine verities of Australian poetry—once dominated by relatively few poets who competed for meagre rewards—seems to be largely at an end (although the rewards for poets have hardly improved).

The poem, ‘Shapes Within a Pattern’ which emphasises the importance of observation, nicely introduces Katherine Gallagher’s *Carnival Edge*, a volume of new and selected poetry that draws on a four decades of writing. Gallagher is not as well known in Australia as she might be because of her long period of expatriation, mainly in London, but it is

gratifying to read a book of poetry that is straightforwardly and clearly written and which demands the same kind of careful attentiveness from readers that the poet has brought to the exercise of her craft.

Gallagher's works are often personal—there are poems about children, lovers and family—and are nuanced and reflective. Her 'Thinking of My Mother on the Anniversary of Her Death' moves subtly from recollection to reflection and the poem leaves the reader with the following delicate and affectionate lines:

Over the cloudbank it's candescent,  
close. I dare her to keep up with me.

She shuffles answers  
to fit my questions. We float,  
  
almost sisters  
in the glide of it.

Gallagher also writes a number of poems about travelling, and some about returning to Australia. Her work consistently conveys a sense of alert awareness even as it rarely claims more knowledge than the poet can demonstrate she has. If sometimes her poems finish with open endings and inconclusive statements my sense is that this is how the poet understands her world.

Another volume of new and selected poems is *Acts of Defiance* by Dennis Haskell. It includes a judicious selection from his total output and contains a brief introduction by Robert Gray. I have been reading Haskell's work for years, off and on, and he is no traditional lyricist. Yet Haskell certainly cares about the rhythm of his lines and how his poems are shaped. He deploys the imagist techniques so prevalent in contemporary poetry but does not make word-pictures just for the sake of it. His occasionally edgy, searching poetry is at its best when it pursues the existential questions that trouble humanity at large.

A relatively early poem, 'Visiting Friends at Henley' is a meditation about death and how it disconcerts people's ways of behaving and

being. 'The Call' transforms an occasion when the poet's young son calls out in his sleep into a meditation on the presence of God—'a word sunk deep in the blood.' The poem's final image of 'His body... in my hands' evokes for me that great Christian tradition of Pietà paintings and sculptures. Haskell's poetic voice is informed by an abiding—if occasionally tentative—tenderness and compassion. His work eschews the rather hackneyed masculinity that was a significant part of, and is still a conservative presence in, Australian poetic culture.

In 'Samuel Johnson in Marrickville' Haskell's colloquial tone and language conjures just a few spare facts of Johnson's biography and juxtaposes them superbly with scenes of modern urban and suburban life. The poem mixes desire, an awareness of the tawdriness and meaninglessness of much of human activity and an enabling urge for knowledge and transcendence. These last qualities are implied rather than stated and give the poem an earthy and memorable grandeur. Haskell also writes tenderly of love and, like Gallagher, persuasively of travel. His poems about other places are an exploration of the liminal territory between being and becoming, and between knowing and uncertainty. If Haskell is a critic of much of modernity, including the crasser aspects of modernity's preoccupation with money, he is also aware of himself as part of the modern zeitgeist, simultaneously involved and detached.

Robyn Rowland also recently published a volume of new and selected poetry, entitled *Seasons of Doubt and Burning*. In her poetry she often speaks about what has happened to her personally (the persona of many of these poems and their author is closely related), including her love affairs, her relationships with her parents, children and her friends. She also delves into large social and historical issues, including issues of social justice, and is not afraid to make poems about traumatic events such as the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires. There is a diaristic quality to some of her writing—for example in the excerpts from *Perverse Serenity*, a 'book-length narrative sequence' that narrates a woman's love relationships in Australia and

Ireland—that reminds me how well poetry has always spoken of the personal and the immediate.

Some poets use language more sparsely as they mature, but Rowland's recent poems, which open this volume, tend to be lush and sensuous. A characteristic image is of apricots that are 'sweet and hot on the tongue.' Rowland's preoccupations are often centred on the body and on her sensuous and sensual life, including poems that explicitly address desire and sexuality, along with sometimes difficult emotional experiences. Illness and crisis are also central to her work and, as a whole, this volume of poetry takes the reader on a complex and ardent journey with a poet who revels in the suggestive power of language. The laconic tonality of so much traditional Australian verse is challenged by Rowland's expansiveness. She is a poet who asks her reader to be involved and to care.

John Tranter's *Starlight: 150 Poems* follows closely on the heels of his award-winning *Urban Myths*. At the heart of the new volume is an extended sequence of poems, 'Contre-Baudelaire' that, in Tranter's words 'echo, respond to and sometimes argue with some poems from Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*.' This is an intriguing one-sided dialogue—Baudelaire's poems are not reproduced—during which Tranter produces some truly accomplished writing. He has always enjoyed working with a variety of forms and has often found starting-points for his poems in the work of others. The stimulus of working with Baudelaire's example brings particular emotional complexities to his work. While these poems are characteristically assertive, they are also exploratory and questioning and Tranter's characteristic control of form—especially of the poetic line—is much in evidence.

In the rest of the volume there is a poem that condenses T.S. Eliot's 'Four Quartets', a long series of poems entitled 'Speaking French' that use deliberate mistranslations of poems by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine and Mallarmé (again) as their points of departure, a poem that 'eviscerate[s]' then rewrites a poem of Ashbery's, and a group of poems that respond to various movies. All of this work is inventive, sometimes droll and occasionally caustic.

Two volumes of collected and selected poems have been published by UWA Publishing: the *Collected Poems: Francis Webb* and *Selected Poems of Dorothy Hewett*. Webb is an important Australian poet and this is the first authoritative edition of his poetry. The editor, Toby Davidson, has aimed ‘to restore the Webb corpus to its correct sequential order, with each poem in its final form’ and the volume contains helpful notes and a selection of unfinished poems, as well as all of Webb’s best-known works. Reading Webb in this generously laid-out and well-produced volume is thrilling. I have always enjoyed his inventiveness and mastery of the poetic line and, if occasionally his textures are clotted, and if he can sometimes be garrulous, pursuing the rhythmic drive of his metre and the expansiveness of generous and multiplying stanzas, this is usually in the service of registering complex poetic textures. This volume demonstrates, if the demonstration was needed, that Webb is one of the most significant of Australia’s twentieth-century poets. Deeply troubled in his life, often sublime in his writing, unfashionable in many of his preoccupations, he makes poetry with a music like a sonorous church organ.

Dorothy Hewett is an iconic Western Australian writer whose poetry deserves to be encapsulated in a handy volume of *Selected Poems*. Hewett’s daughter, Kate Lilley has selected and eloquently introduced the volume and it gives a good sense of Hewett’s poetic oeuvre and preoccupations. Even though she is a writer who benefits from being read whole (so many of her preoccupations are articulated within and across her individual collections), this selection shows how successful many of her inimitably-voiced individual poems are. Hewett’s mythopoeic tendencies are on display, as is her capacity to make strong narratives out of contemporary events. UWA Publishing should be congratulated for bringing Webb and Hewett freshly to us.

Edwin Wilson has also published a *New Selected Poems: a collection of flowers*, which collects a generous amount of his poetry written since 1967. His is poetry with a strong interest in the botanical world, in history and in the worlds of art and literature. His poetry is generally direct and engaging, and often formalist. If it is sometimes

understated there are particular pleasures to be gained from joining him in his meditations upon the natural world.

Another volume that focuses on the natural world is *Lines for Birds* by Barry Hill and John Wolseley. This is a beautiful book, largely due to its generous size, its landscape format and its gorgeous production qualities—allowing the book to do justice to Wolseley’s illustrations. For the purposes of this review, these may be read as a kind of visual poetry, mixing a sureness of line with, at times, a delightfully and artfully improvised air to allow one to see again—to re-imagine—the birds he depicts. Barry Hill’s poems are partly an account of the project of travelling and making that culminated in this volume, and partly a series of observations and reflections about the birds he sees and their lives—and also a response to Wolseley’s art. Such writing suits his observant eye and often terse and suggestive phrase making.

One of the most underrated of Australia’s group of established poets is the Jesuit Peter Steele. This may partly be because much of his poetry comments on the Christian story. In recent years Steele has published two volumes of unusually fine ekphrastic poetry (responding to a wide variety of artworks) and an impressive volume of selected poems that was awarded the Philip Hodgins medal. This new volume, *The Gossip and the Wine*, is characteristically discursive in mode and a number of poems continue his interest in responding to works of art. His poems are eloquent and informed by a relaxed erudition. For those who are unfamiliar with Steele’s work and would like to explore a more studied form of poetic utterance than is currently in vogue, this relatively accessible volume—reflective and probing as it is—is an excellent place to start.

Western Australian poet Shane McCauley’s sixth book of poetry reminds me that strong poetry is being published by poets who are not necessarily as well known as they deserve to be. He is an unusual poet, combining an urge towards essaying with a liking for the pithy phrase. And there is a meditative vein at the heart of his work; a tendency to ruminate. Numerous poems show the influence of other cultures and religions including, for example, those of Japan, the

Sufis and the Mughal Empire. McCauley's points of departure are often the writings of other poets or the paintings and music of artists and composers. Mallarmé features—as he does in John Tranter's volume—and so do Picasso, Celan, Rumi, Bocherini, Pessoa and Kalidasa. But if his inspiration is drawn from numerous other works and periods of history, his poems are his own. He has the capacity to bring distant concerns up to date; to make poems out of past material that comment incisively on the contemporary world—and also to write convincing love poems.

Tatjana Lukic lived in Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia and the Czech Republic and established herself as a poet in the former Yugoslavia in the 1980s before moving to Australia as a refugee in 1992. Her book, *la, la, la* (not, I suspect, the best possible title for this volume) contains a range of poems about dislocation and relocation. Lukic learnt English and began writing poetry in her adopted language—one result of which is this volume. Sadly, she died in 2008.

This book's structure and content reflect her life in Europe (its first section is called 'there'), her life in Australia (the second section is called 'here') and a group of more general poems (gathered under the title 'anywhere'). The book is uneven but never uninteresting. Its early poems take one into a consideration of human injustice, repression and violence—and also into Lukic's sense of her past. For example, the poem '1959' conjures her mother and her own gestation and birth. Others invoke the consequences of the wars and violence that ravaged Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1995. There is pathos in these poems and a sense of the futility of humanity's predilection for conflict. If, for Lukic, poetry is a way of speaking about such weighty matters, it is also highly personal:

i wish to tell about an ache in my chest  
 when i turn the pages of booklets of verse  
 about a nausea when I recall a rhyme  
 and how i heal this pain

(from 'is this important')

It is a significant achievement to learn a second poetic language, let alone to write tellingly in that language. It is a pity that Lukic didn't live long enough to have the opportunity to speak more about what her new country had brought her.

Rosanna Licari's *An Absence of Saints* is largely about the past and family life. She takes the reader on a poetic journey to Europe, including to Istria and Tyrol, and a subsequent journey of migration to Australia. In broad terms the volume's trajectory resembles Lukic's *la, la, la* and it, too, explores the awfulness of warfare and the hopelessness of loss. The first half of the book is nearly all a reconstruction of past circumstances. These poems do not entirely avoid sentimentality but a number are moving and salutary. Like Anna Kerdiyk Nicholson, Licari includes a few poems that reimagine Cook's voyage to Australia, mainly focusing on Joseph Banks and botanising. The volume's second half responds to the contemporary world. Licari's work remembers and records what she knows and believes.

The act of remembering and delineating migratory journeys to Australia is also a hallmark of *Ashes in the Air* by Ali Alizadeh, a Tehran-born Australian. This is a collection of tersely-written, direct poetry that lets the reader into poetic versions of Alizadeh's domestic and family life, and which also comments on culture, politics and society. The author is conscious of his status as a 'Muslim immigrant' (his phrase) and in one poem responds forcefully to this 'nomenclature.' Overall, Alizadeh persistently explores the significance of cultural, national and religious affiliations. Larger issues are often refracted through his personal experience and there is a sense throughout this volume that the poet is writing back to many of the people (and cultures) he has met or knows. Like so many of the poets being reviewed, he draws significant inspiration from a variety of international writers.

Caroline Caddy's often long-lined, and frequently broken-lined poetry in *Burning Bright* indicates how much she is a poet of landscapes and places. She considers the south west of Western Australia that she has written about previously, along with other

places, particularly China. The rhythms of her work have always been plain-spoken (and often fractured), made into poetry by the condensing effects of the forms she uses—juxtaposing observation, reflection and image-making in sweeping patterns. She builds stories in and across her poems and registers, as she does so, connections with the natural and wild world. At times her poetry documents close encounters ('Kittens' is an example), when her poetry is intimate and connected to small things. At other times her subject is the world-at-large. It is this that interests me most about her writing—the sense her poetry conveys that everything connects.

Fremantle Press has published John Mateer's collection of Australian poems published between 1989 and 2009. This is artfully constructed poetry of a controlled alienation and scepticism, often plainly written and plain speaking. It has an almost moralising tendency at times, and a willed dreaming about how humanity might be better than it is. Mateer is alert to the injustices of colonisation and, in the Australian context, is particularly aware of the injustices inflicted by Europeans on Australia's Indigenous population. This is poetry that eschews almost all Romantic ideas and makes few lyrical gestures. Its settings are often urban and shifting; their imagery is frequently suggestive of violence and damage. Yet the poems are also genuinely reflective. Mateer is an articulate poet-commentator and annotator of cross-cultural issues and causes.

There have been many extended verse narratives and verse novels written by Australian poets in the last two decades, the most well-known of them being Dorothy Porter's *The Monkey's Mask*. Anna Kerdijk Nicholson's *Possession: Poems about the voyage of Lt James Cook in the Endeavour 1768–1771* travels imaginatively with James Cook on his voyage aboard the *Endeavour*, which brought him to Australia in 1770. This is an ambitious subject for a sequence of poems, not least because Cook made his own record of his journey in his *Endeavour* journal, now one of the great treasures of the National Library's Manuscript Collection. It is a discontinuous

sequence, some of the poems set on Cook's voyage, others located in the Kangaroo Valley (and even Andalucia) in the twenty-first century. This foregrounding of contemporary domestic life, including daily problems and accompanying metaphysical reflections, does not always sit easily with the evocation of the eighteenth century.

Kerdijk Nicholson's episodic and often evocative sequence begins by foregrounding the ambition, violence and sexual activities of those who took part in Cook's voyages, without ever really characterising these people as complex individuals. Along the way it examines questions about what anyone can claim, name, define or know, offering a critique of colonialism. The book even attempts to reclaim aspects of the worlds of the indigenous communities that Cook's voyage, generally speaking, helped to weaken—bringing, as it did, venereal disease and social dislocation.

Philip Salom's long-standing interest in exploring poetry's narrative possibilities is confirmed by his new volume, *Keepers*. The setting for this work is a School of Arts peopled by academics, students and a variety of others, including a cleaner and print-room assistant who is central to the work's narrative structure. As he proceeds, Salom makes various comments on literature and art and some of the issues attending to the creative process and mentions a variety of influential historical figures, such as Balzac, Artemisia Gentileschi and Francis Webb. This is knowing, often ironic and sharp-eyed writing that demonstrates Salom's poetic versatility while drawing on a wide range of references. There are frequent moments of acute observation and good humour that help to leaven the volume's more serious, sometimes satirical, purposes.

Grant Caldwell's *Glass Clouds* contains a variety of poems that comment on modernity with considerable irony and wit. This is serious, sometimes mordant poetry that dares the reader to take it seriously. One of the recurrent ideas in this volume is how elusive much of experience (and perception) is, and how hard it is to find stable meanings. A poem entitled 'essay on the determinate and language' begins:

to say what you mean (when  
 you're not sure what you (mean  
 when everything sounds so (trite  
 how beautiful is an egg and (why

It is pleasing to follow the poet's reasoning in this work—if that's what it is—and the volume also contains political poems, an enjoyable sequence of haiku and works, such as 'the politics of mist', that take the reader into shifting and uncertain places: 'when the statues fall/there is water in the air/everyone is wild with light.'

Susan Hampton's *News of the Insect World* takes the idea of the life of insects (and other creatures) as a starting point for a series of poems that reflect broadly on modern society, patterns of human behaviour, and occasions of affection and intimacy. The poems are sometimes chatty, sometimes meditative, and they include many details of the natural world. 'Springtails' opens with a strong narrative impetus ('As a boy, the entomologist/was given a magnifying glass/then binoculars then a microscope') and is soon considering an electron microscope's view of moth's wings, that are 'furry [and] an abstract painting.' This linking of the small (and even the tiny) with the large, is one of Hampton's recurrent strategies in this volume and it yields a variety of insights. The poems follow intricate pathways in the natural world into a broader consideration of that larger and idiosyncratic species, *Homo sapiens*.

Claire Potter's *Swallow* has some of Hampton's interest in the natural world but possesses a tonality all of its own. It combines a fastidious sensibility with a variety of sensuous, even earthy preoccupations, conjuring and anatomising a world of relationships, memory, encounters and observations. Potter dwells on the flow and forms of language, as if tracing its lineaments. In 'Old Bee Farm', for example, we read of 'lids she opened and closed gentle as damaged shutters/thatched choirs of bees hung unwoke from sleep.' At times, Potter's is a poetry of indirection; at times it seems to constitute an elusive and searching narrative of loss, and at times it plays with

the sounds and connotations of language. A number of poems take their cues from the work of other writers—Robert Adamson, Charles Bukowski, Heinrich Heine and Francis Webb, among others. This book confirms that Australian poetry is becoming increasingly international as it finds new ways of being and speaking.

Ron Pretty has long been an important figure in Australian poetry because of his encouragement and mentoring of a wide range of poets, his work as an editor of anthologies and magazines and his activities as a book publisher and teacher. He is also, of course, a poet, and the poems in *Postcards from the Centre* explore international issues of warfare and injustice, offer social critiques and examine the import of history. His poetic methods are sometimes challenging. His 'Bierkeller 1933' reflects on the burning of books by the Nazis—especially those by Jewish authors—but also destabilises the reader's sense of time and space as it takes us into the presence of both Hitler and Einstein, as if this Bierkeller has been created as a symbolic space through a trick of relativity. Perhaps this is the poem's point: that the burning of books in 1933 is an analogue for our own age and that human beings continue to experience cultural destruction and neglect. Pretty is certainly conscious of the significance of the poetic traditions that enrich our culture and language, referring to a number of poets, including Yeats and Seferis.

He also makes personal poems, such as 'Pulse', which begins: 'A night so still I can hear my pulse like/some distant machinery breathing.' It is characteristic that Pretty steps back from himself in this poem in order to consider better what he knows. Many of his works seem both private in the force of their convictions and public in their address.

Other volumes of poetry deserve more attention than I can give them here. Angela Smith's *The Geometry of Flight* is a collection of often short, personal, sometimes incisive poems that alludes to and draws inspiration from a variety of writers. The final section, 'Night-side, a diary' presents a series of poems about breast cancer, its treatment and its consequences. Earlier sections of the book

explore ideas of family, the past and intimate relationships. Cameron Lowe's *Porch Music* is an enjoyable volume that explores some of the ways we know and name things. His poetic voice is lucid and appealingly intimate and nuanced. He is also observant, capable of giving appropriate weight to the smaller aspects of experience. He handles ideas deftly and his understated irony adds complexity to his work. Another book, *I Painted Unafraid* by Robyn Cadwalller, is nicely modulated and engaging.

Under its previous incarnation as Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle Press partly made its name through the numerous poets it published, helping to redefine Western Australian literary culture in the 1970s, '80s and '90s. In recent years the diversity of their poetry list has markedly decreased (a small number of writers such as John Kinsella, Tracy Ryan, John Mateer and Caroline Caddy are regularly published). At times it has seemed that the Press has no longer actively pursued diversity in its poetry list. Why this happened will have to be the subject of a history of the Press at a later date. A new collection, *New Poets*, features the work of Emma Rooksby, Scott Patrick-Mitchell and J.P. Quinton, all of whom produce competent first collections. It is a pity that these writers are jammed together in the one volume (no doubt for reasons of cost).

Various chapbooks completed the pile of books that were sent to me for review. David McCooley's chapbook, *Graphic* is a skilled, self-aware sequence responding, as he says, 'sometimes obliquely, to various films by Stanley Kubrick' (and it is also a kind of companion to Maria Takolander's 'Alien Signals: Poems after Stanley Kubrick' published in 2009). Jamie King-Holden's *Chemistry* is an inventive group of poems primarily about family life and the past. And Blue Tongue Press published satisfying chapbooks by Susan McMichael (*Green Hair*), Kaye Mill (*Heartscapes*) and Merle Goldsmith (*Pebbles on the Roof*).

Overall, there are many connections between all of these books, despite their diversity. Memory features strongly and many of the poets speak with and through the voices of other writers. Australian

poetry now carries with it a sense of looking forwards and outwards and is finding new models and images for itself. It will not make poets much money, or even bring them many readers, but it speaks in complex and convincing ways of who we are.

### **Poetry received 2010–2011**

*Titles marks with an asterisk have been mentioned in the review.*

- \*Alizadeh, Ali. 2011. *Ashes in the Air*, St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press.
- \*Caddy, Caroline. 2010. *Burning Bright*, Fremantle: Fremantle Press.
- \*Cadwallar, Robyn. 2010. *I Painted Unafraid*, Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press.
- \*Caldwell, Grant. 2010. *Glass Clouds*, Parkville, Vic: Five Islands Press.
- \*Gallagher, Katherine. 2010. *Carnival Edge: New & Selected Poems*, Todmorden: Arc Publications.
- \*Goldsmith, Merle. 2009. *Pebbles on the Roof*, Armidale, NSW: Blue Tongue Press.
- \*Hampton, Susan. 2009. *News of the Insect World and Other Poems*, Parkville, Vic: Five Islands Press.
- Hartshorne, Kevin. 2010. *Jesus and Muhammad Died Twice: World History in Verse*, Kevin Hartshorne Publications.
- \*Haskell, Dennis. 2010. *Acts of Defiance: New & Selected Poems*, London: Salt Publishing.
- \*Hewett, Dorothy. 2010. *Selected Poems of Dorothy Hewett*, Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing.
- \*Hill, Barry and Wolseley, John. 2011, *Lines for Birds: Poems and Paintings*, Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing.
- \*King-Holden, Jamie. 2011. *Chemistry*, Geelong, Vic: Whitmore Press.
- \*Licari, Rosanna. 2010. *An Absence of Saints*, St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press.
- \*Lowe, Cameron. 2010. *Porch Music*, Geelong, Vic: Whitmore Press.
- \*Lukic, Tatjana. 2009. *la, la, la*, Parkville, Vic: Five Islands Press.

- \*Mateer, John. 2010. *The West: Australian Poems 1989-2009*, Fremantle: Fremantle Press.
- \*Nicholson, Anna Kerdijk. 2010. *Possession*, Parkville, Vic: Five Islands Press.
- \*McCauley, Shane. 2010. *The Drunken Elk*, Cottesloe, WA: Sunline Press.
- \*McCooley, David. 2010. *Graphic*, Geelong: Whitmore Press.
- \*McMichael, Susan. 2010. *Green Hair*, Armidale, NSW: Blue Tongue Press.
- \*Mill, Kaye. *Heartscapes* 2010. Armidale, NSW: Blue Tongue Press.
- \*Mitchell, Scott-Patrick. 2010. '{where n equals} a determinacy of poetry' in 1. *Fremantle Poets: New Poets*, Fremantle: Fremantle Press, pp. 63–119.
- \*Quinton, J. P. 2010. 'Little River' in 1. *Fremantle Poets: New Poets*, Fremantle: Fremantle Press, pp. 121–187.
- \*Potter, Claire. 2010. *Swallow*, Parkville, Vic: Five Islands Press.
- \*Pretty, Ron. 2010. *Postcards from the Centre*, Farmborough Hts, NSW: Profile Poetry.
- \*Rooksby, Emma. 2010. 'Time Will Tell' in 1. *Fremantle Poets: New Poets*, Fremantle: Fremantle Press, pp. 17–61.
- \*Rowland, Robyn. 2010. *Seasons of Doubt and Burning*, Parkville, Vic: Five Islands Press.
- \*Salom, Philip. 2010. *Keepers*, Glebe, NSW: Puncher & Wattmann.
- \*Smith, Angela. 2010. *The Geometry of Flight*, Mornington, Vic: Pulse Publications.
- \*Steele, Peter. 2010. *The Gossip and the Wine*, St Kilda, Vic: John Leonard Press.
- \*Tranter, John. 2010. *Starlight: 150 Poems*, St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press.
- \*Webb, Francis. 2011. *Collected Poems: Francis Webb*, Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing.
- \*Wilson, Edwin. 2010. *New Selected Poems: A Collection of Flowers 1967–2009*, Lane Cove, NSW: Woodbine Press.

poetry

## Kit Kelen

comes from a shallow place  
so easily missed  
like marks passed over  
for want of glasses  
it's never unexpected  
till we see the wall is there  
these men shaped like sledgehammers  
with poetry on their backs  
bashing head against brick  
till the message is clear

## After a Child's Death

**Adrian Caesar**

In early winter, a day raw as grief,  
he lounges, killing time with a useless book,  
looking up sees through the long window  
two children at play, older sister, younger brother,  
helmeted they ride the skate board,  
sometimes taking turns, others together,  
the small boy crouched at her feet  
staring up in wonder as they career  
down the long path that leads to common ground.  
She is tall and slender, twice her brother's size.  
Soon will come the quakes, the seismic shifts  
that mean the end of girlhood. But not yet.  
For now she's only riding at the edge  
of danger, basking safe in her brother's  
admiration, innocent of any adult gaze.

He goes back to his book, wishing the light  
would fall, counting the hours until the first  
drink which will be, he hopes, more anaesthetic  
than the words that drag before his eyes,  
until some intimation makes him look again,  
and there caught in the frame, solitary,  
he sees her waiting. As if there's nothing else  
to do she begins to dance, her white-shod feet  
make moving angles, her body, as if it can't  
contain the life within, betrays a shiver,

like water falling she sashays, and her arms  
join the rhythmic beat, while he, the only  
audience, stands to watch more closely,  
thinking to see the earphones that have inspired  
this impromptu gambol. But there are none.  
She stops as suddenly as she began.  
Her brother re-appears; their play resumes.  
He returns to his languid reading,  
though what he sees aren't words but this image  
squirreled against the darkening night,  
the cold and dreary days to come:  
a young girl dancing to her own tune,  
keeping time to an invisible music.

## Love Letter

Rob Wallis

What he sees from the window  
holds him transfixed  
his body iced up enough  
to suggest *rigor mortis*

unable to move  
he still has the letter  
glued to his hand  
(an excuse of sorts  
for not rushing outside)  
in a room that threatens  
a total eclipse  
as if someone had  
switched daylight off

the snake tossed into the air  
like a comma of rope  
the dog a mirage of fur  
and teeth and snapping jaws

in the seconds it takes  
to re-read the sentence  
the one that renders all  
other sentences invisible  
the words inside the sentence  
rearing up fangs bared  
to deliver their venom

the snake has vanished leaving  
the dog stretched out on the lawn  
its legs twitching in the last  
running thrusts of its death

## Red-Capped Plover

*At Barwon Heads*

**Diane Fahey**

That one red-cap on the shore's silver,  
a smallness set against so much vastness,  
stayed focal long after its quick flight  
had defeated my eyes and it vanished  
through a pinpoint high above the mouth,  
marrying lightness with light.

Nearby, in nest-scrapes under the cliffs,  
red-caps raise their young, ready to draw off  
dogs or marauding birds by miming  
a wounded wing. Although, in my field guide,  
the map of Australia is dark with them,  
in this place they're threatened. I imagine  
dots of space appearing, spreading over  
that blackness—*here*, then *there*, and *there...*

## Country Roads, Take me Home: Prisons, Movement and Memory

### Blaze Kwaymullina

I rub my shaking hands together and breathe, leaving a fine mist hanging momentarily in the air before she softly fades away. She clings to other places though, like the windows of my car that have become opaque from the white, wintery sheen. It doesn't snow here in Western Australia, but in the winter mornings the cold air lies across the land like a blanket, wrapping us all up in her presence. My hands twitch as I stick the keys in the ignition of my old Volvo. I miss twice before I get the keys in, spin them down and listen as the engine tries to turn over. In the distance, in time to the engine's beat, I hear the song of the Magpie. If you live in the South West of Western Australia, you get used to waking up to the song of the magpie. Nyungar people call magpie *Kulbardi*, and they tell a story about him singing the sun up to shine on the earth—but it's not my story to tell (Collard 7). In my language, that magpie we call him *kurrpanti*. I'm from the north, a vast granite country where the sun beats down endlessly, a land of rocky hills and plains, spinifex and sudden floods.

The engine finally clicks over and roars to life. Magpie stops singing and instead Crow, sitting on my letterbox, calls out: 'Warghhhhhh.' I wave a hand at Crow as I stick the car into reverse. I'm not familiar with

any Magpie stories from my way, but Crow or *wangkurna* as we know him, is filled with a cheeky wisdom in our stories. Both birds can be messengers, or heralds of things to come. As I pull out onto the road it occurs to me that perhaps they are seeing me off on the journey I am about to undertake. Magpie with his beautiful voice and Crow with his raucous one.

The stereo wakes too and the CD begins to play. But instead of my usual CD of Indigenous hip-hop I hear the twangy sound of a John Denver classic blare out of the speakers.

*Country roads, take me home, to the place I belong, West Virginia,  
Mountain Mama, take me home, country roads.*

My sister, a Country and Western fan, must have left her CD in my car. I let the song play as I drive out in the early morning. It seems fitting, Magpie singing, Crow warbling, the engine drumming overlaid by the twangy sounds of Country and Western. I'll be hitting the country roads today on the long drive from Fremantle to Albany. I'm doing research on colonial prisons in Western Australia that were used to lock up Aboriginal people in the old days. Though most are now crumbling ruins, the earth and stones of these places remain. These sites are usually perceived as empty of people and empty of meaning—a half seen, half remembered country. A lot of places are like this in Australia, a lot of people too. Half seen and half remembered, we serve as the disjunctive points where two realities overlap.

It's a view where the passage of time has shorn the experience of the past from the present, leaving only a fading reminder of what was, an interesting snapshot for tourists. This is a perception every bit as colonial as the prison itself was. A methodology of disconnection predicated on a simple idea:

*If only we can forget  
then one day  
no one is left  
responsible*

Only ruins are left, broken stone and rusted bars, signposts piercing through the blanket of the new overlaid upon the old. We survived though...so did the ruins. I gaze out my car window as the suburbs of Perth move swiftly through my vision.

I *see* houses, roads, traffic lights  
But I *perceive* worlds colliding  
layering *inside* one another

Meaning and experience are not isolated or contained relationships that fade easily into the march of time and progress. They are embedded in *ngurra* (Country), in the land and people, in the rocks and mortar of the prison ruins, in the sacred sites that lie underneath the skyscrapers, in the songlines that our freeways, highways and roads traverse, in the water we drink and the air we breathe. It's easy to fall into the rhetoric of progress, where the sacred site is *replaced* by the skyscraper, the songline *replaced* by the freeway, where the old gives way to the new. But life is not circumscribed by absolute transitions.

One thing does not *replace* another  
they continue to exist within the same frame  
Distinct but not *separate*  
the ruins of buildings and the ruins of men

It is important for me to visit ruins of colonial prisons rather than simply park myself in a colonial archive. The sites have a story to tell that I will not find in an administrative file. The experience of Aboriginal men in these places is not distant from me, walled away in a separate temporal frame. To accept this notion is to imprison these men in place and time, to position them across an unbridgeable chasm. The chasm though, is merely a matter of perception. In an Indigenous sense 'the past is not another Country – it is our own' (Dixon 15).

As I drive through Fremantle towards the highway that will take me to Albany I am aware of series of cycles turning in relation to

one another, of the heavy movement of chained men across the vast expanse of the West, of the movement of my family across time and space, and my own movement now intersecting with these travel lines. The rubber of my car tyres echoes the movement of colonial forms of transport. The boats used to bring Aboriginal people from the north to the south, the hooting of the trains, the footsteps of men force marched across *ngurra* (Country) chained by their ankles, wrists and necks. And underneath these footsteps the deeper, steady beat of the songlines filled with the voices of the old people singing up *ngurra*.

The songlines are the paths the Ancestors Beings walked when they created the world. Some of them spread out into the sea, into the coral, foam and salt and out to the islands that drift off the coast. It was out here on the seas that the strangers first arrived in cycles of exploration and destruction as seafarers from various European nations lost their ships and their lives upon our reefs.

A building stands perched high upon a hill behind me overlooking both the town and sea. It was the first public building in Western Australia, built in 1830. A prison, built in a circle—‘The Roundhouse’ they call it. Circles and shapes that fold back upon themselves are a feature of Aboriginal philosophy. But the circle the strangers bought with them was broken; fixed. Our circles move; one thing gives way to another, only to begin again.

The ‘Roundhouse’ is static  
 the circle is fixed  
 there is no end, no movement  
 only emptiness and disconnection

How strange must it have appeared to Nyungar people when it was first built? It did not take long for them to see the inside of it, as they became some of its earliest occupants. One of them was a man named Calyute who led a raid on a flour mill owned by Mr George Shenton. For this crime Calyute was ‘...taken to St Georges Terrace,

tied to a whipping post, and given 60 lashes with a knotted rope' (Green 93). He was then held a hostage in the Roundhouse prison in order to enforce the good behaviour of the Murray River tribe. The historian Neville Green relates an interesting story here:

Throughout the long weeks of incarceration his friends never abandoned him. During the day they remained hidden in the bush beyond Fremantle, but soon after dark they came close to the walls of the Round House Prison and softly cooed the sharp whip-like call of the Australian bush, listening then for the answering call that assured them that Calyute was still alive (Green 93).

What was happening behind the walls? Was he still alive? It's easy to imagine the uncertainty these proud Murray River men must have felt. Later that year, in 1834, James Stirling would lead a military action against Calyute and his people resulting in a massacre. The sound of horses running, guns firing, the movements of new relationships in space, intersecting, cutting, obscuring older ones.

Across time these relationships represent themselves in symbols that we consume without understanding their significance. '*Stirling*' Highway is a main artery for traffic into Perth, and I drive this colonial highway every day to arrive at a colonial house where I work—Shenton House. George Shenton, the man who was attacked by Calyute on the raid on his mill, also had a house on the banks of the Swan River. This house is now part of the University of Western Australia and, in a great historical irony, houses the School of Indigenous Studies where I am employed.

Everyday I travel *Stirling's* highway  
and arrive at *Shenton's* House  
cycles of relationships overlapping and intersecting

These are travel lines built into physical structures that obscure the bigger story they connect to, where over time...

*the highway is simply a highway  
and the house is simply a house.*

But the names mean something to me, as do the ghosts and the ideas they hold. My relatives came through the Roundhouse on their way to other places of confinement, as did many men from the north. A movement that connects me to the shadow I drive in, to the building on the hill, the *broken circle*, where once Calyute was interred.

The car pulls away from Fremantle and Perth. The Country begins to change.

I am heading to the outskirts of the old colony rather than staying in its centre. There is a web that can be traced along these highways and roads to places far from Perth, that connects back to the prisons here. As the Swan River Colony expanded prisons dotted the frontiers of territory occupied by colonists. A prison solely for Aboriginal men was opened on Rottneest Island, known to Nyungar peoples as *Wadjemup*, in 1838. This was soon followed by other prisons in the south-west, at Guildford (1841), Albany (1850) and York, Bunbury and Busselton (1879). During the 1870s the frontiers of settlement began to push into the north west of the state and four northern prisons were opened at Roebourne (1881), Derby (1887), Wyndham (1888) and Carnarvon (1890) (Thomas and Stewart 14).

While *Wadjemup* was the only prison solely for Aboriginal prisoners many other prisons contained what were called ‘native cells’ that were used to segregate Aboriginal people from other prisoners, and functioned as a prison within a prison. In this way Aboriginal prisoners were triply ensconced—trapped under colonial control, in the prison world, and in a special room in the prison world:

A world within  
a world  
within a world  
I got no way *back*

Suddenly the car is much colder than it should be. I pull over to the side of the road to examine the small triangle part of my back window that was smashed last week. I had taped up the hole with piles of masking tape and cardboard but it must have blown off. There's no way I can drive with this hole in the window—it's bloody freezing already. I have some tape, but no cardboard. What I do have though is a car full of books, rough sketches, and notes hastily scrawled on torn edges of paper. Somewhere along the way my car became a moving library filled with my strange ideas, and texts on history and imprisonment. I rifle through my papers and haul out a hefty text, it's a photocopy of a diary of a colonial policeman who patrolled the north and 'subdued the natives'. I tape the pages up and fill the hole, hit the pedal and I'm off again roaring down the freeway. I go fast to see if my makeshift job will hold. Surprisingly it does.

Colonial history is *hardy*  
and good at keeping things *out*

The diary that flutters, taped to my window, is an individual story. A lot of Australian history is like that, individual and disconnected. I've read and reread the diary of that policeman, but am always struck by his failure to appreciate the larger system he was a part of. The prisons in the north and the south of the state did not function in isolation from one another. They functioned together in a gulag-like network of prisons that isolated and contained Aboriginal resistance by channeling Aboriginal men away from centres of conflict. The travel lines converged on the Round House and from there, at the heart of the network, lay *Wadjemup*, where most Aboriginal offenders were transported.

From this coast they *came*  
To die upon our reefs  
And now  
upon these reefs  
It was *We*  
who were *exiled*

I have an old newspaper article I dug out years ago sitting in the box in the back of the car that was published in the *Herald* newspaper in 1875:

Rottnest...is called the 'Black Man's Grave', and may not after all be such a delightful spot to pass an idle hour as one might fancy. It is indeed a place of painful memories...Of Rottnest we may say that we can see nothing and prove nothing...But, if we will be taught by the testimony of all past history, this much is certain—the most effective way to make men cruel is to place them in absolute authority over helpless prisoners hidden from public view (Joske, Jeffery and Hoffman 76).

The diary taped to the window flutters in time with my thoughts as the wind presses it in and out against the window frame. The noise irritates me for some strange reason, this diary of the man from the north, who was an active participant in this process of exile.

Did you *know*?  
What would *become*  
When *you* delivered them on the chain?  
Roebourne to Wadjemup  
*across* foam and salt  
Or, was it...  
Just another day at *work*?

My words echo in the car accusingly, my voice sounding odd, strained. I can feel the diary back there. Its eyes on the back of my neck as I drive.

*Flutter*  
*Flutter*  
*Flutter*

Blaze Kwaymullina

It moves in the window in time with the wind, saying the same thing *over* and *over*. Finally, I break free of the city and the bush stretches in front of me, out and away into the horizon.

I smile.

The feeling of heading out bush fills me as I speed down a road now lined with trees and scrub. My reverie is broken by the sound of the police diary moving angrily.

*FLUTTER!*

*FLUTTER!*

*FLUTTER!*

‘Shut up!’ I yell over my shoulder with a grin.

‘You’re coming with me with whether you like it or not!’

## **Welcome to Albany**

Most of the day has passed by the time I finally arrive in Albany. It’s a beautiful Country that reaches down to the saltwater on one side and stretches out to the majestic Stirling ranges on the other. Now that I am driving more slowly the police diary in the back only makes small sounds with the wind.

Subdued?

*Out OF place?*

He patrolled the north this man, and I have brought him to the south as my reluctant companion. ‘Don’t worry mate, I won’t ask you to get out of the car,’ I say over my shoulder, laughing aloud at my own joke.

The diary is *silent*.

I don't think he has much of a sense of humour.

The last time I was in Albany I stood up on a lookout at the top of a hill and gazed into the distance to witness a storm raging over the Stirling ranges. I think it would be hard for anyone who thinks of the land as inert to witness such a storm and remained unmoved. I am a stranger here in this saltwater place, my people are a freshwater mob belonging to the river, but I respect this Country, I see its power in the tempest of the storm and in the waves that make their slow way to the shore from the deep sea. It's a profound place belonging to the Minang, a proud and strong people.

While most West Australians mark the beginning of colonisation in the West with the arrival of James Stirling in 1829, a military outpost had already been established in Albany in 1826 due to fear that the French might claim the west coast of Australia.

I had arrived to view part of this story—the old Albany gaol, a structure used to contain and control. The gaol was unusual in the sense that it had been well preserved and was still structurally sound. More than a crumbling ruin, the prison itself had survived. There is an interesting history down here. When you read through the prison and police files in the archives you see constant flare-ups of resistance throughout the south-west, resistance that in one form or another continues today. In particular York and Albany stand out as recurring sites of resistance. They had some wild fellas down here, strong and clever men and women who did not bow easily to colonial rule. Like Jack Mindun who had spent some time in the old Albany Gaol and was later sent to *Wadjemup*. He escaped from Rottneest and made it all the way back to Ongerup, where he remained until he passed on (Dempster 2).

Escape stories are common in the West. I have yet to come across a prison that held Aboriginal people in substantial numbers that did not include records of escapes. Some stories include mass breakouts. At Roebourne Gaol on Christmas Day 1901, forty four Aboriginal prisoners escaped and made their way to freedom. Other escape stories have sadder endings. The bones of two men were found out in the bush of Nullagine in January 1889, still bound together by chains

around their necks (Special Report Book 363/1–5). It's possible they were related to me, as Nullagine is a part of my Country. And if they were not related to me in life, then they are in death because their bones lie in the Country that birthed me. It's a powerful image, the bones of two men still bound by the chain; a stark reminder of how profoundly traumatic the prison experience was for Aboriginal people and their desperation to escape it. Imprisonment was a punishment that had no parallel in Indigenous society—the very idea was alien.

Climb walls  
break bars  
flee chained into the desert night  
swim from *Wadjemup*  
See my Country again

It was starting to get dark now. The sun was setting over the beautiful ocean as my mind carried the image of men fleeing into the darkness, a night silence only broken by the sound of heavy breathing and the clinking of the chain. I breathed out, misting the air with my breath, and rubbed a hand on my chest trying to loosen up a tightness I felt lodged there. I made my way over to the local caravan park and pitched a tent.

That night I dreamed. I stood high in the sky looking down upon the West. I saw men from the north moving south on the chain. I saw a giant snake in the Pilbara watching the men and I knew it was related to some of them as kin. That it was a part of them and as they suffered it would suffer, that as these men suffered so would their Country and family and all the relationships they connected to. I could see nothing was contained or isolated but that the earth was covered by a vibrant web of law, language and relationships that moved and touched one another like old friends. But there were some things that did not move. I saw black boxes across the land, in a place of colour they stood out, greying the landscape around them. Where

they touched the web of life they frayed its edges, and I could see faint paths connecting the black boxes and I realised, they were lines of travel—the trauma lines of the marches of chained men that had left a scar.

I awoke clammy, tired and sweating in my tent, even though the morning chill had crept in. I heard Magpie singing outside and for a moment I didn't know where I was, as I experienced a strange sense of *deja vu* with the previous morning. It was a pecking sound that had awoken me: the sound and the infamous Albany cold that penetrated my tent.

Tap. Tap

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I peered out of my tent and saw Crow tapping his beak on the diary taped to the car window. 'Hey!' I sang out. But Crow being Crow ignored me, quickly poking more holes in the diary as if he expected some juicy worm to suddenly appear from inside.

'Shoo,' I said waving my arm and scaring him off. The diary was in a sorry state now, there were small holes all over it. I put my eye up to one hole and could see straight through into the empty space behind it. 'Sorry mate.' I said touching the diary; he was a right mess now, this once proud story. But he was still holding up alright; hopefully he would still keep most of the cold out.

I wrapped myself up against the chill and made my way into town for some breakfast. The dream clung to my mind, more real than the bacon and eggs that I began to eat. I could still taste the dream and it left my morning tea tasting bland and watery. I drew out some paper and began to sketch, trying to make sense of it. After some time I realised I was looking at two sets of patterns laid over each other like designs on transparent paper. One pattern was the imprint of creation, the lines of movement that the Ancestor beings travelled when they created the world. As they travelled they engaged in actions at specific sites, creating the sacred places, and each sacred place is

connected along that line of movement. These are the movements and sites that form the pattern of creation—the web of life—it is the relationships of the universe writ upon Country. Laid on top of these were the black boxes, which I realised must be what prisons look like in the eyes of my old people. While the creation pattern functions as an interconnected web of relationships, the prisons appeared to have the opposite effect. They broke down relationships, they removed people from the context of Country and family and isolated them, to the degree that was possible, from the web of life. And the black boxes were connected to each other by the trails of trauma the men marched into the earth.

This was dangerous. If prisons were truly the black boxes of my dream, then they were far more insidious than a simple force of destruction. Creation and destruction are part of the pattern of creation, the Ancestors both created and destroyed, and in doing so laid down the fundamental basis of movement and change across the passage of cycles. However, prisons did not simply destroy, they attacked the way relationships connect, inhibiting the way one thing can relate to another, initiating a process of anti-life that damages the very fabric of creation. I reached into my bag and pulled out a well-worn book, one I have reread over the years, by a brilliant senior Aboriginal Law man from the Kimberley who has since passed on. I thumb my way over to one passage in particular:

We grow up with that spirit of caring and warmth of the sun, fire and love from our family. Those are the growth elements, the elements of Wandjina. Wandjina can't walk in jails. When Aboriginies are cut off from that, they want to kill themselves. They just die then and go to Dulugun. There is only that one channel. And they are all coming back (Mowaljarlai 165).

I often find myself only capable of comprehending small pieces at a time, and it is only now, in light of my dream, that that particular passage makes sense to me.

Prisons *hurt* relationships  
Hard to *feel* my Country  
Death *release*  
Find my way *back*

It was all a bit too much to think about this early in the morning. I sit back and empty my mind and try to enjoy my breakfast. Soon I would walk through town and down to the old Gaol that waited for me on the edge of the inland sea.

### **The Old Albany Gaol**

I stand.  
*Watching*  
Out on the fringe  
*Waiting*

In the north you never approach a sacred site without caution, even if you have permission to be there. And if you don't have permission, you should never be there. A similar sense of caution applies to disturbed sites, places where people died or are buried, or sites where people suffered. They are not places to visit lightly. Prisons are disturbed sites by their fundamental nature. Suffering, in the sense of feeling and memory, are not trapped within the physical body. Country holds memory. The trauma of the old gaol remains vested in the physical structure of the gaol and the structure of the land.

Trauma does not *evaporate* over time  
like water under heat  
Trauma is damaged *relationships*  
you *heal* relationships  
by interaction in Country

There is also a distressing continuity here. A short drive from the old Albany gaol is the new Albany regional prison. A similar situation exists in Roebourne, where the old and the new stand in close proximity. In both Albany and Roebourne there are Aboriginal prisoners in the modern prisons who had ancestors locked up in the old colonial ones. A regime of incarceration stretching more than one hundred years.

These questions run through my mind as I wait. I'm waiting on a *feeling*. Giving time to whatever spirits reside in this place to take a look at me before I wander in. 'Wargghhhh.' Crow is back perched on a tree, cocking his head to the side as he eyeballs me. I *feel* like its time to go in so I head to the front of the gaol and pass through the door, leaving one world and entering another. What feeling and memory is locked inside the walls of the prison in front of me? I pay a small fee to a volunteer who is manning the counter in the Foyer. I know they have a separate Aboriginal cell here and ask the volunteer if they have anything written up about it. They have pamphlets about various parts of the prison history but on the experience of Aboriginal prisoners the pamphlets are silent. I make my way towards the Aboriginal cell. To get to it I have to pass through the convict wing and I immediately get a terrible, sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

*Sick*  
*sweat*  
*Get out!*

It feels hostile and I hurry through to the outer yard. In front of me is the Aboriginal cell. The cell has a second story, which was used to hold the mentally ill. Before I enter the cell I announce who I am so whoever's in there knows. I step in anticipating the same feeling as the convict cell but instead there is nothing. It feels just like an empty cell. A slim ray of light is beading through a window high up on the wall. I look down and see a metal bar running the length of the

floor up against the back wall. It was common practice in colonial times to chain Aboriginal prisoners even while they were inside a cell. Strangely, a sense of peace comes over me as I stand there and I feel welcomed. I interpret this as an acknowledgement that there are spirits in here with me and it's their way of saying 'welcome brother, we understand why you are here.' I find my expectations overturned. The words of a man imprisoned in a different time and space appear in my mind and I whisper them into this silent space.

I am the interstellar wanderer!  
 They have tightly bound my body,  
 But my soul is beyond their power  
 (Solzhenitsyn 595)

The timber-framed cell has carvings scribed into the wood with Aboriginal designs. They are perhaps the oldest example of Aboriginal prison art in Australia. Perhaps, in the eyes of the prison guards, and the passing tourists, the carved images are assumed to be something prisoners did in order to pass the tedium of incarceration. I see them in a different light, as clever and subversive works. I fold my sketchbook out and look back at my two patterns transposed on top of each other. Prisons oppose the creation pattern because they inhibit the expression and connection between relationships. But the carvings etched on the walls indicate that the effect is not total or absolute. The carvings are works that subvert the prison environment, forging relationships from the inside to the outside. By carving a Dreaming Ancestor, or a story or a song into the space of the cell a person can breach their containment. The idea brings to my mind a story a Nyungar colleague of mine, who worked in prisons, once told me and allowed me to write down.

I saw first hand prisoners who had been made to move away from country and family and were incarcerated in some one

else's country, miles from their homelands, within a tight, heavily guarded institution. The 'soul sickness' that developed was hard to shake, resulting in mental health issues whilst in prison, which continued once outside of it. I asked this prisoner, did he know why he was feeling this way, and his reply was 'I'm heartsick for country, I can't see the stars in the night sky. I know they're not from my part of county, but maybe I will get better if I could see them.' So I got him moved to another cell, where this could happen and within a few weeks, he got better (Mia).

Both the carvings and the vision of the stars provide interesting examples of the way relationships with Country can be maintained and forged in even the most hostile of environments. I expected to find trauma in this old gaol, and I have, but also intelligent and planned resistance, a methodical application of Aboriginal systems towards survival. On my way out of the Gaol I overheard a tourist saying to his wife: 'If only these walls could speak.' I remained silent as I walked by.

I walk out of the prison and wander down to a beach that overlooks the inland sea down from the old gaol. After a while an older Aboriginal guy spots me and walks over, I can tell by looking at him that he has had quite a hard life.

'Hey there brother!' he yells as he ambles up and takes a seat.

'Hey brother.' I reply shaking his outstretched hand.

'You a Nyungar?' he asks

'Nah I'm from the Pilbara, Marble Bar way.'

'A northerner eh? Too many northerners down here taking all the good jobs!'

'Yeah well they say the same thing about you Nyungars taking all the mining jobs up north!' I reply with a smile and he starts to chuckle.

'Yeah well we're all mixed up now aren't we. Don't know whether we're coming or going. This is my country down here, all of this,' he says waving his hand around.

‘Whatcha down this way young fella?’

‘I’m doing a bit of writing on how they used to lock up our mob in the old days, like at that old gaol up there.’

‘Oh so you educated then?’

‘Yeah’

‘Well they tried to educate me but it didn’t work.’ He says with a serious face.

‘How come?’ I reply as I notice a cheeky glint in his eye.

‘They said I was too blackwards!’ He says roaring with laughter. His laughter is infectious and I laugh as well.

‘They locked me up too you know. Took me away and put me in the home like a prisoner. I was locked up just like those fellas in the place up there in the old days,’ he says seriously switching topics suddenly, his gazing resting on the old gaol in the distance.

‘Makes me sick that place I don’t go near it.’ He says and we fall into silence. A lot of people walked by us as we sat there, taking great pains to walk a large circle around the seat before setting foot back on the path. Careful not to make eye contact with the two Aboriginal men sitting on the seat. I had grown a rather large beard so I guess I looked the part a bit more than I normally would. The old bloke yells out to one couple.

‘Don’t worry you fullas I’m not contagious!’

That only made them walk even faster. You had to laugh, it was all so ridiculous sometimes. We talked for a while longer then the old bloke shook my hand and left. It was only later that I realised I hadn’t even gotten his name.

## **Take me Home**

I pack up my tent and my gear back at the caravan park. But before I head off I flip through two of the books I’ve been reading. One is *Prison Writings* by Leonard Peltier a Native American falsely imprisoned in the United States. The other is ‘Killing Time’ by Nyungar poet Graeme Dixon who spent many years locked up in one way or another. Both

are inspirational books. One passage by Leonard Peltier sticks out for me.

We don't need more prisons. We need more compassion. That compassion is our own highest possibility...We need each other. Each of us is responsible for what happens on this earth. We are each absolutely essential, each totally irreplaceable (Peltier 208).

Graeme also talks about this connection between all of creation in his poetry:

...for without your humanity  
to witness these marvels  
the joke's on us  
because it's our senses  
that give the universe substance  
and as each one of us  
so dies  
so does part of the vision  
of all things splendour  
and nothing more exists  
in so called reality  
but guard it carefully  
because the Dreaming continues  
far beyond those bars!  
(Dixon 69)

When we lock people up and dehumanise them we lessen all of us. Not just human beings, but all of the pattern of creation. We unpluck the ties that bind the universe together. I haul myself into the car for the trip back, taking the longer route to give me time to think. Halfway along the road I feel the wind roaring back in through the car and I look over my shoulder to see the diary has gone. He lost his final purchase and was blown away. I wonder if he had simply had enough and just *let go*.

I don't stop to tape something  
*different* over the gap  
 I just let the wind blow in  
 I want to *feel* the cold  
 I want to *feel* alive

I get lost and it takes me a long time to get back home. By the time I get near Perth it's dark, the moon is up in the sky and the streets are empty as I drive through the suburbs of Perth. I pull into my driveway and while Magpie is not there to greet me I see Crow, almost invisible in the darkness, lurking in the front yard. I get that warm feeling you get when you come home, and realise that's part of what has been taken from people denied their home, denied their Country. Lenard Peltier once wrote 'To those of us locked away in here, there's nothing more important than being remembered' (Peltier 208). We remember brother because what happened to you is a part of all of us. It's written into creation, in the scar lines across the earth. And maybe, in that remembering and acknowledging, there is healing. For those that are locked up and can't go home and for those that are lost and can't find it any more, I put in my sister's CD one last time and play the last few lines of John Denver's song. If they physically cannot get home then maybe their spirits can follow the song and find their way back to that warm feeling, back to their home where their relatives wait to welcome them at the end of that old Country road.

*Take me home, country roads*  
*Take me home, now country roads*  
*Take me home, now country roads.*

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# The Night Keeper

Jonathan Hadwen

It was never late until my parents' light went out,  
and the presence of the dark shuffled up the stairs,  
climbed the walls  
and hung from the ceiling,

The floors became heavy  
and their noise monstrous,  
ringing loneliness like an alarm  
throughout each room of the blackened house,

These nights cradled me in their darkness,  
put arms around the thing inside me  
that could not sleep,  
taught me to loath and love a world alone,

I worked each evening on the idea of one day being  
the master of light in my own house,  
but counted with each cautious step  
the distance between those slumbering, functioning minds  
and my own,

I heard the clocks strike me off  
as I waded from room to room,  
knowing this was my world,  
I was the thief  
who each night stole an entire house,  
knowing each morning  
I would have to give it back.

# Cairn(s): Arcadian Nocturne

**Matthew Hall**

## **I**

sometimes light  
    stretched across a twisted frame  
    of earth  
comes into itself  
    forms a mark  
    of relevance  
I want another witness  
for which to see

## **II**

sounds perpetual  
where we drown in ourselves  
    soot black mouths  
    breath of tides  
    I slip under  
your words of consolation

## **III**

alone  
towards an axe of light  
splitting the stone-black forest  
    you have carried  
    me  
into a future which burns  
like brass

The memory of earth

## Annamaria Weldon

*We cannot list the victims' names, we cannot call it a Massacre Site or even a Significant Aboriginal Site, the site is only allowed to be known as a Battle Site. [www.pinjarramassacresite.com](http://www.pinjarramassacresite.com)*

### 1

The wetlands have watermarked her. Rivers fill her pen. Pinjarra's lakes and creeks won't stay asleep in their own beds. Her pages are soaked with run-off. She is an inlet where tides rise and fall, a blue eye drifted by clouds. The wild goes walkabout through her notebooks, scattering grain and spores along the margins. She hears trees shed bark, seed cases crack and split, tails slithering through sedges.

Fox and heron make her rooms thoroughfares. Claws scrape dry sand, paws scuffle leaf litter. She tracks small prints that vanish at the edge of soft and damp where savoury marsh samphire is spreading into the corners of poems.

### 2

In the morning now she wakes with the scent of river gums in her sheets. The ink stains on her pillows are rimmed with salt. Through her Bilya Maadjit flows transparent as rain,

cold and clear as the first day she entered  
it, turning her fluvial, insistent as  
blood but deeper than veins, inscribing her  
ochre mapping the history of pain.

Under eucalypt branches, the white threads  
of stamen stitch tannin water, but this  
Kambarang sunlight is leaded with shades  
and a silence like sleep leans on the green  
terrace where mia mias clustered before,  
the morning that those musket shots shattered.

### 3

She is earth from earth, feels the truth buried  
here. Holds her pen like a spade, to disturb  
the surface, shovels until nib hits bone  
and ground cries out this was a massacre.

Flooded gums have forested the red dirt  
on her desk. Their roots, webbed over its edge  
and anchored in air, hang in tangled skeins  
the way that hair comes loose when women weep  
hiding their eyes, covering the babies  
that cling to them as they crouch in hollows  
beneath the Murray's banks where she sees them  
in the watery reflections of trees,  
their footholds eroded by time and grief,  
yet still alive in the memory of earth.

Background note: I was shown this place by Nyungar Bindjareb leader and cultural teacher George Walley who, in telling me its history, named the dwellings, the season and the river in his traditional language.

## Open heart

Pat Jacobs

Waking:  
The return to consciousness was sudden. My eyes opened. I had no sense of an attached body. I could feel nothing, I was a mind. Seeing. Alive. Alert. Banks of instrumentation surrounded me. The room—high ceilinged—wide, stretched away into shadow. I was curious. I wanted to know if the surgery had been successful, if there had been complications. I was aware that the tube of the ventilator was resting in the corner of my mouth. The ventilator—which had been the thing I feared most; the inhibitor of speech, as if not to be able to speak was a sort of death—was there. I was conscious of it, but it didn't panic me. I was surviving. A nurse, red-haired, with a soft brogue, spoke to me. Momentarily we stared at each other. What would she make of that look? Could she, with her experience in intensive care, gauge exactly how aware I was, how conscious I was?

The second time I woke the world had expanded. The nurse with the Irish accent smiled at me, said: I'm going to take the tube out. Family faces loomed, smiling. They were pleased with me. A familiar doctor in a long white coat said '...that will see you through'. I had prospects. I asked the red-haired nurse what the time was. Eleven o'clock, she said.

Day or night? I asked.

Day.

Day! But what day? A piece of time had been snipped out of my continuum. What had been done in my absence? Where had I been?

For two days, it seems, I had lingered in a dark realm, the body monitored by machines, the mysterious buoyancy of blood pressure failing to rise, the dancing cursor on the screen staying flat. No wonder!

Early in the morning of the first day, the surgeon had sawed through my sternum. My ribs had been forced apart. My protective cage breached. My left lung was deflated. Reaching in, he had taken my heart in his hand—my good heart, which had stood me in such faithful stead—and turned it over. He attached an apparatus to it, gripping one section and stopping its pulse, the muscular clench which is all we've really got to work with. Like a fist, clenching. That's us—a muscle clenching, non-stop, from the womb to the grave. On the stilled surface of the heart he attached the vein stripped from my leg, a fine thread stitched with a microscopic needle. The end of an artery pumping into my chest wall was detached and sewn directly onto the surface of the heart. Then, I guess he began the mopping up. I can't imagine the state of my chest cavity. Was there blood sloshing around? Clamps, swabs. All the paraphernalia we are familiar with now. How was my lung re-inflated? What happened to my ribs. Did they spring closed, when released? Having been wrenched open like the ribs on a shipwreck—sprawling, no longer functional—did they have to be forced back into place and wired shut to protect the heart and lungs? No longer open. Closed to all viewers, like a museum on the day you choose to visit. I am beginning to feel like that: an exhibit in a museum of survivors.

On the third day I was moved into the recovery ward with three other heart surgery patients. The third day is the turning point; the resurrection of hope. With the resurrection of hope comes awareness of the body, the drag of tubes, drains and wires emerging from one's flesh, an iron weight of pain and injury stretching from under the

chin to the navel. How can the body survive such a cleaving wound? I don't speak. There is no-one to speak to. Each of the four patients is silent, enveloped in a bewildered state of suspension while the body decides what it can bear. There is an occasional groan of pain. Fear is part of it in this ward, the High Dependency Unit. We depend on the nurse, her presence; someone is looking after us. We are somebody's responsibility. We can't do this alone.

If we stay too long here, it means we are not doing well. With increasing awareness we count the hours, the steps forward that mark our improvement. Still it is a shock when the physiotherapist says 'we are going to get you up for a walk'. My body seems to weigh a ton. It is inconceivable that I am expected to walk. But I do. Along the corridor, the physiotherapist holding me up, my hospital gown loose around me, my hair in greasy threads around my face. It doesn't matter. I am not myself, the self I am is missing. I am a cardio-thoracic unit in recovery. For all they know I look like this all the time: gaunt and sallow; my movements a slow stumble: a grotesque from outer suburbia. A grim desperation pushes me on. I must do what I am asked. I am a believer. I will be resurrected.

The nurses in this unit are confident and competent. They are the elite of nursing. They are proficient technocrats. They tinker and adjust their valves, coolly keeping you alive. The old days when they nonchalantly flicked a fingernail against the hypodermic syringe of morphine are passed; an anachronism. Nowadays it is the acronym we must understand: having a MI (myocardial infarction-heart attack) due to IDI (ischemic heart disease). If you survive the MI, you could be lucky and have a CABG (pronounced cabbage) I am an OPCAB (Off pump coronary artery bypass); it is an advantage over being placed on the heart-lung machine. The OCTUPUS tissue stabiliser makes this possible—the heart never missed a beat! The master surgeon sews a graft across the blocked artery 1.5 mm in diameter. He bypasses a second blockage in an artery 2 mm in diameter. His sewing is daring and heroic. Life hangs by the merest thread. The elite technocrats know so much, but they don't know how I feel. They monitor and

check and fill in charts. They know—from experience—where I am on the ratio of excellent, good, or fair recovery. They tick my boxes. On a scale of ten, they know exactly where my pain fits—but they don't know how I feel, they don't ask if I am intact. For all they know I could be heart-broken. Shattered—like my rib-cage. My defenses demolished. My secret heartaches exposed. Everything hurts. I have a recurring image, sharp and clear, of water pouring from my eyes. The water is a torrent. It sparkles, a crystal cascade. It is unstoppable. Necessary. Am I weeping?

Something can happen to the eyes when they are closed for too long. They dry up. The aqueous humour—evaporates? instead of being replaced every four hours. This liquid, essential to the efficient working of the eye, suddenly is no longer replenishing itself. If the aqueous humour is vanishing, what of the vitreous humour—the blood supply? With dry eyes, I dream of cascades of crystalline tears pouring from my eyes. All the tears I have never shed. It is a shock to understand that flesh is fragile; that 'alive and well' is intransitive. Life, the dancing cursor, has no real substance in this place. It can falter and stop any second. Sight depends on a few hit and miss events, like light hitting the right spot on the retina, adequate aqueous humour and so on; being able to imagine something. Then, of course, the brain takes a stab at it. Does everyone know that sight is subjective, that the perception of an object—an image—is an hypothesis, a dynamic searching for the best interpretation of the available data according to what you know. What you see is not always what you get. Ha Ha.

I hate this slap-dash approach to life and language. I want beauty, exactitude, clarity. I want meaning to be explicit. How can we deny the meaning of the words. If what happens becomes just a compilation of data, with all meaning suspended, nothing matters. Unspeakable things can happen.

I drag my leaden body up the corridor of the cardio-thoracic unit, trailing my tubes and wires and heart monitor, wanting to do everything right, pretending to be unconcerned, waiting for someone to say I am doing well, to say I'm looking much better, instead of

ignoring me. I feel the difference between us: the strong hurrying bodies of the nurses and my slow stumble. They are well and I am ill. There is such a distance. I have crossed over the border. I feel acutely the loss of belonging to the healthy. It is a danger zone, this space between, this borderland between two states: life, with its pulsing vibrant, changing panorama—and death, the shadowland, a perpetual winter of grey and white—like a Siberian landscape? A Russian knowing...

My first shower leaves me trembling with exhaustion. I am grievously wounded. I want nothing more than to be allowed to lie in bed, my apparatus of drips and tubes arranged around me. My torso is filled with pain. I note the colour dimension of pain. Clearly, acute pain is red—scarlet. Deep crimson, like blood I suppose. The book I took with me into theatre has been found and I go, quite easily and quickly, into the chill world of Denmark; a strange freezing world of snow and music. I lie, unmoving, casting vivid images on my retina, creating them from the words the author uses: The lute player, the purity of his music. Snow and ice—of immense depth and cold—which I have never experienced. Music and Silence. The title is the reason I have chosen this book. Music and silence will heal me, besides, the other book written by this author was called Restoration! I grab, occasionally, at meaningless portents. Maybe all this coldness will slow my heartbeat; the irregular pulse, the hair trigger response which gets me into trouble. The deep suspended animation of being on ice, the whiting out of snow. Different. So different to the heat and colour where I come from.

In the dragon-fly season the air is full of them, in a frenzy to fulfill their cycle. The dragon-fly season comes after the end of the wet season when the days are balmy and mild, fresh, after the punishing humidity of the monsoon. At night, heavy precipitation drenches everything. The temperature can drop to a chilling two or three degrees. The grass grows almost visibly, dense, green. Birds, in a

ceaseless noisy hurry, blanket lagoons and creeks. There is a plethora of life, frightening in its superabundance and intensity. There is so much life here that, inevitably, some of it will be wasted, churned into a kind of organic stew that, in turn, will feed the remainder. It is raw and harsh, but there is also a beauty that makes the heart ache with tenderness for such a place. The land is suffused with energy the way the body is suffused with blood when it is thriving.

Outside the sterile, silent cocoon of coronary care it is February—a heatwave. I am sealed off from it in this inner room with no windows, muted artificial light, electronic equipment. The nurse tells me the temperature is in the forties for the fourth day. Children are back at school. The nurse works quietly, concentrating, going from one to the other of her four patients. Two of the men are having problems, something is wrong. Anxiety ticks in my mind, but I turn back to *Music and Silence: Denmark*, the frozen country where I can feel no pain. The black tree trunks are a fine tracery on the white ground. Frederiksborg castle, so bleak; the cold malice in the story. I am transported into this alien frozen world—it passes the time. A Russian intern brings his group of students to my bedside and discusses the procedure. He pokes the wound, with its profusion of wires and tubes, the wired-together bones, the sutured skin, looking for fluid, or infection. I can see that he is quite indifferent to how I feel. He hurts me, this Russian doctor, and doesn't seem aware that he has caused me such distress. I am nothing to him but I am everything to me. This terrible indifference to inflicting pain causes me to lose something, a little of my confidence perhaps, a little of my faith... If my pain matters to no-one, who will notice if my recovery falters? For the first time I am afraid. I am in the high dependence ward, in the confined space with the muted light. The four patients face each other, two on either side with their array of monitoring machines. We can't move. We are helpless. It's a standoff. Who will inch over the cusp of recovery first and move on to the next stage?

Visitors come briefly into the room: close family members. They look alarmed, are wordless. What can they say? I will not—out of

stubbornness—ease their discomfort. I will not say 'I am fine', 'it doesn't hurt' 'I will be home soon'—'don't worry'. In the to-and-fro-ing of words, a denial is being manufactured and I refuse, this one time, to be a part of it; this dialogue that puts a safe distance between the wounded and the observer—the disease and the unease of the onlooker. A heartfelt response is somehow....not seemly, almost a transgression. We are a people who practice the art of 'looking on'. We have a history of 'looking on'. We have 'looked on' at unconscionable acts of cruelty. I think about SIEV-X, I think about the women and children, their journey—their hope of a better life—their drowning in a sea of indifference. I can't get it out of my mind that we 'looked on'; that we engaged in a dialogue that enabled us to feel nothing. Crossing the border cost them everything. They didn't matter.

Cough! The nurse insists. There is fluid there. The bottom of your left lung has collapsed, she says. Cough! The pain takes my breath away. The two halves of my chest are wired together but I feel torn asunder.

The skin, smooth and intact, has been sliced through, its value and meaning compromised. It has held me in—until now. I had no sense of its beauty and fragility before this occasion. The youthful, lustrous sheath, with its intricate whorls and creases, has worn and frayed with age, but now, now, it has been ruthlessly cut and pushed aside. An extraordinary opening up has taken place. I am open to all possibilities. This boundary between the inner and outer world has, astonishingly, been severed, and in the severing, its wholeness, its innocence, has been forever lost. This skin will bear the marks; the outer signs and cicatrices of interior adjustments. Inwardly I have been re-arranged. Consciousness has been suspended, banished to a limbo, a deep sleep of terrifying solitude. Or, hurtled to a collective of consciousnesses twittering with fright. Where was 'I'? Who knew my fears and sensitivities? How could they be sure of recovering the right 'I'?

The man across from me has developed asthma. His wife has been called. A nurse finishes her shift and leaves—abruptly. I can sense

her utter exhaustion. She cannot take another minute. She flees with relief. Who can blame her? I read the book, fingers steadying it on a pillow. The lute player freezing in his cellar below the king's chamber, playing the delicate melodies the King loves, the sound finding its way up through the brass piping, like the tortuous plumbing of the heart's circulation system. The story is strange, strange enough to hold my thoughts in check. But I do think, even so. I listen to the man in the next bed struggling for breath. I think of the women holding their children up from the water as long as they could, their garments trailing in the water. The moment when they knew they—and their children—would die. The man is coughing. The wife cries: do something! A doctor comes... Everyone is agitated. The evening nurse checks each patient, speaking a few words. She brings each of us a cup of tea and a sandwich. She is calm and soothing, not fazed by the crisis. Alone, she will steer us through the next few hours of the night. We are, I imagine, not patients but passengers on a cosmic flight held captive in this capsule by the gravity of the situation. Quite suddenly I want, desperately, to be out of here, at least to reach a destination. At ten o'clock, before she leaves, the nurse comes around. Speaking our name, she touches each one of us on the hand, or the forehead, and wishes us a good night. Does she know, has she any idea what her touch means to us? Our skin has been tormented. It craves tenderness. Our spirit is low. Her kindness heals us.

It is another day. We have no clock or radio to tell the time.. This is not a recuperation ward. It is a survival ward; a place of trial. Tea is brought, and cold hard toast. The asthmatic patient is sleeping peacefully alongside me. Across the aisle, the two men stare back. There is a touch of hostility. It is a standoff. The morning nurse is brisk and efficient. She has a timetable and we have to fit it. Four people must be dragged to the shower and dragged back, trailing I.V. stands and drips, wires protruding from wounded chests. The shower process, in a room cluttered with equipment, is so painful and dehumanizing that I begin to shake, my body is rebelling. It is too much trauma. I feel de-personalised. I am not free. I understand as

never before the pain of those held against their will, the terrible loss of self hood, when our coverings are taken away and our vulnerable skin is exposed, our damaged bodies revealed. We have been taken across the border. This is no-man's land.

There is a long window in the room. I can see sky, pierced by the campanile of the university. I have been transported to the coronary care ward. From my bed the rectangle of the window is like a large watercolour: the sky, a soft hazy blue, terracotta daub of roofs, a mid line of grey-green trees and in the foreground a dominating mist of lilac, blue, mauve, violet, overwhelming the eye. Jacarandas...I rest. My eyes drink in the colours of the landscape. I feel very weak and tired. I understand that I am presumed to be out of danger. I am happy and grateful to have been successfully resurrected—but I am filled with sorrow, my chest hurts with it. My heart aches. It is not fair that I should be resurrected, at great expense, and the women and children of SIEV-X were left to drift on the tide, It is said that during the night when a large number of people were still alive in the water, vessels came and shone lights on the people and then...went away, without attempting a rescue.

It is not inappropriate that the loss of the SIEV-X people is contiguous with my recovery. Their deaths demand recognition. Their wasted lives matter to me. I can't accept my recovery without mourning the shame of their loss.

The Russian intern came back with his coterie of students. I had thought he was, perhaps, a hallucination, a portent from no-man's land across the border, the shadowed Russian knowing...He was real enough. My look must have told him I would not tolerate being prodded. I feel very well thank you, I said politely, drawing the sheet to my chin.

It is not superficial, this opening up of the self; piercing the boundary which separates the inner and the outer world. Recovery is difficult and not always what one might expect. The wound has closed, but...I am not the same.

necessary

## Janet Jackson

Its eyes are orange stones,  
staring nowhere and everywhere,  
hiding a mystery,  
a mind.

Every feather that lines its back,  
creates its wings, defines its tail  
is black: an ancient  
and sacred darkness.

Gripping the rim of the birdbath  
it stretches its Nick Cave neck  
and caws the old long notes  
that mark the morning.

Wanting water, willy-wagtails  
in prim little aprons flit,  
flutter, chitter,  
fly at it.

Balanced, silent, glaring,  
dagging its beak at them  
only when necessary, it continues  
to take its drink.

Sundays

Caitlin Maling

waiting  
for my father  
to be late home  
from surfing  
my mother  
would cut the sky  
to ribbons  
each sunday  
she would take  
her sewing outside  
and lay it on  
the glass table  
and with the kitchen scissors  
tear silver  
through the fabric  
i would lie  
under the table  
and with  
each precise injury  
the cloth  
bled sunlight  
all over me  
she was always  
one of the  
wise women  
from the end of the world

picking apart  
all she  
created  
she would never  
turn her head  
to see  
if he had  
come through the door

Introduced

**Anthony Lynch**

**Rats**

We swept away shit  
gathered in corners  
like wild rice.  
Fed them greens  
shaken from a box  
to stop the 3am whittling  
of joists behind walls.  
The worst was the litter  
with its half-dead.  
I buried them one  
by one in the neighbour's paddock.  
No matter how deep,  
in the night  
something dug them up.

**Canola**

There, suddenly perfect,  
as if sprayed from a can.  
More brilliant than a tub  
of margarine, fitter than ever  
since a pre-season  
in the lab.

Anthony Lynch

I love that blazing paddock,  
treeless, with a two-storey stuck  
in the middle, a kind of big  
mid-American import.

### **Sheep**

Pleading with day, by night  
they chew through our sleep.  
Suckle, butt heads.  
Mount. Break, again,  
the pump at the trough.  
You once freed one  
from barbed wire  
and it hurtled blindly  
back into the fence.  
Sometimes we stare at each other,  
mutually unfathomable.  
Their trails have hoof-like logic,  
ramming the earth, but often  
the greenest grass is elsewhere.  
Philip K. Dick's were electric.  
Here's one lining the creek bed  
unplugged by a fox.

### **Lamas**

Platypus of the paddock,  
kitted with necks  
borrowed from giraffes,  
their eyes do effortless 360s  
like a bird's.  
The brown one you call

Pie Face for the whip of cream  
on its chocolate head  
watches, a faggot  
of boxthorn shackled to its hind.  
Sounds its one-note whinny  
like a truck in reverse.

### **Foxes**

In the middle  
of a ploughed paddock  
a cub in the sun  
scratching, our dog  
delirious on the chain. Later  
you played shepherd  
and spooked one stalking  
the flock. More often  
we see them flung  
on the shoulder  
of a newly widened road,  
as if accessorising  
progress.

### **Hares**

Before dusk is their time,  
vellum antennae making a run for it.  
Their droppings collect  
like carefully gathered seed,  
the land sown with hollows.  
Yesterday one lay  
beside the house,  
pupils alive with flies.

It had taken bait  
and suddenly we understood  
the thumping in the night.

### **Bees**

Not the native kind,  
they installed themselves between loft floor  
and ceiling boards.  
The backyard became a contest  
and the burly man was sent for.  
We had heard of gentle smokings,  
like those of a peace pipe.  
Instead, a cube of pyrethrum,  
cans of home brand spray.  
*Believe me*, he said,  
*it's best*. Sobbing, you went to bed.  
I made him tea with four sugars  
until the fury died.  
Later we swept bodies,  
removed the strange cumulous  
of hive. It was like something  
from a sci-fi. White, alien,  
beautiful.

Sanskrit

Susan Hawthorne

The language is perpendicular—  
the roots elude her, the gerunds  
are thick with meaning she slips

and falls crashing to the ground.  
Picking herself up, she climbs  
a conjugation, declines a declension

all the while, the endings are tangling.  
Seven mountains she has crossed, each  
one higher than the last. The participles

present not too much challenge, but  
the passive is aggressive. Now and then  
she has etymological epiphanies,

blinding insight and then finds  
it was the wrong form, the wrong verb,  
an unknown Vedic version.

She has taken to reading the dictionary  
forwards, backwards, horizontally and  
vertically, even then the *sandhi*—

internal and external—takes her on  
another spin down the rock wall.  
Falling is easy, she hopes she never lands.

From Stroke Poems

**Aidan Coleman**

**Finger Exercises**

My fingers rear up  
contrarily:  
tarantula or papal blessing.

Like a statue  
my hand unfreezes  
slow.

Millimetres, days  
and the drift of continents.

So I might learn to tie a shoelace,  
button,  
point,  
be fluent with change.

**Mirror**

I forget to watch my face  
while talking, picture it fitting my  
better words.

Mirrors shock me back  
to this:  
the dinghy of lips  
on a choppy ocean.

Late and slugged with fatigue,  
I ice the down-side of a smile  
up.

### **Reading**

Like nervous dragonflies

the eyes  
over the dangers of this page

A deep breath in...

Then mount  
the wobbly  
tightrope  
bicycle of speech

### **Victor Harbour**

I'm quiet at the centre  
of the garrulous evening,  
like contentment,  
like envy.

Through the day, I talk  
to my hand,  
practice my sounds  
in the empty house.

Dusk draws the water  
closer, the tea-box houses  
dull and rise to a  
glittering heap.

The sea is the place  
to take your losses:  
how it connects  
and the dead are there.

All night, the house fights  
with itself.  
My sleep fails  
at every angle.

The pine outside  
my window  
has a thousand black  
snowflake hands.

Midday, I jog the gum  
of the surf, taste  
blood, and stumble  
under the weight of a body.

Innovation meets tradition in Brenda Walker's  
*The Wing of Night*

Clare Rhoden

Australian literature of the Great War seems out of step with its counterparts from Britain and other engaged nations. Australian accounts, to the present, rely largely on a classical heroic tradition long abandoned by others, who prefer to express their disillusionment by rejecting romantic 'glorious war' notions and emphasising the sordid realities of conflict. However, the heroic features of most Anzac stories form only part of the distinctive Australian style. Recognisable Anzac tropes persist even in modern works that inevitably convey something of today's attitudes to war in general, and to the Great War in particular. Diverging from a number of Anzac features described in this essay while also complying with others, Brenda Walker's *The Wing of Night* (2005) represents a new direction in Australian Great War fiction, one which speaks cogently of the emotional as well as physical costs of war.

### **Great War writing**

The Great War is often read as an admonitory exemplar of war's horrors and futility. Those who experienced that war became disillusioned

with classical notions, and canonical<sup>1</sup> Great War narratives by writers such as Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Erich Maria Remarque, Richard Aldington and Ford Madox Ford which are understood to stand witness to the meaninglessness of war.

In stark contrast to this, 'Australians perpetuated man's traditional fanfaronade about his military might' (Gerster 14).<sup>2</sup> Australian authors in the main present the war as justifiable and worthwhile, part of the continuous historical process upon which civilisation is built, and its proponents the Anzacs as heroic and selfless. Robin Gerster's major study showed that traditional heroic narration is the major defining characteristic of this body of literature, but other differences exist. Richard Nile, for example, identifies the tropes of both dislocation and absence as characteristic of Australian Great War fiction (50–55). John Laird notes a handful of themes neglected by Australian authors but important to the canonical British writers (6). There are, however, further features which Australian authors address but treat differently from the canonical writers, such as attitudes to women, homo-sociality, conception of the home front, and the depiction of killing.

Modern interpretations of the Great War tend to consolidate rather than challenge the critically-perceived divide between Australian heroic and European disillusionment texts. Australian novels such as Jackie French's *A Rose for the Anzac Boys* (2008), Graeme Hague's *And in the morning* (2002), and Peter Yeldham's *Barbed Wire and Roses* (2008) by and large reprise the heroic Anzac. Aside from the complexity of Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (1991–1995) and Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* (1993), recent English novels such as William Brodrick's *A Whispered Name* (2008), A.S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* (2009), Ben Elton's *The First Casualty* (2006), and Michael Morpurgo's *Private Peaceful* (2003) are more attuned to the disillusionment perspective. Walker's *Wing of Night* (2005), however, provides us with a thought-provoking alternative, even while retaining surprisingly many of the characteristic elements of traditional Anzac literature. An overview of the characteristics of

Anzac literature will assist in exploring how Walker both supersedes and harnesses them in *Wing of Night*.

### **Distinctive Anzac features**

*Trench life:* In most Australian Great War fiction, trench existence is given less priority than in European novels. Australian soldiers spend much of their time outside the trench. Putting aside arguments over historical accuracy, the fictional men of the AIF participate in more raids, more out-of-the-line fatigues, and more behind-the-line revelry. They frequent estaminets and farmhouses, training camps and depots; they travel to Paris to view the sights; they go on leave to London or Scotland, visits uncomplicated by the presence of wives, parents, and (usually) sweethearts. There is less scope for trench-bound nightmares of rats, mud, corpses, rain, and ceaseless shellfire. This is not to say that instances of these do not occur, but the more interesting action happens beyond it. Trench events are extensively outnumbered by outside occurrences in Leonard Mann's *Flesh in Armour* (1932), Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929), and J.P. McKinney's *Crucible* (1935).

*Killing:* Alfredo Bonadeo (1989) points out the numerous instances in Great War literature where men are compared with animals, and are victims like animals, as in Wilfred Owen's *Anthem for Doomed Youth*: 'What passing bells for these who die as cattle?' These victim-animals occupy the shambles-trench, a place not only of death but also of the sophisticated, insular introspection so characteristic of disillusionment texts. Joanna Bourke notes that 'readers of military history books might be excused for thinking that combatants found in war zones were really there to be killed, rather than to kill' (2); so too might readers of the disillusionment canon.

Unlike their European counterparts, soldiers in Australian works leave the trenches not simply to be mown down but to fight: they are active agents of death as well as prey for enemies. Australian Great

War prose is more likely 'to communicate the *thrill*, rather than the terror, of the fight' (Gerster 12, original emphasis). In effect, canonical protagonists occupy the trench and contemplate the war and their likely deaths; Australians actively prosecute war. The disillusioned man of thought is opposed to the antipodean man of action.

Australian authors give their soldiers permission to kill publicly, and to admit pleasure in the task. For example the platoon in *Flesh in Armour* attack a German trench with no mercy or remorse:

They were running towards the spot where one of the torpedoes had exploded. They were into the wire, cutting at it, tugging it and scrambling through its barbs...Skipton nearly fell on a man whose face, white with the fear of death, like the reflection of a full moon, he dashed aside with his knobkerry. Another, trying to climb the opposite wall of the trench, was stabbed by the sergeant and Bill Potter simultaneously. Albie Chomley shot another at the muzzle of his rifle. Charl Bentley and Frank Jeffreys pitched some bombs into a dug-out. Everything was now a welter...The rest of the Germans in the trench were being despatched. One, as he died, shot Bob Allison in the thigh. There were more dug-outs, deep... 'Share that among you,' yelled George Hecht, who, with Ikey with his bayonet ready alongside, held the bomb two seconds after the lever had sprung off before he pitched it down. (Mann 233–4)

There is little time for fear or quailing from the task, and no compunction. Enemy soldiers are 'despatched' in a workmanlike fashion, with no apparent pause or emotional confusion about their faces 'white with the fear of death'. While some at least are noted as individuals, they are not necessarily seen as human. The Anzacs are competent, impassive workers, and killing is their task.

*Homoeroticism*: Santanu Das has studied the portrayal of male intimacy in Great War literature and concludes that despite the ravages of industrial battle, the war 'restored tenderness to touch in male

relationships' (2005, 4). The homoerotic implications of many British works have been well documented (see for example Paul Fussell's Chapter 8, 'Soldier boys: Mars and Eros'), but Das moves beyond this to consider the ways in which men at war fulfilled nurturing and caring roles more typically associated with the touch of women, especially the mother figure. The intimacy of these maternal acts intensified the emotional bonds between the men (Roper 6, 284), and 'the image of soldiers mothering one another appears in a surprising number of soldiers' novels of the Great War' (Raitt and Tate 10). Of course intimate touch between males at war is not a new facet of war writing; there are the examples of Achilles binding the wounds of Patroclus, and the comfort of Hardy's kisses to Nelson. Contemporary novels such as *The Regeneration Trilogy*, Elton's *The First Casualty* and Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting* deal specifically with homosexual relationships, as does Linda Newbery's juvenile fiction *The Shell House*, while Canadian Tim Findley's *The Wars* includes an instance of male rape. The war's narrowed homo-social context invests the texts of other nations with an emotional intensity absent from the male-male relationships in Australian works. Australian authors, however homo-social their stories may be, eschew homoerotic and homosexual themes in Great War novels.

Das analyses many of homoerotic themes in British works, commenting that 'eroticism is on the side of life, meaning and beauty' (2002, 61) as opposed to the war's context of death and decay. If this is the case, eroticism is a force for life which Australians devote exclusively to heterosexual relationships.

*Nurturing:* Although the exigencies of the Western Front trenches and the harsh conditions of Gallipoli and Mesopotamia required men to perform intimate and caring tasks for one another in the absence of any alternative, this is an aspect of the war experience which is rare in Australian works. The binding of wounds, the dying kiss, the steadying hand, and the comfort of sleeping close, are more likely to appear in the pages of British novels.

Australians convey a cruder, less sexually charged version of male tenderness, showing the rough-and-ready, bracing physicality of mateship in necessity: ‘they got up and grabbed at each other while the earth rocked’ (Mann 79); ‘they shared home news and parcels and shaving gear and rations’ (McKinney 64). Although Bain and Fairbairn ‘pooled their blankets’ for warmth, this is represented as a very uncomfortable situation, annoyingly preventing either man from turning easily in his sleep (McKinney 58), and not at all seductively homoerotic.<sup>3</sup> If the war was for some Australian protagonists the best time of their lives, it was because of homo-social mateship, and not because of homoerotic, homosexual, or even platonic love for a special individual:

The one compensating aspect of life as then lived was the element of mateship...The platoon was prepared to sink all individual differences of moral outlook or mental equipment to vindicate [mateship’s] sacred rites...Thus, within their groups within groups, a vaguely satisfactory travesty of home-life was attained... [which] gave a sense of being an individual again, with decent, friendly, personal contacts. (McKinney 63–66)

*Women and war:* In the disillusionment works of Aldington and Ford, and the more recent modern-memory inspired novels such as those by Hill, Newbery, and Findley, women are not only ignorant or even malicious supporters of war (Raitt and Tate 2), but constitute a malevolent force every bit as destructive as war itself. Sometimes these female characters goad and torment their menfolk into enlisting. Sylvia Tietjens causes most of Christopher’s problems in the tetralogy *Parade’s End* (Ford 1924–1928); Sylvia Dilton, who selfishly uses Dominic Langton in *When Blackbirds Sing*, lives by ‘the code... “never be found out” ’ (Boyd 58). In *Death of a Hero*, Winterbourne’s life is rendered intolerable by the women closest to him: ‘poor old George got so fed up, he went off and joined the infantry, fell into

the first recruiting office he came to' (Aldington 26), and Aldington spares none of them his bitter acrimony. George's mother is 'not only a sadist, but a necrophilous one' (20) who found the news of his death 'rather exciting and stimulating at first, especially erotically stimulating' (17). George's wife Elizabeth and mistress Fanny 'both had that rather hard efficiency of the war and post-war female, veiling the ancient predatory and possessive instincts of the sex under a skilful smoke-barrage of Freudian and Havelock Ellis theories', falsely claiming that no 'primitive' emotions such as jealousy 'could inhabit [their] enlightened and rather flat bosoms' (25–26). Such women are represented as cold and hard, while none displays the tenderness traditionally expected of her: those functions are better fulfilled by the male-male bonding in the trenches, where 'soldiers...had perforce to love another soldier, there being no dogs about' (Aldington 31).

Women in Australian Great War novels are notably scarce, even in those written by women: 'the absence of women is everywhere in these texts' (Coates 11). Although this absence can be read as more positive than the bitter portrayals provided by Ford and Aldington, feminist reviews see it as misogynistic, claiming that women writers followed the lead of their male counterparts in that they 'sublimated their own needs and desires, absented themselves from the war narrative...and backed the Digger's attack' (Coates 6). Donna Coates disagrees with the proposal that only women writers, 'unimpressed by male histrionics' (Gerster 20), were likely to portray the Digger non-heroically; she finds that most Australian women writers, for example Mary Grant Bruce, privilege Anzac manhood above the war-related concerns and activities of women.

Coates is correct, here. The use of tradition or disillusionment is not gendered: most Australian writers prefer traditional tropes for writing the Great War. Another striking similarity between Australian male and female writers' stories of the war is the representation of women either as absent (often due to the distance from significant women at home) or as feminine, supportive and tender. In *Crucible*, Fairbairn has afternoon tea with his fiancée's friends at the nurses'

quarters in Abbéville, and reflects that 'he had never before realised how distinctly Australian and capable and purposeful and womanly our girls were' (McKinney 70).<sup>4</sup> These women are very different from Aldington's amoral predators.

*The war at home:* The home front in Australian Great War texts is neither the scene of disillusion about politics and strategy, nor the location of awkward and changing relationships.<sup>5</sup> While there are few references to home in contemporary Australian narrative accounts, it is generally constructed as a separate entity, protected from the all-consuming contagion of the war. The Australian home front is so distant from the scene of battles that it has few connections to the daily lives of the men. It is imagined as stable, almost static, and always supportive. While disillusionment characters experience betrayals and misunderstandings which not only destroy their confidence in home but often send them hurrying back to the front, Australians can look sideways at the goings-on of the London crowd, secure in their alienation from it, but also themselves displaced. Fairbairn feels he is losing touch with home, even though his fiancée's letters form 'a mental footbridge' (McKinney 33). He is changed, but home endures in its original state: Australia is untouched and unsullied, while London is an 'overgrown, crowded antheap' (85) where 'it was hopeless trying to escape the war. It had London in thrall just as much as it had a section of front-line trench' (81).

In more recent Australian Great War novels, home front life continues in an ideal fashion; few domestic disturbances trouble the diggers at the front. In *Boys of Blood and Bone* (Metzenthén 2003), Andy's fiancée Cecilia is faced with the shocking discovery that another girl is pregnant to him, but this is far from the clichéd betrayal of the soldier's girl with another man. There is no concupiscent corruption of the bush society in Patrick White's *Tree of Man* (1984) during Stan Parker's four-year absence at the war. While there is more home front complexity in both *The Blood Vote* (Lindsay 1985) and *Benton's Conviction* (Page 1985), these novels deal more closely

with the conscription referenda and notions of just war than with the corruption of society engendered by the war.

*Anzac features in Wing of Night: innovation and tradition*

Brenda Walker's *The Wing of Night* (2005) differs in important aspects from the overall characteristics of Australian Great War prose literature briefly considered. In some respects, *Wing of Night* fits more comfortably within the canonical disillusionment group; it lies outside the normative curve of Australian Great War prose, approaching more nearly the bitter but also elegiac texts of some Australian Great War poetry.

For example, while Walker's featured characters are all residents of the bush, this bush is not a land of sunshine and wattle blossom. It is a remnant of the previous century, as grim and threatening as Barbara Baynton's, as emotionally isolated and intense as Rodney Hall's in the *Yandilli* trilogy (1988-1993); Chris Womersley's outback town of Flint in *Bereft* (2010) is a similarly dark, dangerous location. In these works, the Australian homeland is threatening and perilous quite independently of the war, and its dangers are even less predictable, and therefore more terrifying, than those of the front.

Walker's focus on the home front, where most of action of *Wing of Night* occurs, is also unusual for Australian Great War narratives. Women alone on bush properties (and these are the only women of interest to us here) are subject to constant threat of assault and rape; both during and after the war, rootless men prowl the bush in a frightening premonition of Great Depression days. By September 1915, women 'are afraid of wandering swagmen, afraid of rape and robbery' (41); by July 1921, there are 'plenty of crazed men travelling the road just below [Elizabeth's] farmhouse' (169). It is as if all the men of Western Australia's southwest have enlisted, while shiftless characters from other places have arrived to prey on lone women.

Class explicitly divides Walker's characters in a way unusual for Australian novels, but reminiscent of the prejudices and divisions in Rebecca West's *Return of the Soldier* (1918):<sup>6</sup> 'rich people were

allowed to be mad in ways not open to the poor' (Walker 6); 'the rich did not lose fingers in farm machinery, they did not grow up paying urgent attention, for hours and hours, to their own hands and the hands of the people they loved' (11–12); 'the rich used surnames' (124). Indeed, for middle-class Elizabeth to be introduced to chicken-farming Bonnie 'would be a breach of local custom. Men mixed freely in the bush, but well-off women were less likely to meet poorer women as equals' (63).

As is the case in many canonical novels, the Great War plays only a part in the characters' tragic struggles; yet it does not recede to become a part of life's natural contingency as it does in Bruce's *Billabong's Daughter* (1924), David Malouf's *The Great World* (1999), Peter McConnell's *A History of the Great War: a novel* (2008) or White's *The Tree of Man*. All the women in *Wing of Night* are damaged prior to the war both by the harshness of Western Australia and by life in general: Elizabeth by her mother's death when she was only eight, and two shattering miscarriages (46, 61); Bonnie by her orphaned upbringing, abusive marriage, and the suicide of her first husband (64–68); Annie by the tragic death of her daughter who 'took seven days' to die following an accidental scalding (103). These women are then further damaged by the war: all three lose their men to it. Elizabeth's husband dies at Gallipoli (76); Annie's husband, who enlists following the persistent white feather campaign against him (presumably perpetrated by the women of the district in the absence of their male partners), dies in France (104); Joe Tully, Bonnie's sweetheart, is so emotionally damaged that he rationalises he cannot return to her until he stands on an equal financial footing (136), something that does not appear to have been an issue previously in their relationship. Joe's mother is also a damaged female character, having 'been mad, before and after the death of his father' (34). She dies early in her second marriage and Joe, a doctor's son, suffers a drop in social class which prevents his attending private school and reduces him to labourer status, emphasising the importance of class distinctions in this text.

It is Joe, so relentlessly beaten by the uncaring blows of fortune, who suffers most sorely; like the wren which 'had seen its reflection and was trying to fly in through the glass to meet itself' and 'fell back exhausted' (169), there is no safe home-coming for him. Unlike the traditional Australian hero described by Gerster (but like White's alternative archetype Stan Parker, a decorated, competent and silent veteran), Joe does not 'big-note' himself or his war experience. In a scene reminiscent of the suicide of Bonnie's husband, Joe hangs himself in a police cell while hallucinating about his unresolved but accidental murder of a Turkish prisoner.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile Elizabeth is waiting at the cottage hospital for him to take her and their son back to the farm, focussed on a future to which Joe cannot bring his past. Unusually for an Australian novel, there are few opportunities for redemption for any of these characters,<sup>8</sup> and the war is more the final note in their tragedy than a large-scale historic event that temporarily interrupts their lives. It is not even certain that Elizabeth will raise Joe's son well; it is Bonnie who holds him at the novel's end.

But despite all this, *Wing of Night* does have similarities to the traditional Australian features previously described. For example, Joe Tully and Louis Zettler (the husband of Elizabeth) lie together for warmth one cold night on the Gallipoli peninsula. Although Joe remembers sleeping 'close to another man...his arse in the other fellow's lap' he recalls vividly that it was 'the cold that drove them to sleep tight up against one another' (185). As with other Australian Great War narratives, there is an implicit rejection of the homoerotic in Walker's work.

Although Joe can't remember killing (apart from the accidental murder of the Turkish prisoner), he is sure he was as adept as any Australian commander could wish: 'it was a funny thing. Joe couldn't remember shooting anyone. He must have killed someone. If he'd shot wide for the whole war [Lt-Col] Brazier would have had a word or two to say to him' (146). In keeping with the Australian style, it is not the memory of the death of any individual friend, or of being shelled, or blown into the air by high explosives, that provides

the final impetus for Joe's suicide. It is the memory of killing the helpless prisoner. Joe is unlike the victim-protagonists of the canon to the degree that it is killing, not death or his own terror, that unhinges him.

There are further similarities with typical Anzac features in Walker's representation of officer-man relationships. Consistent with the traditional Australian perspective, Walker presents the men's immediate commander as humane and approachable, and the relationships between the men as explicitly egalitarian. This contrasts with the disillusionment view that the leadership was culpable and out of touch with the conditions of the fighting men.

Both Joe Tully and Louis Zettler are Light Horse troopers, dismounted for the campaign in the Dardanelles. The West Australians are commanded by a local man, Lieutenant-Colonel Brazier, 'a steady old fellow who knew his men and his horses' (11). Brazier argues constantly with Colonel 'Bullant' Antill, who 'had been brought in from the east and put above Brazier and the first thing he did was complain about Brazier's troops. The officers had their own little war, even before they left Australia' (11).<sup>9</sup> The 'little war' between Brazier and Antill is similar to a clash of cultures that occurs in other Great War narratives: here, between the divergent Australias of the west and east; in the canonical works, between the classes, the genders, and the generations; in many Australian accounts, between the Empire and Dominions.

On Gallipoli, Walker shows Brazier wishing to protect his men: he 'imagined a whole city waiting cleanly in the ice. Not a filthy city like this encampment in the gunfire and the dirt. He thought of pathways and high windows. Spires. An empty city. He would like to take all his soldiers there' (20). When Joe Tully asks whether the men are allowed to wear their greatcoats while waiting in the freezing pre-dawn hours to attack, Brazier has to refuse, and then becomes angry because he called Joe by the wrong name (thus failing the clichéd Australian expectation of officers and men being on first-name terms):

Who did the fellow think he was, calling for a coat, putting him [Brazier] in the wrong? He was already so far in the wrong. The man was likely to be dead under his command in the morning. 'You're Harry when I'm around,' he said.

The soldier shrugged when he should have saluted.

Brazier was suddenly ashamed. 'Have a drink,' he said, handing over his own flask. (21)

The sharing of the flask reinstates the Australian norm of the relationship, which we see demonstrated when the men reciprocate Brazier's egalitarian attitude:

Zettler was woken by the tramp of footsteps...Lieutenant-Colonel Brazier had just walked past him.

One of the men who were yarning climbed to his feet and reached into the small supply of firewood. He followed Brazier and offered him some branches. Wood was scarce.

'Sir,' said the soldier.

Brazier turned, his face white with cold. He took the branches and tucked them under his arm as if they were a baton and he on a parade ground. He could barely smile. He patted the back of the soldier's hand. (28–29)

This passage shows characteristic Australian style not only in its egalitarian exchanges but also in the understated, unexplored tenderness and care exchanged between officers and men.

To sum up, this brief review shows how, by both discarding and reiterating many typical Anzac literary features, Walker's novel claims new ground in Australian responses to the Great War. *Wing of Night* maintains resonant echoes of the traditional Australian style, even though the influence of the ethos and understandings of the twenty-first century can be seen in its rejection of the noble-sacrifice myth and its exploration of Joe's inner emotional distress. Readers can be both reassured by recognition of the novel's comforting provincial

continuity, and challenged by its testing of conventional Australian tropes in a way which exposes the dismaying barrenness of emotional life and the lack of reciprocal integrity in the bush. Walker uses the Great War to explore the fractures in Australian society and the hollowness of martial aspiration, while at the same time affirming egalitarian ideals in both intimate relationships and wider society. In transcending some of the more bombastic Anzac features while reinterpreting others which we still recognise as positive, *Wing of Night* invests the Australian Great War narrative with renewed life.

## Notes

- 1 As the 'disillusionment' school of writing has become the more highly regarded in critical terms, it is referred to as 'canonical', although it describes an explicit break with literary traditions more usually called 'canonical'. Thus the Great War canon is, somewhat counter-intuitively, the anti-traditional school.
- 2 Most analyses generalise 'Australian' as a definable style and to a great degree a unified perspective (just as some writers see the 'woman's' perspective as a single voice). Although for purposes of brevity my comments in this essay subscribe somewhat to this view, Australian responses to the Great War speak with multiple voices and perspectives. My analysis of the 'Australian' style refers most directly to mainstream prose fiction.
- 3 That is unless we posit that the discomfort arose from the unacknowledged physical attraction of sleeping so close together, a reading not supported by the text, but perhaps extant between the lines.
- 4 This is unusual as most of the women portrayed in Australian Great War novels are foreign.
- 5 The tropes of 'civilian venality, official pompousness, and the attraction of wives and sisters to [other men]' (Hatherell 2007, 81) in the 'corrupt, concupiscent and complacent wartime city' (85), so evident in canonical novels of the Great War, appear much more markedly in Australian novels of the Second World War.
- 6 Class difference is of central importance in West's highly-regarded novel. Chris Baldry's wife Kitty and his cousin Jenny are reluctant to receive a lower class visitor. Margaret is a woman 'repulsively furred with neglect and poverty' (7). They 'hated her as the rich hate the poor as insect things that will struggle out of the crannies which are their decent home and introduce ugliness to the light of day' with her 'wet, clear, patient gaze

- ... the gift of animals and those of peasant stock' (10). But it is Margaret's selfless love that saves Chris.
- 7 Bonnie's first husband is similarly emotionally damaged by his accidental shooting of his little brother when he was ten.
  - 8 See Christina Spittel 2007 for an exploration of redemption in Australian Great War novels.
  - 9 Brazier and Anthill are historic figures whose disagreements were of noted proportions.

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## A Different Sea

Graham Kershaw

To dodge a black wave inside my head  
I drove back later, to a different sea,  
all teals and metallic blues and greens  
racked on a hard black bed, silver foil floundering  
in lines of brittle foam, under the pewter plate  
of a shrouded sun, slicing through lighter surf  
overhead, catching light from the sea itself,  
it seemed, as if lightning were cracking off  
the ocean's jagged skin, kinetically.

Each bird had their own complaint—  
indignant oystercatchers, surprised plovers,  
grumpy gulls—as they scampered and started  
and flew away, one by one. Company wasn't expected  
nor wanted, and yet I felt the slack of empty space  
from dune to hill, and rock to ocean, and it came to me  
that this was some kind of rendezvous, after all.  
I had come to meet some absence  
I could not live without.

strange teacher

## Helen Gildfind

white wall, a grey signature of rub  
your place for sleeping, stopped

white stubble snout, paw-propped, claws curled  
buckled knuckles of knees, those

cruel masters, the whip and whip of slipping hip,  
muscles shorn, a stilled life, silent

torn terrain of jag and jut, bone-joust cloaked in golden mane  
bur-spun to matted ropes, soiled, oiled grey

crinkle-cut droop of jowl, black-sheen of lip up-thrust,  
ferocious joke of canine

eaves of lash, gentle frames, dark glitter-glint of mind  
swept under, choked in blue opacity, a breathless, depthless sea

salt-wet lips to stubbled cheek, hard bone of brow, cleaved slit of lid  
I kiss you

rough pads of paw, our thousand paths, nose pressed deep  
I breathe you

flesh with fur, flesh with face, flesh that stopped me eating flesh  
I stroke you

strange teacher, my friend, unknowable creature  
thank you

## Boys Dying

Ross Donlon

We enjoyed dying almost as much as killing,  
happy to see the finger pointed, thumb cocked,  
his cold eyes saying you'd been shot  
before he jerked his hand away  
and went on with the game.

For we loved to die slow motion then,  
pleasuring in the drawn out death,  
staggering light bodied arms and legs  
through the summer air, anemone boys  
swept to sea with their final breath.

We were practiced in the ritual from movies:  
the mouth must gape, then arch open  
(like at the dentist), the neck stretches back ready  
to snap, the eyes tilt skywards, the last gasp  
like life's first, or the rapid fire hint of future sex.

But even as we rolled and bucked the grass,  
laughing as we mocked a dance of death,  
we acted both the end of life and the signs  
of resurrection. For we were counting up to ten  
even as the killer left, then rose to kill him.

## Middle East Sonnets

### Roland Leach

#### 1. Babel

He never intended to give them words,  
knew the fecund rubbing of syllable  
on syllable led to riotous talk,  
and once spoken were stone temples,  
were ropes that held ramparts across rivers,  
were nails that joined planks, broke through waves.  
So when Nimrod erected his ziggurat  
built of burnt brick and cemented clay  
it seemed like a missile aimed at him.  
He sent down winds from a dozen lands,  
filled with mountain echoes, voices of birds  
and storms, the sounds of water on rock  
and let them fill their mouths till their words  
separated them, thick and stone as walls.

#### 2. Gaza 2009

In the land of the first written word  
they are forging a new cuneiform. In this  
stony land, in empty houses, on walls,  
soldiers graffiti vigilante policy:

*Arabs need 2 die!!*

*Make war not peace!*

*Gaza here we are!*

There are drawings, malevolent as prophecy:  
Soldiers pissing on toppled muezzin towers.

A gravestone: *Arabs 1948 - 2009*.

In this land of walls walls walls they intrude  
into the intimacy of rooms. Graffiti is not enough.  
The shelling is not enough. Soldiers drop bags of scat.  
Leave their scent like great desert cats.

### **3. Kites**

They are flying kites at Beit Lahiya.  
Children with kites, women in black burqas.  
Attached to the sky. On the beach at Beit  
Lahiya where buildings expose their skeletons,  
the kites are coloured confetti, they are splashes of paint.  
Lifting with the wind, defying gravity.  
They are held by blood. Months ago there were  
only stray gunmen in alleys. People pleading  
for blood. You need wind to defy gravity.  
Things fall. It is a law of nature. Bombs  
fall. Missiles rise and fall. Buildings expose  
their skeletons. It is a law of nature.  
On a beach in Gaza with homemade kites  
children, women, men, make peace with the sky.

## The Yellowing Pages of the Almanac

M.G. Michael

### *A List of all those Names*

He leafed through to the middle pages of the diary, securely bound by little chains of silver hair. In his long candle-like fingers, Isaiah the old deacon was holding a quill which had dropped from the throat pouch of Tychon, a migrating pelican. The 'disobedient' priest-monk who had been exiled for centuries on account of his heresy (he had written a scandalous book for a religious: *On why my Embrace is not Governed by the Principles of Euclidean Geometry*), started to write with a trembling hand. On the one page he put down a list of all those names which he felt he had wronged and on the other he drew a list of all those names which he felt had wronged him. Not long afterwards the India ink started to run on both sides, freely mixing with the hot ash falling from his eyelids. Isaiah the old deacon contentedly brought the pages together, smudging the names until they were wholly indistinguishable one from the other.

### *This Unpardonable Effrontery*

The novices were preparing for their first all-night vigil, the *Feast of the Dormition*, the ‘falling asleep’ of the Mother of God. They entered the ancient church, hewn from the side of the Mountain, with all of the required solemnity. All prostrated before the Virgin’s miraculous icon which was only just visible inside the thick cloud of sweet-scented smoke. The novices bowed the knee and inwardly supplicated for her intercessions, hoping she would recollect them in the winters and in the centuries ahead. All prostrated except for one, the beardless youth from Kiev, Isidore the Mute. When the abbot approached to chastise him for this unpardonable effrontery, he was stunned to find Isidore the Mute and the Virgin Mary absorbed in deep conversation. Then he all at once recalled his long-ago days as an acclaimed professor of modern logic and made back for the pew feigning to have heard *nothing*, but making sure to remember that this was *something* for the almanac.

### *The Bishop’s Mastery of the Game*

The Bishop would pick us up and put us down with the prescience of a *grandmaster*, a Chigorin or Capablanca. And then, when it would suit his purposes—and *that was often*—he would even have us betray and sacrifice each other, that the pieces remaining on the board would configure precisely as he had planned. But at least Chigorin and the others would occasionally permit for their pawns to dream of reaching the other side. The Bishop’s mastery of the game, it must be said, especially the *end-game*, was unsurpassed. Occasionally, however, one of us would surprise him via *en passant*.

### *Pointing to the Headlines*

‘What is it about *glory*,’ asked the young philosopher who had cornered the old man in a second-hand bookstore, ‘that can so corrupt

those who might desire it?’ The old man cast his longing eyes through to the two shelves buried at the back, under a conspicuous pile of box coals and torn banners. The two shelves were enigmatically labeled: *Improbable Biography*. After picking out one of the musty diaries, he bent down to tie the young philosopher’s left shoelace. ‘Do you recall the story of the Baptist and his reference to the sandals of the Messiah?’ The younger man said that indeed, he did recall the story. ‘Well?’ whispered the old man, ‘glory will only ever corrupt those who have not as yet discovered the way to pass it on.’ The young philosopher then looked across the aisle to the newspaper stand. The old man was pointing to the headlines: *Sic transit gloria mundi*, thus passes the glory of the world.

### *The Yellowing Pages of the Almanac*

Every Sunday after the Divine Liturgy, Parthenius the Reader would visit Priscilla who was recently made a young widow. She would prepare a sumptuous feast of rare delicacies and miraculous aromas in the tradition of her Constantinopolitan grandmothers. And he in turn, would chant selections from the *Psalter* and the *Typica*. Then they would tenderly embrace, turn over the yellowing pages of the almanac, and weep at the passing of the seasons for it was not yet in the *fullness of time*. Parthenius the Reader would dust off the cherry soil and the scented incense from his overcoat and return to the cemetery. Priscilla, the recently made young widow, would tidy up and skip over onto the edges of paradise. Yet the gossips persisted in their scandalous talk: *fama nihil est celerius*, nothing is swifter than rumour.

### *Holding Strong onto a Bundle of Star Charts*

Bald-headed Mustapha wore large coats neatly sewn and put together from discarded white potato sacks. This unusual attire was complemented by oversized spit polished white shoes, made

all the more fantastic by the absence of shoelaces. He also carried about a colourful standard stitched from Moroccan veils which he would wave on *All Saints Day*. Each night he would make for the *Reno Café* to help sweep the linoleum floors, pack the fresh milk into the refrigerator, and help take out *the remains* of the day. One such night he turned up with one of his legs missing. He was weeping and pointing to former constellations. ‘What’s wrong Mustapha?’ the little boy asked. There was no answer. Bald-headed Mustapha turned around and hopped away, holding strong onto a bundle of star charts.

### *The Old Man Paused for a Moment*

‘Do you dream old man?’ asked the young boy. ‘Why? Are not old men supposed to dream?’ he responded. ‘What is it that you dream about?’ The old man paused for a moment to consider the young boy’s line of questioning. ‘I dream of the *other side*, and of mountains with golden peaks, and of celestial spheres, and of large fish that swallow me up.’ These all had to do with archetypes but it was not yet time for the young boy to fully comprehend. Pointing to the standard text on orienteering the old man started to write his long anticipated letter to Methuselah. He tickled the top of the young boy’s head making sure to leave behind two nightingales, ‘*Hatavat Halom*, may your dreams turn out good.’

### *Gethsemane’s One-Thousand and One Nights*

The young boy caught the old man weeping in the garden, next to the discarded writing desk. His twig-like fingers, on which *Monarch* butterflies would often come to rest, were tightly cusped over his large eyes. He could hear him moaning and heaving with ‘sighs too deep for words.’ His long beard parted in the middle like a huge divide, the salty water dropping onto the earth from both ends. The old man it is true, did often weep the *ancient prayer*, but almost always in private and in the secrecy of his room. He had once confided to the

young boy that tears helped to clean the heart. It was where the great battles of our journey would either be won or lost; it was there we would discover our name. ‘Something like the story of Gethsemane?’ the young boy proudly asked. The old man was pleased at this early discovery, but wept additional tears for such revelations would come at a high cost. ‘Gethsemane’s one-thousand and one nights’, he replied with one of those sighs too deep for words, ‘for deeper the chalice greater the pouring of the light.’

### *Even Other More Difficult Questions*

Cicero the unemployed theologian enjoyed playing saxophone; he had a strong preference for the pitch of the alto. One day, however, his next door neighbor Cleopatra the piano teacher, who had died unexpectedly from an undisclosed illness, bequeathed to him her magnificent *Steinway*. This generous gift confused the unemployed theologian because Cleopatra was a declared atheist and did not approve of his profession. Though, he did certainly recall, an unusual exchange the year before. He asked her to speak to him of ‘sharps and flats,’ and she embraced him and said that without ‘the staff what would it all matter?’ That, of course, raised even other more difficult questions. Cicero now practices day and night, training his ear into the mysteries of inharmonicity and to the resonance of the light between the keys. He especially takes pride when the left hand and the right hand fall naturally onto the chords.

### *Strong Metaphorical Implications*

Tabassum was nervously anticipating the arrival of the morning mail. Soon he would know if Shazana had forgiven him, or if she had otherwise accepted his conditions. He had asked her to write to him, so he could put the epistle away and return to it years later as was his custom. Otherwise, he would have to go through a series of communications to clarify things, which ultimately, only distressed

him and helped no one. It was a large brown envelope; Shazana had made it secure and marked it '*Urgent*'. Tabassum applauded hard when he noticed a thick eyelash had been trapped under the sellotape. She must have been rubbing her eyes, he thought, and normally that was a good sign. From previous correspondence, Tabassum had discovered that this invariably indicated, 'I forgive you my precious heart; your white shirts will be returned; and I agree that the crescent moon has strong metaphorical implications.' Later on, they would both agree, that there are a multitude of ways to read a story.

### *The Lily of the Valley on the Floor*

Martha drew breathtaking pictures on her walls. Though she knew that no one would see them, she continued nonetheless, to draw them with the precision of an iconographer. She predominantly illustrated flowers, especially *verbascum*, *scarlet pimpernel*, and the *sunflower*. Her favorite colors were cherry, bottle-green, midnight blue, and gold. Sometimes she would imagine that her drawings would come alive and she would be pleased. She would sing and skate about her room on her way to discovering that her nights were filled with grace, for it was enough that she alone knew and believed it in her heart. This was one of the 'great mysteries,' Vincent had benevolently told her several springs ago, when he too, was painting in his room. Then she would wake up, not knowing whether it was all a dream. Martha could never explain the *lily of the valley* on the floor and the spectacular colour dripping beneath her door as the tropical rainstorms subsided on the outside.

### *With a Wavering and Hesitant Voice*

Nestor the poet delivered his verse with a wavering and hesitant voice. He was terrified that the audience might snigger and guffaw, *Twitter* his shortcomings to each other and then slander him to the world on *Facebook*. There was also his anxiety over the potential

misuse of those lifeless emoticons! But he had never claimed to be a poet. So why was Nestor here in the first place? It was not only because Judith the organizer of the event had invited him, quite accidentally. He had crashed into her front-yard one morning when practising on the cello. The truth is he was fond of speaking certain words aloud: *autumn, mercy, perseverance, rhapsody, companion, hope, and angel*. And then he desired to look into his listeners' eyes to see if anyone had truly loved him. An old snowy-haired man in the back-row nodded his head in approval and acknowledged with a shaft of light. Nestor the poet rejoiced, he too, had been tutored in the lost art of wordless communication. The Creator, as it has often been supposed, speaks to us through many voices.

### *Watching Excitedly from the Sidelines*

Constantia, the little girl with the spring daffodils and the new leather sandals (which her godmother had recently bought from Jeremiah the cobbler), was playing Persian hopscotch on the quiet street below. As she hopped from one square to another, flower gardens shot up from beneath her feet, and the despairing crowds in the balconies above cheered... *grateful* for another day of *Rest* and redemption. The meticulous pattern drawn on the ground had also not escaped the attention of an exiled Greek Platonist who had himself picked up a stone, to fling at *Canis Majoris*. Other young girls were watching excitedly from the sidelines, waiting for their turn to join in the game which they called *Deliverance*.

### *Interested in the Bright Paintings*

It was like Bibi had said to him when they embraced and departed, 'some days are awfully bad, some days are awfully good.' Maximus the farsighted biographer, bumped into the young girl during a Sunday downpour one afternoon, outside a coffee-house in Berne. She suffered from muscular dystrophy, a disease which progressively

weakens the skeletal muscles. Maximus was interested in the collection of bright paintings that she was holding. They were copies he was informed, of Renoir's *Dance at le Moulin de la Galette*. Bibi told him, that later in life the French Impressionist suffered from chronic rheumatism, and that eventually he had to paint with the brush tied to his fingers. Maximus the farsighted biographer was not entirely sure however, if the connection was meant for him or for the young girl herself. Then again, he did remember only recently having shared with his creative writing class, that 'context' comes from the Latin *contextus* which ordinarily means 'connection'.

### *The Beholder of the Voice*

Quadratus stood by the corner with his ear attentively stretched towards the direction of the voice. He could not immediately recognize whether this was a male or a female talking. Nor could he see whether this person was beautiful or plain, young or old. After making some instructive references to *seeds and sap* the voice continued. 'Many have spoken on love and written poetry and composed music to explain its terrible and eternal mystery.' The beholder of the voice suddenly collapsed onto the wet soil clutching at some fresh shoots. On that same spot, not long after, a large *English elm* appeared which gave shade and shelter to many. Quadratus would later note that elms are deciduous and shed their leaves annually. It was only then that he was able to understand that to *providence*, as well, there is a dark side to the moon. Then he smiled, recollecting the words of an old man he had once met in a second-hand bookstore, '...slowly we learn to walk, slowly we must prepare to die.'

### *Keith the Wise Mathematician*

They were friends from the earliest days, Keith the wise mathematician and George the sharp-witted cartographer. Every now and then they would meet to embrace, and to exchange implausible

stories and angel feathers. On this day by the edge of the great pond, the wiry professor (who had specialized in mathematical modeling) was swinging a black sack over his right shoulder. ‘There is bread in there’, he leaned over to whisper to his stocky friend, ‘and it’s for the ducks.’ At that moment an inquiring young woman (a collector herself of tapestries and patterns) who had by chance heard the conversation informed the two friends from the earliest of days, that there had been no ducks in that place since before the floods. The two men shared in quiet laughter. Keith the wise mathematician bent down and scribbled some unintelligible formula on the water. And as if from *nowhere*, after the stirring of the waters, twenty-four ducks appeared brushing the wintry wet from their shimmering downs. The last of these, that is, the twenty-fourth, waddled proudly out of the great pond and pecked on the bare feet of the inquiring young woman. At that moment George the sharp-witted cartographer turned to Keith the wise mathematician and enquired of him, ‘Any news from *Leunig*?’

### *The Peculiar Looking Hitch-Hiker*

Chrysogonus the young poet had driven hundreds of miles and was now satisfied to be heading home. He had successfully recited his fine poetry at a two-day symposium organized by a committee of refugee angels who had decided to remain on earth. As a reward for his time and effort and in lieu of monies they gave him a special gift—Wenders’ *Der Himmel über Berlin*. It was a favorite of the angels (they were especially delighted with Peter Falk’s cameo which would excite a fast and furious slamming of the feather). Chrysogonus noted a tousled middle-aged man by the side of the road thumbing for a ride. He was holding a small stretch of canvas and blowing on a large *calla lily*. At first the young poet (and understandably so) was reluctant to stop, ‘What if this tousled middle-aged man was a lunatic?’ Wiping away the rush of tears from his muddy face, the peculiar looking hitch-hiker thanked him and jumped into the back of the car. ‘Where

are you heading?’ the young poet asked. ‘From Genesis to Revelation’, the tousled middle-aged man replied. Many years later, Chrysogonus who had now taken to writing very short stories on the inside of his garments, took a peek into his rear-vision mirror. He reminisced on the peculiar looking hitch-hiker and on the strikingly inscribed word on the small stretch of canvas he had left behind: *ITHIKA*. And he wept for a long time at the uncanny likeness to their handwriting.

### *Leo had begun to Sprout Wings*

The newly ordained deacon, Job, did not know how he could speak to the young man. Leo, who had recently competed in a half-marathon, was riding his motorcycle when he was hit by an inebriated driver. The time on the young man’s watch was trapped to that very instant of the collision: *11.37 PM*. All things from that moment onwards would stand still. The doctors informed the newly ordained deacon, Job, that Leo had suffered a dreadful form of quadriplegia brought on by his traumatic injuries, resulting in *locked-in syndrome*. The deacon would visit the young man every other afternoon. They began to communicate by using a small letter board. Job would indicate the letters with his fingers and Leo would confirm the selection with eye blinks. Soon they were able to create innovative short-cuts and other clever ways to get through the alphabet. One evening Leo informed Job, who had himself suffered in other ways, that he could feel sharp pains about his shoulder-blades. Job lifted the young man carefully to examine him, for he had known of such pains. It was as the newly ordained deacon had precisely imagined. Though they were still stubs, Leo had begun to sprout wings. Soon he would be going to *another* place. Job asked Leo one final question, ‘Was there ever a time when you wished to die?’ Leo, who was now weeping *calla lilies* replied, ‘Yes, but each pain goes by another name, and I had not yet exhausted the definitions.’

*The Loving Teacher, Sosthenes, who was Exceedingly Sad*

The old man noticed the loving teacher, Sosthenes, who was exceedingly sad, alone and bowed in the corner of the olive grove. He was painting icons on the earth; the color was spilling from the tips of his fingers. He had known the teacher since before the arrival of the eleventh generation of the *sacred kingfishers*. ‘Why are you sad?’ enquired the old man of the loving teacher. The teacher, who taught his young apprentices *voyage planning* and the *art of prayer*, said that his most beloved pupil had broken his heart. The old man discreetly scattering the chapters from the younger man’s shoulders and back into the earth, embraced him tenderly speaking into his generously proportioned right ear, ‘Well done, you have finally taught the introverted one that he must take to the crossing.’ The loving teacher, Sosthenes, who was exceedingly sad, gave thanks for this prepared lesson in improvisation.

## Letters

### Christopher Konrad

The letter            it brings its liquid calligraphy  
its immediate pulp and striation  
its hard stone dirt and priority

it brings several languages            none of which I understand

letter box    epistle    self stamped    belles lettres  
letters from the orient            Dear John    letters from a swallow's death

it bleeds a river from Conrad's jungles    was sent from an oasis  
today a butterfly tomorrow a cyclone  
washing down great red floods through Karijini

unopened            it was sent eighteen years ago  
scoured these walls with a kind of Mandarin  
infiltrated my dreams like a little girl destined to die

it yielded its envelope on the altar to Janus            secret  
in its cipher of privation            it speaks an ancient cuneiform  
sends armies to their peril and lovers to their death  
young men to the asylum—its seal doomed by

the conflagration of more moons than any lover could handle  
it is replete with a grammar of blood glue  
glyphed with approximations of strange punctuation someone  
once deciphered as 'return to sender'

# Persephone

Jo Mills

and if I ask you Persephone  
what drug your newest doctor has prescribed  
you slide your eyes from the pharmacy bag  
sitting crisp-innocent on the table beside  
this morning's decaf, unlace  
sunless fingers from a handle less white—  
bone china no match for subterranean pallor

eyes fashionably shadowed  
in heroin chic, no heroine you play it safe on  
legal medications, dream of underworlds where  
cold gods stalk the barren ground of each  
synaptic cleft—strum on filigree webs spun  
across endless tiny chasms where messengers  
once turned somersaults on thought

abused, you disabuse my concept of autonomy  
lips reddened on Hades' juice, pomegranate spills  
its treasure, each seed a ruby leaking crimson life  
remember Persephone days spent ransacking  
the sounds caught in our body-warmth?  
We trawled for love's bright metaphors  
consumed heady strings of words professing  
adoration, our courtesy's half-stifled laugh

but inside drunk on dream-delirium  
I didn't see the bars of your cage, underworld  
of others' needs and dominations, web of  
white lines cloying nostrils, brain, breath  
set you on a throne Persephone  
sealed the sun in stone, no ray must touch your  
cheek, heat dark blood congealing, trashed  
on china-white and chalk

in this now-hour I imagine  
your escape, not because your mother  
rages, searing earth and crop as  
lamentation, not because Hades' eyelid  
dews a single agate star, not for seasons,  
cycles, rhythms' ineluctable tug on  
female bodies, not for money, love or  
self-destruction: Persephone

you hold it all in shimmer-fire  
cradle stony infants in your arms until  
skin lights, softens, grey webs melt  
across the café floor—you smile, pick up  
your cup, and tell me your new name.

## Watching a young kestrel learning to fly

Yann Toussaint

You'd outgrown your Robin Hood outfit by then  
but you may have still been wearing the green cap  
as we sat by the churchyard steps late one afternoon  
watching a young kestrel learning to fly.

It was the calls that had attracted our attention  
a plaintive keening on the wind, two specks in the sky  
and this bundle of feathers chick-chacking and  
equivocating on the stony ledge.

We watched it tumble from the steeple,  
bobbing on the ledge then half flying, half-falling  
to this new perch on the gutter's edge  
blown like an autumn leaf russet and desperate.

Desperately you watched it and desperate it sat.  
Then it began to climb, trying to regain the nest  
it had lost but the pitch on the roof was too steep.  
It tried to use its wings—not as you or I might

but crawling, wings out-stretched as a grounded bat might  
or as you said a pterodactyl might, or Archaeopteryx  
reaching forward with vestigial thumbs adorned  
with bastard feathers still in quick like unearned epaulets.

It crawled on the mossy slates and then slipped  
back. It fell further this time to a window ledge,  
where it sat perched above stained glass angels  
and chucked angrily. You watched it anxiously

and turned to me your soft cheek and clear eyes  
and asked with that mix of worry and another emotion,  
that one I know too well, whether, if it fell,  
if it slipped off the edge of the sky and tumbled to our feet,

if it was hurt and lost and needed a home  
could we take it in and keep it safe, forever?

## Heart Attack

**Brooke Dunnell**

They left the house at seven a.m. Alex sat in the Lancer's passenger seat, legs buried in pillows and thermoses: Megan had commandeered the keys early and would not be argued with. 'This is safer,' she said, and the words lodged in his gut. As they got onto the Great Eastern Highway she put on one of his pub-rock CDs, which was a concession on the grandest scale. His girlfriend, a pop-ballad diehard, abhorred his Foo Fighters and Powderfinger. Reprieved from six hours of 'Better Man', Alex sank back in his seat. The music was too loud to talk.

He'd slept badly and at five-thirty had already been awake. In the grey light the ringing of the telephone hadn't surprised him but instead seemed somehow inevitable, and he'd answered it with dread welling in his stomach. It was his stepmother, Gail: His father had woken with chest pains and was unconscious by the time she drove him into Emergency.

'A heart attack,' Alex had breathed, and felt Megan's hand on his back.

The Mitsubishi passed the airport turn-off and headed into the trees and houses of the Perth Hills. The other traffic was excruciating.

Seven-thirty on a Saturday in September and all these idiots were merrily trundling along at five k's under the limit. Where was every-one *going*, for Chrissakes?

Megan changed lanes. The houses began to thin out.

The previous night the two of them had fought over his refusal to go to after-work drinks with her colleagues. When she got home, her tongue loose with wine, she was shakily furious. 'What do you think it's like for me to sit there and for people to say, Is he coming? Is he coming? Some of them don't even believe I *have* a boyfriend because they've never even seen you.'

'I didn't feel like it.'

'You never feel like it. You never feel like it! You realise that relationships are about, about making sacrifices, about doing things for the other person sometimes?'

'So next time you stay home with me.'

When she put her hands to her face and leant into her elbows he'd felt dulled and remote, as if he were watching it on a screen. He'd spent most of their relationship accompanying Megan to work functions and social engagements. He'd been happy to. But then she'd changed firms and the thought of learning all those names again had suddenly leeches him of all energy, like the wall-slam of chronic fatigue. Watching her cry about it, he'd felt worse; worse because it didn't spur him to action the way it should have. His girlfriend—usually such an embracer of challengers, a wielder of convincing argument, an avoider of weakness—had been sitting on the far corner of their bed with her shoulders hunched miserably, and it made him feel tired. Too tired to socialise. Too tired to comfort her.

Outside Irishtown they drew up behind a truck carrying a piece of mining equipment so huge it straddled three lanes, preventing overtaking. Alex leaned forward as if to counteract the Mitsubishi's drop in speed.

Megan glanced at him and turned the music down. 'All right?'

'What's that fucking thing *doing*?'

'They'll wave us around eventually.'

Her patience made resentment bloom in him. It was all right for her, comforted by the steering wheel in her hands, the sense of control. Earlier Alex had prickled to get going, to join the dots of purpose that had formed solid in his mind: Pack, shower, eat, leave. In the passenger seat his thoughts scrolled endlessly through this instantaneous to-do list while the final task remained incomplete: See his dad. He put his head in his hands.

Ten minutes later one of the beetly vehicles warning of the ‘Oversized Load Ahead’ zipped over to the wrong side of the road. An arm emerged, indicating they should overtake the truck. Megan did so, and when the Lancer had returned to the left Alex stretched back from his hunch, the flood of momentum that washed uselessly through him easing a little as they picked up speed. He turned up the volume on the stereo.

He couldn’t be surprised that his father had had a heart attack: The man was morbidly obese. Alex’s windpipe tightened whenever he visited and saw Noel filing handfuls of grease and cholesterol into his mouth as if it were a paper shredder. He ate like Elvis in his dying years and though it was hardly surprising his abused heart muscle had finally given in it was still sad, because unlike the King, Noel Warner really enjoyed life. Every bucket of hot chips, far from being a minor diversion from despair, Noel treated like the icing on the cake of existence. Cake itself made him giggle. He had such passion for living badly; the way he suckled cigars was almost obscene.

Waddling down Hannan Street, belly like a giant scoop of ice-cream, Alex’s father would beam at everyone he met. Noel loved Kalgoorlie for what he saw as its similarly robust unwholesomeness—prostitute-based fame, great gouges in the earth, reliance on freshwater from a three-hundred-mile-long pipe. Apart from breathing difficulties and leg pain, Noel didn’t have a care in the world. He had a roundtable of friends to play cards with, a good TV and the cushiest couch in Kal. He hugged often, providing waterbed comfort to the weak and downtrodden, and would write love letters on the back of old receipts and leave them in Gail’s handbag.

Alex couldn't be like that. Cigars made his tongue into the burnt sole of a shoe, and heartfelt sentiment embarrassed him. He loved his father with a keenness he couldn't help but think was inappropriate in a grown man: It was the kind of love Noel had for Gail and food and all humanity, except the larger, more plentiful Warner wore it better.

'You want to stop in Kellerberrin?'

Alex snapped out of his vacant stare. There was nothing around but red dirt and sagging flora. 'What?'

'You want to stop in Kellerberrin?'

'I don't know, can't we just keep moving? I'm not hungry.'

'All right,' Megan said slowly, 'But we're going to have to stop soon.' Hands still on the wheel, she wiggled a thumb at the dashboard. 'We forgot to fill up.'

Ten minutes later they pulled into the Kellerberrin servo and Megan got out. He leaned over. 'Can we switch drivers?'

She shut the door.

There were two guys in a ute at the next bowser, and when Megan bent to fit the pump's nozzle into the Lancer they both extended their necks to look. Tiredly, Alex watched them watch. Megan was gorgeous; he knew that. And yet after four years together her attractiveness was like a blind spot to him—he found it impossible to be objective, to qualify her appearance. As his girlfriend she had become ubiquitous to him; a given, like his mother or Gail. He was as inclined to ogle her as he would either of them.

He reflected that this was probably terrible.

It was one of the issues they skirted. Megan attacked from all sides but couldn't risk a direct hit. 'Why don't you ever get jealous?' she would say, or 'Do you think I'd look good with short hair?' Asking *Are you still attracted to me?* would incite a run for cover.

From the servo she brought back a bag of lollipops to sweeten her coffee-soured mouth and a Mars Bar for him, which was nice but he couldn't eat it. The thought of his tongue negotiating the wedge of chocolatey goo, his saliva thickening to syrup, made him feel sick. 'Thanks, good.'

‘You can eat it now.’

‘I’m not hungry, I said I wasn’t hungry.’

‘Keep your strength up,’ she said mildly, turning the key and putting the car in gear. When she glanced over he was still holding the chocolate in a fist. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I just want to get going.’

‘Slow and steady,’ Megan said, her voice stressed with good cheer. ‘Your dad wouldn’t want us to have an accident, would he.’

‘Yeah, okay.’ Their wellbeing on the long drive inland was always one of Noel’s greatest concerns. He hated car travel, with his heft causing claustrophobia and the ghost of a lost brother who rolled on the way down from Broome.

Megan drew up behind a road train and sank back into its slipstream. Out the window the grass was dry and stuck up to the sun. Every so often there was a collapsed shed or burned-out car. Passing Doodlakine Alex felt a kind of despair, as if he were stuck in the middle of nowhere. He was. He wound his window up and craned forward in the seat again, eyes fixed on the signs advising ME – 40, ME – 30, ME – 20.

‘You’re going to ruin that.’

He looked down. He had been squeezing the Mars Bar so tightly it drooped. Ahead the road train farted smog. ‘Can you go around that truck, please? I feel like I’m going to jump out of my skin.’

‘Okay, hang on.’ After a few seconds of ducking and checking Megan shoved the Lancer into fourth and swung right. Alex looked out the window to see what company the truck was from but its carriages were painted an obstinate black. Sighing hugely, Megan steered back to the left. ‘Jesus, I hate doing that.’

‘Thanks.’

Eyes on the road, she reached out to pat his thigh. ‘I know it’s stressful, but there’s nothing you can do but sit tight. Why don’t you try and sleep?’

He would have welcomed oblivion but knew it was impossible; his mind was leaping around like a frog. ‘I can’t.’

She retracted her hand. ‘Okay.’

They drove through Merredin without stopping, passing the railway station. The structure was long and had the frozen grandness of old buildings that exist only to house evidence of their former glory. The first summer they were together Alex had driven Megan to Kalgoorlie to meet his father, stopping at the Railway Museum on the way out of some misguided notion that she would be interested. Of course he was showing off—Megan had never driven to Kal before, so Alex felt like the trip was a gift he could give her—and, in his excitement, had considered everything interesting. Luckily Megan had reciprocated, looking at every exhibit and asking questions and buying a fridge magnet as a souvenir. Later, in the car, they had kissed with the excited intensity and vague disbelief that comes with meeting someone who likes you back.

His father had loved her on sight. ‘She’s a lovely girl, a lovely girl,’ he insisted over a beer at the Exchange. Given that Megan was the kind of woman parents instantly loved—sweet, intelligent, goal-oriented—and Noel’s default position was adoration, it was hardly a surprise; still, Alex had been relieved. He knew his dad considered a good woman to be the saviour of every mis-stepping man and once his only child had this anchor to steady him, Noel could sleep better.

During their goodbyes at the end of the trip Noel had wrapped wobbly arms around Megan and swayed with her. ‘You are that boy’s best thing,’ he crooned. ‘Don’t give up, eh?’

Megan had flared red and said nothing on the way back until they stopped for fuel at Southern Cross. Alex got out and she wound down the window. ‘Your dad’s great, isn’t he?’ she said thoughtfully, and then put it back up and went to sleep.

The grey pipeline from Mundaring stretched alongside their car, first to the north, then ducking under the road to the opposite side for a while before returning. Beyond the orange-flecked bonnet the sun hung low in the midmorning sky, crowded by clouds. Alex hoped it would rain.

They passed through Southern Cross and plunged onward to Coolgardie. The Warner family called this the dead stretch, the excruciating repetition of stooped colourless shrubs and nothingness. Passing a mound of blood and fur mashed into the roadside Alex reached out to where Megan's hand rested on the gearstick and covered it with his own. Their little fingers tightened together.

Maybe he should have proposed at some point. Like lots of couples they had started getting nudges and inquiries after a couple of years together, but Alex had always ignored them. They were too young, he'd dismissed; only twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight. Megan never brought it up with him and managed to weave gracefully out of the discussion every time someone else did. She had never seemed the type of girl to be worried about that kind of thing; she was interested in her career, in winning deals and socialising aggressively. A woman who wanted to get married wouldn't be spending her Friday nights networking with the partners at her new firm. Would she?

Alex didn't know. They had never really talked about it. It was entirely possible that Megan wanted an engagement but wouldn't humiliate herself by asking for one.

He looked across to where she sat behind the wheel, eyes fixed on the unfurling road, lollipop stuck out the corner of her mouth. He didn't know what he thought about getting married, either. It felt contrived, somehow. Meeting Megan when they both worked at Woolies and then later bumping into her at a party and kissing her and then dates and sex and sleeping over and eventually moving in together had all happened easily, as if in cruise-control. When it came to getting married he felt like they'd run out of fuel. Why should they dress up and sign something and eat cake as the next step? Because they loved each other? The connection seemed flimsy.

Megan gave his finger a squeeze. 'What did Gail actually say?'

Alex had to haul himself out of the sucking quicksand of his thoughts. 'About what?'

'The heart attack.'

'Oh.' He looked out the window again. 'I don't know.'

‘How bad was it?’

He knew what she was asking, but he couldn’t answer. ‘He’s in hospital.’

‘Yes, but...’ She said nothing for a moment. On either side of the road the trees were dead, victims of bushfire the year before. ‘I’m sorry about last night.’

‘What?’

‘You don’t have to come out with us if you don’t want to. I shouldn’t have got shitty with you about it. It doesn’t matter.’

Alex went itchy with sweat. He stared out the window at the mass of black sticks, aware that she was glancing at him out of the corner of her eye, waiting. Her apology made him feel the opposite of relieved: If it really was okay for him to stay home while she went out with her friends, then that meant something else was wrong between them. Something that made her curl over and cry while he watched, exhausted.

He felt as if his grip was slipping on something he was supposed to hang on to. ‘You don’t have to say sorry just because my dad’s sick.’

‘But I am sorry.’

‘Don’t,’ he said, voice tightly balanced. ‘Don’t.’

Megan’s hand moved underneath his and he let go, surprised, as she shifted down through the gears. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m just going to pull over for a bit,’ she said evenly.

The wheels bit up red gravel as she braked gently, stopping alongside an ash-coloured trunk. They were dead in the middle of where the fire had been the previous January, and all around them was dark with burnt vegetation. On the opposite side of the road stood three crosses for the truck drivers who had turned back into the blaze. The highway stretched out forever in either direction and yet theirs was the only vehicle in sight. There was no one else for ages.

Alex felt as hollowed as one of his dad’s meringues. He wondered what Megan was going to do. She wasn’t the kind of person who pulled over for idle leg-twiddling breaks, especially not when they were speeding pointedly towards a prone body in hospital. But then,

she wasn't the kind of person to sob tipsily over having to go out alone. She wasn't the kind of person who gave up.

*You're that boy's best thing.*

For a second he wondered if he should propose right now. These kinds of situations, they were supposed to make you confront your own mortality, to crystallise what you want out of life. He would get down on a knee in the dirt and tell her he loved her, that he'd always loved her, and Megan, crying happily this time, would pledge to work shorter hours. And they would get to the hospital and Noel would be sitting up eating fruit salad and grinning grey teeth at them.

No. He'd already reduced this once proactive girl to someone who tiptoed. He had bloated her with the empty calories of his love.

Megan got out of the car and walked around to the front. Feet squared in the dust, she placed two hands on the bonnet and stared down at it. From inside the car Alex watched her arched shoulders rise and fall with measured breaths. He wondered if his father, overflowing a hospital bed, was breathing the same way, or if he wasn't. His poor ruined heart.

## Coup de Grâce

### Bob Morrow

My first shot took one galah  
from those tearing at the haystack.  
Slow, stuttering fall,  
wings scrabbled at the air,  
trailing wisps of pink and grey and  
shrieks of terrified companions.

That shot justified the trust of parents,  
proved my fitness for responsibility—  
and showed my younger cousin city kids could shoot.  
I strolled with him to inspect the corpse.  
The bird lay in a patch of barley grass,  
alive.

I slipped another bullet in the breech,  
but in my cousin's world  
such waste was scorned.  
He handed me a rust-scabbed bar,  
prised from the dirt.  
*You don't need the gun. Take this.*

I had no choice. He'd tell.  
The bird watched, unmoving,  
understanding and reproach  
in the still black pellet of its eye.  
I closed my eyes and struck,  
fear behind the blow.

Sacha

David Buchanan

This is no reprieve  
it is a field  
a bed  
a boat lying on sea grass  
looking up to a diffuse sun  
a squint against rain  
a lip gently bitten after *that* kiss  
a neck arced to heaven.  
If it is a no-man's-land  
then I have given up  
like the man on September 16, 1916  
who walked out amid the shells the bullets  
the concussion of detonation  
to move against the terror  
and name the unspoken  
slouched across a shoulder  
unreached yet loved  
as a cross.

## The Year's Work in Fiction

### David Whish-Wilson

The headline in the January 2010 Fairfax papers suggested that 2010 would be 'The Year of Reading Dangerously', describing the literary offerings for the period as representing nothing less than 'an outbreak in crime.' It is certainly worth noting that 2010 was the year that, for the first time, a crime writer won the Miles Franklin Award. Some of Australia's best loved writers have written crime—I'm thinking of Brenda Walker, Frank Hardy, Judah Waten, Randolph Stowe, Andrew McGahan and others—but Peter Temple was the first nominal crime writer to have received the award, on this occasion for his 2009 title *Truth*, having been shortlisted a couple of years previously for his bestselling *The Broken Shore*.

However, while the Fairfax article intended to suggest that 2010 was a year when a larger than normal number of crime titles was to be released, as far as I can tell this proved not to be the case. In other words, far from it being a matter of crime fiction working its way into more literary terrain, replacing a previously literary readership, Australian fiction in 2010 by and large moved in quite the opposite direction—that is, a large number of ostensibly literary titles published in 2010 used crime fiction conventions to enhance a more literary

mode of storytelling. A quick glance at the Miles Franklin longlist for 2010 publications reveals the success of this particular strategy. Of the nine titles longlisted, only Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance*, Roger McDonald's *When Colts Ran* and Melina Marchetta's *The Piper's Son* do not use either a particular crime or a central mystery as its framing device, its means of framing a deeper exploration of place, or of culture, or of the psychology of a particular character (the other six titles being Chris Womersley's *Bereft*, Jon Bauer's *Rocks in the Belly*, Kirsten Tranter's *The Legacy*, Honey Brown's *The Good Daughter*, Patrick Holland's *The Mary Smokes Boys* and Stephen Orr's *Time's Long Ruin*.)

Of the novels mentioned above, the standout work of fiction published in 2010 for me was Kim Scott's fourth title, *That Deadman Dance*, which has already garnered a swag of prizes and glowing reviews. In Scott's *Benang—From the Heart*, which made him the first Indigenous writer to win the Miles Franklin in 2000, he signalled a willingness to use the historical record as a means by which to interrogate both government policy and its effects upon his own family history. *That Deadman Dance* is also a work thoroughly grounded in historical research, but one that is yet transformed and enriched by means of a binary optic that suggests, on the one hand, the reading of Country as a living, nurturing presence, and on the other as a site of struggle, exile and gradual adaptation. *That Deadman Dance* is a great example of the blending of fact and fiction for a particular purpose, and is something more artful and poignant as a result. Set in the earliest moments of contact between whites and Noongars around what has become contemporary Albany, the tragedy of what ultimately became of traditional culture in that area is used as a device that gently frames (the unsaid speaks throughout) the exploration of the human side of what has become known as the 'friendly frontier.' The novel is structured so as to essentially provide a voice to each of the participants, on both sides of what was to become a great cultural divide, although what Scott makes clear is that initially this divide wasn't (and therefore isn't) unbridgeable. The pleasure of reading Scott's beautiful prose, the richness of his characterisation and

effortless flowing between voices and dialects and ways of reading the country are only some of the pleasures of this novel.

One of the other tangible results of the publication of *That Deadman Dance* is the fact that, as far as this reader is concerned, history is the richer as a result (perhaps because I'm a Western Australian, as I was reading this novel I was continually thinking that *this* was the book that I have been longing to read about *this place* for most of my life.) *That Deadman Dance*, and particularly its central character Bobby Wabalanginy give voice to not only what was, but also to what might have been—serving not only as a reminder that history is always a matter of individual people, and the choices they make, but also the hard truth that the very openness and generosity of the original inhabitants of the area, something that enabled at one point a genuine possibility for intercultural understanding, particularly as it relates to the nature of understanding Country, was lost (although not irrevocably) precisely because to a large extent the learning and resulting cultural adaption only went one way. As Scott has indicated in recent interviews and at the Guwanyi Aboriginal Writer's Festival in NSW in March, the novel deliberately aims to suggest a counter-narrative to 'the dominant yarn of the story of defeat', thereby holding out the possibility of hope, principally because the 'story' is not over, as it's 'a long yarn.' This is a generous perspective, and one that not only reflects the survival of the kind of openness and generosity that can only come from a position of strength, but also responds directly, or serves as a challenge to the non-Indigenous perspective described by Mary Gilmore that suggests that we, who 'had not wit to read'<sup>1</sup> might, even at this late stage, begin to see more clearly.

Chris Womersley's first novel *The Low Road* (Scribe 2008) won best first crime novel in the Ned Kelly awards for that year, and the generic markers of moody atmospheric and structural unity can be equally felt in his award winning second novel, *Bereft* (but also in his fine short story included in Black Inc's *Best Australian Stories 2010* collection). The novel is the first of many published in 2010 that are set in a marginal rural space, despoiled and purgatorial that

yet positions its characters on the margins of the marginal, from where the narrow social life of the towns might be seen in a clearer light. This contrasting of the natural world with civic corruption is of course commonly a trope of Romanticism, and yet the contemporary Australian vision appears devastatingly anti-romantic, complicated by a metaphorical blindness and consequent distance from the land whose potential spiritual or psychological nourishment is only ever apprehended in glimpses that suggest, but never deliver the yearned for deeper apprehension (much like Wordsworth's plaintive cry of 'will no one tell me what she sings?' in his ballad *The Solitary Reaper*). Indeed, *Bereft* uses the device of a young female character 'gone native' as a means of drawing the badly damaged central character out of his psychological isolation, and Patrick Holland's *The Mary Smokes Boys* contains the character of young mother Irene Finnain, an Irish speaker who has the most unmediated connection to the land (the device of a younger female companion who serves to draw the older protagonist towards a greater understanding of himself/herself is also reprised in Natasha Lester's well-received *What is Left Over, After*, and Jeremy Chambers' *The Vintage and the Gleaning*.)

*Bereft* begins with a prologue where sixteen-year-old Quinn Walker's beloved sister goes missing during a memorably fierce storm. Soon after, Quinn is discovered by his father and uncle in a disused shed by the town weir, bloody knife in his hand, his sister raped and dead before them. Quinn flees his father's wrath, and the bewilderment and anger of the townsfolk of Flint, where is referred to thereafter as 'the murderer'. Some few years later he is a newly demobbed soldier returning from the Western Front. Quinn has been gassed, his lungs have been ruined and his hearing is damaged. His scarred face resembles 'a slur of porridge.' Quinn hides out in the hills above his parent's farm, observing his father's comings and goings before he decides it is safe to visit his mother. He desires to convince her of his innocence, but it is some time before he can convince her, in her influenza delirium, that he is real. His visits to his dying mother and his retreats to the hillside to escape the still

murderous vengeance of his father describe both the structure of the novel from then on, and the push and pull of his desire to be absolved by the only one who loves him, and his competing need for solitude, for anonymity, merely one of millions of men on the post-war roads, searching for a place to belong. Both Quinn's needs are coloured by concealment and ambivalence. He cannot tell his mother the whole truth, for fear that in her weakened state it will destroy her, and he cannot find solace in the 'dun-coloured and exhausted' landscape. So profound is Quinn's damage that he even comes to envy the blind and deaf soldiers he has encountered for their utter isolation. The mechanised nature of modern warfare is absolute. In the meeting of metal and flesh, it is flesh that is defaced, humanness that is banished. This truth metaphorically inflects his vision of men disfigured by injuries so horrific that their faces are replaced by 'masks of tin on which were moulded and painted those features which had been blasted off', and his vision of country, where a 'glimpse of dirt road lay like a fuse through the elms.' At one point Quinn lays his ear to the earth, and listens: 'beneath him the dense meat of the turning earth...he imagined fires down there, the screech of metal, those goblins and devils with their peculiar industry.'

The vision is gothic, a human and physical landscape characterised by the recent desertion of God, of a grasping at intangibles, understandings just out of reach, but present in the landscape. Quinn believes he has been charged with protecting the spirit of his murdered sister. He camps in the bush, and observes, and listens, but the natural world is not immediately inviting, rather reflecting his own sense of dislocation, recalling the 'weird melancholy' of Marcus Clarke. 'Even the native trees looked to have grown not from this country but, rather, to have been thrust—unwilling, straining skyward—into the soil from which they now attempted to writhe free...And overhead, always, that sheer, blade-sharp sky.' Womersley's prose is gently formal, reflecting the language of the period, peppered with descriptions such as that of hawks circling overhead 'like dark, watchful stars disentangled from their orbits', and the domestic image of Quinn's sister playing

knucklebones, ‘a sound through the house like rodents’ (Womersley consistently deploys aural images to great effect). His microscopic sensitivity enables Quinn to listen so intently, in his wariness, that ‘[a]t night, when the house and surrounding bush were still, he heard the whiskers growing through his cheeks with the sound of countless nails being prised from wood.’

It is only when Quinn meets Sadie Fox, a runaway from the town that he becomes emboldened enough to seek revenge upon his sister’s murderer. Sadie Fox, ‘the angel of death’, becomes to Quinn’s vulnerable mind the sister that he has returned to protect, although it is she who does the protecting. She steals food from the town to sustain them, but she also shows Quinn another way of entering the mystery of Country. She takes him to the ‘cave of hands’, where she divines their future in the entrails of a lamb, she makes small propitiations in the form of delicate locks of hair, tinsel and nails, through ornaments ‘beautiful and pathetic, a tiny thing made sacred by a girl.’ A magical tone, a wonderment begins to pervade the sensibility, such that by the end of the novel, despite the openness of the conclusion, we suspect that Quinn too, like Marcus Clarke before him, has become somewhat more accustomed to his inevitable fate, that ‘beauty of loneliness’ that explains both his disappearance from the story, but also his continued status as legend, as a ghost who stalks the outskirts of the town, the subject of nursery rhymes and warnings to children, a man outside the ken of ordinary folk.

Angela Meyer, in her ever-popular blog *Literary Minded* has suggested reading Womersley’s *Bereft* and Patrick Holland’s *The Mary Smokes Boys* in complement, and while I didn’t have this opportunity it is something I’d recommend. Patrick Holland’s second novel *The Mary Smokes Boys* (his first was the award winning *The Long Road of the Junkmailer* [UQP 2006]) begins with its main character, ten-year-old Grey North watching fireworks flame into the night sky, the sights of children his own age enjoying rides at an exhibition fairground seen from his position behind a hospital window, having just found out that his mother has died giving birth to his new sister, Irene.

This opposition between the carnival festivity on the other side of the window and Grey's sombre mood is deliberate, and metaphorically suggests the social position that he and his family occupy in the town of Mary Smokes—just an hour away from the lights of Brisbane but another world entirely, 'a town surrounded by blowing fields...a broad corridor of flatland before the Great Dividing Range before immense inland plains...The wide and empty country in which the world was uninterested.'

Grey's father William is a manual labourer, and a drinker. When they retire to their home in Mary Smokes it is upon Grey's shoulders that the task of raising his sister primarily falls. While Grey's mother was alive, he had remained close by her, the object of his adoration and love. His mother had married badly, the result of a teenage pregnancy of which Grey is the fruit. Just like the young female character in Womersley's *Bereft*, Grey's mother Irene Finnain is linked closely to the land, whose spirit or essential nature she seems to perceive because of her Catholic piety and the Irish language that she speaks, but which Grey never bothers to learn (indeed, Grey's best friend Eccleston, a 'half-caste' Aborigine is similarly bereft due to the loss of his mother's language, as it relates to the mystic connection to country that he senses, but does not entirely apprehend in the way that his ancestors did). After Grey's mother's death, however, Grey becomes one of the town's Lost Boys, taking to the night with his friends to walk, and drink, and observe. Although the novel is set just outside of sub-tropical Brisbane, because much of it takes place at night, the atmosphere is by turns haunting and menacing, the style at once spare but lyrical, especially when describing the Lost Boys and their muted conversations over a campfire at night, with the land a powerful presence. Much time is spent simply sitting and watching the changes that come over the land, a reminder of the static nature of their lives as they recapitulate the mistakes of their forebears, carrying within them the unspoken burden of a grief and guilt for things they have not done. The boys and Grey's sister Irene in particular are beautifully drawn, with humour and great pathos. In the absence of

adult models the Lost Boys and Irene draw their strength and lore from the land that they traverse, and the waters that pass through. The bonds between the youthful characters are intense and loyal to a vision of friendship that endures despite the passing of years and the mobile nature of the limited employment available to them. But even as they leave and return, and age and love and gradually lose hope, always there is the Mary Smokes Creek, in flood or broken into pools, and their reprising of the rituals of their lost childhood, the sense that their simply observed rituals of watching beside the creek at night confers upon them a sense of identity, and belonging:

At Mary Smokes Creek...The water's violence had grown quiet, stored like the violence of a candle flame...Slabs of granite and basalt were settled in the bed and the water purred around them, though in time of heavy flood you heard the rocks grinding, the water turning them over...And all this, that they barely comprehended themselves, was the boys' secret at this hour of the night. No-one else in the universe was watching these waters. The boys and god were alone. Grey imagined they were the water's keepers.

*The Mary Smokes Boys* works patiently towards its dramatic and violent conclusion, the result of a crime that Grey and his friend Eccleston have committed, albeit with the best of intentions.

This patience is something that is also characterised by Jeremy Chambers' very promising first novel, *The Vintage and the Gleaning*. The novel's narrator, Smithy, has given up a lifetime of drinking as a result of his ruined guts (we suspect it might be terminal.) Once a 'gun shearer', a bloke who's worked and played hard all his life, noted for his strength and work ethic, Smithy now labours in a vineyard somewhere in North-East Victoria.

The novel is structured as a kind of diary, relating in its early stages Smithy's day-by-day labours down the rows of vines, then the sessions in the pub afterwards. It is significant that the shortest

chapter in the book falls on a Saturday, a day of rest. Without his job, it seems, Smithy ceases to exist. The men that he works alongside consist of different generations, but what binds them is drinking. It is also what has ruined Smithy's life, has made it pass without his noticing, leaving him with plenty of regrets.

The first half of the novel builds quietly to establish the character of both the man and the town that he inhabits, in particular what lies beneath the sun-bitten streets. The language of the men is stilted, inarticulate, drawing out every moment of communication, helping to pass the time, although the novel doesn't suffer for it. Chalmers, like his characters, weighs each phrase and action with a significance that threatens not to hold, but then does. Even the silence is loaded, and the cadences of the men's voices are authentic in this regard. Like Womersley's *Bereft*, cycles of repeated action are refracted through subtle accretions of detail, minor changes in key—a funeral, a dream, Smithy's walks to the pub down the train track behind his house, the odd jobs he does for 'Boss's wife.'

Smithy is a great character, but in the early parts of the novel he is barely a man of words. It is in the pub that Smithy's sobriety properly reflects his new perspective on things. The tone is *Wake in Fright*, but Smithy's eye is in—he is not an outsider:

The smell of beer is everywhere and it brings memories to me, shapeless, formless memories, all soaked in the smell and the smoke and the noise around me and they are the forgotten memories of a lifetime...and there are men who talk and there are men who are silent and those who talk do not know what they are saying and those who are silent do not listen, but drink for the very silence, for the silence of their souls. And I was such a man.

Half-way through the novel Charlotte appears on Smithy's doorstep, not knowing who else to turn to. Her abusive husband Brett is due to be released from prison the next day. Smithy takes responsibility for her, a daughter of the landed gentry who's chosen badly, and been

disowned as a result. Charlotte's arrival into his life, and the resulting violent infantilism wrought upon the town by Brett and his friends ultimately draws out the best in Smithy. Brett has murdered before, and gotten away with it. In the small town, everybody knows this, but nobody wants to talk about it, except Charlotte, and then only to Smithy. Charlotte is self-pitying and defensive, but in her voice and ultimately in her actions, Smithy sees a parallel with his own wasted life, its beauty and sadness, its tragedies defined by its inevitabilities.

But it is Smithy's memories that really set him free. In one of the finest passages of writing I've come across in an Australian debut novel, Smithy casts his mind back to his time as an orphan in an Aboriginal Mission settlement in long elegiac sentences of rare power, drawing out the strange beauty and mystery and terrible sadness of the images of his childhood, even as Charlotte embarks upon a long self-serving monologue designed to justify her love for an abusive husband. By the novel's end Smithy has returned to his job on the rows, the cycle of actions are repeated, but his time the repetition is made significant, poignant in light of recent events.

Another very successful debut novel is Stephen Daisley's award-winning *Traitor*. The main character, and the Traitor in question, is a naive young man from rural New Zealand serving in the trenches of Gallipoli. His first experience of life outside the theatre of war, where he achieves some distinction, is when he meets a Turkish doctor, who is treating an Australian soldier on a Gallipoli ridge, during a battle. David isn't sure what to do. Shoot the Turk? Help him? A naval shell makes the decision for him, and the explosion sends them both to the same military hospital.

Mahmoud is a worldly man, a doctor who has trained in London. He is also a Sufi. He befriends David, and there begins a relationship characterised by gentle teasing, and encouragement. David has never met anyone like Mahmoud, and in his war-brutalised condition he is vulnerable to the kind of sensitivity that makes of Mahmoud's epigrams and gentle coaxing and inextinguishable humour a kind of rational alternative to the crude obviousness that otherwise defines

his military life. With Mahmoud, nothing is as it seems, and so begins a fragile balancing act—a friendship characterised by David's love, essentially a desire for the kind of grace that Mahmoud embodies.

David's crime is that he helps Mahmoud to escape, although the two don't get very far. They are shortly after separated, never to meet again. David is sent to the Western Front to act as a stretcher-bearer, as punishment, where again his bravery and compassion amidst the stupid carnage distinguishes him from his peers. Back in New Zealand, David receives a final letter from Mahmoud's wife, telling him that Mahmoud has been sacrificed at the altar of Kemal Ataturk's desire to secularise and democratise his new republic. The novel jumps forward to where David, now the 'old man', forty odd years having passed, still carries the haunting beauty of Mahmoud's ambiguous teachings inside him, and in his rural isolation, discovers that his words begin to make perfect sense (although he must work to make them understandable—he looks for clues, answers in the natural world around him.) There is a numinous quality to much of the prose that describes his life here as a shepherd, the visceral realities of life on the land aside, he is marked as an outcast, a recluse, and yet is strangely at peace with the physical and emotional landscape that he traverses, the reverential words of Mahmoud colouring his perceptions of the life that remains to him, the barest sense that it is an illusion, a trial, and a blessing.

Michael Meehan's *Below the Styx* is a psychological exploration of a murder committed by the central character, Martin Frobisher. At the novel's inception Frobisher is being held in a Melbourne remand centre, looking at a life sentence. Having been called 'a louse' by his wife, who had been going through his private writings stuffed in a black garbage bag, he belts her over the head with an epergne, 'a large, unwieldy object designed to suspend delicacies—usually fruit—above the table.' Martin is as surprised as anybody that he has committed his crime, and the moment of the criminal act is returned to time and again, as befits the meditations of a man in prison for murder, and is used as a structural device by which he is able (from

the arc, of the swing) to spin out a whole series of threads upon which unspools the main core of the narrative.

Frobisher is an editor at a publishing house, a 'courteous and self-effacing man' who because of his crime has been largely abandoned by his friends and colleagues. With nothing much to do in prison he is drawn to the writings of Marcus Clarke, and with the help of a research assistant, Petra, he begins to trawl through Clarke's entire oeuvre, looking for clues as to the man's essential nature, beneath the mythmaking and logorrhoea that has created for Clarke a viable public persona, while leaving few clues as to what he was really like (even in his letters he was, it seems, he was always 'in character.')

The book is as much about language, and storytelling, as anything else. Frobisher is reluctant to talk about himself, especially to others, and what he gives us instead are stories from his childhood, stories from his life as a younger man, and stories about his married life. Frobisher's stories, as Clarke's stories before him, serve to characterise, of course, but also very cleverly lead the reader towards an examination of the ways in which language frames identity, or in Frobisher and Clarke's case, can be used as a strategy to conceal an essential hollowness at the heart of character, a kind of vacant selfhood, chameleon in nature and eternally elusive. Frobisher is 'utterly superficial', an actor in his own play, a character in his own novel, that has taken a tragic turn (although the tone of *Below the Styx* is wonderfully absurd), to the extent that he realises that without the permanent record which his story will become, that he has essentially never existed in any authentic fashion, an authenticity that is itself called into question. Ultimately, it is in Frobisher's textual analyses of Clarke's stories and letters that he comes to understand, and appreciate Clarke's struggle for recognition, ultimately forgiving him his evasions and cynical accommodations with the hack-writing made necessary for him to survive. In effect, Clarke has succeeded where Frobisher has failed—Clarke has survived in the only manner available to us, perhaps, enshrined in text, in language, in the fickle memory of our culture. It is only Frobisher's enduring prison

sentence that paradoxically frees him to recognise that (sentenced, to spend time within himself), double place where he is both 'more in touch here, without phone, diary, or appointments, than I have ever been', representing both a place of absence and yet of creating, a place where out of the essential absence of himself he is yet free to tell the story of himself, truthful or otherwise, to whoever will listen.

Different again in tone, but nonetheless absorbing, Stephen Orr's *Time's Long Ruin* examines the improbable and troubling disappearance of three young children from a crowded Adelaide beach, in 1960 (linked very closely the disappearance of the three Beaumont children in Adelaide, in 1966). The tagline on the front cover reads '*what happens when children disappear?*' and in every sense, Orr's novel is a fictional exploration that seeks an answer to this question, rather than an answer for who committed the crime. The novel is narrated by Henry Page, who still lives in the same suburban house that he grew up in, some fifty years after the three Riley children's disappearance (Janice, Anna and Gavin were his next door neighbours and best friends). Henry's father is a detective, and even before the children disappear, Orr goes to great lengths to detail the way such mysteries serve to enthrall a city's inhabitants, when Henry's father and Bill Riley discuss obsessively the earlier mystery surrounding the identity of a man found dead on another suburban beach.

The slow pace of the novel's first half, prior to the Riley children's disappearance allows the reader to spend a great deal of time getting to know them, which is important in a novel that is never going to achieve any real resolution, where the purpose is rather to look at the previously idyllic Croyden through new eyes. Henry is an awkward character who reveres his father, even when he's beaten by him, and yet is chary of his mother, an unsympathetic and resentful woman who abandons them at one point, and who he discovers has written on the back of a picture of the three of them—*Holy Trinity, 1948. The father, the wife and the crippled son* (his mother's fears that she'd give birth to a 'cripple' having been realised). Henry's father, however, is lovingly portrayed, both as the long-suffering husband

of an inexplicably withdrawn wife, and the figure of neighbourhood respect that comes with his office as detective. There are other colourful characters who live on the Croyden streets, representative of the times, certainly, the New Australians amidst the slightly wary Anglo-Australians, but it is never clear whether or not Henry now looks back at this earlier life as a period of innocence, or of general denial, given that at one time he is molested by the local doctor, and the fact that the Riley children disappear so easily from such a public place. The children are never found, in fiction as in real life, and it is Henry who is left behind at the novel's end, the last survivor of the old community since irrevocably changed, haunted and alone and still bearing witness to the damage done to a life, to a family and a neighbourhood.

Jon Bauer's debut novel *Rocks in the Belly* has been widely acclaimed, and endorsed by the likes of J. M. Coetzee, David Malouf and M. J. Hyland. The story is narrated by a character that is never named, in a city that is never named (you might say that the real setting is childhood). The narrator is an eight-year-old child made jealous by the arrival in his family of an older foster child, Robert, who is charismatic in a way that the narrator is not. Robert comes from more difficult circumstances but he is not the selfish and ungenerous child that the narrator has become, nor does he display the sociopathic tendencies that the narrator carries into adulthood, when he returns home from a career as a prison guard in Canada to care for his dying mother. The power of this novel lies in the alternating voices of the eight-year-old boy and the man that he has become, in the lack of distance (it's all scene and no summary, which lends the narrative an immediacy and focus) and the deft juxtaposition of humour and a sometimes startling inappropriateness, as the narrator's manipulations and self-deceptions begin to retreat before the obviousness of the grief he has caused his mother. As his mother fades towards death and loses her physical and psychological dominion over him, he is able to be tender towards her, recognising that while the emotional distance he has always felt from others is now, with the loss of the

only person who might love him, absolute—he is ultimately able to take responsibility for his life, and, in the final flux of past, present and future—his actions—both the feelings that engendered them and the deeper feelings that lie concealed.

The other standout novel of 2010 for me was Fiona McGregor's *Indelible Ink*, indeed one of my favourite novels of recent years (Kirsten Tranter's *The Legacy* having been discussed in last year's review essay). The novel largely shifts its focus between Mosman and Surry Hills, reflecting the orbit of the novel's central character, Marie King, who is a woman in her late fifties becoming increasingly dissatisfied with a life spent catering to the needs of others. One of the real achievements of this novel is that McGregor is able to invest initially unsympathetic characters with a deal of empathy. From the first chapter with its omniscient view of Marie and her three children; Hugh, Leon and Blanche, we are drawn into a world of wealth and privilege complicated by dissatisfaction and anxiety that yet never feels churlish—McGregor never judges her characters. Marie's North Shore home is a haven of sorts, but in the larger picture and framed by her increasing peregrinations Marie comes to recognise 'the cellular structure of society, like a hive, cheek by jowl the wealthy lawyer, the tattoo artist, the housing commission Aborigine.' Marie is becoming increasingly unwell, and the plan is to sell her beloved house, which to Marie and her children means severing themselves from a sanctuary more emotional than material, particularly for her son Hugh, for whom 'Mum is the house...Everything he had first learnt about the world, his primary sensations and obstacle courses were in that house and to lose it was to lose the very foundations of his life.' *Indelible Ink* is an intensely contemporary novel, exploring to great effect the current urban anxieties and feelings of helplessness associated with environmental decline and climate change in particular (indeed, in my opinion the novel is vastly superior to Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* which explores similar terrain).

It is mid-summer, and the city is in drought. The hardness that we associate with the drought-stricken interior has entered the heart

of the city, but the city's inhabitants do not draw from it any sense of character, rather blame others in their helplessness. 'Forty-six degrees. Each day hotter than the day before, the heat moving stealthily into every corner of the house.' Trees are dying. The economy is suffering. Water has become a precious resource. But what power the characters of *Indelible Ink* have over this sense of terminal decline can only be expressed through minor adaptations and acts of consumer choice, although this of course does not satisfy their anxieties. When Marie remarks upon the beauty of her best friend Susan's new car, a 'fawn Peugeot convertible', she is met with the following response—'It runs on biofuels. Or it's supposed to. That's why we got it. And two months later we find out that we're responsible for food riots in Bangladesh or wherever. Fabulous, isn't it.' Marie has always been an avid consumer too, but she is able to articulate this consumption as a response to satisfying a deeper sense of guilt, the sense that her wealth, particularly as it relates to her ownership of a prime piece of real estate, is not 'rightful', such that 'the sadness of losing it also contained relief.'

The real momentum of the novel consists in Marie's gradual sloughing off of her attachments to the material, and the subsequent movement towards an interiority defined by her increasing distance from the disapproval of her wealthy peers and her children. The defining moment occurs when a drunken Marie enters a tattoo parlour on a whim, and marks herself with indelible ink. The transformation is immediate, although the reasons for her increasing attachment to the tattoos that subsequently adorn her body are made apparent only later in the novel. Initially, the experience is painful, but strangely pleasant, pathetic in its desperation, perhaps, but immediately empowering. By undergoing the rituals of marking her body Marie feels she has finally 'planted a flag in her own country.' Physically unwell, anticipating the grief she will feel when her house is sold from beneath her, Marie returns time and again to the company of Rhys, her tattooist, who understands Marie's need. 'The heat brought the tattoos up like braille. The dips and swirls disappeared then

rose up again, fresh enough to scale slightly, ancient enough that they seemed to have always been there. This language of welts was strangely familiar, as though the needles hadn't so much inserted ink as stripped the veneer from an underlying design.' Marie's tattoos become increasingly elaborate, drawing her towards understandings lost in the passage of her life, wedded to a successful advertising man and a milieu characterised by boredom and avoidance of unpleasant truth. When Marie recalls witnessing the slaughter of animals as a child, the significance of her tattoos and the intimations of her physical decline become apparent: '[i]t wasn't how a little girl was supposed to feel. Animals were being murdered, but their pain to Marie was subservient to a bigger force, beyond Win and herself: it was the force of human appetite stretching back though infinity.' With the diagnosis of a terminal illness the novel changes key and the voices of the children come to predominate. They gather round Marie and their Mosman home, having 'not seen each other this often since they were children.' Their mother's dying cuts through their self-absorption but the tone is unsentimental, calling forth the larger themes of regret and loss and love in a manner that characterises Marie's final act as one of betrayal, certainly, but also as an act of clarity, of inevitable and courageous honesty.

Gail Jones' *Five Bells* is also a brilliant evocation of contemporary Sydney, although the tone is vastly different, more akin to Slessor's elegy to his lost friend (the poem from which the novel, of course, draws its name). Jones' language too is poetic and beguiling, and the structure is ambitious for such a short novel. Four characters converge on Circular Quay at roughly the same time. The day is luminous and the Quay is crowded (in the words of one of the characters, James, the effect is 'cinematic'), although the atmosphere is festive. Jones uses the aesthetic reading of the regular landmarks to both characterise and distinguish her characters. Ellie, for example, a young woman from rural Western Australia, sees the Sydney Opera house for the first time up close: 'It was moon-white and seemed to hold within it a great, serious stillness. The fan of its chambers leant together,

inclining to the water. An unfolding thing, shutters, a sequence of sorts...she was filled with corny delight and ordinary elation.’ James, a depressed young man from the same country town as Ellie, sees the Opera House rather as ‘White teeth...Its maws opened to the sky in a perpetual devouring.’ Pei Xing, a Chinese émigré and survivor of the Cultural Revolution, inflects the Opera House (as with many things, always beautifully) with her own cultural perspective: ‘There it was, jade white, lifting above the water. She never tired of seeing this form...The shapes rested, like porcelain bowls, stacked one upon the other, fragile, tipped, in an unexpected harmony.’ And finally, Catherine, a young Irish woman also seeing the Opera House for the first time describes it thus: ‘...nestling before her, its folded forms stretching upwards, its petal life extending. The peaked shapes might have derived from a bowl of white roses, from the moment when they’re tired and leaning, just about to subside. *Blown*, that strange term, *a bowl of blown roses*.’ It is Catherine’s reading of the Opera House that leads to the first play of what becomes Jones central method—images suggesting emotions which in turn suggest memories, as each of her characters draw upon the contrast between the vividness of the scene before them and the trauma that has brought them to Sydney. The ‘fifth’ bell of the novel is a young child gone missing from the Quay whilst amongst them, and whose absence serves ultimately to bring them together. While this device deliberately calls attention to the larger themes explored in the novel, those of loss and the exigencies of fate in particular (I’m not sure that I would call the effect of this technical employment slight, as much as convenient, or circumstantial) the effect of the rising emotional tempo yet works much like a musical score, and indeed captures, as presumably intended, the powerful emotional resonance of the culmination of Slessor’s own poem.

The following are novels that are hard to categorise, except to say that they have what Les Murray calls *Sprawl*: Gregory Day’s *The Grand Hotel*, Wayne Ashton’s *Equator*, David Musgrave’s *Glissando* and Roger McDonald’s *When Colts Ran*. A particular kind of *Sprawl*,

it might be said, in the face of another of Les Murray's assertions that 'failure was the first rhyme for Australia.'<sup>2</sup> Gregory Day's third novel, *The Grand Hotel* explores in some detail the turning of a coastal property into a locals' pub, the eponymously named Grand. The characters are all lovable rogues and the hotel itself, with its Dadaist speaking toilet and inventive means of clearing out unwanted visitors, is also a significant character. The novel is by turns garrulous and wonderfully absurd, good natured and inventive, even as it describes the construction of a creative space for the locals of Mangowak, free from the creeping encroachment of touristic development.

Wayne Ashton's *Equator* is an altogether odder although equally free-spirited affair. This is a novel utterly without restraint, and is the more pleasurable because of it. Using repetition as a linking device, and a loopy enthusiasm as its means of maintaining velocity, the novel yet has at its core a serious and melancholy heart, and might best be described as an anti-realist experiment in memory and consciousness that addresses climate change from aslant. Humans are called 'inheritors' and are by and large simultaneously self-aware but ignorant of themselves, mere pawns in a Manichean struggle between the 'boxes', the artfully made opposed to those industrially manufactured. The boxes rant and rave, often sounding like characters from an episode of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, anarchic and energetic, by turns moralistic and amoral, chopping syntax and expressing cosmological 'flux', returning time and again to the phrase 'memory is like water', with the whole functioning as a loving elegy to the ocean.

David Musgrave's *Glissando* is something entirely different again, although it too mines a fervent absurdist strain not often associated with rural narratives. Working both with and subverting Patrick White's *Voss* (the thinly disguised writer and his partner even make an appearance towards the end of the novel), the novel is a wickedly clever parody that uses a pastiche of letters, erudite observations of historical events and literary allusions alongside the framing device of the hunt by shadowy figures for a lost promissory note. *Glissando's*

characters are by turns grotesque and humorous, such that the novel has at times the tenor of a satirical fable, with a central character reminiscent of Voltaire's *Candide*, although it certainly cannot be said of Musgrave's *Australia* that it is the best of all possible worlds (although, while the arts have a currency in the world of *Glissando* lacking in our own, human nature, such as it is, provides both the continuity and generative comedy).

Finally, Roger McDonald's *When Colts Ran*, both critically lauded and highly accomplished, reprises a familiar Australian fictional landscape, but in a manner that is both cartographic and 'epic' as it has been described elsewhere. While the author has called *When Colts Ran* a novel 'about the broad stream of life, structured around seventy years in the life of a drunk', it is also an interesting exploration, inflected with nostalgia, of the nature of character through the generations, in the sense that the novel's earliest characters are products of the traditional outback and war school—they have character in the traditional meaning of the word—but are ultimately supplanted by those who essentially lack character (one young thug accidentally shoots a man, out of boredom, for example). A tone of meanness creeps into the town that they inhabit, where the eponymous Colts, now an old man, takes in a young woman, who, like Charlotte in Chalmers' *The Vintage and the Gleaning* is escaping a no-hoper partner, but whom, also like Charlotte, soon returns to that partner. The changes are subtly wrought, but significant enough such that by the end of the novel Colts seems utterly adrift in the modern world, the way of life that defined his generation having disappeared forever. But whereas Musgrave consciously and deliciously inverts the traditional Australian focus upon war and the working of the land as a source of national identity, and replaces it with the warring of artistic 'visionaries', McDonald works deliberately with the exaggerated but familiar. The landscape of the novel traverses the interior from west to east, but is everywhere peopled by stories in abundance. Indeed, 'the Isabel' where the latter part of the novel is set fairly bulges at the seams with stories of characters past and present.

While exactly the kind of unremarkable rural area that a visitor might pass through without a second glance, what McDonald makes visible is the layer upon layer of living history that all such places contain, and for which he clearly has great affection. Even with a couple of pages to go the stories keep coming, the characters continue to sing the song of themselves, albeit with an increasing desperation. Their bodies are old and broken but their spirits are keen, such that when Colts returns to his mother's grave to finally make his peace, we are aware that this ending is merely provisional, sensing that these characters and their superseded lives, much like Martin Frobisher in Meehan's *Below the Styx*, are similarly pleading to survive in the only manner available to us, perhaps, enshrined in text, in language, in the inscribed memory of our culture, our timeless fictional present.

## Notes

- 1 Michael Ackland, 'Poetry from the 1890s-1970s,' in Elizabeth Webby (ed.). 2000. *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 85.
- 2 Les Murray, 'The Australian Card,' in Steven Matthews. 2001. *Les Murray*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 107.

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*Those marked with an asterisk have been mentioned in the review.*

- \*Ashton, Wayne. *Equator*. Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2010.
- Averill, Roger. *Keeping Faith*. Melbourne: Transit Lounge, 2010.
- \*Bauer, Jon. *Rocks in the Belly*. Melbourne: Scribe 2010.
- Brown, Honey. *The Good Daughter*. Melbourne: Penguin, 2010.
- \*Chambers, Jeremy. *The Vintage and the Gleaning*. Melbourne: Text, 2010.
- Cowell, Brendan. *How It Feels*. Sydney: Picador, 2010.
- \*Daisley, Stephen. *Traitor*. Melbourne: Text, 2010.
- \*Day, Gregory. *The Grand Hotel*. Vintage: Sydney, 2010.

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- \*Holland, Patrick. *The Mary Smokes Boys*. Melbourne: Transit Lounge, 2010.
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- \*Jones, Gail. *Five Bells*. Sydney: Vintage, 2011.
- \*Kennedy, Cate, ed. *The Best Australian Stories 2010*. Melbourne: Black Inc, 2010.
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- \*McDonald, Roger. *When Colts Ran*. Sydney: Vintage, 2010.
- \*McGregor, Fiona. *Indelible Ink*. Melbourne: Scribe, 2010.
- \*Meehan, Michael. *Below the Styx*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2010.
- \*Musgrave, David. *Glissando*. Melbourne: Sleepers, 2010.
- Nunn, Malla. *Let the Dead Lie*. Sydney: McMillan, 2010.
- \*Orr, Stephen. *Time's Long Ruin*. Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2010.
- Reid, Ian. *The End of Longing*. Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2010.
- \*Scott, Kim. *That Deadman Dance*. Sydney, Picador, 2010.
- \*Tranter, Kirsten. *The Legacy*. Sydney: Fourth Estate, 2010.
- \*Womersley, Chris. *Bereft*. Melbourne: Scribe, 2010.

## Money Street

**Peter Bibby**

It is winter and the leaves have turned  
But not fallen from the tall Plane trees  
For they must wait for something more than cold  
To bring their bronze and golden glory down:  
The gusting winds of Autumn did not come,  
The nests are dry for there has been no rain  
To weight the canopies with sodden freight  
And send them tumbling in a slow cascade  
From weakened stems, a dry year's mortgage deeds  
Discharged for passing feet and tyres to trash.  
Like some assembled crowd in puzzlement  
Behind a barrier, the brown ghost cloud of leaves  
Murmurs over the street of many changes,  
What's the project holdup? Where's the rain?

## Bower Birds

*[for Jane Hammond]*

**Mark O'Flynn**

In the autumn-bones of cankered crab-apples  
beyond the cold constraints of windows  
they sit. A gang of satin bower-birds whirring  
their ratchets, as the slick, oily male  
parades his midnight gloss. All the blue pegs  
have vanished from the line and the blue garrottes  
about the necks of discarded milk containers;  
all gone to serve a powerful vanity,  
for he must be the best blue stud around  
judging by the half-a-dozen olive  
green females compiling his harem. Unless  
they are the juvenile males making up the gang  
and he their mentor, a tyrant of seduction.  
Let's face it, you are no ornithologist.  
The bower itself cannot be found  
even though you've searched the gully  
leaving little blue bits and pieces  
about the place like talismans;  
such charity, such easy altruism.  
Pleased are you when such offerings disappear,  
knowing the persuasive power of blue to delude  
and allure. You see the birds from the windows  
and wonder why you are so greatly favoured  
to have them inhabiting this tiny corner of your world.  
The black beads of their faeces hang  
on the washing like caviar; their trill  
a Geiger counter's chuckling.

Why?

for beneath the apple tree lies  
the children's empty wading pool,  
obsolete now, blue as a new bruise,  
the pluvial music tapping on plastic.  
A carved shell of immaculate beauty  
like the Fatima sun dancing in the sky.  
All the females aloft on knuckled  
branches where the only leaves left  
betray the topographic maps of their veins.  
The pool too full of rain and rotting leaves.  
The male flings them violently about,  
but it's beyond him to lift this giant  
blue symbol of his prowess, this whopper,  
and wing it back to the boudoir. So, ever  
alert, he brings his entourage here  
where they perch in awe, as miners  
at gold.  
You might be tempted to anthropomorphize,  
(to endow their purring amazement  
with some philanderer's randy strut.  
After all it's not how big one's big blue  
wading pool is).  
But you don't. Instead you offer blue  
trinkets, (you brothel keeper you), raw  
design for the bower's frail architecture.

## Perth Poinsettia

*Euphorbia pulcherrima*

### Helen Hagemann

I count seven florets in the centre  
of each leaf which would not be visible  
except for the open spread of red  
that could catapult them like the season's  
pop of Bon Bons. The poinsettias  
are fireworks to the eye, an explosion  
on New Year's eve, the first red twirl  
of a Catherine wheel. It's Christmas  
in a backyard thirty years ago,  
the red combustion of our lives  
*with none of the prescience of  
oncoming dreams.* No matter.  
The future means change. The house  
in the evening held only  
by the wind's disturbance.  
A bitterness inside, while outside  
the poinsettia is a ruby star.  
Each flower driven upward  
in its small nature. Perhaps, this is all it can  
do before winter's change, to sway there,  
a Frida Kahlo *objet d'art*,  
vibrant and dazzling  
in the moon's eclectic shine.

## The Thirsty World

**Kate Whitfield**

There had been a cool change after five days of heat, and I took Paul into the front yard to let him play in the fresh air. He saw something odd, and pointed to a glitter in the gutter. He pulled at my hand and we went over to look. It was a trickle of water that ran all the way down the street. Paul looked at me with wide eyes.

The southerly breeze lifted my hair off my still-sweaty neck, but it was weak. It would barely penetrate the house if we opened up the windows and doors. I remembered the cool changes of my childhood: dramatic affairs, with charcoal clouds, writhing trees and the wind saturated with the smell of rain. My brothers and I would run out into the downpour as the clouds finally burst with, it seemed, as much relief as we felt. Thunder accompanied it, and the whole world was changed.

I looked up at the blank flat sky. Paul poked the water with a stick. Then he put his hand in the water and made a handprint with it on the hot concrete, and squatted there watching it disappear as piece by piece it dried away.

My son has never seen rain.

I thought no more of the water until the next day. When Paul and I went out the front door, he ran straight to the gutter and stamped in it, so that water splashed up his legs, and he laughed.

I took his hand and we walked up the street to find the source. We walked six blocks and could see no sign, just the same trickle running down the gutter, slightly wider than yesterday. But Paul was hungry, so we turned back.

Paul talked about the water that night until he went to sleep, and the next day he ran out to find the trickle had become a small, gently flowing stream. He stood in it up to his knees. It eddied around the tyres of parked cars. It was clear water except for the leaves and sticks it had picked up in the gutter. I put my hands into it, for the novelty. It was cool and—I touched my finger to my tongue—fresh.

We lingered on the nature strip next to the stream all day, and by evening there were a couple of dozen people gathered along the street looking at it. A few paper boats sailed down it, launched by children upstream. I helped Paul thread together his own two leaves and a twig to make a sailboat. It capsized immediately, but carried on out of sight.

The next day the stream shallowly covered half the tarmac. A few groups spread picnics on the dusty nature strip by it. Older children and teenagers leapt into it to splash around, but by afternoon they were forced to get out as the stream thickened, and started to carry objects—wooden planks, garden chairs, plant pots. No-one could tell where they were coming from. The shouting and laughter died down and the crowds thinned; the residents of the street went back into their houses and closed their front doors.

The next day there were other streams on other streets, and ours now covered the entire road and lapped against the footpath. Cars that were still parked there had their engines and half their doors underwater.

Some of our neighbours shut up their houses and buried themselves indoors; others filled trolleys and wheelbarrows with

their possessions and made an escape on foot. Paul and I watched from our front step without talking. From time to time I went inside and moved things around—gathering underwear and photo albums, moving things to higher shelves—but without any clear plan in mind. I kept expecting that, at any moment, someone from the police or the government would come and tell us what to do, but no-one came. So we stayed on the front step and watched.

We were still there when we started to see stranger things being washed down the river. There was a dollhouse, sitting atop the river like a houseboat. Next, a Persian carpet and a whole school of books. A reef of brightly coloured sari silk. The objects became more and more extraordinary, and then came the animals: a drowned sheep, the carcass of a peacock, a live monkey clinging to a floating tree branch. Paul started to wail, and I took him inside.

I turned on the TV, expecting universal coverage of this and perhaps other calamities, but instead, and to Paul's great relief, I found cartoons. I left him in front of them and went to the front window to watch.

There were no sounds now except the rushing of the water. No traffic moved on any streets nearby; the trams and the trains had stopped running. The water lapped through our front fence now, pushing the soil out of my barren flower beds. Three cats jumped the fence from next door, ran across the yard, and disappeared over the next fence. It was too late to escape, or do anything but wait for help, so I lay down on my bed and listened to the water running.

It had not rained for four years. The water in the river outside did not come from the sky.

I woke with Paul scrambling onto the bed, diving onto my shoulder. I could feel him trembling. It was evening now, and the water had reached the house. The entire garden was submerged, and I could only see the spear-tops of our picket fence. I couldn't see a single person anywhere, though for all I knew they were still shut up in their houses, like us. But, I thought, perhaps they had escaped to somewhere safe.

I slowly walked back to the living room. It was news time, though I doubted there would be any signal. I switched on the TV and there was a picture: on every channel, still cartoons.

We sat on the couch together, and Paul snuggled in against my side. I could see that he was ok if I was ok. As long as I was not worried, he was content to sit with me and watch a cross-dressing bunny dupe a duck. Cartoon logic—wherein a cat puts his face through a bird's drawing, and the bird rubs out his features with an eraser—that evening, had a comforting rightness to it. Both of us, eventually, were stunned into sleep.

At first it was a pleasant sensation: the house seemed to move with the rhythm of sleep. Then there was a great thump and shudder, and we were jolted physically so that Paul fell off the couch. I picked him up and held him as light from the window moved across the room.

We went to the window. Paul laughed first, then started to cry, a gasping, open-mouthed cry. It was the position of the sun that undid me: still low in the sky, staring at me through this south-facing window.

The other house, that we had collided with, was already several metres from us, and moving away fast. I thought I could see people standing at its window, though it was perhaps only a reflection of us. I could see several other houses on the water, but far fewer than there should have been in my suburb.

There was no way of telling how deep the water was now—there was no landscape, only the flat water and the houses that perched atop it as easily as seabirds, with utterly un-house-like buoyancy.

I stared for a long time, while Paul sat at my feet, sniffing, and then gradually becoming bored. I forgot he was there.

I saw bits and pieces of the flotsam of our former lives—a floating electricity pole, a children's slide, some café tables, but there was less of it as the hours passed. The house was definitely moving—carried along by a strong current, but to no apparent end. The river had surely now mixed with the sea. I wondered if there was any land left anywhere.

Finally I left the window and went back to the TV, although of course it no longer worked. The electricity was gone. I walked back to the window, my legs unsteady.

'I'm hungry,' Paul's plaintive voice came from the kitchen doorway. Automatically I went and made him a ham sandwich, smearing a thick layer of his beloved pickle onto the bread with no regard for where the next jar of pickle might come from. This crossed my mind as I squished the top layer of bread down and cut the sandwich diagonally. Then I remembered that we had an unopened jar in the pantry, and I was relieved.

Paul was sitting on the floor in the lounge room looking at a book. I noticed that he had thrown up in a corner. I put the plate with his sandwich in front of him and lay down on the carpet, curling myself around him like a serpent.

We slept more, and woke when the light was going. Both of us moved sluggishly, pale and queasy from the sensation of our house moving under us. But we each ate half of the sandwich that had sat on the floor while we slept.

I stood and began to move towards the front of the house, then stopped. Something else was different. It was a smell. I couldn't identify it, though it was familiar.

I called Paul to me and we stood together at the closed front door. I looked at him, and his returning look told me we had nothing left to lose.

So I opened the door. The sea—that was all you could call it—was dead calm, and we no longer seemed to be moving. Our front steps were still there, and the water only came halfway up them; it would not enter the house. But ours was the only house in sight. Everything else had drifted far away from us.

Suddenly I realised that the light was dim not only because it was evening. The sky was grey. Clouds, heavy and gravid, clung to the underside of it, seeming so low, so close. And I realised what the strange and familiar smell was.

I watched Paul's face as he watched the drops fall on the water. And then there was a sound, like horses galloping across the sky.

'Matisse is jammed with confidence': Painting  
and creative inspiration in the early writings  
of Murray Bail

**Michael Ackland**

Ever since their publication Murray Bail's first books, *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* (1975) and *Homesickness* (1980), have posed major interpretative problems and defied neat classification. Readers immediately recognised that these works marked a radical break with the Australian realist tradition, and were soon enrolling the author among the ranks of postmodernist experimenters, noting the reliance of his work on the fragment, innovative narrative strategies and the absurd.<sup>1</sup> Bail also acknowledged these affinities, and professed an interest in writers such as Tournier, Roussel, Borges, Marquez, Calvino, Grass and Bernhard, as well as Kafka and Patrick White, but this left many questions concerning his approach and subject matter still unanswered.

A different, largely unexplored area of potential influence was his obvious preoccupation with the visual arts, especially painting. The seriousness of this interest is attested to by him having served on the council of the National Gallery of Australia from 1976 to 1981, and by specialist publications on such resolutely independent, antipodean modernists as Ian Fairweather, Colin McCahon and Sidney Nolan. Commentators, uncertain of the relationship between these two

sources of inspiration, have treated them as distinct entities, a tendency epitomised by the most recent survey of Bail's output. Repeatedly it emphasises his 'postmodernist narrative techniques', coupled with satire, and treats art as an enriching addendum:

Bail's experience as an art critic for the Australian National Gallery in Canberra has enabled him to enrich his postmodern narratives by the visual imagery and intertextual allusions to painting through which he builds up his postmodern vision of the world. As the title of his first collection...implies, he incorporates visual imagery in his narratives. (Kušnir 348)

As evidence, 'The Drover's Wife' is adduced—a work that turns on its speaker's self-revelatory response to an iconic canvas by Russell Drysdale. In narrative terms, however, this is one of the least experimental of Bail's early stories, and so the adduced 'intertextuality', like other commentary, leaves unexplored putatively deeper links between his own creative project and his fascination with painting—evident in diverse references which pepper his early fiction, as well as in his decision to work concurrently on *Home-sickness* and a monograph on the painter, Ian Fairweather. To Bail these were arguably not discrete but cognate tasks, for as he confessed: 'Certain aspects of modern art have altered my thinking, my ways of seeing, and so my writing efforts' (L45).<sup>2</sup> How he arrived at this position, and what it might actually have meant for his work, is the subject of the following paper.

Bail's engagement with art predates his literary efforts, and was intense as well as unusually thorough. His seminal encounter with painting came allegedly when, as a teenager in Adelaide, he stood spellbound before Drysdale's *Woman in a Landscape*—'I'll never forget it' (C42). But whereas a similarly defining moment in 'The Drover's Wife' renders the viewer self-obsessed and focused on domestic events, in Bail's case it helped trigger an abiding concern with art, as well as attendance at art school. How wide-ranging,

indeed encyclopaedic, this interest became is attested to in extracts from his London diaries of 1970-74, first published as *Longhand: A Writer's Notebook* (1989). In this slim volume, presumably selected and edited to show an embryonic authorial mind at work, the attention and thought devoted to the visual arts are particularly striking. Though Flaubert, Proust and Tournier, as well as Goethe and Thomas Mann, rate important entries, it is not just the gallery-goer but the diarist's pen that engages with a seemingly endless list of painters, from the Italian High Renaissance through to the radically experimental movements of the twentieth century:

Picasso's *Weeping Woman* (Tate): an accusation against the disintegrating face. And vice versa. So the viewer keeps going backwards and forwards.

The silence and serenity offered by Rothko and Nicholson only a few paces away is not all that reassuring. (L26).<sup>3</sup>

Though reportedly 'ogling art' (L26) to the point of making a spectacle of himself, Bail's is a highly informed, reflective response from a man who had adopted painterly ways of viewing everyday life. He is equally alert to the emotionally disturbing undertow of Rothko's planes of primary colour, or the visual algebra of analytical Cubism, which features also in his fiction. Comments on early modernist masters, such as Cézanne, van Gogh and Matisse, are prominent as well, and reveal a broad acquaintance with their correspondence, notebooks and revolutionary programs. And their ways of seeing apparently were colouring his own, for, quoting Panofsky, he has to warn himself against regarding humans as 'nothing but the change of certain details within a configuration forming part of the general pattern of colour, lines and volumes, which constitute my world of vision' (L8). Other entries show how inter-related he found the problems posed by painting and writing. A door slammed in his face, for instance, triggered an illusory epiphany, as well as evidence of what he was seeking: 'I am confronted with the grain and texture

of wood, and bits of paint, a few inches away' (L5). For a moment this seemed an encounter with the authentic, with 'what is "real"', and the threshold to a 'new meaning of art—it should possess such a compelling force' (L5). Both the quest for new artistic meaning and its 'compelling' embodiment would exert a strong influence on his short fiction.

In brief, Bail as a writer would be concerned not merely with 'incorporat[ing] visual imagery in his narratives', in the sense of describing or alluding to a particular canvas, but arguably with tackling similar problems to those confronted by artists. They could afford either practical lessons in ways of depicting subjects of common interest, as when he acknowledged that studying perspective in Australian landscape art, and 'their way...of painting objects within space, made me write things more visually' (C42), or more critically they could be a dynamic source of inspiration, suggesting new angles of vision and firing his creative imagination: 'Strolling from one picture to another in art galleries, even commercial ones, I am assailed by literary ideas which beg to be resolved' (L47).

The most crucial intersection between painting and Bail's early fiction concerns the seminal aesthetic challenge of the twentieth century. Often referred to as a crisis of representation, it arose from the progressive problematising of conventional notions of normative, objective reality. Developments in photography throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century had both challenged artists' time-honoured *raison d'être* of accurate representation, and provided them with an opportunity to seek new subjects, approaches and media. Suprematism, Fauvism, Futurism and Cubism, as well as a multitude of other movements and manifestos, signalled a liberation that was well underway by the outbreak of the First World War. As the century unfolded this artistic revolution accelerated until, by the time Bail was composing his stories, it could be stated as 'self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist' (Adorno1). Art, as Adorno's synopsis continued, had replaced deterministic empiricism

with infinite possibilities; however, artists still needed to stress their own and their work's autonomy—as Bail does, for example, in 'A B C etc' with repeated reminders of the story's status as artefact ('These marks on paper, and so on' [183]). Modern art had become unapologetically intent on presenting the individual artist's response to reality, much as it had moved from smooth, flawless paintings, where any trace of a brush-stroke was effaced, to avant-garde works that underscored their own materiality, whether through clotted, dripping paint or a boldly slashed canvas.

Bail, having immersed himself in the major modernists and their doctrines, had comprehensive knowledge of these developments, and railed about their short-sighted reception in Australia.<sup>4</sup> 'There just aren't any cubist paintings in Australia. Not one', he noted bitterly. 'So we've been deprived of the third great modern experience' (D276). Locally 'dun-coloured...realism', and its artistic equivalent in the eucalyptus-dominated landscapes of Hans Heysen or Albert Namatjira, still enjoyed popular acclaim in Bail's youth.<sup>5</sup> Overseas, however, he was able to see art works that embodied the modernist revolution: 'The *Red Interior* of Matisse is jammed with confidence' (L46). Though not acknowledged but presumably appreciated, the canvas marks a high-point in the shift of painting away from objectively rendered matter to its subjective observation and formulation, for this 'interior' is painted entirely in vibrant red and filled with Henri Matisse's earlier works. Artistic perception and its individual evolution provide a sufficient and all-important subject, which the painter boldly espouses ('jammed with confidence'), raising cognate issues for a would-be writer, and affording arguably encouragement to embrace audacity and invention in his own work. Further support for adversarial, iconoclastic intentions was sought among artistic precursors, as his notebook reveals. The maxim 'the practice of art is antichrist' is attributed to William Blake (L107); to the painter, Francis Bacon, the dictum that 'the image must be twisted if it is to make a renewed assault on the nervous system' (L80). According to Bacon, who 'manages to say things...that are beyond most writers

on art' (UP), the need to defamiliarise reality boldly and to launch a visceral assault on audience complacency constituted 'the peculiar difficulty of art today' (L80), and is one obviously embraced in Bail's early fiction.

*Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* (1975) marked a stark break with 'dun-coloured...realism', in favour of interrogating how reality is known and presented. Rather than focusing on psychological development, in the manner of Flaubert, the great Russian novelists or White—authors whose example he has praised—Bail is intent on how individuals perceive and react to the world during a revelatory incident, like the narrator of 'The Drover's Wife' or the rabbit-trapper in 'The Silence', who finds intolerable the fortnightly intrusion of a work-mate on his outback solitude. More extremely, other stories are predominantly 'propositional', in the sense of 'proceeding to answer a certain problem or to explore one' (D265). Also realists rarely foreground the authorial contrivances that foster an impression of verisimilitude and lend coherence to their account, whereas Bail, aligning himself with a modernist aesthetic, repeatedly disrupts his audience's willing suspension of disbelief by underscoring the status of his tales as artefacts, as in his often anthologised story 'A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z.' Its very title draws attention not to a potential story-line but to the inert building blocks of fiction, and to the fact that meaning depends on their arbitrary or, more usually, manipulated conjunction—points underscored from the outset:

I select from these letters, pressing my fingers down. The letter (or an image of it) appears on the sheet of paper. It signifies little or nothing, I have to add more. Other letters are placed alongside until a 'word' is formed. And it is not always the word WORD.

The word matches either my memory of its appearance, or a picture of the object the word denotes. TREE: I see the shape of a tree at mid-distance, and green.

I am writing a story.

Here, the trouble begins. (173)

The opening offers a series of affronts to the realist tradition and its informing empirical assumptions. These presuppose an objectively knowable reality, language commensurate to its depiction, and usually a one-to-one relationship between signifier and the object or property signified. The ‘trouble’, mentioned intriguingly above, is identified first with William James’ proposition that ‘the word “dog”...does not bite’, then with the evocation of ‘philosophers other than myself [who] have dismissed the inadequacy of words’ (174). For Bail’s speaker, words are inherently neutral, but our understanding of them is highly personal. It is likely to invoke a visual image that reflects the reader’s subjective conception and cumulative experiences, rather than any unalterable universal, whether the signifier be ‘tree’, or the starting-point here, ‘a weeping woman’. Thus, instead of being a conventional short story dealing with an unhappy protagonist, Bail’s fiction becomes multi-layered, grappling with the roles of language, writing and subjective perception, as well as providing an inquiry into what produced the woman’s condition.

The interconnectedness of the written and pictorial realms, evoked here, and its potentially transgressive implications are elaborated on through the main protagonists. Kathy, a librarian in the British embassy in Karachi, and her eventual lover, the Pakistani Syed Masood (‘Perhaps he is our best painter [but]...I have my doubts’ [176]), are linked respectively with books and art and, importantly, with unconventionality. From the outset she is not a stereotypically staid and narrow custodian of book-lore, adverse to outside experience. Rather she is willing to embrace other ways of knowing and expressing reality, witnessed in her unusual decision to learn the local tongue, Urdu, and her empathy with its speakers (174). Because of this openness to foreign influence her home soon becomes ‘a sort of *salon*’ (175), a word redolent with the French avant-garde, and she remains receptive to further radicalisation through a contemporary painter. For both protagonists traditional values, and their signifiers, have become unstable. ‘When Kathy thought of London she often saw “London”—the six letters arranged in recognizable order. Then parts

of an endless construction appeared, much of it badly blurred' (175). With an effort she can recall other details, some of them 'strangely dead', while half-conscious awareness of the dependence of this reality on her subjective perceptions encourages the feeling that 'it [London] existed only when she was there' (175). To her Karachi 'stands for something else' (175)—an open-ended formulation rich in radical possibilities.

Masood represents the antithesis to bourgeois valuations of life or art, and dramatises the modernist challenge through his iconoclastic attitudes and actions. On one occasion he wilfully destroys one of his own prized canvases, on another he states: 'You can spell my name four different ways' (179). Then, having mockingly demanded she look up a word, which to them has distinctly personal significance, 'in one of your English dictionaries', he challenges her to think of him as 'an exclamation mark! It amounts to the same thing. I would see you, I think, as a colour. Yes, I think more than likely pink, or something soft like yellow' (179). Englishness, and its clear, authoritative definitions, which are embodied by the approved lifestyles of embassy staff or standard reference works, are played off against a view of reality as constituted by variable, interchangeable and intensely personal codes. Flagrant breeches of the imperial or master code eventually cost Kathy her job, with her trajectory affording a potential parable of the perils for a literary sensibility of being affected/infected by modern art. She is forced to return to London which, like its governing values, has never ceased to exist or exercise a very real sway. There, in the final scene, she is moved to tears by the unexpected receipt of Masood's self-portrait in the mail. To the end, the story affirms multiple ways of knowing and exerting influence on the world, with officialdom serving as a surrogate for those stable, commonsense traditions against which Bail has repeatedly railed in interviews. Their shortcomings are shown to include a limited response to emotional needs and complexities, as well as a failure to encourage what is most spontaneous and inventive in existence, like art itself.

Further inklings of the kind of ‘literary ideas’ which presumably had ‘assailed’ Bail in London galleries, and ‘begged] to be resolved’ (L47), emerge in ‘Heubler’. This character is clearly based on the American Conceptual artist Douglas Huebler (1924–1997). His excellent eye was first revealed spotting, from the air, camouflaged enemy positions during the Pacific War—and camouflage is a Bail leitmotif—while post-war he made headlines by announcing an intention identical to his fictional counterpart: to ‘photographically document...the existence of everyone alive’ (3). Though seemingly unrelated, both ‘Heubler’ and ‘A B C etc’ play on modern dilemmas of representation and, as the first and last stories, arguably draw attention to kindred material in the collection.

Appropriately ‘Heubler’ focuses on the form of reproduction, photography, which accelerated the crisis of representation, and underscores the new medium’s hubris and limitations. This is done respectively through Heubler’s undertaking and by depicting characteristics, or ‘types’, that would escape a camera’s purview, accompanied by the provocative comment: ‘I offer them to Heubler, helping him, one artist to another, whether he likes it or not’ (4). Two centuries earlier William Blake’s narrator, at the end of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, had promised readers his ‘Bible of Hell: which the world shall have whether they will or no.’ The parallel is apposite, for both speakers are committed to a radical enterprise that involves subverting conventions and anticipated responses. Blake’s composition is profoundly antinomian, reading black where the majority see only white and embracing, through the Voice of the Devil, antithetical codes that privilege energy over constraint, imagination over reason, and infinite over finite potential—an evaluation dear to the Australian writer, who had noted: ‘The practice of art is antichrist’ (L107). Bail’s aims, though cast in a less tendentious and morally confronting key, are similar, inverting straightforward, univocal meaning in favour of inventive, ludic readings—thereby setting in train a project that culminates in the narrative challenges posed by ‘A B C etc’.

The keynotes of these twenty-three ‘portraits’ are reversal of expectations and a privileging of diverse, rather than one, form of presentation and narration. For instance, ‘**1. At least one person who always has to have the last word**’ turns out to be a character who, to overcome fear of his own mortality, is determined to contribute the last entry to the Oxford English Dictionary. First he produces coinages, such as zynopic or zythm (5); next he contrives to have them appear in print, so that they may qualify for inclusion in this standard compendium of the English language. Even the empirical gathering of data is open to manipulation; subjectivity apparently will not be denied. The next portrait, ‘**2. At least one person who would rather be almost anyone else**’, depicts an architect, doomed to minor commissions by the distrust he awakens in clients. He cannot bear his own characteristics when reflected back to him in the face of his son. Reproduction and duplication, as this vignette shows, can assume many forms, while the fact that recognition of these family similarities is emphatically subjective, and that the boy’s face is said to function ‘like a camera’ (70), constitute an unsettling commentary on photography and the way viewers respond to its end-products.

These varied ‘portraits’ also blur the supposedly definite categories of fact and fiction. This begins with the transposed vowels in Heubler’s name that signal the appropriation and tweaking of historical detail. Still playing with facts, the next ‘portrait’ is nothing more than a bald summary of personal details: ‘Age: 54/ Date of Birth: September 22, 1920/ Status: married’ (8). But is it any less a portrait and, if so, do reader-viewers expect something more than the merely factual? The data hardly rises above an official questionnaire and is adjudged ‘a bit woolly’, either because of its dubious bearing on the type portrayed or because the bare facts fall short of constituting an adequate portrait (8). Ensuing heterogeneous matter challenges conventional notions of what is permissible in fiction. The title of ‘**15**’, for instance, breaks off in mid-sentence and is followed by two blank pages, while ‘**13**’ is set apart by distinctive type-face and the claim: ‘I tore this out of the London *Times* on June 16, 1973. It

can be reprinted here without changing a word' (23)—strategies that broaden the range of potential narrative modes, much as the modern artist, no longer limited to oils or water colours, might include collage, words and found objects on his canvas.

Throughout the collection the essentials of Bail's argument remain unchanged, though the variables by which they are expressed mutate imaginatively. The imbrication of subjectivity and supposed objectivity is underscored, and critical awareness about fiction and its motives is promoted by challenging, multi-layered stories which acknowledge the viewers' role, whether as artist, main protagonist or audience, in the creation of meaning. Texts at their best ripple with word-plays, resonate with allusions, as the ludic principle trumps definition and grounded knowledge is shown to be wanting.

Repeatedly reality appears elusive or unreproducible, and words mediate limited or subjective perceptions. Efforts to transfix 'the essential nature of a thing' (65) are in vain, as Zoellner and the fledgling cartographer in 'Cul-de-Sac (uncompleted)' learn. Mere imitation or reproduction, through pantomime and synecdoche, fails lamentably to capture or bring to life an individual in 'Portrait of Electricity', while promised panacea, from extraordinarily high-yielding ore to man-made nirvanas, prove equally delusive to their intellectually limited questers. For simple Hector, the ordered view and routine provided to him as a bus-driver seem to bring fulfilling happiness within reach: 'The distance to Paradise, with the great screen framing all kinds of life, gave him this gentle advice: move, slow down, stop, let them get on, move, see, Paradise. The world was beautiful. It was plainly visible' (117). Yet reality is shown to be more complex, and exceeds the superimposed frame of reference through collision with a green van. Relatedly, the dentist narrator of 'The Drover's Wife' belongs to a profession which, unlike modern painting, has definitely not turned its back on the referential object, nor abandoned belief in knowable, 'plainly visible' reality. Nevertheless, this proves no impediment to his highly subjective reading of Drysdale's canvas. Also, although he may arraign the artist for 'altering the truth for

the sake of a pretty picture, or “composition” (60), he himself has been guilty of far greater omissions, oversights and manipulation of detail or perspective in his private life—which ultimately cost him his wife. Again an empirical mind-set is found wanting with regard to art and the vital, emotional existence that sustains it.

*Homesickness* (1980) provides much additional evidence of Bail’s inspirational encounter with the heritage of artistic modernism. People, objects and settings yield up at times a modernist impression of shapes and colours: ‘The surface [of the pool] tilted with the shifting dining room fixtures and candles, fluid lights, and the board floated, an interesting twisted rectangle’ (H22). Pointed allusions to its high-points abound, whether in references to such early masters of abstraction as Malevich and Mondrian, or to seminal schools from the Bauhaus to Abstract Expressionism and Conceptualism. These are evoked respectively through the building housing the pygmy museum, Hofmann’s passion for stripe paintings (associated with the unnamed Jasper Johns), and the nose of an Englishman presented as a replica of Ayres Rock: ‘Performance and conceptual artists tried to claim Russell...three of the world’s great museums had all offered him prestigious One Man Shows’ (329).

Covertly specific scenes ripple with riffs on the modernist legacy. The first collection visited, for example, makes sense not as a museum of handicraft (its alleged subject), but as an assemblage of ready-mades: ‘On a pedestal waist-high for easy viewing stood a soda-water syphon...it possessed a compelling strangeness under a bright light in a museum’ (29). Though to Mrs Cathcart such ‘*objets trouvés*’ merely evoke the junk in her garage, Bail liberally scatters among them items famously elevated to the status of art by founders of the genre, from an umbrella, bound to ‘an early Singer sewing machine’ by ‘its jabbing needle’, to ‘a porcelain urinal’, whose presence is signalled by ‘what seemed to be the hiss of a small fountain’ (31). The latter, playfully entitled ‘The Fountain’ and attributed to R. Mutt, was the brain-child of Marcel Duchamp, while the entangled duo enacts Lautréamont’s celebrated image of ‘the fortuitous meeting of a sewing machine and

an umbrella on a dissecting table'.<sup>6</sup> Here is incontrovertible evidence of how the significance of givens varies according to the experience brought to them by individual beholders, while Bail's reprise of these objects reissues their original challenge to the established canons of art and consensual values.

In scene after scene, knowledge and perception are shown to be fragmentary and coloured by individual experience. London, for example, is described as the 'capital city of facts' (75). Here if anywhere should be found a solidly grounded reality, as well as the means of dispelling nagging possibilities and maybes. 'Let us stick to the facts' (65), the narrator enjoins, as if they represented a tangible certainty, and focuses accordingly on such reputable forms of knowing the past or recording actuality as newspapers and museums. Yet reality, as the narrative stresses, is not a simple given; rather it presents itself as a text to be interpreted ('Messages were everywhere' [65]) by intensely subjective viewers liable to error ('a foot occasionally slipped into the gutter, tilting their vision' [67]). In addition, no two persons' realities are tailored alike, nor the opinions of any individual immune from joining the 'grey sludge' of variegated 'shades of opinion and history' (68). Typically their knowledge depends on the 'vaguely remembered or briefly seen' (198), as well as on a 'certain angle of vision' (199). It has no intrinsic claim to validity, nor does it encompass actuality, while paradoxically what seems solid is frequently undermined by the very perceptions and conjectures that sustain it, or in a striking physical analogue of this condition, by the operations, in the form of myriad tunnels and excavations under London, which honeycomb its very foundations (358–59).

Hence by the novel's end Bail's protagonists are no closer to wisdom and self-knowledge, as individuals or as a group, than at the outset. Then dazed and disoriented, they deplaned among 'fragments, static and commonplace...Soon it would become a slowly moving fresco, clarifying, but with certain parts vague or completely missing; always be missing' (2). In the final scene they, the creators of coherent meaning, are identified with the surrounding, fleeting impressions, in

a brightly-lit museum that exhibits only their shadows and reflections on its white walls. This is the nadir of so-called objective knowledge but the beginning of modern art, epitomised by an insight attributed in 'Cul-de-Sac (uncompleted)' to 'the great Giorgio de Chirico': 'There are many more enigmas in the shadow of a man who walks in the sun than all the religions of the past, present and future' (150).

A further dimension of this interweaving of Bail's passion for fiction and modern art was played out by his working, in tandem with *Homesickness*, on a substantial study of Ian Fairweather. This was an intriguing choice—and a revelatory conjunction. Why burden himself with additional labour when his first novel was proving so demanding? Why single out a painter of English extraction and international outlook, when Australia was preoccupied with its landscape artists, or the radical figurative and representational innovations of painters such as Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker? Unlike these loosely associated, Melbourne-based individualists, Fairweather was a pronounced loner, known for subtle, at times almost monochrome abstractions, infused with the lessons of Cubism. According to Bail, on returning to Australia he had 'thought that given the renaissance in art publishing, there was bound to be a full treatment of Fairweather. To my dismay there was nothing' (D268). It was long overdue. Fairweather 'was the great artist, a painter's painter—ask the painters', as the novelist obviously had. Making good this shortfall enabled him to render homage where it was manifestly due, and to explore a life that 'morbidly fascinated' him (D268). Bail also forestalled the charge of having foolishly divided his own creative energies by presenting his biographical efforts as virtual leisure-time activities. Week days were set aside for the hard labour of composing fiction; evenings and weekends allowed him limited opportunities to research a non-fictional monograph. Gradually 'a mountain of material' was accumulated. Bringing it to paper took five months. 'It wrote itself, it was like a holiday' (C41).

The Fairweather project, however, was complementary in unspecified ways: namely in focusing Bail's thoughts on seminal

issues of modern art, refracted in his novel, and on what a dedicated, creative career might entail. Artistic individuality, as he knew well, 'is not spontaneous. It is a search' (*IF*118) often carried out in solitude and Spartan conditions. It is not achieved through imitation or, like much Sydney abstract art, by following the latest fad, but must 'come from within' (*IF*160). Fairweather, determined to discover and unfold what was truly distinctive in his own talent, chose the modernist trajectory, exemplified by Cézanne, of overcoming conventional academic training through the reclusive cultivation of his craft and genius—with Bribie Island becoming Fairweather's version of the master's Aix-en-Provence. Bail himself, alert to the high seriousness of his calling, exercised a similarly rigorous discipline, producing at best 200 words a day, but sought comparable isolation and creative focus in the anonymity of major cities: first in a below-street-level dwelling in London, then in a bare, white-washed retreat in Balmain. And he, no less than the painter he was writing about, subscribed to a radical tenet of modernism, encapsulated by 'Giacometti's proposition that reality is unsharable' (*IF*213), that is, composed of perceptions unique to each individual, which become a hallmark of that person's art.

Importantly, too, the Fairweather monograph underscores how the distinctive vision of *Homesickness* has at least as many similarities with vanguard modernism as with any later movement. Once again individual perception and its consequences are foregrounded. Bail's Fairweather, from early on, had 'the sure knowledge that I am not going to paint as though through the lens of a camera. What I wanted to express was the effect the scene had on me' in a 'picture that conveyed my thoughts' (*IF*15). Repeatedly Fairweather's subject is identified as the 'regrouping of shapes and feelings' (*IF*204), while Bail's account of a key canvas could serve as a description of the conclusion of *Homesickness*: 'Fragments of armpits, buttocks, breasts, ankle and elbow advance/retreat: now you see me: now you don't' (*IF*128). Not *prime facie* proof of nihilism, such a scene may well project subjective perception or point to 'the eternal mystery of the

world' and, in the case of Fairweather, hint at 'its comprehensibility' (IF128). Congruence is evident also in their responses to creative issues. Fairweather's paintings are read, by the self-professed novelist of ideas, as 'visual equivalents which present ideas in a new and original way, often quite ravishing in its unity and clarity' (IF206). To the painter are attributed the thoughts: 'there was nothing new here (Fairweather's constant phrase)', and 'our ways of seeing are infinitely more complicated' (IF114)—which recall Bail's quest for a 'new meaning of art' (L5) and forms of expression commensurate to 'the complexity of the world' (S). Here was a life-story that clamoured to be told because it intersected with the painterly sources of his own writing, and afforded numerous affirmative analogies.

The complex legacy of artistic modernism, then, not only provided Bail with enriching, intertextual allusions, but it also helped shape his earlier depiction of how individuals interact with the world. Indeed, by the completion of *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* he had provided a fictional response to many of the key dilemmas that had preoccupied artists throughout the century, as well as presumably to those art-inspired literary ideas which, during his London sojourn, had 'beg to be resolved'. The impact of modernism is discernible, too, in his paradigm for achieving artistic excellence, and in the lives of the early antipodean modernists he chose to explore in detail. Far removed from the hapless, ineffectual protagonists of his short fiction, Bail's creative heroes are great and idiosyncratic loners, from White to Magritte, from Fairweather to McCahon, who remained true to their vision of art at whatever the cost. Small wonder, then, that when he came to re-organise and reprioritise his library, the accompanying culling reflected his mature convictions, as well as the completion of his earlier apprenticeship. He threw out 'whole shelves of dry Australian novels, story collections, stolid histories and biographies', having thoroughly passed beyond such 'dun-coloured' writing. Less predictably, he also divested himself of 'hundreds of art books' (UL). The separation from these 'accidents' of modern art was reportedly 'painless', presumably because he had so thoroughly internalised

its history and lessons, together with its uncompromising artistic credo, which was encapsulated for him by Delacroix's claim that 'real superiority...admits no eccentricity'—an adage which his fiction and non-fiction, from the outset, insistently confirmed (N266).

## Notes

- 1 This was a frequent verdict of reviewers, confirmed by such groundbreaking studies as Daniel 193–217, and Gelder 14–19, 115–16, although Bruce Bennett argues that Bail's short fiction prefigures a local 'postmodernist turn', completed by a later generation of such writers as David Brooks and Gail Jones (224).
- 2 References to interviews and occasional commentary on his own work are identified by the following abbreviations: C: Chisholm, 'The blue biro world of Murray Bail'; CS: 'Continental Shift'; D: Davidson, 'Interview with Murray Bail'; L: Lysenko, 'Portrait of Murray Bail: An Interview'; S: Sayers, 'A search for something else'; UL: 'Unpacking a Library'.
- 3 *L* indicates a page reference to *Longhand*; *N* to its sequel *Notebooks*; *IF* to *Ian Fairweather*. Other parenthetical page references are to *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* and *Homesickness*.
- 4 See Ackland 29–82; Haese; and Stephen 98–148.
- 5 The quoted phrase was made famous by Patrick White in 'The Prodigal Son' (1958), and its recurrence in Bail's early writing signals an affinity with White's program, while Bail's own views on the local art scene are refracted in an early story: 'Arr, Australian art...They're all slaving away in a style everyone else dropped thirty years ago. It's all representational stuff...There must be a figure in it or a bloody gum tree. Still, in 1970! Jesus!' (1972 18).
- 6 'Comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie', from 'Les Chants de Maldoror' (Walzer 24–25). The early sewing machine featured in other iconoclastic art, most famously perhaps when, shrouded with a blanket, it was baptised by Man Ray 'The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse', which was Lautréamont's given name, in homage to his influence on Surrealism.

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## Last Time I Saw You Your Hair Was Long

Renee Pettitt-Schipp

I don't know how it should work,  
driving down the South West highway, thinking your  
bundle of flesh and bones is in cold storage somewhere  
while we race back through the heat to help make  
*arrangements.*

I think of the thin pile of you  
stacked against beige pillows and us trying to  
rearrange you  
prop you on your spine in front of your  
white cut sandwiches, crusts off,  
blinking as you ate them slowly like a tired child.

Your hair, always perfectly set  
(audience or no)  
its unruly rebellion now out of reach kept  
bothering you.  
Tenderly I stroked it into a bun  
and I think you were glad though  
you thought I was my mother, 'Jan' you said  
and I guessed she probably was thirty five  
the last time you saw her.

Christmas and we left you  
alone in that cubicle  
worrying about the spider  
behind the light.

Christmas and we left you  
inserted between pastel screens  
we three believing we had  
little choice.

At the door we forgot the code to  
get out and laughed saying  
'imagine we could not leave' and then  
were silent.

47 degrees

*Re: Black Saturday*

## **Maria Takolander**

Like succulents and the nocturnal,  
my newborn and I keep secrets from the sun.

\*

He consents to being lulled by the air conditioner  
in the absence of my heart and lungs.

\*

While we sleep, cots are x-rayed into molten,  
and radiance seals the eyes of women and men.

\*

Black-out. Torchlight in my child's room  
catches his silent, cloth-bound watching.

\*

The world, at dawn, is a tray for yesterday's cigarettes,  
unattended for my infant and his lush bawling.

West Hobart Winter, 1955

## Graeme Hetherington

During the weekend, Uncle Len,  
Lounging before the fire, would rouse  
Himself enough to listen to  
The races, urging to come first  
The horse he'd had a flutter on.

Or else he might shift his behind  
Grown heavy from three decades with  
The Hydro as a desk-bound clerk,  
And go with thermos, thick warm rug,  
Aunt Vivienne and me to watch

The footy from the comfort of  
The members' stand his boss could get  
Him tickets for. At Sunday lunch  
They'd warn me, eighteen years of age  
And boarding there, off catholic girls,

Drink, reading books in preference to  
A social life, about 'the perv'  
Who lived unmarried with his mum  
And cat above the corner shop.  
Then studying late, I picked up,

To move it closer still, a switched  
On radiator by its bar,  
Not so much from absence of mind  
As sub-consciously driven to  
Shock myself out of their small world.

## Decansos (sestina)

**Rachael Mead**

No beam of light illuminated you,  
just a smear of non-descript shadow  
pooled where you lay near the road,  
a place not special for any reason, just  
a stretch of unremarkable ground  
under a conifer's fingers laced with dawn.

In that dim patch untouched by dawn,  
lying there as if dreaming, you,  
on that familiar but not yet known ground,  
looked so comfortable on your bed of shadow,  
as if about to stretch out of sleep, just  
a breath away from shaking off the dew of the road.

But on this ordinary stretch of road,  
as bleak reality begins to dawn,  
until now just the way to Ashton, just  
the valley road until this very moment, because it's you  
lying there in the moist shadow  
no longer part of me, now part of the ground.

And the world is moving beneath me, the ground,  
the geography of this place, the road,  
the air, the trees, the light and shadow,  
the clattering birds of dawn,  
all are shifting now, around you  
lifting and sinking into a new topography just

unrecognisable from how it appeared just  
one night ago. And life, now rudderless, runs aground  
right here where it's you  
lying so still by the road  
among crickets fiddling a dirge in the dawn  
for you and all that has passed into shadow.

All dims to a palette of shadow  
and any faith in the balance of fate to be just  
is lost here and now, in the glacial dawn.  
This foreign land, this strange new ground  
has with tectonic shifts resettled, its core now this road,  
my world still spinning on the axis of you.

Bright flowers might be placed on the shadow strewn ground,  
just here, or nailed to the conifer by the side of the road  
but every day my fresh decansos<sup>1</sup> for you will be the dawn.

1 Decansos is a Spanish word meaning rest or resting place. The practice of erecting markers called decansos at the site of fatal accidents originated in Mexican folk tradition and is now becoming widespread across the world.

## An Allegory of the Crow man, Curlew and Frog

Tim McCabe

There is a place named Quelcon near Denmark. This name Quelcon is of Noongar origin, and it means to dodge a spear. The same word was the call of the Noongar eagle man who finding his waterhole covered with the lice of his nephew, the crow, had called on his nephew to dodge the spear he was flinging.

From this one word an epic is born, and a story rests waiting to be told. This place name Quelcon rests like a footprint left by its previous owner and yet remains readily translated by those who know the story of this ancient relationship between eagle and crow, and what went wrong between them.

The crow man aims with his sharpened beak, the spear he holds between his black eyes, and his feathers all shiny hide his thoughts and all he watches.

Yet here in suburbia as green Swan transit buses pass me by I often speak with the crow men I meet. For some crows, they readily introduce themselves as such, and warn you they are watching. Others meanwhile tell you they are curlews or frogs but are crows and attempt to conceal their tracks and intentions.

‘Well, hello,’ he says. ‘I haven’t seen you for a long time...’ and he watches and waits for you to react. ‘I was only thinking of you and wondering how you were getting on,’ (but you know he’s come looking for a song or some article he can snatch and fly away with).

See an eagle man taught the Kingfisher who taught me and the murder of crows know it and seek me out. And the crow who would steal the meat from your mouth if you let him is brazen in his perfected art of politeness.

‘Oh, you’re looking great, do you remember when...’ he tries to placate you with his pleasantries, but look close and you can see his skinny black scaly crow legs and feet, sticking out from beneath his trousers and shoes.

‘I need that song,’ he tells me. ‘And, if I get it, I will do what I have never done before, I promise I will share my wealth made from the Kingfisher with the Kingfisher’s family of golden swallows.’

And I am inwardly laughing at his charade. A crow man sharing with golden swallows, unheard of—no way!! But he seems so humble, so sincere, and so I make him promise that he will keep his word, but true to his black feathered lice filled kith and kind, he disappears. Ever the crow he is gone, he disappears into thin air with that song never to be seen or heard from again.

He was true to his kind, in every way a crow, as true as the lice beneath his black suit coat, which flaps in the breeze like crow wings, I should have known, I should have seen him coming, but didn’t. Crows don’t hunt their own meat and are always on the take, they always want a piece of yours.

Now this crow man who calls himself a frog and who sings the songs of the Kingfisher, who taught me, he says he learnt them from around the fires of tradition, from the old ones and fires he had sort out to sit by. But all the while he is singing *Aaarrk, aaarrk, aaahhh* as he constantly patrols and hunts along the highways looking for his next feed of road kill. But unlike most other hunters of road kill, he knows which way to jump—smart crow that!

Now to the Noongar of old, the crow was one of several moieties or divisions within their clan that once endowed social order and rules over who one could marry and, the social attitudes and expected ways and mores of acting within the group. In the southwest the crow or *Waardang* was one half of the division and Munitj the white cockatoo was another. Both were nephews of the eagle man. In Kellerberrin there was another moiety of birds. My old teacher was a kingfisher or *Djooak* and I, his adopted son became in turn the golden swallow, or *Birrangaa*. Kellerberrin holds to different country from that of the western or southern lands of black crows and white cockatoos, and for us kingfishers and golden swallows our knowledge of crows and cockatoos was supposed to give us a deep and enduring suspicion and awareness of them. The white cockatoo who boasts and the crow man who scavenges and watches had supposedly given the peoples of the east a reason to take care, but how easy we forget.

Now the Noongar legend of the crow names him as one who killed his younger swan wife from an act of rage and then who having been saved from drowning by his uncle an eagle man from the east, the crow tracked his uncle's hidden source of fresh water and dirtied it with his body biting lice. Old crow nephew of the eagle man couldn't be trusted. But in the bigger scheme of things the crow and eagle were linked by a relationship, one of uncle and the other of nephew, one of teacher and the other of student.

Now further, this story whilst relating to those Noongar who are crows who try to hide it, like their ancestor who tried to hide the fact that he had stolen and polluted the waters of his uncle all those many years ago is also about my experiences of a crow who masquerades as a Wiilo or stoned curlew; who with long skinny legs, big bulging eyes, is all seeing and remains akin to the crow, well camouflaged.

Now this crow who masquerades as a Wiilo walks on skinny legs, and true to the crow has rarely caught his own meat but has lived depending upon the scavenging of another. Now before I knew this crow was indeed a CROW, singing as a crow, with feathers shining like a crow and with black legs of a crow, I imagined something

different. He did not boast like a Munitj or white cockatoo, well not least initially, for he seemed humble and dedicated. He wore a different feather coat entirely, and I had thought, that he wore feathers like my own, for birds of a feather flock together. I even imagined he wore gold under his wings, but true, you seldom see what is under someone's wing until they fly above you, but ever since I found his lice floating upon the water of the old man's rock water hole I learnt from, I have known, too late, that he was not the golden swallow I thought he was, but every bit the crow.

Now the etymology of the name Wiilo might be the one who originates from another's territory, the stranger who comes unannounced to do harm. Noongars still talk of their fears of the feather-foot beyond the lands of their own who travel from the north or east to unleash their magic upon the unwary. My old teacher, old kingfisher spoke one night in whispers, a Yamatji revenge party was moving through the town on their way to Quairading. We all hunkered down and turned out the lights. Now Wiilo remains one that is respected. He stands among a league of messenger birds well-known for his unwanted and feared messages. My old teacher had a song for that bird, the Wiilo, and he'd sing: *weelo wang mai wang woll ta buddin gaabin ngany mai wang woll...*singing, 'Curlew talk, sound and talk, alarm, I wonder who—who does that song belong to, to whom is that weelo singing, I wonder who?' For the message was most often one of great clarity, 'Who is that message for, for whom?' To the Noongar of Albany, the threat of the Will tribe or Wiil 'strangers' from the north was never underestimated.

The Wiilo did bring messages and came as ghosts. Uninvited and unwanted men with messages from the north must always have been their consternation, so what did they think when strangers appeared from the ocean in the south? What were these ghosts with their pale white skin, who brought their diseases and strange ways? The Minang Noongar of Albany attempted to claim them as their own ancestors who had returned from the dead, and perhaps that is why their fear of them was lesser than the fear of the northerners.

Thus to Mokare's people mimicking the ghost's red coat's march upon the shore, the Wiil or WIL was a direction and more, much more. Sure north of Albany, way beyond Bluff Knoll with its meeyowl boolaa, old hill with 'many eyes' was watching where the six toed, six fingered blood eaters went creeping this way and that, gnawing upon raw flesh and whose serrated teeth marked every marrow filled bone on which they fed.

Were the Wiil the 'Wheel-men' or their word for all people and things, messages, and threats from the north? To the Minang, the southerners, the Wiilo who went crying in the night, were stoned curlew, bad news bearers who on their wings of fright, were bad news singers forecast bringers of death with messages to fear, foretelling future eaters where a stranger's shaft of spear might finds its mark and dig their future grave.

Now I don't know why, for what's behind that curlew's eye bulging round like the full moon, but we shouldn't be afraid of him or his tune. I once shared with a Wiilman, I talked into the night near my smoky fire till this smoke of me shared its scent with him, and he within ear shot, listened and mimicked my smoke, and from the smoke of that fire he discovered where to find the old man's maia, his hut where he lay and his ngaama rock water hole, fresh and deep, and then this Wiilo shape-shifted, he became a crow man and ever since I have seen some parts of him, floating in the cool clear water, his itching flesh eating lice.

His black feathers and white lice still line the bowl where he drank from, his crow tracks still surround the old man's rock water hole, and like that place named Quelcon we know it is him, how does he think he can mask his theft of the old man's water when the tracks of him sit so visible upon the soil and page. For from that old man's hollow I sometimes read his most recent revelations where his black steps upon the white page convey his attempted footsteps dodging spears.

He would try to hide his tracks but we know it is him. 'Quelcon' said the eagle man, 'Quelcon,' dodge this spear if you can!

## Glossary

birrangaa	rainbow bee-eater
boolaa	many
djoak	sacred kingfisher
quelcon or kwelkon	'dodge this'
maia	hut
meeyowl	eyes
minang	south, direction term
Mokare	name of historic elder
munitj	white cockatoo
ngaama	rock water hole
waardang	crow
wheelman	name of people of the Jerramungup region as recorded by edith hassell
wil	north, direction term, or tribe from the north of Albany

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Michael Ackland** holds the Roderick Chair of English at James Cook University in Townsville. He has published widely on 19th and 20th century Australian poetry, colonial verse, and Henry Handel Richardson and is currently working on a book on Murray Bail.

**Isabela Banzon** teaches at the University of the Philippines. Her book of poems *Lola Coqueta* is introduced by Dennis Haskell. She lives in Metro Manila.

**Bruce Bennett** is Emeritus Professor of the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra. A Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, he was awarded a Doctor of Letters degree of the University of New South Wales in 2004 for his research and publications in Australian literature.

**Peter Bibby** has written poems, plays and short stories over a long period. His work has been published in magazines, the press and anthologies and performed on radio, television and the stage. He worked as an editor with Magabala Books for ten years.

**David Buchanan** lives in north east Tasmania and has published poetry in Australian and New Zealand journals since the 1980s. He is a senior lecturer at the University of Tasmania in the Faculty of Health in Launceston, where his principle area of research concerns better understanding of the neuroplastic brain and what this may mean for the whole person in mental health and persistent pain states. He is also a playwright and musician.

**Adrian Caesar** was formerly Associate Professor of English at UNSW@ADFA. More recently, he has split his time between teaching creative writing at ANU and writing full-time. He is the author of several books of non-fiction and four books of poetry, including his latest publication *High Wire* (Pandanus Press, 2006).

**Aidan Coleman's** poems have appeared in the *Australian Literary Review*, the *Weekend Australian*, *The Age*, *Southerly*, *Island*, *Antipodes*, the *Warwick Review* and *Westerly*. His first collection, *Avenues and Runways* (Brandl & Schlesinger) was shortlisted for the Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry. In 2011 he has an Australia Council New Work grant.

**Bruce Dawe** is one of Australia's best known poets and his work has won many awards. His collected poems, *Sometimes Gladness*, was the only volume of poetry included in a list of the ten best Australian books of the decade in 1984.

**Ross Donlon** lives in Castlemaine, Victoria, where he convenes a popular monthly poetry reading. *Tightrope Horizon* was published by Five Islands Press as part of the New Poets program. He was the Varuna Dorothy Hewett Flagship Fellow for 2009.

**Brooke Dunnell** has been published in the collections *Allnighter*, *Best Australian Stories 2009* and *New Australian Stories 2*. She is currently completing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Western Australia.

**Diane Fahey's** *The Wing Collection: New & Selected Poems* will be published by Puncher & Wattmann in 2011. Her previous collection, *Sea Wall and River Light*, was a winner of the ACT Government's Judith Wright Poetry Award.

**Helen Gildfird** has had book reviews, short stories, poetry and essays published in *Antipodes*, *Southerly*, *Island*, *Westerly*, *Hecate*, *Veranda*, *Idiom*, *Poetrix*, *antithesis*, *AWBR*, *TEXT*, and *Voiceworks*. In September of 2009 she was the Emerging Writer in Residence at the Katherine Susannah Prichard Writers' Centre in Perth.

**Jonathan Hadwen** is a Brisbane poet, who has been published in journals in Australia and overseas, including *Southerly*, *Overland*, *Page Seventeen* and *Small Packages*. In 2010, eight of his poems were published as a ‘micro-collection’ as part of the *Brisbane New Voices* series.

**Helen Hagemann** has prose and poetry published in Australian literary magazines, including *Overland*, *Island*, *Westerly* and *Southerly*. She is the author of *Evangelynne & Other Poems* published by the Australian Poetry Centre, Melbourne, 2009.

**Matthew Hall** is completing a PhD at the University of Western Australia. His second and third collections are coming out in the coming months: *Distant Songs* from Sea Press Meta in the UK and *Royal Jelly* from Black Rider Press. His poetry, prose and criticism regularly appear in journals internationally, and he is the Feature Editor at *Cordite Poetry Review*.

**Susan Hawthorne** is the author of six collections of poetry, the latest of which is *Cow* (2011). *Earth’s Breath* (2009) was shortlisted for the 2010 Judith Wright Poetry Prize. She is Adjunct Professor in the Writing Program at James Cook University, Townsville.

**Graeme Hetherington** is a Tasmanian who formerly lectured in the classics department at the University of Tasmania. He now lives in Czech Republic and is the author of four books of poetry.

**Paul Hetherington** is Associate Professor of Writing at the University of Canberra and the author of eight collections of poetry, most recently *It Feels Like Disbelief*. He is co-editor of the online journal: *Axon: Creative Explorations*.

**Janet Jackson** has published a collection, *Coracle*, and a chapbook ‘q finger’ (2011, PressPress). Janet’s website Proximity, [www.proximitypoetry.com](http://www.proximitypoetry.com), is archived by the National Library of Australia’s Pandora project.

**Pat Jacobs** lives in Perth, Western Australia. An historian, fiction writer and reviewer, she has received awards for both history and short fiction published in Australian journals and anthologies. Her novel, *Going Inland* (1998), won the WA Premier’s Award for Fiction in 1999 and was long-listed for the 2000 Dublin Impac Award.

**Christopher (Kit) Kelen**'s most recent volumes of poetry are *God preserve me from those who want what's best for me* (2009, Picaro Press), and *in conversation with the river* (2010, VAC, Chicago, USA). For the last eleven years Kelen has taught Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Macau in south China.

**Graeme Kershaw** has published two novels with Fremantle Press and, more recently, poetry in *Indigo*, *Canberra Times*, *Famous Reporter*, *Westerly* and *Eureka Street*.

**Chris Konrad** has lived in the hills around Perth pretty much all his life. He works currently with the new and emerging communities and is undertaking a PhD in creative writing. His poetry has been published with four other WA poets in an anthology, *Amber Contains the Sun* (2008), and in many journals and on line zines and journals. In 2009 he won both the Tom Collins Prize and the Creatrix Prize (WA).

**Blaze Kwaymullina** is a Palkyu person from the Pilbara. He is a Lecturer at the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia. Blaze is a published children's author with an interest in all forms of writing.

**Roland Leach** is a West Australian poet and the proprietor of Sunline Press. He has two collections of poetry published and is a past winner of the Newcastle Poetry Prize and the Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize.

**Shirley Geok-lin Lim** has published seven books of poetry; the first, *Crossing the Peninsula*, received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. The most recent, *Walking Backwards*, appeared in 2010. Her memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces*, won the American Book Award; and she has also published short story collections and two novels. She is currently Professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

**Miriam Wei Wei Lo** lives in the south-west of Western Australia. A widely published poet, she is working towards her next book.

**Anthony Lynch** works as an editor with Deakin University, is the publisher for Whitmore Press and author of the short story collection

*Redfin* (Arcadia). His collection of poetry, *Night Train*, is forthcoming from Clouds of Magellan.

**Caitlin Maling** is a West Australian poet who has previously published across Australia in journals such as *Blue Dog*, *Going Down Swinging*, the Sun Herald Extra, and *Quadrant*.

**Tim McCabe** is an anthropologist who maintains an active interest in the Noongar language, in placenames and cultural landscapes of the eastern Noongar. His work with the late Noongar elder, Cliff Humphries, formed the basis for the Noongar linguistic report in the Native Title Claim of *Bennell versus the State of Western Australia* (2006). His writings relate to his observations and experiences tied to SouthWest palimpsests and the stories they reveal.

**Megan McKinlay** is a practising poet and children's writer. She has a PhD in Japanese Literature and has taught Australian Literature, Japanese Language and Creative Writing at UWA and other tertiary institutions.

**Rachael Mead's** poems have been published in a range of journals. Her chapbook was shortlisted by Varuna for publication with *Picaro*.

**MG Michael** is an honorary senior fellow at the University of Wollongong where he reseraches ethics and privacy issues in information and communication technologies. He has been previously published in a number of literary journals and anthologies including *Five Bells*, *Southerly*, *Westerly*, and *Ulitarra*. 'Uberveillance', a term he coined to describe the trajectory of embedded surveillance systems in the human body, was recently entered into the *Macquarie Dictionary*.

**Jo Mills** is a poet, short story writer and budding fantasy novelist who lives in the Perth hills. Her poems and stories have won or been short-listed in numerous competitions, and published in anthologies, journals and online. She is currently working on a quartet of epic fantasy novels, and blogs with four companion writers at <http://egoboo-wa.blogspot.com/>.

**Bob Morrow** is a Melbourne poet who is particularly interested in what makes up a sense of belonging. A keen body-surfer, he divides his time between the city, the bush and a Bass Strait beach.

**Mark O'Flynn's** poetry and short stories have appeared in a wide range of journals and magazines. He has published three collections of poetry. His second novel, *Grassdogs*, was published by Harper Collins in 2006.

**Geoff Page** is a Canberra-based poet who has published eighteen collections of poetry as well as two novels, four verse novels and several other works including anthologies, translations and a biography of the jazz musician, Bernie McGann.

**Renee Pettitt-Schipp** is an emerging Western Australian writer whose work is currently inspired by living on Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean territories. In November 2010 Renee was short listed for the Trudy Graham Biennial Literary Award and in 2011 she won the Ethel Webb Bundell prize for poetry.

**Clare Rhoden** has recently completed a PhD at the University of Melbourne. Her thesis investigates the representation of leadership in Australian Great War narratives.

**Page Richards** is Associate Professor at the University of Hong Kong who publishes on poetry, drama, American literature, and creative writing. Her work has appeared in numerous journals and books and she has written *Distancing English: A Chapter in the History of the Inexpressible* and a book of poems, *Lightly Separate*.

**Kerry Stokes** (1949–2009), *Westerly's* cover artist, taught art and printmaking in Perth, Broome and abroad, and participated in and organised a myriad of festivals, master-classes and field trips. Her work, as painter, sculptor and printmaker is held in significant private collections around Australia and internationally as well as in notable public collections. Latterly she worked mainly in oils and acrylics, and her style had become abstract and intuitive, but with her sculpting background and knowledge of materials, she was always fascinated by the possibilities offered by different surfaces that allowed her to control the absorbent qualities of her support.

**Maria Takolander's** short stories, poetry, and essays have been widely published. She won the inaugural *Australian Book Review* short story

competition in 2010. Her book of poems, *Ghostly Subjects* (2009) was shortlisted in the 2010 Queensland Premier's Literary Awards. She is a Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies and Creative Writing at Deakin University in Geelong, Victoria.

**Yann Toussaint** is a tutor and PhD candidate in Anthropology at the University of Western Australia. He lives in Albany on the south coast of Western Australia.

**Rob Wallis'** second poetry collection *My Life As A Sheep Dog* was published in 2009 by Mark Time Books. His short stories and poems have been published in various magazines, and his awards include first prize in the FAW John Shaw Neilson Poetry Prize in 2006 and second prize in 2009.

**Annamaria Weldon** was awarded the Tom Collins Poetry Prize 2010 for 'Memory of Earth'. Her essay 'Threshold Country' won the 2011 Nature Conservancy Australia Essay Prize. Both were written as part of a landscape journal set in the Mandurah-Pinjara wetlands, on which she has been working since her 2009–2010 residency at the Adaptation Project, Symbiotica UWA. In 2008 Sunline Press published her poetry collection *The Roof Milkers*.

**Kate Whitfield's** short stories have appeared in many Australian journals. She lives and works as an editor in Melbourne.

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**Chris Wortham** is an Emeritus Professor of English at UWA. His most recent publications are a co-edited book on early drama published in early 2011 and a further co-edited book on *Perceptions of Terra Australis* now in press.

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