



westerly<sup>58.2</sup>  
*the best in writing from the West*

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## From the Editors

In 2012, *Westerly* presented an issue on 'Writing and Ethics'. A year later we have something of a companion volume. Our topic this time is Beauty and this issue of *Westerly* presents a variety of perspectives on the subject of beauty and its treatment in contemporary literature and visual arts. Our guest editor is the magazine's former long-time editor, Emeritus Professor Dennis Haskell. Haskell opens the topic in typically provocative fashion, by contending two related positions—that the proponents of high modernism, galvanised by the outrage of the Great War, abandoned beauty (as it had been traditionally defined) as the organizing principle of art. More recently, and Haskell claims a causal relationship, criticism has also abandoned its long-held function of assessing a work's aesthetic merits. This second idea is also voiced in the essay by Susan Lever, where she argues that this turn away from the aesthetic has not served certain writers well, and is one of the reasons for the critical neglect of the significant Australian novelist, David Foster. Ali Alizadeh is not so sure that there has, indeed, been any real diminution in the cultural importance of beauty, but in any event opposes any attempt to restore the concept of beauty as a depoliticized ideal. Haskell and Alizadeh

unite, however, in their citing of political poetry that is capable of nevertheless sustaining beauty. It is a fascinating exchange.

Away from the trenches of these cultural wars, there are also important studies of beauty and its nuances in this issue. In particular, Cathryne Sanders investigates the idea of beauty as it is expressed in the depiction of houses in contemporary Australian fiction, while art curator, Sally Quinn, discusses the relevance of beauty to the visual arts today with Consuelo Cavaniglia, Pilar Mata Dupont and Helen Smith. These artists all feature in the current 'Bliss' exhibition at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery on the campus of The University of Western Australia, and they have kindly made available reproductions of their work. Moreover, the poems and stories included in this section of the magazine deal with beauty directly or indirectly, demonstrating its interest to at least some contemporary writers.

It is also of interest to the theme of this *Westerly* that the Chair of the Sydney Opera House Trust, Kim Williams, opened the October issue of *The Monthly* with a short piece 'In defence of beauty' (10). He argues that 'the arts are every bit as important to social cohesion and advancement as excellence in sport and science' and points to the weakness of cultural policy in Australia which seems to be linked to a populist derision for valuing creativity. The connection he makes between beauty and the arts and their significance in Australian society is one which *Westerly* endorses as it continues to publish new poetry, fiction and thoughtful essays on broadly literary issues. As well as the Beauty section, this issue contains a rich feast of creative writing, and a reflection by John Barnes in which he recalls his long friendship with the late Leonard and Elizabeth Jolley. The editors hope this *Westerly* will not only provide good reading but also stimulate spirited debate on the questions it raises.

Delys Bird, Tony Hughes-d'Aeth (Editors)  
and Dennis Haskell (Guest Editor)



BEAUTY



Dennis Haskell is an Emeritus Professor of English and Cultural Studies at The University of Western Australia and Director of the Westerly Centre, UWA. He is an award-winning poet and critic.

## Introduction: The Challenge of Beauty

### Dennis Haskell

Contemporary developed societies are obsessed with physical beauty; they are communities in which models have become ‘supermodels’ and it is more important for popular singers, male or female, to look good than to be able to sing. Yet, in the same societies the whole idea of beauty has disappeared from the arts. In describing beauty as challenging I am not thinking of the complexities of the concept but of its very pursuit, however beauty is conceived. The ‘Venus de Milo’ and the ‘Laocoon’ or Michelangelo’s ‘David’; the paintings of Raphael, Rubens, Titian and Turner; Medieval song, the works of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Messaien are all concerned with beautiful images or sounds. Picasso’s ‘Weeping Woman’ and ‘Les Demoiselles d’Avignon’ or the paintings of Francis Bacon and the installations of Mike Parr; Stravinsky’s ‘The Rite of Spring’ or Karlheinz Stockhausen’s ‘Helicopter Quartet’ are not. To many eyes and ears this will seem a truism. But if this is true it conveys an extraordinary idea: for hundreds of years, in fact from the time of the first writings about art in western culture, beauty was seen as its basis, its *raison d’être*, and now it is not.

Plato, whose thinking haunts Western philosophy in almost every respect, in the *Symposium* saw contemplation of the beautiful as capable of leading us to awareness of the Ideal. Although he mistrusted the senses Plato thought that perception of particular beauties might lead us to awareness of Beauty with a capital 'B', to awareness of the realm of ideal Forms. This, for Plato, is an indication of what beauty *is*. In his *Poetics* Aristotle, a more worldly figure, is less concerned with this Idealism than with what constitutes beauty that we might perceive, and sees this in 'an orderly arrangement of parts' and 'a certain magnitude' (*Poetics* vii.4; 31)—neither too small to observe adequately nor too large to comprehend. Aristotle's idea of internal order is taken from Plato's *Phaedrus* (*Phaedrus* 264c). The philosopher and editor of Aristotle, S H Butcher, notes that Aristotle 'assumes almost as an obvious truth that beauty is indispensable in a work of art' and 'makes beauty a regulative principle of art' (Aristotle 162). Aristotle gives special attention to poetry because, in Butcher's paraphrase, 'it has a higher subject-matter than history; it expresses the universal not the particular, the permanent possibilities of human nature' (Aristotle 164). These quasi-Platonic terms, I would argue, are related to the concept of beauty. Nevertheless, mention 'beauty' and your reflex action is likely to be to think of painting, photography, sculpture. Sight is our dominant sense and we predominantly think of beautiful-looking people or things. As with all such concepts, it is very interesting to consider our use of the adjective as compared to our use of the noun. When after 9/11 President George W Bush declared a 'war on terror' it was astonishing that the media and security experts took it up as a coherent idea. You can have a 'war' on terrifying groups such as Al-Qaida or terrifying people such as Mexican drug lords but a war on terror is no more sensible than a war on anger or melancholy or any other human state. Unless you are a Platonist—and I doubt there are many around today—the same criticism might be made of beauty; it is easier to think of a beautiful person, a beautiful building, a beautiful film or a beautiful poem than to conceive of beauty *per se*. The Romantic poet William Blake

once said that ‘To generalize is to be an idiot!’ (Blake 451). Blake was given to fiery statements and this one seems interesting until you realise that the statement itself is a generalisation. It shows our need for generalisations; even though they gloss over differences they are convenient, much as the notion of daylight makes sense to us even though the quality of light may be different every day. The concept of beauty looks to what is common when we claim that a woman is beautiful, or a man (these seem different to saying a person is beautiful), or a building, a film, a painting or a poem. I suspect that our meaning is slightly different when we apply the word to each of these people or things.

Beauty has been a central concern of many major literary theorists in English, where the concept has had a Platonic edge. The first major theorist is recognised as the Renaissance writer, Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586). In his Aristotelean tract *A Defence of Poetry* Sidney declared that poetry showed the possible, not just the actual: Nature’s world ‘is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden’ (Sidney 24). Without using the word, this ascribes a notion of beauty to poetry. English literature’s next major theorist, Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), the first and I think still the greatest of all literary critics, did not invoke beauty; he thought that the role of literature was to enable us to enjoy or to endure and that ‘Human life is every where a state in which much is to be endured and little to be enjoyed’ (Johnson 632). Johnson’s eighteenth century, a literary period sometimes known as ‘the Age of Reason’, was in many ways a down-to-earth period, and it had little truck with Platonism. Human nature being what it is, there was bound to be a reaction to the eighteenth century’s refusal of imaginative Idealism and this came with the Romantics. John Keats uses the concept of beauty perhaps more prominently than any other poet: ‘A thing of beauty is a joy forever’ he wrote as the first line of his long poem *Endymion* (Keats 55). Few would disagree, although over time we may change our minds as to whether a particular thing is beautiful. In the ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ beauty has ‘lustrous eyes’ but in the ‘Ode on Melancholy’ beauty ‘must die’, a fact that might well

be the basis of all art (Keats 207, 220). In his letters Keats claimed that ‘all our Passions’ are ‘in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty’ and that ‘with a great poet a sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration’ (To Bailey 22 Nov 1817, 37; To George & Tom Keats 21, 27[?] Dec 1817, 43). These life-affirming statements stand in stark contrast to Samuel Johnson’s less than cheerful approach to life and aesthetics and produce a zing of excitement even today. We want them to be true even if we think they are not but they do result in a statement that may give us pause at the end of the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’. The urn is a joy forever and

...shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,  
‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’... (Keats 210)

There has been a lot of discussion about the truth quality of statements in poetry and it does seem true that poetic statements do not need to be actually true for them to work as poetry. They need to have an imaginative truth—that is, they must not be outlandishly false but it might be enough that in an ideal world they would be true. That I think is the case here, and the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ is by critical agreement one of the great odes in English literature. A diehard Keatsian might argue that it’s the urn saying this but the poem makes clear that there’s no writing on the urn—this is the poet’s interpretation of its carvings and its beautiful shape. No philosopher would have a bar of Keats’s claim; the truth might be ugly, and apparent beauty might be misleading. Getting at the truth about the Nazi holocaust might have been impressive and admirable but no-one could consider it a beautiful process or result. Two of the most famous photographs from the last decades are ‘The Kiss by the Hotel de Ville’ by Robert Doisneau and ‘An American Girl in Italy’ by Ruth Orkin. Both photographs might be considered beautiful. We now know that each of these photographs was staged; they pretend to be impromptu representations of human experience but both

were contrived. For some people this has made them fake or at least misleading—synonyms for ‘untrue’.

Just what constitutes beauty has been the main subject of Western aesthetics, although that discussion has inevitably rippled out into other philosophical issues, especially in ethics. Robert Wicks in his recent book *European Aesthetics* observes that ‘the history of European aesthetics from 1790 to 1990 is significantly motivated by the effort to understand the roles of beauty and art in connection with morality’ (Wicks 7). The linking of ethical issues to beauty and art indeed has a long tradition, but one of my arguments is that in most artistic criticism and theory of the last forty years or so aesthetics has become totally subservient to ethics.

The best-known statement about beauty is the adage that it lies in the eye of the beholder, and that is one philosophical position—that beauty is entirely subjective. That, however, is not the position most expert philosophers or most people hold; most of us would distinguish between the statement ‘I find Vermeer’s painting “Girl with a Pearl Earring” beautiful’ and the statement ‘Vermeer’s painting “Girl with a Pearl Earring” is beautiful’. The latter implies that *you* should find Vermeer’s painting beautiful too, and that if you don’t there’s something wrong with your eyes. The distinction was most forcefully pointed out by the major philosopher of aesthetics, the eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). All philosophers since have written responses to Kant. Kant distinguished between judgements of taste, which exist only in the being of the beholder, and judgements of beauty and of the sublime, which can be shared and agreed upon. Kant’s philosophy is, of course, complicated and tendentious; like Plato he is more suspicious of sensory apprehension than we are likely to be and he drew on Aristotle in seeing beauty as a matter of form. In Wicks’ paraphrase, ‘Judgements of pure beauty rest upon the feeling of harmony between the cognitive faculties (the imagination and the understanding) as these faculties are jointly geared towards some given object in the appreciation of its abstract designs’ (Wicks 20). Kant also saw judgements of beauty as disinterested, in the sense that the

judgements are not being made for instrumental purposes. This makes them particularly applicable to works of art. Wicks' comments that Kant characterises 'artistic creation and artistic beauty' as 'the expression of "aesthetic ideas"'—that is, of images or works 'of imagination ... highly resonant in meaning', stimulating 'more thought than can be determinately specified, like a literary work filled with suggestive metaphors' (Wicks 31)—is the base on which modern ideas are constructed. Kant's positions are theoretical but they could readily be allied to those of that much more pragmatic Enlightenment figure, the lugubrious Dr Johnson. Johnson argued in his 'Preface to Shakespeare' that,

to works not raised upon principles demonstrative and scientifick, but appealing wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem. What mankind have long possessed they have often examined and compared, and if they persist to value the possession, it is because frequent comparisons have confirmed opinion in its favour (Johnson 261–62).

Johnson's pragmatism means that longstanding aesthetic judgements, the sum of many individual subjective judgements, are likely to be correct and create a community of shared aesthetic values. Johnson was writing about Shakespeare, in the essay which first established Shakespeare's greatness, but his view does not help with recent works of art.

Pragmatism has been a strong force in English thinking, and in the Australia which inherited it. One prominent art critic who voiced it later than Johnson was Walter Pater (1839–1894), the Godfather of the Aesthetic movement. In his most famous book, *The Renaissance* (1873) Pater wrote:

Many attempts have been made by writers on art and poetry to define beauty in the abstract ... to find some universal formula for it... Such discussions help us very little to enjoy what has been

well done in art or poetry, to discriminate between what is more and what is less excellent in them, or to use words like beauty, excellence, art, poetry with a more precise meaning... Beauty, like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative; and the definition of it becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its abstractness (Pater 27).

Pater turned his back on Victorian moralising and championed the idea of art for art's sake. Art, he said is 'always striving...to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material', and he sought an art in which 'form and matter, in their union or identity, present one single effect to the "imaginative reason"' (Pater 132). (Pater is like Blake in that these are abstract statements, generalisations.) It was Pater who devised the maxim, 'All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music' because music is pure form (Pater 129). He also wanted 'Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself', a life lived as a 'hard, gemlike flame' (Pater 222). This, I think, is as far away from contemporary views of art as you can get.

Pater's most famous followers were Irish: Oscar Wilde, whom Pater taught at Oxford, and, more importantly, William Butler Yeats. This is surprising in that literature, working with the material of language, is the most content-laden of all the arts, and thus the furthest away from 'the condition of music'. However, language does have its own music, which poetry especially is concerned to explore. Moreover, as the philosopher of aesthetics Anne Sheppard articulates, literature has a capacity 'to point beyond itself, to mean, or show, or maybe just suggest, more than it states on the surface' (Sheppard 128). Yeats was the most musical poet of the twentieth century and in his early work he attempted a Paterian poetry that was light on content:

Where the wave of moonlight glosses  
 The dim grey sands with light,  
 Far off by furthest Rosses  
 We foot it all the night,

Weaving olden dances,  
Mingling hands and mingling glances...  
(Yeats 'The Stolen Child' 20)

Yeats did not think much of this as a mature poet and we don't think much of it now, but it certainly aimed at beauty. Yeats set about making himself a different kind of poet and in doing so he stretched notions of beauty. In one of his transitional poems, 'No Second Troy' he writes of Maud Gonne, who repeatedly refused his proposals of marriage,

What could have made her peaceful with a mind  
That nobleness made simple as a fire,  
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind  
That is not natural in an age like this,  
Being high and solitary and most stern? (Yeats 101)

This is highly impassioned rhetoric that has moved far from Pater's deliquescent prose. Who before would have thought of likening beauty to 'a tightened bow' or conceived of it as 'high and solitary and most stern'? However, Yeats was to go further, in perhaps the most extraordinary poem about politics ever written, 'Easter, 1916'. In contemplating how the actions of the rebels in the Easter Rising had transformed all expectations of everyday Dublin life Yeats recognised a new conception of beauty. He had been

certain that they and I  
But lived where motley is worn:  
All changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born (Yeats 203).

No-one before had ever imagined a 'terrible beauty', but to subsequent generations, watching, say, Leni Riefenstahl's films of Hitler's rallies the phrase is powerful. Could we describe these rallies as beautiful? They were certainly choreographed—that is, great



attention was paid to their form. The critic Geoffrey Galt Harpham has argued:

The seductive power of the aesthetic actually intensifies as one moves farther and farther right. Fascism, according to a famous comment by Walter Benjamin in 1936, meant the aestheticization of politics; and others were quick to seize the hint, analyzing... the way in which...rational discourse was superseded by fantasy, myth, spectacle, and fetish (Levine 128).\*

Yeats, dying in 1939, never witnessed the full horror of the Nazis, but they and his poem point to the effectiveness of Pater's conception of an art that exists entirely for its own sake, separated from political and social events. However, Yeats's poems are still concerned with beauty; 'Easter, 1916' is so well crafted, its form fitted to its contents, that it presents and encourages a simultaneous awareness of beauty and politics, without one being subservient to the other. This is crucial to the poem's success.

Late in life Yeats made a broadcast on 'Modern Poetry' for the BBC, in which he reminisced,

In the third year of the War [the Great War] came the most revolutionary man in poetry during my lifetime... T S Eliot published his first book. No romantic word or sound, nothing reminiscent...could be permitted henceforth. Poetry must resemble prose, and both must accept the vocabulary of their time; nor must there be any special subject-matter. Tristram and Isoult were not a more suitable theme than Paddington Railway Station. The past had deceived us: let us accept the worthless present (*Selected Criticism* 245).

Yeats confesses that he doesn't like 'this new poetry' but must admit 'its satiric intensity' (*Selected Criticism* 246). Eliot had turned his back on beauty. Eliot's Modernist aesthetic triumphed

so completely that Yeats actually understates the case; from then until today it would be much harder to write a poem about Tristram and Isoult than about Paddington Railway Station. A great shift in aesthetics had occurred.

A rat crept softly through the vegetation  
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank  
While I was fishing in the dull canal  
On a winter evening round behind the gashouse... (Eliot 140)

These are far from being the harshest lines in Eliot's 'The Waste Land' but as imagery they are also far worse than Paddington Railway Station; at best, Yeats would have considered them prose. In terms of artistic movements, Yeats's time had passed, supplanted by High Modernism, whose art includes Picasso's cubist paintings and Stravinsky's 'The Rite of Spring' (whose riotous first performance Eliot attended). They may seem mild compared to what has followed but they lead to Pound's poems, Stockhausen's Quartet, and art installations made of used menstrual pads. Keats's terms have been inverted; it is more likely the ugly that will be seen to constitute the truth rather than beauty, as if life is everywhere much more to be endured than to be enjoyed. There may be comments to make in favour of these works but those comments will not be couched in terms of beauty, or even of aesthetics but of art history (at best), politics and sociology. In turn this has led to an art criticism that is couched in terms of politics and sociology, in which ideas of beauty and works which attempt it are seen as a staid, conservative retreat or even worse as conservative retrogression, a reification of privilege. For many artists and critics across the range of the arts the whole idea of aesthetics and aesthetic judgement has fallen into disrepute. The art critic Elizabeth Prettejohn observes that 'the modernist repudiation of beauty was succeeded, in the late twentieth century, by a more strident denial of the aesthetic on political grounds' (Prettejohn 193–94).

All shifts in aesthetics are most stark in the visual arts and there the issue has prompted a great deal of debate, including some moves to reinsitute beauty as a desirable aim for artists and a desirable criterion for art critics. On the one hand critics such as Alexander Alberro argue that ‘recent attempts to revalidate the experience of the beautiful’ are ‘driven by intensely nostalgic impulses’ to return us ‘to an idyllic and abstract past that knew of no internal tensions, disputes and contradictions’ and that ‘today’s writing on beauty is deeply antipolitical’ (Beech 66-67). On the other hand, Kathleen Marie Higgins argues that ‘Beauty creates a space for spiritual openness. Political activism, taken by itself, does not...our political commitments are suspect if they cannot survive confrontation with beauty’ which ‘allows moral insight to develop further...beauty provides the comforting background against which one can think the uncomfortable’. Moreover, ‘Because beauty allows us to appreciate in a still, contemplative way, it develops our capacity for nuance’ (Beech 34). Higgins argues further that if we are ‘Obsessively aware of what is unbeautiful, we can only find beauty a threatening challenge’ (Beech 35).

Parallel arguments run in literary circles. George Levine, as long ago as 1994, complained of literary criticism and theory that ‘reduce critical practice to exercises in political positioning’ but a great deal of such criticism still exists (Levine 3). Levine argues that ‘literature is all too often demeaned, the aesthetic experience denigrated or reduced to mystified ideology’ (Levine 3). Levine sees literature, as I do, as a distinct activity, ‘a subject worth studying “in its own right”’ that ‘*requires* the sorts of literary and formal analytical skills that have been associated with the New Criticism’ (Levine 17, 16). He does not conceive of the aesthetic as isolated from ‘particular societies and political organizations’ but sees it as opening ‘possibilities of value resistant to any dominant political power’, and points to the suppression of ‘free art in totalitarian countries’ as ‘obvious evidence’ (Levine 16). It is important to recognise that his position is two pronged, seeing a value of literature in itself and

its value as a relatively uninhibited space for examining social and political beliefs. This is the mature Yeatsian position.

The horrors of the Great War that lie behind the Modernist revolution ensure that any notion of the aesthetic, and any artwork or its reception can never be seen as existing in a spiritual bubble, lifted entirely out of the socio-political world. However, the refusal of the aesthetic, of the arts as valuable and distinctive activities and of the individual as having personal decision-making power ('agency' in the jargon) has too often led to hectoring art and art criticism in which ideology is all. Elizabeth Prettejohn, writing on visual arts, has said that 'By the end of the twentieth century...beauty could again be associated with a progressive politics, as it had been in the eighteenth century, and often in the nineteenth' but that 'it has proved inordinately difficult to dispel the sense that beauty is somehow a thing of the past' (Prettejohn 195–96). A return of the arts to ideas of beauty would encourage a return of the general public, who have never given up faith in beauty as an aesthetic ideal, would steer the arts away from the effort to shock to that of giving pleasure, and would take critics out of a self-righteous political pulpit into a more nuanced sense of art and a fuller sense of life. Samuel Johnson often repeated the Aristotelean idea that the role of art is to instruct and to please; in the last century the second aim has frequently been forgotten. In his Nobel Prize lecture Seamus Heaney, thinking of writing poetry during the Irish Troubles, said that 'Yeats's work does what the necessary poetry always does, which is to touch the base of our sympathetic nature while taking in at the same time the unsympathetic nature of the world to which that nature is constantly exposed'. He also asserted that in doing so 'Poetic form is both the ship and the anchor'. Aristotle and Immanuel Kant would have been pleased.

\* The reference is to Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (NY: Schocken Books, 1968), 241.

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## Some Thoughts on Beauty and Bliss: A Conversation with Three Contemporary Artists

Sally Quin

Seven artists were recently invited to create works for an exhibition entitled *Bliss*, held at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery (University of Western Australia) between 12 October and 14 December 2013. The exhibition brought together new painting, photography, objects and video works by Jacqueline Ball, Consuelo Cavaniglia, Julie Dowling, Pilar Mata Dupont, Helen Smith, Miriam Stannage and Joshua Webb. The works were inspired by the experience of bliss, while also investigating related concepts such as harmony, perfection, pleasure and beauty.

As curator my preference for the theme of bliss, over beauty, lay in its potential for greater reflexivity and a richer variety of artistic responses. Beauty may be an important aspect of the fulfilment that underlies bliss, but as a concept it risks remaining tied to the objectifying contemplation of external, static things.

By contrast bliss immediately suggests an emotional or experiential dimension, which might exist between artist, art object and viewer in the gallery. In keeping with the theme of this issue of *Westerly*, however, the commentary and conversations that follow investigate ideas of beauty in contemporary art, since the exhibiting artists

have almost invariably contemplated bliss as a corollary of beauty. I posed questions to Cavaniglia, Mata Dupont and Smith (who created objects, film and paintings for the exhibition), about the multifarious ways in which beauty is manifest in contemporary practice. Beauty is treated seriously by these artists but not as a notion which is hermetically sealed, or simply idealised. Elements traditionally inimical to the expression of beauty in the western tradition, such as imperfection, surprise, parody, and politics, are incorporated to form a new paradigm.

This discussion is to be seen against a backdrop of art historical writing which focuses on the rejection of beauty in avant-garde art practices of the twentieth-century, and a concurrent recognition that beauty has returned as a relevant theme in contemporary art. In western aesthetic theory beauty has been defined either in relation to a set of objective rules, or as a concept which is mutable and subjective.

The former, implying a kind of universal standard of beauty, has always rested on shaky ground. In Classical Greek sculpture, ideal beauty was embodied in the male nude which adhered to a set of rules or the canon (*kanon*), based on the symmetrical—and thereby harmonious—relationship of the parts to the whole. Yet just as this perfection was attained in Classical statuary, new emphases emerged in the Hellenistic sculpture that followed, challenging the purity of previous forms.

The tensions are also apparent in the work of sixteenth-century art historian Giorgio Vasari, who while seeing Renaissance art as a revival of classicism, nevertheless introduces a historically new set of aesthetic criteria. His definition of beauty can be understood in a description of Giotto's *Presentation in the Temple*, a now lost fresco, originally part of the Chapel Tosvighi-Spinelli in the church of Santa Croce in Florence. Vasari describes the moment when the infant Jesus is passed from his mother to the priest Simeon as

...a very beautiful thing, seeing that, besides a great affection that is seen in that old man as he receives Christ, the action of the Child, stretching out his arms in fear of him, and turning in terror towards his mother, could not be more touching or more beautiful (Fermor 124).

For Vasari, beauty lies in the naturalistic rendition of the scene, and the variety of gestures and emotional states depicted. The quality of beauty is based in the emotional involvement of the viewer, moved by the intimate narrative (Fermor 124). With art criticism embracing the feelings elicited by beauty, the concept moves further towards the realm of the subjective. Further, the primacy of innovation in artistic style—which begins in the Renaissance and reaches its apex in the early twentieth century—does not sit well with an adherence to predetermined standards. And yet the desire to render beauty, most often in the form of the female nude, remained a dominant feature of western art practice until the late nineteenth century. For Wendy Steiner, the advent of modernism marked a definitive turning point in what she sees as a revolt against the feminine, embodied in art that was charming, decorative or pleasurable, where the female body is the synecdoche for beauty (and art itself). Steiner's thesis also traces the re-emergence of beauty as a valid artistic theme in contemporary culture, noting that '[the modernists'] violent break from an aesthetics of passive allure now frees us, paradoxically, to contemplate new possibilities in beauty and its female symbolism' (Steiner xix).

In the exhibition there is no particular evidence of a feminist critique or reference to the particularity of the position of women in relation to beauty. The theme of 'bliss' as opposed to the more loaded associations of 'beauty' may account for this in part. But there is an intriguing plurality in the artistic responses which most certainly speak of 'new possibilities'. Many works on display are intimate and personal while some use the idea of beauty as a catalyst to the description of broader aspects of the current political and economic world. The lexicon of beauty encompasses notions of disruption,



chance, parody and irony, in works that are often beautiful despite themselves.

Consuelo Cavaniglia's work emerges from an interest in abstraction, as well as the intrinsic quality and potential of the materials of her art. There is a strong conceptual underpinning within her often formalist and austere art practice. Cavaniglia's early installation works concentrated on the internal structures of furniture and buildings in an effort to reveal what lies beneath. The metaphorical dimensions of objects and an attraction towards the concealed or the underside, has remained a sustaining theme. Her current work utilises sculpture, photography and airbrushed drawing, as she states below, to 'represent abstract depictions of psychological spaces'. She describes her work in *Bliss* as 'based on the idea of containment or the inability to contain something [ranging] from mirror and acrylic pieces that suggest openings or entry points to other, imaginary worlds, to fabric works that literally have openings that allow access to unseen spaces'.

Cavaniglia's creations may appear pristine at first sight but she aims to disrupt the experience of viewing, through unexpected distortions in the mirror and ruptures in the fabric. Paradoxically, it is the recognition of these breakages that may result in pleasure and insight. Her art speaks of beauty in a damaged world, and the incorporation of imperfection into her objects seems an unavoidable consequence of that desire. Indeed Cavaniglia writes that her interest lies in work which seeks to '[amplify] our understanding of beauty to increasingly encompass the imperfect'.

There is an elegiac quality to her objects. Like *vanitas* still lifes they are captured in full bloom and yet their flaws indicate the inevitability of their demise. The intense colours of the works belie the ordinary quality of the materials underneath, and the visual effects imparted by the objects change according to their positioning in relation to a light source and interactions with other objects. In a broad sense such aims call to mind Junichirō Tanizaki's exploration of Japanese aesthetics in *In Praise of Shadows*, which connects



Consuelo Cavaniglia, *Untitled*, 2013, grey mirror, glass, pigment ink, 47.8 cm diameter; and *Untitled*, 2013, grey mirror and blue acrylic, 125 x 94 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Blakiston Gallery. Photo Lyle Branson.

beauty to themes of imperfection and transience. Tanizaki speaks of what can be gained by the apparent inconvenience of living in a traditionally dark Japanese house: 'The quality that we call beauty... must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty's end' (29). He speaks of 'the soft fragile beauty' of light falling on a clay textured wall: 'We delight in the mere sight of the delicate glow of fading rays clinging to the surface of a dusky wall, there to live out what little life remains to them' (30). Here, beauty resides in fragility, in the quiet appreciation of fugitive effects.

Helen Smith's paintings are influenced by the tradition of minimalism and geometric abstraction. An artist interested in multiple mediums, Smith has also worked on large-scale wall works and numerous photographic series, and has created ephemeral art works through actions in the urban landscape, as in the 'Pink Interventions' where bold pink shapes were placed in locations in New York and Berlin. Interest in social and cultural systems underpins these investigations and is evident in the body of works presented by Smith in *Bliss* entitled 'Alighiero e Boetti from Wikipedia'. The paintings reflect upon the work of Alighiero Boetti (1940–1994), also known as Alighiero e Boetti, who was part of the 1960s Italian Arte Povera movement, and in particular his 'Mappa' series of woven world maps produced from 1971. Smith has travelled widely over the last few years, and the works meditate on these movements, and more broadly on geo-politics and the systems of classification used to describe relations between nation-states.



Helen Smith, *Alighiero e Boetti from Wikipedia, United Nations*, 2013, oil on canvas, 150 x 216 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

In the series Smith represents various geo-political alliances such as ‘Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation’, ‘Eurozone’ and ‘Commonwealth’, and constructs a system whereby the colours of individual national flags are combined to symbolise the countries in question. Information on the various alliances is derived solely from Wikipedia and each canvas is constructed so as to fit all of the countries that form the particular alliance. These serious and playful paintings critique the nature of language and classification systems that attempt to represent a uniformity of purpose in global politics. Though many of the outcomes of these processes are predetermined by careful calculation, the ultimate interaction of the lines on the canvas has an unpredictable quality, often resulting in what the artist describes as a surprising harmony.

Pilar Mata Dupont works in a variety of media including film, photography and performance. In film works (sometimes made in partnership with Tarryn Gill) she has employed a kind of exaggerated, and therefore at times brittle and artificial beauty, deriving from the language of Hollywood movies, propagandist imagery, and art history. Surfaces are often colourful, decorative and sumptuous and incorporate high-pitched drama. This sensory profusion is a veneer which belies a deeper purpose: to investigate disturbing political histories and the tropes of nationalism and patriotism. Her recent solo work is strongly informed by extensive travel, recently to Finland, South and North Korea, Argentina, Germany, Australia and the UK.

The video work created for *Bliss, The Embrace*, meditates on the reunification of North and South Korea. It shows two Korean women, representing figures from the ‘Three Charters for National Reunification’ monument near Pyongyang, North Korea, captured in a close embrace. The initial expressions on the women’s faces are blissful but this later changes to grief and confusion. Attention is upon these intense emotions, as well as the texture of their fine clothing, and the subtle movements of their hands. The work is the result of a sustained period of research in Korea, including a visit to North Korea; meetings with a North Korean defector; and a residency



Pilar Mata Dupont, *The Embrace* (이상적인 포옹), 2013, Single-channel High Definition digital video, sound, colour. Duration: 5.04 minutes. Image courtesy the artist

in Goyang, South Korea in 2013. The imagery references ‘DPRK propaganda, K-pop, texts by Andrei Lankov and Lee Eung-joon and the romantic notions of unification used by artists, filmmakers, and writers in South Korea during the late 90s and early 21st Century; the ‘Sunshine Policy’ era of soft-line attitude to the North’ (Mata Dupont).

### **Sally Quin in conversation with Consuelo Cavaniglia, Pilar Mata Dupont and Helen Smith**

**Sally:** Much has been written about the rejection of the concept of beauty in modernist art of the twentieth century and also in contemporary times, with art making focused on political and social enquiry. And yet it is also clear that beauty is found in a great deal of contemporary art. Can you comment on this?

**Consuelo:** This is a discussion that I turn to periodically when considering tendencies evident in contemporary art—how is beauty, and more broadly aesthetics, considered in current art production?

I also tend to consider this question in relation to the use of colour; there has at times been a connection between the search for increased criticality in artwork and a loss of coloration. As colour is an important factor in my work, I am interested in how attitudes towards its use shift over time.

The position of criticality versus beauty is a complex one. Within this is the conversation of equating beauty with fantasy, with fantasy seen as something to reject in favour of a more political position that has truth and transparency as an outcome.

The discussion on beauty has at various times questioned how one can consider the concept of beauty in the face of the state of the world—wars, environmental decline, financial collapse. Indeed, much contemporary work seems to offer no allegiance to aesthetics. Perhaps, though, what we are seeing is not a rejection of beauty but a redefinition of it. I am interested in artwork that reaches a sense of honesty through its rawness—of materials, forms and presentation. This is also work that functions to amplify our understanding of beauty to increasingly encompass the imperfect.

The curatorial premise of *Bliss* addresses this, as it encourages an exploration of ideal reality or an ideal state—bliss—to involve a consideration of ‘perfection in imperfection’. This is an understanding of beauty removed from its traditional definition and one that is less idealistic and perhaps more real. I find beauty in the grating and violent colours of Anselm Reyle’s work, the scarred textures and marks of a Sterling Ruby assemblage and the oversaturated pages of the screen-printed colour spectrum books by Tauba Auerbach.

I think aesthetic decisions are invariably made at some point in the development of an artwork. That is, even if an artist takes the stance that aesthetic considerations should be rejected or resisted, the resultant art work is often beautiful. I am not convinced that the presence of beauty means a loss of criticality.

**Helen:** Artworks that display a political or social intent often utilize beautiful imagery from the past to create a new aesthetic experience for

the viewer. Although my practice is informed by a non-figurative and formalist viewpoint, many of the contemporary artists of particular interest to me come from a figurative, surrealist oeuvre. British artist Glen Brown references historical works by painters including Diego Velázquez and Eugène Delacroix that display traditional notions of beauty. He then subverts these by changing colours and distorting forms so the works appear to be painted in thick impasto, but are actually composed of thin brush strokes of almost photographic quality. The beauty in Brown's works lies in the idea of subversion, as well as in the execution of the painting and apparent respect for the original. By manipulating the original images in a photoshop-like method, his paintings generally appear as deliciously grotesque and inventive.

Another contemporary artist whose work I particularly appreciate is the Canadian artist Kent Monkman who references paintings from the Hudson River School (1825-1875) in the style of Albert Bierstadt. His large-scale, beautifully painted, sweeping romantic landscapes with indigenous inhabitants (many painted in drag) nested into small areas of the foreground, comment on sexuality from both a historical and contemporary perspective. Once again, for me it is the subversion of the concept of beauty and the reference to grand Romanticism combined with social commentary that is interesting.

**Pilar:** I don't believe that the pursuit of beauty is the central aim for many contemporary artists who create beautiful work, though perhaps it is a side effect, or strategy, in their work. However, there are many artists who still value beauty in terms of a broader definition of the concept. For example, the lush video works of Jesper Just, Salla Tykkä, and John Skoog, and the installations of Kimsooja (especially the exquisite 'To Breathe—A Mirror Woman', 2006) lead me to believe that the purposeful creation of beauty as an aim is not completely spent as an idea in contemporary art.

The concept of beauty seems to have been narrowed to just physical beauty in the modern and contemporary age. The greater

meaning of beauty for me encompasses not just physical beauty, but beautiful thoughts/ideas and customs. And I believe, as far as experience of an artwork is concerned, beauty in that sense is still a central concern for a viewing audience, as well as many artists.

I have recently fallen in love with the work of Jeon Joonho here in Korea [Mata Dupont was in Korea at the time of publication]. His work deals with Korean politics and social realities, but his techniques and great skill in animation and sculpture create, in many cases, aesthetically pleasing well-made works that still bite. Social and political commentary does not necessarily need to abandon beauty and aesthetics to work, and in my opinion, and can possibly utilise it to, in fact, aid such an agenda.

**Sally:** Gianluca Garelli writes that ‘in an attempt to resolve the opposition between rationalists (advocates of the objectivity of beauty) and empiricists (supporters of the subjectivity of aesthetic appreciation), Kant seems to have introduced a new idea: beauty is not any cognisable quality of a certain object, but it is the feeling of pleasure aroused in the subject by its mere representation; a pure representation, free from the desire to possess or consume it that instead typifies the other characteristics of things (goodness, utility, pleasantness, etc)’ (36). This leads me to a question regarding the relationship between the artist and the viewer, in relation to the production of the beautiful and the emotions elicited by artworks. During the artistic process do you consider the viewer in your artistic deliberations, or do you concentrate on a private resolution of the work?

**Consuelo:** In recent work one of the main tactics for me has been creating illusions. I have made works that border on optical tricks with the use of overlaid reflective surfaces and simple drawing techniques that make a two-dimensional surface appear three-dimensional. In developing this work I consider at great length the act of looking, as I try in some way to almost create visual traps for the viewer—that is I



set up a visual lure and then create a space where the viewer becomes lost, disorientated and unsettled.

I try to create a sense of allure, through the use of colour, a seductive surface or bold shape, to draw the viewer in. I consider where things need to be viewed from and how close to bring the viewer to the surface of the work. The work then sets about to disorientate and destabilise—in large, mirror and coloured acrylic works for example, the rich colour of the work is the point of attraction, then once in front of the work the viewer is faced with a split and doubled reflection so that the focus is never sharp or accurate and things drift, or swim, within the surface as if in a mirage. What I consider then is more how to create a sense of allure rather than a consideration of beauty, or creating something beautiful.

**Helen:** The works from the ‘Alighiero e Boetti from Wikipedia’ series are determined by content, with the idea or concept of the work basically generating the outcome. The paintings evolve from the set perimeters of the canvas with information acquired from Wikipedia. Whilst making these paintings I cannot visualise the outcome, so the viewer is with me only in so far as neither of us know of the result that will appear. So really here the answer is ‘no’, the viewer is not part of the equation, and any resulting perceptions or associations with beauty are more likely to be those connected to the objectivity of science and mathematics.

**Pilar:** I try to keep the viewer as a primary concern when making my work; how a particular scene, frame, or melody, could manipulate their emotional state, or explain a narrative or idea. I often reference propaganda in my work, so the viewer’s response is critical to that being successful. In *The Embrace* I really focused on the space in my compositions and the actresses’ internalised emotion, and I tried to create a real sense of the narrative with barely any physical movement at all. In saying all this, I also highly value a complete private resolution—for me there needs to be a balance of both.

**Sally:** In 1924 Karl Kraus wrote ‘she lacked but a flaw to be perfect’ (Bradburne 11). This is getting at a more contemporary definition of beauty. Can you comment on this in relation to your work? Does surprise, play or deviation from the norm figure in your practice?

**Consuelo:** One of the constant interests for me has been the relationship between a thin finishing veneer and its underlying supporting structure. I looked at this relationship initially through architectural forms, to suggest that we draw a level of security from exteriority, which we are not even aware of.

In recent work I have repeated the element of a split or cut. The split creates an imperfection in the surfaces and also suggests that the veneer/surface can be corrupted and penetrated. In these works there has always been something just below the surface that has been waiting to escape, seep out or explode. The force, or nature of the underlying element is unknown, yet what is clear is that the thin surface veneer is incapable of containing it.

In response to *Bliss*, my work is about containment or the inability to contain something. As such the works have a feeling of unease, there is the element of surprise but that surprise may be more aligned to alarm than excitement or celebration.

**Helen:** I guess in relation to my art practice all these aspects play a significant part, especially at the conceptual stage. By referring to the ideas of Alighiero e Boetti, in particular his ‘Mappa’ series of woven world maps produced from 1971, a departure point is established. Banality has always been of interest to me as a guise for something of significance, and this is evident in my current work, reducing the national identities that exist within political alliances like the Eurozone, the United Nations and the Commonwealth to a muddy mix of juxtaposed, tertiary colours. A number of questions arise from such a process. Why are these alliances formed, how do they work, how don’t they work and what determines the inclusion or exclusion of countries? Obviously the answers to these questions have tremendous political and social ramifications.

**Pilar:** In a recent video trilogy completed in Finland, I played with ideas of understatement, melancholy and imperfection to reflect the personal nature of the subject matter (they were made by collecting memories and histories from local Finnish people and I wished to respect this). This translated well to the Finnish concept of ‘kaiho’, which refers to a deep and aching longing for an unobtainable something or someone, explored in the work. However, in parts of that work, and in previous work, I’ve generally held to western standards of perfection—the flaw appearing in the subtext, or in the actions of the protagonist. Often the beauty is so overstated it goes into kitsch.

In *Kaiho II* (2012) the character of the ‘Swan of Tuonela’, the swan who sings while circling the Finnish mythological underworld, is played by a classically beautiful, and sublimely pale, performer. While the Swan knows she is being watched she sings her tune (‘The Swan of Tuonela’ by Finnish composer Jean Sibelius), plays with her silver necklace bearing the Finnish coat of arms (often worn by members of the Finnish right-wing), and gracefully glides in her pool. But as soon as backs are turned she stops singing and nonchalantly chews on her nails and swears. She physically represents the ‘ideal’ of the Finnish nationalists, and her actions playfully subvert that ideal.

**Sally:** The organization of form and the quality of the materials you use, be they traditional art materials, or not, seem central to your work. It is the arrangement and quality of these elements that creates the beauty. Can you elaborate on this?

**Consuelo:** The materials I have been using recently, grey mirrors and coloured acrylic sheeting in particular, have their own innate attraction. They are materials that are activated by light and have lovely smooth and reflective surfaces.

It is the placement of the materials in relation to one another that allows me to create a sense of illusion in the work. Increasingly

the position of different works in relation to one another in the gallery is becoming of importance. The contrast between forms and materials—a rectangular airbrushed drawing on paper next to a round mirror with coloured acrylic—is what allows me to create a sense of unease, this is accentuated further through an unexpected arrangement on the wall that sees the work move away from the regular convention of hanging work at eye height.

**Sally:** In the series of paintings you have made for *Bliss*, there is a clear connection to beauty. But these works also seem to deviate slightly from some of your previous works that may be perceived as more ‘beautiful’. The difference in this body of work seems to lie in the conceptual process, which relies in part on chance or random effects in the mixing of the colours of the flags. What was this process like for you in relation to previous processes?

**Helen:** I guess the difference is directly related to the concept. Previously ideas for paintings and photography have come from the urban landscape in a more localised sense. The colours were chosen as signifiers, including industrial palettes of mid greys and ‘safety’ orange and yellows. Colour has always presented a challenge in relation to the concept of beauty and I guess I prefer to use it conceptually rather the aesthetically. But I’m still constantly surprised by how harmonious some outcomes may be. More recently the opportunity to travel has provided materials and ideas that are collected in broader global terms so perhaps this explains the shift you mention. In previous works invariably two colours would be used in a painting, but in *Alighiero e Boetti from Wikipedia, United Nations* for example 195 tertiary colours are included.

**Sally:** I’m also interested in how the process of creation is contained. Perhaps I am trying to ask the slightly clichéd question of how do you know when a work is done?

**Helen:** The works are always conceptually proscribed with a distorted grid and a list of components defining completion. In the case of *Alighiero e Boetti from Wikipedia, United Nations*, this process took two months so that irregularities in the painting (for example there is a more accurate brushstroke applied in the mornings and a looser one by the afternoon) add (or detract) from the patina of the finished work. A final comment on beauty in contemporary art (from my small studio located in Neukölln, Berlin) is summed up in two words... Anselm Reyle.

**Sally:** Would it be correct to say that a long-standing preoccupation of your work is beauty and its opposite, as you deal with difficult stories but present them in a lush and seductive manner?

**Pilar:** In the past, in my collaborative practice with Tarryn Gill, I have used beauty/sexuality as a way to seduce audiences to see an underlying difficult theme in the work in a non-threatening way, and investigate how cultural propaganda can seduce in the same manner.

For the work I made in Seoul for the *Bliss* exhibition I am using a similar technique; using the gloss of a K-pop video clip mixed with the utopian aesthetics of DPRK propaganda to explore the concept of unification as officially presented by the governments of both Koreas, and the heavy issues and emotions that come along with that. The difference is now I am focusing more heavily on the history and psychology involved, the emotions attached to nostalgic ideals, and the purposeful manipulation of ingrained values and cultural legacy both by me in my work, and in the reference material I investigate in my work.

Recently I took a Korean artist friend of mine to the DMZ (the heavily militarized zone separating North and South Korea). She is in her early twenties and part of the younger generation in South Korea (the *yishipdae*) who feel they have no connection to the North. They do not remember any relatives who live there, and their grandparents who did are passing away or have already passed. Only about 40%

of younger people in South Korea are in favour of reunification. My friend had never visited the DMZ, but when finally faced with the view from the tower she burst into tears. Actually being able to see past the wilderness of the DMZ zone and into the physical North awakened all kinds of emotions and triggered cultural memories she didn't know she had. It was a touching experience. I am not Korean, but I recognised those emotions in me. I had similar ones when confronted with the realities of the 'Dirty War' in Argentina (1976–1983), even though I never experienced it myself and my family passed relatively unscathed through the era. In my work I have tried to provide my take on the Korean romantic and emotional sentiments towards reunification while keeping a distance from the darkness (but not the reality) of the politics behind it by using a bright and alluring aesthetic in the visuals and music. The darkness is there in the reality of the situation; it didn't need reiteration for an audience to understand it.

**Sally:** Can you explain how the particular quality of the medium of film is used to convey your ideas, particularly in relation to the idea of beauty?

**Pilar:** Beauty is fairly easy to create in film and photography just because the frame can be very selective; with some skill what is presented on screen is very controllable. The lens of a camera can also make the 'unbeautiful' beautiful. I use film precisely because it is so easily controllable in this way and I can be specific about how I present my ideas, though I am still far from mastering the medium!

The lexicon of cinema is generally understood by an audience and this can be played upon and employed for what I am trying to achieve. The immersive quality of film and video is also difficult to attain with certain other mediums, and that makes it attractive to me.

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## On Behalf of Nature Poetry

### Carmel Macdonald Grahame

Silence incarnate, a snowstorm  
sifts the imagination for words,  
is an antidote for our urban chic.

A cityscape so lavishly recovered  
invokes poetry of a kind  
rarely heard these days, here.

A night fall hangs in street-lights,  
lunar curtains darkness clings to  
aloft—soft, held, numbed.

Eighth Avenue becomes a crystal canyon.  
Trash transforms into piles of lustre.  
Snow—copious and incandescent—

is beauty insisting, insisting  
on everything, and everything,  
relieved of its geometry, succumbs

to measureless fractal treasure  
adrift in its own depths  
as falling flight, a paradox of weight



entering the world as *white*, pure  
sum of all colour, the point  
at which light swallows rainbows...

In a blizzard's hush we hear again  
those lyrical lost tongues—  
if only we could speak them.

## Clutching at Petals

### Carmel Macdonald Grahame

Radio talk in the background instructs me  
that pilots making a kill cry, *Shack!*  
that an enemy is subdividing,  
how warlords will, or will not, why  
who hates most for longest, where,  
and in whichever war is being made  
into the latest justice,  
who is, and isn't, coming back...

Hearing all this grave indifference,  
I notice the orchid dying in the window.  
Each knuckle on each stalk  
bears a memory of stemmed wings.  
Escaping roots finger the glass.  
Wrong light, then—I position it  
where Earth rotates us into shade.  
This room is a living room, I think,  
and *a kill* is nothing made.

Flowers have the capacity to console  
so there may be more to orchid anatomy  
than purple petals curled round wimpled throats  
suggest—something of essential good.  
You could forget despair in the secrets  
of beauty folding and unfolding there.

More than all this scarlet-petalling  
within shell pink haloes, say, or  
than hard core form, pearl-white-bonneted  
and held like breath, as tongues lick air  
and the gaze is arranged  
to collect light from a room.  
Life itself flocks these surfaces,  
blossoming there, in arabesques of sense  
that dispose of certainties.

So I find myself wondering:  
under the skin, what engine, what cause,  
how comes this succulence, this content,  
this elemental form-producing force.  
I can't discern a source of petals,  
naturally, but the wind has me  
dreaming I hear leaves applaud,  
as I stare into the last blossom  
and what makes life worth living  
catches me unawares—

subtle, subtler even  
than imagined orchid breath,  
beyond sentences, deep in,  
intuition turned inside out,  
a future tense impenetrable as death:  
as if the flower could hope with me.

Oedo Chapel, Korea—

## Carmel Macdonald Grahame

Quiet embodied by incense  
infuses this simple white cell  
with hints of imminence.  
A shell of windows glasses us in,  
insisting we look out and down—  
for the soul, an atrium.

Out there, prayer's natural habitat:  
I am transfixed by the water-stone  
matrix of ocean, cliffs, seeming  
eternity decanted into sea and sky,  
at an apparent edge of endlessness.

In the bowsprit of an island sanctuary  
I do not expect dread, but it comes  
unsolicited, the accidental, chronic real.  
In its wake, the usual consolations of beauty,  
this time taking the form of seals  
far below, flickering in foam.  
Their off-on obliteration absorbs me  
until hinterland shadows cancel all  
other-creaturely flirtations with oblivion  
and night falls.

When I look back on Korea  
it will be this room I see,  
its last minute light being shed  
on my days of unravelling from here.

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## The Beauty of the Australian House.

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What does it take for an Australian house to be considered beautiful? Can a house built not for its aesthetic value but rather to occupy the largest space possible for the cheapest money available be beautiful? When an apartment might bring to mind a concrete cave how can we find beauty in such space? The answers are possibly contained in fiction. In this essay I focus on a number of dwellings in literary Australian fiction and explore them in light of Gaston Bachelard's notions of the beauty of the house in *The Poetics of Space*. In particular, I examine representations of the house where the author conjures a sense of beauty. What I mean by beauty is a combination of qualities that pleases the intellect and the senses. Bachelard's thesis on the poetics of the house, first published in 1958, has been contested, in part, for the way in which he concentrates on what he calls 'felicitous' houses, those that please the occupant. Jennifer Rutherford, for example, states that in the context of Australian fiction, 'shadow houses flicker into view' (113). However, Rutherford's examples of houses that are less than pleasing spaces concentrate on those found in colonial fiction. In more contemporary Australian literary fiction I argue that houses are often spaces in

which characters find shelter and their beauty lies, partly, in the provision of this function, which is one of Bachelard's conditions for the beauty of the house. His thesis proposes three conditions of beauty: poetic space, sufficient shelter to allow the occupant to daydream and a connection between exterior and interior spaces. It provides a framework to consider the beauty of the house that is still valuable in a literary context.

Bachelard describes various houses that serve as examples of beauty. For instance, he refers to a house with a light in the window and quotes H  l  ne Morange: 'I shall see your houses like fire-flies in the hollows of the hills' (p. 35). He also quotes a poem by Paul Eluard:

When the peaks of our sky come together  
My house will have a roof.

The beauty of these dwellings is contained in the fact that they are poetic spaces. According to Bachelard, a poetic space is one that resonates in the soul. He states: 'The poetic image is a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche' (p. 1). Often, it is a single aspect of the house that renders it poetic. David Malouf has this same understanding of the house, whereby the smallest of details might convert it to an alluring space. In his novel *The Great World*, beauty is as simple as a solitary object caught in filtered sunlight. For example, he describes a bunch of sweet-peas in a vase in a house that the main character, Digger, dreams of while he is interned in a prisoner-of-war camp. The image sustains him in the face of the cruelty he encounters:

Cut, in a tight little bunch, they would sit in a glass in the front room. He saw the room empty, with the curtains drawn against the sun, which could be strong, even in winter, and the glass with its two kinds of light, one air, one water, and the pale stalks and paler blossoms on a table in the centre of it (146).

The curtains drawn to soften the sunlight, the pale stalks, the soft colours of the sweet-peas and the glass vase containing clear water conjure a picture of a simply beautiful room. Malouf also creates a poetic space within the kitchen of that same house.

There was a wooden rack over the sink with plates in it, thick white ones. They leaned there drying, and had been washed a thousand times with a block of Sunlight soap in a little wire cage-like contraption, and rinsed, lifted out of the water and left. Beautiful they were (146).

These poetic descriptions of small details of domestic objects open up a sense of the entire house while representing its essence. The beauty of these objects lies in their simplicity, their honesty and the way they register as something deeper than a mere image. In this way, a simple vase of flowers might transform a house that has not been designed for its aesthetic value.

The house in Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* is also summed up poetically in the minutiae of its space even though it is a strange and unwelcoming house for much of the narrative. Some of the floors sing when stepped on (39). Iron lace decorates the verandah and the rain falls sweetly on the tin roof. All these images are easily recognisable and are designed to resonate in the depths of the reader's mind. The *Cloudstreet* house is a large old place with sloping floors and buckled windows. It contains the ghost of an Aboriginal girl who swallowed poison because of her unhappiness in the house. Yet the Pickles and Lamb families eventually come to recognise its beauty. Rose, for example, can't bear to think that developers might pull down the house when her father considers selling it. Towards the end of the novel she rejects the modern house that she and Quick have been building and decides to stay at Cloud Street. The house has been transformed into a beautiful space despite its dilapidation, firstly because it sings sweetly to its occupants, secondly because it shelters them perfectly, and thirdly because a window has been opened up



in the haunted library letting the ghosts out and the light in. Tim Winton's poetic descriptions of houses come from his reverence of such spaces as a potential site of daydreams. He speaks in *Land's Edge* about a shack in Geraldton that he loved. It was a humble house where he spent time reading books and daydreaming. He states that it was 'A strange house in retrospect, to a child it was the most remarkable place to have year after year, and I sometimes think that it was this house that caused me to become a writer' (12).

In Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* beautiful spaces are harder to find because Number One House is described as a fortress of rubbish. The house has been constructed from refuse collected from the local tip by Angel Day, an Aboriginal woman, living in a camp called Pricklebush. However, beauty is contained in her partner Norm Phantoms' working space within the house, that 'dark dank dwelling' (15). Norm is a taxidermist who creates objects of great beauty from dead fish.

It was here in the amber womb that each member of the family had come to lose themselves in their father's world of fantasised hidden treasure, as they watched Norm intricately creating fish jewels of silver, gold and iridescent red, greens and blues (194).

Sky roofs, singing floors and rooms of jewelled fish are the stuff of dreams and this brings us to the second way in which Bachelard recognises the beauty of the house. He refers to the capacity of the house to act as a place where we feel safe enough to daydream. Bachelard states: 'If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace'(6). Rose Pickles in *Cloudstreet* actively searches for a space in the large old house on Cloud Street in which to daydream and she finds it in a room with a window overlooking the street, 'an *Anne of Green Gables* room' (38). Sadly, she is soon robbed of the room when her father divides the house into two separate living spaces.

Christopher Koch is also an author who seems to value the house as a site of beautiful daydreams as he devotes passages to poetically summing up such spaces. Derek Bradley in Christopher Koch's *The Memory Room*, for example, muses on the type of house that might contain his daydreams:

Looking at illustrations in his childhood books, he had often singled out images of peace, and dwelt on them. In one of these pictures, a gabled house with dormer windows, set on an empty hill (a house that was merely portrayed as a background to the story unfolding in the foreground, and not intended to be significant), took on a special meaning and attractiveness for him: he returned to it many times, wanting to enter the picture, and to find perfect happiness there, on the quiet hillside (16).

Another character in *The Memory Room*, Vincent Austin, also recognises the daydream qualities of the house. He is reminded of the Faery world when he gazes on the little houses situated on Lutana's hill in Tasmania at sunset with the light transforming them.

The house, as a space in which to daydream, takes many forms but two of the most beautiful, nest and shell, are referred to in chapter headings in *The Poetics of Space*. Australian authors seem particularly fond of using images of these objects to describe the beauty of the house. In his text, *12 Edmondstone Street*, which is, in part, a biographical account of his childhood, David Malouf gives an example of a nest-like structure when he writes of dwelling in a weatherboard house in Brisbane.

They have about them the improvised air of tree houses. Airy, open often with no doors between the rooms, they are on such easy terms with breezes, with the thick foliage they break into at window level, with the lives of possums and flying-foxes, that living in them, barefoot for the most part, is like living in a reorganized forest (10).

A similar Queensland house is described in the novel *Orpheus Lost* by Janette Turner Hospital.

Like all equatorial habitations, the house rested on twelve-foot stilts so that cooling breezes and cyclonic floodwaters could pass beneath. Above the stilts there was more outdoors than indoors: more covered veranda than walled rooms (158).

The beauty of these houses is twofold. Firstly, they are spaces that are in touch with their external environment: they fit into the landscape. Secondly, they are reminiscent of nests in childhood tree houses, those daydream spaces.

Any childhood house is a potent space. David Malouf argues that the house of one's childhood acts as a first guide to the world. He states that the house taught him 'what kind of reality [he] had been born into, that body of myths, beliefs, loyalties, anxieties, affections that shape a life, and whose outline we enter and outgrow' (*12 Edmondstone Street* 12). Dorothy Hewett also acknowledges the potency of the childhood house in her autobiography, *Wild Card*. She includes a detailed description and begins with the statement that, 'The first house sits in the hollow of the heart, it will never go away' (3). In regard to the childhood home, Bachelard combines information about the position of a window overlooking a hill in his room with the smell of raisins drying on a tray. He states: 'The odor of raisins! It is an odor that is beyond description, one that takes a lot of imagination to smell' (13). We might not smell Bachelard's raisins but we immediately smell the odour of our own childhood house and if that smell was comforting to us then Bachelard's house, by association, seems beautiful. In this way a single image, one scent might transform a house from the ordinary to the beautiful. And so, the smell of raisins might transform a concrete cave.

Andrew McGahan and Kim Scott, on the other hand, imagine shell-like rooms and houses. The house in Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth*, which constitutes an obsession on the part of its owner,

John McIvor, is divided into two areas. The ground floor is roughly partitioned and many of the more beautiful architectural features have been removed. The upper storey, however, still contains poetic spaces. Of these, the white room is the most beautiful. Its interior is lit 'with an ethereal glow from arched windows hung with billowing gauze' (30). The description of this room suggests what it might be like to occupy a shell. In *Benang*, there is an unfinished home, '...a shell to hold us', which shelters Harley in his childhood, despite its lack of flooring (409). These living spaces are rendered beautiful because they link the exterior and interior through the image of the shell and they situate the dweller in an enchanted world.

In Australian literary fiction the humble house is more common than the mansion. Bachelard points out that the hut, in contrast to the mansion, is often the more welcoming abode. He states, 'Over-picturesqueness in a house can conceal its intimacy' (12). Patrick White's novel *The Tree of Man* captures Bachelard's concept of the simple intimacy of the hut. The house built in the bush by Stan Parker with its simple meals by candlelight, white rosebush outside the window and logs for sitting to shell peas in the sunshine conjures a sense of intimate shelter (29–31). Bruce Bennett argues that the Australian house is somewhere between the tent and the castle in terms of human architectural achievement and that the castle is most often aspired to (15). This may well be true in relation to the Australian community, but it is not generally true in Australian literary fiction where a more humble house is common. In the Australian context, I also argue that although the mansion is aspired to for status and the financial security it promises, we more often dream of the 'tent', a relatively smaller home that links, as a tent might, the interior to the exterior. This is evident in the popular acclaim of Australian architects who take the exterior into account in their designs, such as Glenn Murcutt who received the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2002. The houses in Australian literary fiction are more likely than not to acknowledge the tree outside a window or the rain on a roof. In Susan Duncan's novel, *The House at Salvation Creek*, there is a poetic

description of a humble house whose beauty lies in this linking of outside and inside:

I cannot bring myself to give up my house, where the earth, sky and sea surge though walls of glass. Where the moon prances on the bedroom floor and the sun spears rainbows of light on the timber deck (1).

Some Australian fiction imagines the tent as a long-term living space. One example occurs in *Cloudstreet*, when Oriel Lamb abandons the house. She does this temporarily, returning to the house once she feels that she belongs there, but the tent with its Tilley lamp lighting up the canvas walls is her personal space in the backyard of the house for much of the narrative (113). The character Anna, in Brenda Walker's *Crush*, also encounters a family living quite happily in a tent in Geraldton. Similarly, Angel Day, in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* occupies a type of tent, two blankets placed over a tree branch, for some months while she builds Number One House. More often, however, the 'tent' is a simple wooden or stone house that seems to nestle in its environment. Bachelard states: 'If we look at it intimately, the humblest dwelling has beauty' (4). Winton's *Land's Edge* recognises this when it focuses on images of the humble home. For example, there is a photograph of a family standing outside their converted bus and a couple who live in a shack with its garden of gnomes.

The modest house is a consistent motif in contemporary Australian fiction. For example, in Favel Parrett's *Past The Shallows* a hut provides a temporary refuge to the novel's protagonist, Harry when he escapes the threat of violence from his father and his mate Jeff:

From the outside, this place looked just like a picker's hut, all weathered up and grey. But the inside was bright and neat and clean and Harry thought it was nicer than where he lived, nicer than the brown house, even though it was just one room and

there was only a sink instead of a bathroom and the toilet must be outside somewhere down the back. There were even fresh flowers in a vase (66).

The brightness of the space, its weathered walls with their reference to the outside world and its vase of fresh flowers, but also the sense of shelter it represents, renders this house beautiful.

Houses constructed and occupied by characters in the novels *Benang* and *Carpentaria* are similar to the house in *Past The Shallows* in that they are makeshift and humble. They are especially beautiful because of the shelter they provide. Uncle Jack Chattalong's humble house in *Benang*, 'walled with hessian and flattened kerosene tins' is a sturdy place for him to shelter and 'might easily outlast him'. (61) Number One House in *Carpentaria* is similarly sheltering despite being constructed from rubbish from a nearby tip. In fact, the rough and ready nature of the house protects the Phantom family in *Carpentaria* because interfering town residents and bureaucrats are slightly afraid to enter it in case it collapses. Similarly, in *The White Earth* William's childhood home provides him with a clear sense of shelter despite its insubstantiality. The farmhouse inhabited by William and his parents, until his father's death, is the 'centre of his world' (9). The idea of fragility is turned on its head in this description of the house as it is in *Carpentaria*. A less solid construction is protective according to William's father who explains that although the house rests on shallow stumps that move and warp, this characteristic makes it more durable. William's father believes that brick houses on concrete slabs are not suitable for the black soil of the area:

'Those slabs will crack one day,' he'd insist. 'And then all those bricks will just crumble. A wooden house is better. It might not look like much, but this old place will never fall down.' (9)

Despite its crooked doorframes, the house's flexibility ensures that it doesn't crack and crumble like a house made of a more dense

material. Once again shelter is obtained in a humble house that is constructed more lightly and in a makeshift fashion. The beauty of such spaces is contained in these details.

These poetically invoked houses are depicted in contemporary Australian fiction as shelters, places of comfort and security because of the sense of familiarity, and, often, the feeling of calm, they invoke. They are ideal spaces in which to daydream because they shelter the dreamer. Their modesty is an alluring and intimate aspect. Contemporary Australian fictional characters are drawn to such houses. They satisfy Bachelard's conditions for beauty in a house. They shelter the daydreamer and they are poetic and quite humble spaces. Their connection to the natural world, their nest, shell or tent-like sense, renders them enchanting.

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## Wallpaper

Laurie Steed

They had argued about the colour of the walls all afternoon. Patrick wanted light blue, sky-like, or so he said, cracks filled in and a vibrant reimagining for their family home. Jen replied that with kids, you had to go with wallpaper. You needed to be able to wipe away the mess they left behind, she said, tossing a ring of colour swatches onto the couch.

It mattered very much how things looked, said Patrick. Without beauty, a home was just four walls, a roof, and fingerprints smudging the handle of the fridge. You can get beautiful wallpaper, said Jen. That's fine, said Patrick, but wallpaper peels away. One day you're left with the wall, and you'd better hope that it's pretty, too.

In the end, they agreed to let it lie. Some things were more important than the colour of the walls, or how you covered the cracks. Tonight was Emily's recital. It seemed only fair to put their differences aside. To focus on things they'd done right instead of all that could possibly go wrong.

'You ready, Em?' Jen called across the landing.

'Nearly,' said Emily, from behind a half-closed bedroom door.

'Jay? Alex?'



She heard an ‘oof’, and then voices, raised. ‘Jay says he can’t go ‘cause he’s stupid,’ Alex yelled from downstairs.

‘Alex,’ called Patrick, ‘be good or you won’t go.’

‘Great,’ said Alex.

‘Oops,’ said Jen, slipping a tie from the coat rail.

The silk slid across her fingers. The dust coated the headboard. *Knock it off*, thought Jen. The dust, the two of them rocking back and forth, if only they had the time, or the energy. She heard the bump, bump, bounce of Alex and Jay jumping on the living room couches.

‘Kids!’

‘It was Jay,’ shouted Alex. Then quietly: ‘She always thinks it’s me.’

Jen rested the tie around her husband’s neck, looping it over itself, and then gently tightened the strip of blue, seeking the button to slip inside the fabric.

‘Now, if we take this bit down—’

‘You look amazing,’ said Patrick.

‘Hmm?’

‘You. You look gorgeous.’

‘Thank you. You look pretty good yourself,’ said Jen, pulling him close.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean me, this. I’m not always there for you. At least, not how I’d like to be.’

‘I know.’

‘Can we start again?’ He guided her gaze to his with his index finger.

Jen nodded, smiling. She liked to watch him dress; to watch him undress, too, charting his shadow as he walked half-naked across the bedroom.

‘Emily’s getting good,’ said Patrick as he slipped into his blazer.

‘You ever tell her?’

He paused. ‘I must have... I’m sure I have, at least once.’

‘Tell her. How else is she going to know?’

‘You shouldn’t mollycoddle your kids.’

‘Or ignore them,’ said Jen, under her breath. She finished with her lipstick and then capped it. She rubbed top lip on bottom, rose from the height of the mirror, snuck a stray, teased hair back behind her ear and smoothed an already tight black dress.

‘I’m getting fat.’

‘What?’

‘Me,’ said Jen. ‘I’m huge.’

Patrick’s hand went to her cheek. ‘What did we say?’

‘Brush before bed?’

‘You said whenever you were being hard on yourself, I had to throw you onto the bed and make love to you, regardless of whether or not the door was closed. I heard Emily head down the stairs...I can send Alex and Jay out for ice cream.’

‘Patrick.’

He slipped a hand down her side.

She giggled. ‘Patrick!’

‘Say that you’re beautiful.’

‘Fat.’

‘Beautiful.’

‘Fat.’

He pushed her onto the bed.

‘Beautiful,’ said Jen.

‘Phew. Our daughter will never know how close she came to serious trauma.’

He lifted his wife off the bed. ‘And what else?’ asked Patrick. She shrugged her shoulders. ‘We fight for this. Always.’

They packed into the car. Alex punched Jay because he was taking up too much space. Patrick demisted the windscreen as Jen undid Jay’s seatbelt, lifted him up and told Emily to please move across.

‘Can’t we just go?’ said Emily. ‘We’re going to be late.’

‘We’re not going to be late,’ said Jen.

‘I don’t have to come,’ said Alex, pulling his shirt out from inside his trousers.

‘Yes you do,’ said Jen. She turned around. ‘Alex, look after your brother, OK? And tuck your shirt in.’

‘OK,’ said Alex, kicking the back of the passenger seat. ‘God, piano recitals are so poofy.’

‘Do you even know what that means?’ Alex shook his head. ‘Then don’t say it.’

‘What’s Mum talking about?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Patrick. ‘Just don’t say it, all right?’

‘Fine. I love piano recitals. They’re my favourite.’

Jen shot a glare at Patrick. ‘What did *we* say?’

‘Well, I don’t know,’ he replied. ‘You make up these rules, how am I supposed to keep track?’

‘You think, Patrick. You just need—’

‘Can we just have a good time tonight? Please?’

‘It’s the next left.’

Patrick flicked the indicator, tapping his foot in time with its tick-tick.

Cars clustered around the driveway and spilled out onto the verge. The family wandered in, trailing a girl and her parents, both of whom repeated how amazing she was.

Alex laughed. ‘Dad.’

‘Hmm?’

‘Do you think Emily will suck?’

‘Alex,’ said Jen. ‘Pack it in.’

‘I didn’t do anything,’ said Alex, kicking at the grass. ‘God!’

They wandered in through the open front door. The hall led into a crowded living room, the shelves stocked with silverware, china and the odd family photograph.

The parents were grouped in a tight semi-circle with the kids kneeled close to the piano. Patrick motioned to the snack table and mimed eating. Jen nodded, and he turned away.

‘Dad!’ called Jay.

‘Sorry, baby boy,’ said Patrick and scooped him into his arms, redoing a buckle on Jay’s dungarees as he went. He held out his son to evaluate the end product. ‘Better,’ he said, bringing Jay back to his chest. He caught Jen’s gaze. ‘Back soon.’

Jen glanced around the room. Flawless fathers, modern mums. Probably packed tiny dinners, eating them on the front verandah with Ikea cutlery. Or worse, they’d cooked dinner beforehand, dishwasher now churning and a Kinder egg for the kids before they left. Model parents with colour-coded lunchboxes, knowing Jo doesn’t like Vegemite, and Declan likes his crusts cut off, and—

‘Jen,’ called a voice from behind.

She turned to see a man in a crisp crimson shirt, black dress pants ironed down the crease.

‘Peter. What are you doing here?’

‘Natalie,’ said Peter. He pointed to a blonde-haired girl, cross-legged near the piano, her hair in a tight plait. ‘Emily?’

She nodded. ‘Peter—’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘Not a good time.’

‘No, not at—’

‘Hi,’ said Patrick, squeezing between them. ‘I don’t think we’ve met.’

‘This is Peter,’ said Jen. ‘Natalie’s dad. You know Natalie.’

‘No,’ said Patrick.

‘She’s Emily’s friend. Where’s Emily?’

‘She needed to go to the loo. I think she’s nervous.’

‘You sure she’s OK?’

‘I think so.’

‘Do you want to check?’

He smiled uncomfortably. ‘Back soon.’

Patrick sidestepped out of the living room as he trod carefully in his size ten loafers, slowly making his way between seated children. Jen raised an eyebrow. Peter waited until Patrick was out of the room.

‘I’ve got the place this weekend. Said it was a work retreat.’

‘Peter, think.’

‘What?’

‘A weekend?’ said Jen. ‘In Pinjarra?’

‘Later, then. A carnal catch-up,’ he said, grinning.

‘Now’s not the time.’ She glanced nervously around the room.

Alex pulled at his mother’s arm to get her attention. He looked first at her, then at Peter. ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m a friend of your mother’s.’

‘My mum doesn’t have any friends,’ said Alex. He turned to his mother. ‘What? You don’t.’

‘Where’s Jay?’

‘He’s getting me chips,’ said Alex. ‘And a Coke.’

‘Brothers, hey? Can’t live with them, can’t shoot them.’ said Peter.

‘I don’t like you.’

‘Alex!’ said Jen.

‘I don’t. He smells funny.’

‘It’s all right,’ said Peter. ‘I’m going, anyway. Nice to see you, Jen.’

‘You too.’

‘Glad he’s gone,’ said Alex.

‘Ssh,’ said Jen. ‘Your father’s coming.’

Emily and Patrick returned. Emily ran up to Jen, pulling at her arm. ‘I’m going to go sit with the other kids.’

‘Good luck, darling,’ said Jen as she straightened her daughter’s hairband, its bow brought back to the centre. She kissed Emily on her forehead, watched her run to take her seat with the other children. Saw a spot of lint on her daughter’s otherwise immaculate blue-silk taffeta dress, but *too late now*, she thought. *No need to worry her any more than necessary.*

The teacher stood in front of the piano, facing the audience. ‘Tonight we’re hearing some of the most talented pianists I’ve had the pleasure of teaching. They range from Grade 1 to Grade 5, so they are at varying stages. They’ve all been working hard, though, so I’m sure you’ll show your appreciation with a warm round of applause.’

Emily looked back at her mother. Jen raised her thumb in approval.

The recital began. Patrick held Alex close. Jen held Jay's hand. Once the music started, Jay seemed placid. His feet no longer tapped, his hand gone limp.

'You good?' asked Jen.

Jay nodded, snuggling up to his mother. 'Mummy,' he whispered. She bent down. 'I love you.'

Jen reached down to cuddle him close. 'Love you too, baby. Don't ever forget that.'

Alex also seemed calm. Jen felt silly to have chided him; what did it matter who handed out the discipline? Why did she always feel the need to appear authoritative?

She thought again of her mother, veins tensing in her neck, pulling at her daughter's ear. Tears turned to terror; an unshakeable fear that everything she'd ever done was wrong.

With Patrick, she felt hope. He'd not left yet, and though things hadn't been great, they were still together. Things could always be better, and yet, in Peter's arms, she felt... not safe, but sensual. Even now, she felt his stare warm the back of her neck. She almost turned around but stopped herself, short of breath at the thought of another betrayal.

She tuned in at the end of a young boy's *Liebestraum No. 3*. It was no better or worse than any other time she'd heard it.

There was an almost ecstatic round of applause from the child's parents, their applause punctuated by an occasional holler of support. Sophie called Emily to the piano. She bowed once, smiled, and then lifted herself onto the stool.

'Boo,' yelled Alex. 'Get off.'

Jen looked over to Patrick, who dragged Alex out, despite his howls. Emily tapped a foot pedal in double-time as practice, her knee almost hitting the piano. Jen relaxed a little and offered the widest smile she could muster. Emily rolled her shoulders, took a deep breath and began to play *Für Elise*.

She played so beautifully, thought Jen. It was the proudest she had ever been, not for her daughter's skill, but for sharing a moment: Her, Emily and Jay. No Alex to say the wrong thing, or mess things up, and Patrick... well, he'd never been great with praise.

Emily played on, bit softly on her bottom lip as her fingers traversed the keys. When not in use, her pinkies wiggled slightly, nearly hitting wrong notes but lifting just before they landed.

*Keep going,* thought Jen. *You're doing so well.*

She began the final verse note-perfect, her back straight and fingers slightly bent. Jen scanned the room for Patrick and Alex, but they were still outside. As the piece reached its climax, Jen felt a hand on her waist. She turned, startled. Peter stood within a hand span of her left shoulder. Her tiny gasp was drowned out by the music. He put a finger to his lips, and Jen turned back to the piano. As the song was about to finish, he shifted his hand to the small of her back.

The audience clapped. Emily turned away from the piano, seeking her mother's approval, but instead saw Jen and Peter, closer than they should have been. Emily froze. Peter whispered, nudging in a little closer. Jen nodded, clasped his hand, and he disappeared into the crowd. Jen turned back a second too late. Emily had jumped off the chair and run out of the room, headed straight for the front door.

Jen struggled to part the crowd, sidling past parents holding champagne glasses, grasping Jay's hand as tightly as possible. Try as she could, she couldn't make her way through.

She slammed open the screen door, which bucked against the outside wall, its handle letting out a tinny clang. With Jay now scooped in one arm, Jen saw the three of them at the car. Emily was in Patrick's arms, crying. Alex was in the back of the car, kicking the driver's seat.

'Baby, are you all right?' said Jen. She turned to Patrick. 'Is she all right?'

'She's fine,' said Patrick. 'Something spooked her.'

'Em.'

Emily wouldn't look at her.

‘Baby, it’s fine. You did really well.’

‘What happened?’ said Patrick.

‘It’s nothing,’ he said. She kissed Emily on the cheek. ‘She’s just tired. You did great, baby. I’m so proud of you.’ She turned to Patrick. ‘Come on, love. Let’s get these guys home.’

Patrick put the kids to bed. Jen climbed the stairs, ran her left hand up the wall, feeling bumps and blemishes.

She removed her make-up, cleansed and moisturised, wiping the bathroom sink dry with a scrunched-up tissue. Took the clips from her hair, let it fall in front of her face. Brushed her teeth, scrubbed and scrubbed, spat it out, a flush of the tap to wash away the foam.

She knew she had to call it off with Peter. And yet...he was exciting, awake, turned on by her presence. With Patrick, it was as if he were analysing her. Forever so distant, his thoughts like quotes from a technical manual.

Her lips had lost colour. Crinkles formed around her eyes, and her skin was fast losing its elasticity. She lifted up her dress, flinging it onto the bathroom tiles. Saw herself on display: lumps, bumps and cellulite thighs. *You’re ugly, Jen. How could you ever expect to keep a man?*

Saw Emily’s face, rushed to the toilet and was sick, the taste of wine clinging to her lips, saying *baby, I’m sorry*.

Patrick came up late. He sat on the bed and faced away from Jen, towards the chest of drawers, slipping his jacket onto the bedpost before loosening his tie. He took it off, hung it over his jacket, and then unbuttoned his shirt.

Jen watched him in the dark, a shadow in the hallway’s casting light. His form, familiar: belly bump, more crest than barrel.

‘Come to bed,’ said Jen.

‘In a minute.’

‘Is Emily alright?’



‘She’s fine. A bit shaken up.’

‘How was Alex? He wouldn’t leave her alone.’

‘Kids are smart. They know when something’s up.’

‘What do you mean?’

Patrick turned to his wife, meeting her gaze. ‘I’m not sure. Is there something you need to tell me?’

She stared past him at the wall, just below the windowsill. She’d seen it before, maybe weeks, months earlier. A hairline crack. Small, but spreading.

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## The Beauty of a Dead Child: Art, Violence and Negativity

Ali Alizadeh

### Classical Beauty and Late Capitalism

It has been suggested that contemporary artistic products are bereft of beauty. Such suggestions cite instances of modernism as atonal music, abstract painting and experimental poetry as evidence for the demise of the beautiful, such as a significant genus of modern works of art. Abstraction, fragmentation and conceptualism are viewed as dominant currents antithetical to the once privileged position of the aesthetically refined or pleasing. The term modernism has become synonymous with an unstoppable assault on such genres of harmonious and enjoyable art as the nude painting and the love poem. And this offensive against beauty has been seen as causing a good deal of contemporary art's inability to connect with the general public.

I write this essay in opposition to such an argument. In my view, far from having been ravaged by the *avant-gardes* of modernism and the subversive practitioners of postmodernism, classical or poetic beauty is a key trope in today's hegemonic culture industries. After Alain Badiou, I define such a notion of beauty as *classical* since what

is commonly seen as beautiful is that which is perceived as *likeable* and, as such, this definition adheres to the modality of Western art termed by Badiou as the ‘classical schema’ of art (*The Handbook of Inaesthetics* 4). After Jacques Rancière, I see such a beauty as *poetic* since what is perceived as beautiful according to contemporary doxa is symptomatically *good* and *proper* and may therefore be seen as a theme of the regime of art called by Rancière ‘the poetic regime of art’ (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 17).

*The Great Gatsby*, Baz Luhrmann’s highly publicised 2013 adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel, is excessively appealing and *likeable*, supplementing the overabundance of the scenes of opulent festivity and sexually glamorous partygoers with mawkish, overproduced music and, finally, overwhelming 3D imagery. The movie is also a *good*—that is, in this particular sense, adequate or suitable—continuation or imitation of its creator’s previous movies, such as his equally hyper-aestheticised blockbusters *Romeo+Juliet* and *Moulin Rouge!*

That movies such as *The Great Gatsby* are produced and popularised is not sufficient to prove that the only discourse of beauty available to us is one promulgated by late capitalist Hollywood entertainment. Indeed, an aspect of this essay’s argument is a call to seek another, and in my view far more powerful, formulation of beauty. Nevertheless, the dominance of the likes of Luhrmann’s *The Great Gatsby* indicates that classical, poetic beauty—that is the kind of aesthetic object which may be seen as primarily *pleasurable*, ‘cathartic’ or designed to act as ‘the treatment of the afflictions of the soul’ (Badiou *The Handbook of Inaesthetics* 4)—is nothing if not prevalent today; and that such a modality was not at all supplanted by the modernists and their iconoclastic progeny.

It is undeniable that the modern, from its genesis in Romanticism, has promoted a ‘rejection of the classical model of beauty’ (Rancière 95). According to Rancière, the inauguration and development of what he has termed ‘the aesthetic regime of art’, from the writings of Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Edmund Burke in the

eighteenth century, via the innovative, so-called serpentine dance of the American dancer Loïe Fuller in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, through to our time, has renounced

the well-proportioned body: a Vitruvian house designed according to human forms, akin to Leonardo da Vinci's ideal man, with extended limbs inscribed with the perfect form of the circle. The serpentine is the destruction of the organic as the natural model of beauty. It is opposed to the order of geometric proportion by the perpetual variation of the line whose accidents endlessly merge (Rancière 95).

It could be further said that it was not only aesthetic phenomena such as Fuller's dance but also technological developments which participated in the intended destruction of a notion of classical, *organic* and *geometric* beauty. According to Walter Benjamin, as discussed in his famous 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 'the cult of beauty' in art—'developed during the Renaissance and prevailing for three centuries'—was fatally challenged by 'revolutionary means of reproduction' such as photography and cinema (217–8).

And yet photography and cinema have since become the very media for the projection of cultish, classical beauty. To state the obvious, the actors appearing in something like *The Great Gatsby* are bodily well-proportioned, and the film as a whole, through its insistent digital manipulations and abundantly contrived audio-visual extravagance, is very much a formulaic replication of 'the order of geometric proportion' of a hit Hollywood movie. The emancipatory early twentieth-century promises of technologically reproduced art have not materialised to thwart the elitist and classical notions of beauty, and have indeed greatly strengthened these by, among other things, installing the so-called cult of celebrity apropos of classically and—in Rancière's sense—poetically beautiful actors.

I do not, however, wish to overemphasise the endurance and might of the traditional versions of beauty in the contemporary world. Nor is it my aim to further ruminate on the ultimate inability of modern art, modern technology and artistic modernisms to effectively challenge the classical or poetic schemata of art. While the cult of conventional beauty—due to its potent fetish and commodity value—remains culturally privileged in our late capitalist contexts, we may yet think of ideas of beauty that break with existing artistic regimes. In this essay I would like to propose a perspective for a non-classical, non-poetic beauty.

### **The Presence of Dialectical Beauty**

I would like to begin my proposal by briefly outlining the view of beauty developed by Benjamin's peer and critic, Theodor Adorno:

Beauty is not the platonically pure beginning but rather something that originated in the renunciation of what was once feared, which only as a result of this renunciation—retrospectively, so to speak, according to its own telos—became the ugly. Beauty is the spell over the spell, which devolves upon it (47).

The kind of classical beauty spoken about earlier in my essay is aligned with Aristotle's response to Plato's suspicion of art's claim to truth—the perception of art 'as the pure *charm* of truth' (Badiou *The Handbook of Inaesthetics* 2)—which counters this mistrust by positing that art 'does not claim to be truth, and is therefore innocent' (4). It is precisely this innocence which Adorno describes as 'the platonically pure beginning' and which he rejects. For him, beauty is devoid of a positive substance and is primarily dialectical and oppositional: beauty is the negation of fear. This first negation identifies the fearsome as the other of the beautiful—the ugly—which once negated, produces the eventual, as opposed to the original, beauty. In other words, 'beauty is the result not of a

simple equilibrium per se, but rather of the tension that results' (Adorno 46).

Such a conception of beauty is emptied of the motifs favoured by the classical, poetic version utilised and propagated by the pervasive commodity fetishism of late capitalism. Since dialectical beauty is originally a contradiction of fear, it lacks a pure or autonomous initial substance such as organic proportionality or natural harmony. It is the no-thing of a thing called fear. And yet artistic beauty is not simply a lack or an absence (of fear): in a work of art, the abstract nothing is concretised and becomes something. As Adorno states succinctly: 'by its form alone art promises what is not; it registers objectively, however refractedly, the claim that because the nonexistent [of beauty] appears it must indeed be possible' (82).

In agreement with Adorno, I believe the work of art, no matter how masterfully executed or how faithfully representative of natural beauty, may become truly beautiful only if it is an object in which the fearsome and the ugly are included and effectively countered. A skilfully executed painting depicting an attractive human figure is banal and clichéd if it does not cite or enact a hideous component or an unlikable technique. A carefully crafted love sonnet and a self-consciously innovative text of *avant-gardist* poetry remain albeit uninspired imitations of things that are external to art (love, the desire for novelty, etc.) unless they are structured and composed as the negativity of the others of love (contempt, loneliness, sexual exploitation, etc.) and the others of innovation (stifling ideologies, cultural reifications). The beauty of a work of art must be the very presence or the very appearance of a transcendent possibility which negates the material contingency of a work's formal criteria and its represented content.

I would like to refer to a particular poem to illustrate this objective appearance of a powerful new possibility, a radical beauty emancipated from a pre-existing, natural or primordial goodness or likeability. Apartheid-era South African poet Ingrid Jonker's 1963 poem 'The Child Who Was Shot Dead by Soldiers in Nyanga' ('Die

kind (wat doodgeskiet is deur soldate by Nyanga)') has, as its title declares, an openly disturbing and horrific theme for its subject matter. Yet, in my view, the poem is a forceful negation of fear and the ugliness of this referent; it is the objectivisation of a potent nonexistent beauty.

I would like to quote Jonker's poem in its entirety before exploring its dialectical operation (in Antjie Krog and André Brink's 2007 translation from Afrikaans):

'The Child Who Was Shot Dead by Soldiers in Nyanga'

The child is not dead  
the child raises his fists against his mother  
who screams Africa screams the smell  
of freedom and heather  
in the locations of the heart under siege

The child raises his fists against his father  
in the march of the generations  
who scream Africa scream the smell  
of justice and blood  
in the streets of his armed pride

The child is not dead  
neither at Langa nor at Nyanga  
nor at Orlando nor at Sharpeville  
nor at the police station in Philippi  
where he lies with a bullet in his head

The child is the shadow of the soldiers  
on guard with guns saracens and batons  
the child is present at all meetings and legislations  
the child peeps through the windows of houses and into the hearts  
of mothers

the child who just wanted to play in the sun at Nyanga is  
everywhere  
the child who became a man treks through all of Africa  
the child who became a giant travels through the whole world

Without a pass

The negative aesthetics of Jonker's poem are evident from the very opening line. The title of the poem is the invocation of a black baby shot dead by Afrikaner forces during a protest against the so-called pass laws, the system which prevented the free movement of the country's black citizens, in one of the townships of Cape Town. This is clearly a shocking image. But the first line immediately negates this representation by telling the reader 'the child is not dead'. In the following line, the undead child raises his fist in opposition to his mother's grief. The horrible image of a murdered child in the arms of his grieving mother is central to the poem; yet the poem comprises systematic negations of this theme. The sensory quality of the mother's grief, which is associated with the suffering of an entire continent, is coupled not with smells of fear, cruelty and oppression, but with 'the smell / of freedom and heather'. And yet this uplifting connotation is itself immediately negated by being placed 'under siege'.

My dialectical reading of the poem is inspired by Adorno's aesthetic theory and Badiou's *inaesthetics*. For Badiou, a properly philosophical view of art presents the work as neither a classical nor an expressive nor a didactic creation, but as an object with 'an implacable argumentative severity' (42) in which 'truth arises' (50). To discern this truth, the poem must be seen as a 'subtractive operation' (Badiou *Conditions* 57). To use the terminology of Badiou's proposed approach, in the first stanza of Jonker's poem the image of the murdered child *vanishes* into the motif of his unnaturally raised fist and the mother's scream disappears amidst 'the smell / of freedom and heather'. This negation displaces the fearsome, devastating



connotations of the killing of the child with a hopeful, active drive for freedom from the siege of tyranny.

But this vanishing or subtraction is also negated or, in Badiou's parlance, *cancelled* in the next stanza. Here we have the child's father 'marching' with his 'armed pride' in the name of 'justice and blood' of his murdered child; and yet the child's fist is also raised *against* this figure. The negation of the mother's grief in the first stanza has resulted in the father's rage in the second stanza, and the truth of the child's presence, manifested in the naming of his fist, annuls this result. The non-existent of this situation, the void revealed by the event of the child's killing, resists being contained in the themes of outrage, revenge and pride. This cancellation maintains the status of the poem's truth, which is the key undecidable ingredient of its opposition to fear and its beauty, in a negative relation with the immediate, familial receptions of the event's tragedy.

In other words, by the end of the second stanza of Jonker's poem, the particularity of the central signifier is negated and this negation prompts a new, radical universality. The next two stanzas of the poem comprise potent statements of the dead child's thorough subtraction from the specificity of the event of his death. Here he is no longer a particular child of particular parents with their emotional responses to the killing of their child in a particular place (Nyanga), nor the child in other parts of South Africa where children were shot dead by the Afrikaaner police ('nor at Orlando nor at Sharpeville / nor at the police station in Philippi / where he lies with a bullet in his head') but a child 'present at *all* meetings and legislations', with a death-defying eternity that 'treks through *all* of Africa' (my emphases). By the end of the poem the murdered child of Nyanga is seen 'everywhere', present as 'a giant [who] travels through the whole world', breaking with the unjust laws of the ruling class, 'without a pass'.

This liberated giant, having negated both the horrific killing signified by the poem's referent and the particularity of the emotional responses to the killing, is the figure of fearless truth that ruptures tyranny and brutality 'everywhere'. 'The whole world' is transformed

from a site of inescapable injustice and murderous hegemonic confinement to a space in which people can forever move 'without a pass'. This powerful event of emancipation is a new idea that transforms our fear of the barbarity of the child's killers.

By the end of the poem, the oppressors have been shorn of their might and exceptionality, overcome by the power of the giant of an undying child who has undone the knowledge of the oppressor's violence. The oppressed victim is reconfigured with supernatural strength and invincibility, promising the ultimate defeat of oppression and an end to barbarity. This final figure is, despite its horrific origin in the signified of a child dying in his mother's arms, a presence of a radical universal truth and an exceptional manifestation of hope. It is, to my mind, absolutely beautiful.

## **Conclusion**

Based on my reading of Ingrid Jonker's 'The Child Who Was Shot Dead by Soldiers in Nyanga' one may come to agree with Michael Chapman's view that Jonker's 'rebellion [despite having] no coherent socio-political agenda, was shaped nonetheless by immediate social and political exigencies' (251). And Nelson Mandela's reading of this poem to the South African Parliament in his 24 May 1994 State of the Nation Address as the President of the post-Apartheid nation is a testimony to the poem's specific political potency and pertinence.

The truth and beauty of the poem are perhaps different considerations. What I have aimed to explore in this essay has been the operation of beauty in a work of art that clearly rejects a classical schema. The violent content of Jonker's poem provides the thesis which foments an antithetical renunciation in the poem's argumentative process. The fear and ugliness of the event represented in the poem are countered by the beauty of a dialectical and subtractive system of articulations which renounces fear and grotesquery. The beauty of the murdered child is the articulation of the ultimate defeat of the child's murderers as manifested in the body of this poem.

I started the essay by objecting to the perception that today's art is bereft of beauty, and I hope that I have made a compelling case for arguing that true beauty in art is to be found in unlikely places such as a poem about political violence and infanticide. I will not, however, claim that a dialectical beauty is to be found in all, or even most, contemporary artistic products. In a world saturated with 3D movies and the cult of the celebrity, we remain besieged by a cultural superstructure that sedates spectators with 'cathartic' entertainment and rewards those who financially and ideologically benefit from this sedation. My aim is to advocate for an aesthetics of truths that breaks with this dominance, both in my own writing and in my engagements with others' works.

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## Burning Barbie

### Simon Jackson

Even at five I deeply resented  
the fact that my friends had laser guns, light sabres,  
cutlasses, Action Man—while my toys  
were non-violent, gender neutral,  
even girly and therefore crap.

Later they told me I should feel guilty  
but I didn't—not even a smidgeon—  
as I held Barbie over a candle  
until the slowly melting thighs  
softened, twisted, buckled, blistered,  
the arms curled into trigger guards,  
the calves a deadly double handle,  
melted to fit my tense hand's palm.

Kaboom! An explosion, an acrid puff  
of powder smoke and deadly flame  
bursting from the blond haired muzzle.  
She was perfect, terrifying.  
Since then I've never been able  
to resist the *femme fatale*.

## Eight Years and Four Months

### Jake Roseman

He thought of how she had been on the beach. They had been alone in the heat at the edge of a quiet bay. The waves had been slight, the air had been still and at noon the sun had been immediately overhead. Distant white sails were on the water and gulls occupied the rocks and cliffs. Little else interrupted their solitude. They had been young, she had been beautiful and he had tried not to fall in love with her.

Now she was standing on the small balcony of a city apartment. Between Eric and Elizabeth there was a glass wall and door that reached from floor to ceiling. She stood in the darkness outside and through the reflection of the room upon the glass he was unsure of whom exactly he could see. She wore a dark blue dress and a light black coat. She smoked a cigarette next to a little potted tree that held onto the last of its autumn leaves. The cold exaggerated her exhalations and great gasps of hot smoke escaped her. She looked to her side and Eric strained through the reflection to see her face. She looked a little older and a little thinner and though her hair was shorter and dyed far darker, he knew that he saw Elizabeth.

And so there in that apartment, with just the glass and the reflections, the cold air and eight years and four months separating them, he thought of how she had been on the beach. There was little else Eric remembered of that summer. Its heat, its light and its bright solstice sun had been lost among the memory of all those other summers of his life. Yet the image of Elizabeth there before him on that midsummer's day did not diminish. There they had talked and laughed and been together and he had tried not to fall in love. That was the last day they had seen each other.

In that clear coastal air Eric and Elizabeth had been able to see out from their beach, over the water and to the very highest portions of the nearby city's tallest buildings. Those bulks of glass, steel and grey concrete were too tall to be fully concealed by the horizon. There in the distance their tops had shimmered and had appeared quite blue through the vast hot haze of the intervening atmosphere. Eight years and four months passed and it was on the balcony of one of those buildings that he saw her again.

On the beach he had not been able to so clearly see the sinews of her neck and the bones of her cheeks and her skin had not seemed so tightly drawn. He thought of how her cheeks had dimpled with each smile. He thought of how her long hair had been so fair in the light and how it had shone as they had come out of the water together. Eric watched her on that balcony as he remembered this. In her face and her figure, in her clothes and in the smoke which she exhaled he looked for the girl with whom he had been on the beach. It was difficult when she was not under the gaze of the summer sun. He saw that all the light which fell upon her there on that balcony sprung only from the fluorescent flickering and the incandescent glow of the city around her.

She stamped out her cigarette, exhaled one last gasp of grey smoke and turned to come back inside. She did not see him immediately among the small crowd of people gathered there for the party and for a short time he watched her. She looked bored. When she did see him

her face became full with a familiar smile and she rushed to him. In her embrace she pressed herself tight against him and he stumbled and thought he might fall. But with his hands he held her also and in her touch he looked for the girl who had been on the beach. As she pulled herself back she held him by his shoulders and looked into his eyes.

‘Eric, I’m *so* glad to see you!’

‘Elizabeth, it’s been quite some time. How are you?’

‘I’m *fantastic*.’

Just as she opened her mouth and a thousand questions stood on the edge of falling from it, an old but not very close friend approached Eric, an Argentinian. Elizabeth closed her mouth and flushed with awkward embarrassment as he interrupted their reunion. The Argentinian approached Eric briefly, greeting him and shaking his hand, asking a brief question and then leaving with a smile and a nod to Elizabeth. He did so all in Spanish. Eric replied clearly in a European dialect of the language. He was charming and Elizabeth was impressed.

‘You speak Spanish? How?’

‘I spent a few years there before the crash. I had been doing the books of a construction company. That’s what I’ve been up to since I graduated. I had to come back here after the bubble popped and there wasn’t any money to record in those books anymore.’

‘You went to Spain? But Spain is *so* far away from here! Why did you want to go *there*?’

‘It was warm and they had money.’

‘But money isn’t *everything*.’

‘Well, I got to sleep a lot too. Have you been here this entire time?’

She had. She told Eric of her time in the city since he had left it for university. She had worked a series of jobs in the city and she was living in a shared apartment just a few blocks away. Eric nodded and smiled and tried as he always did to be charming. Her breath smelled of vodka and cigarettes

He thought then of when they had kissed on the beach. Her hair had still been wet and she had smelled of the sea. As they kissed she

tasted of the ice cream they both had eaten. The touch of her cheeks and lips had been soft and sweet. He opened his eyes and found hers looking at him. They were large and they were grey. They had then tried to kiss a second time, but their laughter and their giggling interrupted. They had smiled with their faces close together and their noses had touched.

‘Aren’t you just *so* glad to see me?’ Elizabeth asked him.

‘Sure.’

‘Do I look good?’ she turned on her heel.

‘Yes,’ it felt like a lie.

‘I’m going to go have another cigarette. Do you want one?’

Eric answered in the negative and she left.

She walked through the building and he thought of how she had walked along the beach. In the apartment the lights had been dimmed and she did not then glow as she had when she had passed along the sand and through the summer towards him. She had gone to get the ice cream while he had tried to fix the umbrella. She returned with one cone in each hand and had skipped over the hot sand as it burned her feet. The ice cream melted in the sun and streaks of colour ran over her fingers. She rushed to the refuge of the umbrella’s shade. Eric thought of how her smile had looked then, how her legs, her belly and her breasts had appeared as she skipped along that sand. He thought of how her shoulders, her arms, her hair and her entire self had been in the summer light. Yes, it had been hard not to fall in love.

Again she smoked her cigarette on the balcony. A cold wind came through and rustled both her dress and the little branches of the small tree beside her. For a few seconds the gust rested and then blew again for several more. It plucked the last few leaves from the little tree’s branches and sent them out into the air far above the streets below. In the darkness of the balcony Eric saw that something had faded from her. He wondered when it had been that the girl on the beach had been carried away and the woman he saw on the balcony before him had emerged in her place. An autumn had passed and the girl on the



beach had faded and she had fallen from the branches of the tree of the world.

He could remember some of the conversation they had had on the beach that day. He was going to a different city to study. She was moving downtown to work. She wanted to leave the suburbs. They both wanted to travel. She wanted to learn French. He wanted to learn Spanish. Mandarin was too hard. They had not known each other long. It seemed like far longer. He told her that she was beautiful and the words had been true. They knew that it was best not to get too involved.

When they had said goodbye on the beach the sun was below the horizon but in the dull light he had still been able to see her face and the grey of her eyes. They seemed moist and he wondered if she might cry. He wondered if he too might cry, but neither of them did. The sky across the water had been alight with the orange glow of the city's sodium lamps. In the East it was to Eric like an approaching sunrise that lasted all the night. They drove back to her home, she stepped out of his car and then eight years and four months passed.

Another old friend of Eric's interrupted his musings. Fred had become an accountant, like Eric, in the time since they both had finished school together. Eric thought that Fred seemed far older than he had been then. Fred told him of his marriage, of his beautiful wife and his adorable daughter.

'So you've been working in Spain?' he asked Eric.

'Sure have. I just got back.'

'I couldn't be more jealous. I'd love a little warmth. These winters come too early, last too long and are far too cold. How's your Spanish anyway?'

'Mi español no es malo.'

'It's a pity you had to come back. You must have been doing well over there.'

'I don't mind so much, it's not like I have to move in with my parents. There's work here and I get to see old friends. I don't think this party could've been better timed.'

She came into the apartment from the balcony. Her arms were crossed tight against her body from the cold. She smiled at Eric from across the room and pointed at the bar and mouthed some words which Eric could not understand, signalling that she was going to the bar and would speak with him again soon. Eric nodded.

‘I didn’t know you were friends with Elizabeth,’ Fred said.

‘I got to know her a little before I left. She seems a little drunk now.’

‘Well, I guess that’s just Elizabeth.’

‘Is it?’

‘You’ve been gone a long time,’ Fred laughed.

Eric agreed.

‘Say, do you mind if I run off to that balcony to have a cigarette?’ Fred asked.

‘Not at all.’

‘Want one?’

Eric didn’t. He did want fresh air though and he joined Fred on the balcony.

‘It’s hard to imagine how much time has passed,’ Fred said, ‘that summer after we finished school still seems so recent. I spent *weeks* in the sun. I cared about nothing. It was all so beautiful.’

‘I know just exactly what you mean.’

‘How long has it been since then anyway?’

‘About eight years now, I think.’

As they spoke Eric saw that before him there was an alleyway which cleaved a path through the concrete wall of apartments and offices to the West. He was twelve storeys above the street and by running downhill the path opened a view from between the buildings that remained unobscured by the next wall of concrete. Eric peered along the path, through the buildings and over the city and the Earth to the horizon.

Standing there with Fred he noticed a familiar landscape. The sun had set only recently and there still was light enough yet in the sky for the land to silhouette against it. Eric saw the hills that marked the

Western edges of the bay upon which the city was built. Though little land could be seen through this concrete corridor, Eric was certain that he could see the Southern slopes of the largest mountain to have emerged from those far hills. His aunt had lived in a town not far from there. He had gone there often as a child. It was near to those foothills that Eric and Elizabeth had spent that midsummer's day.

He wondered if that beach were in front of him there distant across the bay just as the city had been all those summers ago. There were lights from towns and roads and other smaller villages and farms out there upon the land and the hills. But they were too far away to be seen with any real resolution. He thought that, among the shadows of the hills and the blur of those lights out there over the water, perhaps he saw the orange street lamps under which they had driven on the road back to the city. Perhaps in that moment faint particles of light were reaching his eyes from his aunt's distant home. Perhaps that exact spot where they had spent that day beneath the sun was then within his sight.

The girl whom Eric had known on the beach was then as distant and as indiscernible from him as was that beach across the bay. She had faded from light and could no longer be seen. She had fallen and was now obscured by the horizon. But within Eric a dusk glow remained. Within him persisted one last true particle of that girl who had been there on that beach eight years and four months before. Within his mind she was like a sunset that lasted all the night. Eric could not be certain if that beach was in his vision in the twilight among all the land and the lights across that bay, but he knew it was there over the water to the west.

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## On drawing a stranger, unobserved

### Vivienne Glance

He looks down, elbows on knees, bare toes  
head cupped in hands, eyes closed.  
His shape comes to me through my eyes  
down the length of my arm

to fingers poised at the tip of my pen.  
His edges are sharp enough to cut—  
is there anything more appealing  
than the idea of another's skin?

He is all natural lines: muscle contained,  
thigh length, spine line, chest breadth,  
curve of buttocks, shoulder and ear  
his shape is surf and football fields.

He does not notice my act of preservation,  
how paper and ink save him from  
time's inevitable tides, the pull of gravity's lines  
when all edges soften to impermanence.

*Josephine Clarke's poetry and short stories have  
been published in a range of Australian journals.*

Karri Hazel

## Josephine Clarke

cascading the sun into so many greens  
Rhamnaceae—flattering attendant  
to that ivory forest bride

inflorescence in five-pointed stars  
bunched custard cream tulle—  
bridesmaids' skirts silver underleaf  
hiding hooped arcs of grey silk  
long pins in the petticoats

seduced, I watch  
bees nuzzle the clinging nectar  
suck your mead breath

there are ways of finding light I long to know

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## Strange and Beautiful: David Foster's *Sons of the Rumour*

**Susan Lever**

In Australian universities, the past forty years have seen the decline of 'aesthetic' critical appreciation of literature with a corresponding rise in more ideological and social interpretations of texts. Various liberation ideologies have drawn Australian fiction into their focus—postcolonialist and feminist readings being particularly influential. At the same time, the wider perspective of cultural studies has encouraged critics to read Australian fiction in terms of its social context, with claims that popular fiction is as important as the literary and aesthetic.

As I have learned through my own attempts at literary history, a literary historian must somehow encompass the aesthetic achievements of literature in a narrative of its society, and the social and political context of the writing can overshadow its aesthetic qualities. The critical difficulty lies in giving full measure to the aesthetics of a text and, at the same time, understanding the culture from which it comes—a particularly important task for Australian literature which has been dismissed as aesthetically unworthy in the past. But it may be more difficult because the Australian literary canon was barely established before the shift to ideological readings

and poststructuralist theory overtook it. Recent arguments about the place of Australian literature in the universities have concentrated on the rise of theory as damaging to our understanding of the aesthetic qualities of fiction and poetry (Hassall) or the perceived neglect of the writing of the past (Williamson, Goldsworthy). But the retreat from the aesthetic has also affected our ability to read contemporary work, particularly the complex literary fiction of writers like Brian Castro and David Foster.

As Hassall comments, outside the academy aesthetics still matter to writers and readers (33), but the determinedly aesthetic work of fiction or poetry often requires skilled literary criticism if it is to be appreciated more widely. In this respect, the abandonment of aesthetic literary criticism has affected the reading of fiction more fundamentally than that of poetry which has always been a primarily aesthetic form, reliant on the few readers who appreciate its complexity.

As early as 1994, George Levine argued that the aesthetic literary work's very resistance to critical templates and standard ideologies has a liberatory effect; it demonstrates freedom from the confines of reductive ideological approaches to literature. More recently, Lindsay Waters has argued that aesthetic criticism may focus on the 'rebellious, destabilising, liberating aspects of art'. It is an argument that celebrates the freedom of art to venture into the unexpected, to violate our fondest beliefs and shared wisdoms. Maria Takolander's survey of the debate notes the frequent association of the aesthetic with intellectual freedom, with 'transporting and transforming power', and 'the radical nature of the aesthetic experience which is implicit in traditional theories of the sublime' (167). Of course, any defence of aesthetic approaches to literature as outside of ideology may be dismissed as the unselfconscious ideology of individualist liberal humanism—yet most people who have devoted their lives to an art form treasure the aesthetic qualities of their favourite works of art. Even academic literary critics maintain their commitment to literature because they enjoy its aesthetic pleasures—rather

than its political implications. So, many literary scholars are in the hypocritical position of working professionally against our own private pleasure.

In Australia, David Foster's fiction may have suffered more than most from the decline of aesthetic critical approaches. He writes complex, demanding novels that may be dismissed as anti-feminist, racist, homophobic and generally anti-liberationist because of the attitudes Foster espouses both in the novels and in public life. His long novels operate in a comic hybrid mode shifting tone from the vulgar to the poetic, changing pace and digressing into arcane byways of knowledge. His fiction may be erratic, vulgar, occasionally tedious and often ridiculous—but it is also sometimes sublime. His novels challenge the standards of aesthetic judgement as well as those of ideological readings, because comic writing—particularly the broad humour of much of Foster's fiction—conflicts with conventional ideals of beauty. For many admirers of art, Beauty must be serious.

In my book on Foster's fiction, I gave more consideration to the satiric interplay of ideas in his novels than their aesthetics, partly because of the sheer complexity of the task. While I was writing my study he wrote to me that he had lost interest in satire and wanted only to write books that were 'strange and beautiful' (1 April 2003, see Lever 204). The novel published immediately after, *Sons of the Rumour* (2009), demonstrates what he meant.

*Sons of the Rumour* explores the limits of sheer verbal invention, insisting on the power of language to focus human intellectual and spiritual striving. Matthew Lamb has speculated that Foster may be the 'last fiction writer in Australia' because his writing ventures 'outside of the dominant forms of imaginary control in the modern world'. Here, I want to consider the novel on its own terms, as an aesthetic achievement, and an example of how literary art may be beautiful while challenging our expectations of beauty.

*Sons of the Rumour* is, at least in its first part, a collection of fables that explore sexual and spiritual mysteries, held together by a frame



story that parodies Scheherazade's desperate delaying of death in the *Thousand and One Nights*. In Foster's version Shahrazad's stories of genies and magic bore the listening Shahrban to distraction—it is a broken execution knife, Shahrazad's extraordinary breasts and her possible pregnancy that keep him from killing her. By day, he goes down to the Khangar in his city of Merv where the fraternity there, the Sons of the Rumour, tell him their stories of masculine adventure and suffering. Foster openly takes up the challenge of writing stories as engaging, as magical, and as beautiful as those of the Arabian nights, in a display of virtuosity and bravado.

Some of these stories are baffling, others are choked with exotic place names, obscure vocabularies or arcane debates, most have moments of insight, shocking violence or revelation. All of them contribute to a cumulative sense of the extremes of physical endurance, suffering and folly that make up the human search for meaning beyond the material world. It becomes apparent that the stories form a process of educating the murderous, misogynistic Shah in the possibilities for spiritual life and the fatal nature of sexual desire. The stories form a kind of symposium on the brutality of sexual desire and its relationship with religious belief.

Then, at page 284, the Shahrban finds himself in the Mezquita at Cordoba in Spain and, overwhelmed by the combination of conflicting religions there, falls into a swoon. The novel shifts to our own time, following the thoughts of a contemporary Australian man, rather like Foster, trying to come to terms with a crisis in his marriage as he travels by plane to Ireland. It is a version of Zhuangzi's uncertainty about whether he dreamt he was a butterfly or was a butterfly dreaming he was a man—a favourite postmodern trope from Borges to Stoppard: is the Shahrban dreaming he is a contemporary Australian man, or is the man dreaming he is the Shahrban? With all these competing elements the novel may appear an undisciplined conglomerate of genres. It is hardly the 'well-wrought urn', the formally unified artistic work beloved by the aesthetically-focused New Critics.

One way to accommodate such incoherence is to identify the novel as what Northrop Frye calls an anatomy/novel hybrid (311–312). The anatomy typically shifts from one mode to another, includes exhaustive encyclopaedic digressions, sometimes incorporates poetry, often contains an intellectual symposium, and combines humour with serious intellectual engagement. Frye argues that the anatomy (as in Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, or Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*) has influenced novels such as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*—and an Australian might add Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life*, especially if we include the symposium of *Rigby's Romance* as part of it. Inconsistency and disorder, vulgarity and low wit may be read as crimes against the beautiful, if our standards of beauty rely on formal restraint. By contrast, the anatomy finds its aesthetics in destabilising one mode with another; it plays with form, refusing to be constrained by a single genre template. An anatomy novel asks to be judged by its 'intellectual exuberance' (Frye 311). Its beauty must be found in its linguistic energy and the range of its ideas and effects.

Rather than unity of form, the anatomy relies on inventive formal disruption, on the power of imagination and beauty of language, and, most importantly, an emotional effect on the reader. The aesthetics here invoke the qualities mentioned by defenders of aesthetic criticism, especially 'the virtual energy of language' (Takolander 176) and the destabilising of expectations (Levine).

David Foster's entire oeuvre could be regarded as one vast anatomy, a conglomerate of vulgar comedy, lyric poetry, fantastic mythology, autobiography, satire and philosophy. The success of his novels has been various, both in literary and popular terms, but his 'big' novels, particularly *The Glade Within the Grove* (1996) and *Sons of the Rumour* clearly aspire to beauty, with passages of virtuoso brilliance embedded in sometimes banal or vulgar narrative frames.

Foster indicates his aesthetic ambitions early in *Sons of the Rumour*. On the second page the narrative voice points to an Azure Column 'that arises from the dust by the roadside...gleaming like a

needle of gold as it captures the last light of the setting sun'. *Sons of the Rumour* will be a novel that finds the 'needle of gold' arising from the dust, intent on enriching the material world with magic and mystery. Each of the tales venture to where the membrane between the Two Worlds—the physical and spiritual, the flesh and the spirit—is thinnest; and the tale tellers claim momentary enlightenment or passage to the other world. Foster pursues such enlightenment through his own powers of imagination, pushing the possibilities of literature to its limits.

There are no simple or obvious answers to the quest for enlightenment. After listening to the first story, 'The Fire Lamb', an apparently pointless account of a dreaming boy and his golden-fleeced lamb, the Shahrban notices a dirty old wether in the Khangah with a fleece that was once golden. This fire lamb has never revealed its secret, never spoken the wisdom that the storyteller is waiting for—but the old sheep has been spared death in the hope that something may emerge. Not all stories yield up their meaning.

The second tale, 'The Mine in the Moon' delineates a desolate fantasy of a world without women where little boys are born from the moon to live in monastic seclusion. The narrative voice is accordingly childlike and spare as it conjures up a world of ice:

Our monastery perched on the side of a cliff hollowed out by the flank of a glacier, a cliff too sheer to hold dust and at times barely clearing the ice. Built of stone with open windows, it cantilevered over the moraine. A staircase had been cut into the stone just above the surface of the cirque. There were forty-nine monks (30).

But the awakening of sexuality brings banishment from this cold paradise: 'I found, eventually, the path out. It was downhill all the way (36).

As the tales progress, it is apparent that they are exploring masculine sexuality, the brutality of sexual desire and the way sex binds men to the physical world (women, by tradition, promising

the beauty of the spiritual but bound by motherhood to the material world)—familiar subjects for Foster. ‘The Tears of the Fish’ manages to be both funny and horrifying. Its narrator is an Aristotelian scholar heading off to the university at Harran for a seminar in Hellenic Studies:

The papers were given in Latin. John of Damascus gave a plenary address—strangely off-key as I thought, it had to do with the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mother’s parents—and was thanked by Geber, whom I’ve recently read may not even be an historical figure. I presume I gave a paper on Aristotle (51).

The parodic collision of contemporary academic attitudes and life at the turn of the ninth century does not prepare the reader for the rest of the tale where the scholar investigates activities in the Temple near the university. There he finds men queuing for a circumcision ritual where their foreskins are removed by fish trained for the task. He returns the next night to participate in a sexual orgy stimulated by the tears of a giant fish which has emerged from one of the tanks in the Temple forecourt. After their night of rape and debauchery the men lie in a state of self-disgust: ‘We’d lost something of value, possibly our souls, and we all knew it. How could I return to my marriage bed having done what I’d just done? I’d be guilty and I’d be bored’ (64). Most of the men respond by cutting off their own genitals, tossing them to the giant fish, and joining the monks. The narrator, a married man and a Christian, resists: ‘I fucked it’ (65). It is an astonishing tale of pagan barbarity told in the disciplined voice of an intellectual who recognises his own instincts. It manages a twenty-first century understanding of human psychology and desire, through a Christian philosophy. The story is humorous, frightening, and brutal, and is followed by a sermon on the nature of love and the possibility of the resurrection of the body.

Several tales consider the nature of beauty and its relationship to sexual desire. ‘The Man Who Fell in Love with His Own Feet’

turns the origins of foot-binding into a comic story of misadventure and male obsession: an indigent club-footed man is accidentally spellbound by love for his own feet, and develops the idea that the most desirable foot would lift up from the ground. He shares this idea with a nobleman who binds the feet of a baby girl, producing tiny 'lotus feet'. The 'Celestial aesthetic' of these feet produced by suffering is applauded as a link with Heaven (158). For all its ludicrous logic, magical spells and outright comedy, the story has a disconcerting plausibility.

As readers struggle through the myriad foreign names and exotic vocabulary of the tales, sharing the depredations of the characters, as they travel from the far east of Asia to Europe, listening to their debates about religion and sexual practices, they are likely to notice a pattern in the novel's apparent formlessness. In most tales, a central character suffers in a desert, or travels a vast distance, or is locked up in a prison but experiences, briefly, an apprehension of another world. In 'The Tunic of Santa Eulalia', the narrator, after his failed search for the saint's tunic, is imprisoned and does not speak for twenty years. When he is released, he experiences the abundant plant and butterfly life of a spring day as a revelation of another world:

It was a warm, cloudless day, I recall, with nary a breath of wind. I walked up through the golden ash, wych-elm and small-leafed lime to discover a glistening hay meadow all adrift in butterflies. I seated myself on the moist grass in the middle of the field—it would have been midday—surrounded by kidney vetch, mountain cornflower, bloody cranesbill, musk mallow, white asphodel, spiked rampion, bastard balm, Solomon's Seal, woodcock and sawfly orchids, purple loosestrife, ragged robin, marsh ragwort, pink lousewort, great sheets of devil's-bit and all about me, butterflies—swallowtails, green hairstreaks, grizzled skippers, black-veined whites, silver-studded blues, purple-edged coppers, clouded yellows, large wall browns, common brassy ringlets, heath fritillaries, marsh fritillaries, purple-edged and sooty copper

fritillaries, long-tailed fritillaries, mazarine blues—and through the dancing of this rainbow were the green beech trees in the middle distance with their translucent leaves, the meadow being utterly surrounded with a beech forest one hundred feet high.

I heard myself suddenly sobbing, as the door opened on another world.

I had found the tunic of Santa Eulalia (228–9).

Foster calls on the incantatory properties of the list to convey this moment of revelation to us—an epiphany of the immense bounty of nature. But the revelation would be meaningless without the suffering that precedes it.

In the tale ‘Hashim Wali Abu Muslim’, the narrator sails as a boy into a magical landscape of boiling mud cauldrons and salt seas to collect naphtha. When the ship sinks he is left alone to guard the naphtha and returns ‘half man, half salt’ (201) after five years. In ‘Cartouche Chiseldorf’, a Muslim Qadi conducts a court inquiry into the beliefs of the Jains—interrupted each day by the presence of a Sky Clad monk who practises the ‘twenty-two discomforts’ including the absence of clothing, never washing, and ‘having to avoid despair in the face of loneliness, self-doubt, and suicidal depression’ (258). In ‘Blue Melons’ the narrator walls a hermit into a cave, is imprisoned in a latrine, then travels naked across a desert while under the spell of the blue melons he has eaten. He finds he must return to the desert in a mystic quest and the novel provides intense descriptions of the geography and the tribulations he endures. Indeed, much of the novel is taken up with describing imagined landscapes of extreme heat and cold, of crags and moving sands, of endless rain, salt lakes and ice cliffs.

Readers may feel themselves to be enduring the same suffering as the cameleers, warriors and holy men who tell their stories. We are being invited to share the characters’ awareness of a world beyond the material one, and, though reading is more comfortable than being locked up in a latrine, Foster is not going to allow us any easy

access to spiritual enlightenment. The religious debates may grow tedious, yet they drive home the novel's insistence on the multitude of ways humans have tried to understand their relationship with the spiritual world, and the sexual practices that follow these attempts at understanding (often involving cruelty, usually to women).

Foster tells much of this brutality and theology in a comic, detached, absurdist tone. The frame story offers a burlesque Punch and Judy show, with Shahrazad backchatting the Shah in the voice of a boisterous 'Aussie slag'. The Shah's obsession with his latest wife's past, or the beauties of her body, and her responses sound the notes of vulgar comedy, disconcerting to a reader seeking wisdom and enlightenment: 'Oh, yeah. What do you want, Slobodan? Sleaze on! I've come to expect being perved on, Eyebrows, but can't they do it with *decorum*?' (125).

Once again, Foster challenges conventional notions of aesthetics, repelling some readers with this coarse byplay, amusing others and apparently withdrawing from the seriousness of the novel's drive towards the spiritual and sublime. Though the novel is absorbed in the quest for contact with the beautiful world of the spirit, it constantly confronts the world of the flesh in the vulgar comedy of its frame story and the repeated physical humiliation of its tale tellers. In the final story, the teller endures extremes of physical suffering only to find that the role allocated to him by the spiritual powers has been merely to shit blue melon seeds.

Ultimately, none of the belief systems under discussion in the novel offer a solution to the puzzle of human life with its conflicting lust for physical pleasure and passion for spiritual understanding. Foster knows that his readers belong to a secular world and he invites them to laugh at the absurdities that follow religious conviction. This does not, of course, mean that he thinks there is nothing to be learned or understood from religion: 'all religions are attempts more or less unsuccessful, to describe One Truth'. The idea that religion seems 'to work in practice but not in theory' (37) recurs in Foster's fiction—and it is the failure of theory that interests him. The novel

follows the classic satirical position of an intellectual attack on intellectualism, in the honoured tradition of Swift. It is a satire on theories and ideologies, fitting for a novel that positions itself outside contemporary theories of art.

The novel's sudden shift to a more familiar world pushes everything that has gone before into a new dimension. We find ourselves listening to an Australian, Al Morrissey, talking to himself as he travels to Ireland. He is clearly a version of Foster himself, a musician and small farmer, but echoes of the Shahrban are evident and phrases from the Iranian tales intrude on his contemporary consciousness. Like the Shah, Al obsesses about his wife's sexual history; like the Sons of the Rumour, he is seeking places where the membrane between the Two Worlds is thin. In the twenty-first century this may be a sign of mental breakdown rather than visionary perception.

As he wanders around Dublin, 'this grotty shit of a city' (324), Al encounters signs of the other world: outside Trinity College a man drops dead in front of him but comes to life again after basic first aid. The man moves off, but Al understands that a miracle has occurred. In the museum he sees the red hair of the bog bodies and begins to notice the prevalence of red-haired people around him. He reflects on the genetic link between the red hair of orangutans and human red hair.

He rushes to visit Inishbofin, the island where St Colman established the Celtic Church in defiance of Rome in the seventh century—an island that was attacked by Vikings two hundred years later. Al experiences the presence of only red-haired people on the island as uncanny; he perceives a greeting from a passing islander as a blessing from a 'red-haired Angel of the lord' (379) and breaks into sobs. Wandering through dense fog, he finds himself confronting a Viking attack, with all the Vikings bearing the face of his Norwegian father-in-law. Time has disappeared as the world of the ninth century becomes present.

If the *Thousand and One Nights* shadows the medieval part of the novel, then James Joyce's *Ulysses* shadows this section. Joyce is



invoked directly on Al's arrival in Dublin when Al visits the Martello Tower described in the first pages of *Ulysses*. Like Joyce's character Haines, Al sees panthers among the people of Dublin. The whole sequence of Al's travel to Ireland is told in an energetic stream of consciousness. Al, like Leopold Bloom, walks through Dublin—now a city of modern ugliness, with its boarded-up buildings and people shouting obscenities. Even Inishbofin, the place of enlightenment, has an air of degradation with 'a squalid, noisome, corroded, rubbish-strewn midden complete with porcelain toilet' (376).

Other Irish literary allusions crowd Al's pilgrimage, from the Book of Kells to Bram Stoker, Shane McGowan and Seamus Heaney, whose poem 'Seeing Things' about his childhood premonition of his father's death begins at Inishbofin. The novel is utterly literary in its premises and in its faith in the power of the word as a source of revelation. It is a work of scholarship drawing on the history of intellectual life, founded in the monasteries, mosques, universities, temples and courts of eighth and ninth century Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Taoism and Hinduism.

Cronulla could not participate in this history but Foster sees the immediate influence of all this intellectual debate and spiritual questing on the confrontation of Islamic and Western values in Cronulla. He did not need to invent the Bali memorial standing amidst the chaos of the December 2005 riot; seven Cronulla women were killed in the Bali bombings of October 2002 and the memorial in Peryman Place bears doggerel written by their families. Its clichéd naivety is particularly excruciating in the light of the novel's commitment to the beauty of the word:

Seven young girls set off for fun,  
to relax and soak in some Bali sun,  
but the news broke out and rang in our ears,  
our girls had been killed and we cried many tears,  
we wish we had known that that goodbye would be our last,  
how could we have known that your future would be our past?

How do we right this terrible wrong?  
For all of you we must stay strong,  
we will try to move our lives forward as our goal,  
you will always remain deep in our hearts and soul. (335)

This is not satire; Foster simply presents us with the inscription on the memorial and it is enough to declare the inadequacy of Australian culture when confronted with the great conflicts of religious philosophy and inexorable death.

The intrusion of the contemporary world changes our understanding of what we have read. It brings us back to the social and political world that we recognise as our own. The ‘Author’s Note’ of the final pages makes the context for the novel even more specific to our time and place; it declares that the novel was ‘prompted by the Cronulla riot of 2005’ on the premise that ‘a major flashpoint exists between (fundamentalist) Islamic man and (anti-Christian) secular Western woman’ (424).

It is not until the final pages of the novel—indeed, the pages *after* the novel—that Foster proposes the connection between the Cronulla riot and the motivation for the novel. Its more universal human concerns—the nature of spiritual belief and the absurdities and cruelties it instigates in the material world—demand our attention long before any connection is made to the particular circumstances of cultural and religious conflict in contemporary Australia. If this Author’s Note had appeared at the beginning, along with the experiences of Al Morrisey, the movement of the novel would be from the particular to the universal, perhaps inviting more social or political readings. As it stands, the note reinforces a sense of the uncanny as the rival theologies of the Early Middle Ages come into conflict in the author’s own suburb in contemporary Sydney.

Do readers feel an emotional response to the novel’s striving towards the sublime? Reviewers of the book found it ‘daring, riotous, stunningly beautiful’ (Sornig), ‘dazzlingly intricate’ ‘a tour de force, a challenge to conventional pieties’ (Riemer), a ‘masterwork’ (Lamb)

‘a work of brilliant and fervid imagination, of prodigal narrative invention’ (Pierce), a novel of ‘satirical verve’ ‘sheer vitality’ ‘brilliantly sustained’ (Ley)—all terms recurring in attempts to define qualities in the aesthetic work of art. These readers were all responding to the creative energy and imagination in the novel, in particular, in the Al Morrisey section. The emotion it invokes is more likely to be awe and wonder than more familiar feelings of empathy or pity. For this reader, the novel is that rare achievement, a work of art that enriches the everyday world with spiritual and intellectual possibilities. It breaks down the barriers of time and place, making the philosophies and conflicts of the Middle Ages present in the contemporary world and insisting on the continuity of the human search for meaning, right back to our connection with the orangutans. Without offering magical answers, it suggests that our secular material certainties are part of a more complex and continuous history of human anguish and desire. And it creates all this through the astonishing power of its language.

But there is another quality, readability, that contemporary reviewers are obliged to consider, and they also warn of the novel’s length and sections of tedium, and that it may be ‘outside the scope of most Australian readers’ (Lamb). Readers who respond to the beautiful in literature are likely to find a shorter, more contained novel like David Malouf’s *Ransom* (2009) conforms more closely to their ideas of the aesthetic. As Takolander notes, traditionally beauty is aligned with the delicate and pleasing. Foster’s work has no delicacy—he is reaching for the sublime, and he makes us suffer to get there.

Foster’s novel, in line with the claims of anti-aesthetic critics, appeals only to an elite group of readers—though there is no reason to believe that it is an elite based on class or wealth. It is more likely an elite responsive to intellectual complexity, tolerant of shifts of genre and tone, and dogged enough to continue reading in the hope of some enlightenment. Foster’s fiction is always excessive, and *Sons of the Rumour* provides just a little more than most readers can bear. Yet the success of *Ransom* among a wide range of

readers suggests that a determinedly aesthetic novel—like *Sons of the Rumour*, rewriting a classic text—still can excite the interest of contemporary Australians.

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## Endless Winter

### Deborah Hunn

*'I think now and always (for these memories never cease to encircle me) of that seemingly endless winter before you left...'*

Do you recall the opening lines of Francisco Silveira's novella *Endless Winter*? Do you recall the singular sensation of beautiful grief provoked by that tapering ellipsis that served (like some encrypted premonition) to mark the pain of inevitable separation awaiting the two lovers—Stephan and Isabel—who, at that very moment in the story, are about to meet for the first time, by fortuitous accident, in the chess-board-chequered, bomb-cratered town square?

I am sure 'encrypted premonition' is a phrase that might have crossed your lips that night near the cusp of the new millennium when you scored *Endless Winter's* first line in black ink onto the delicate whiteness of the linen napkin that lay between us. And, as I am resuscitating you here, I will make that crossing for you.

'Francisco Silveira,' you told me, 'is a little known Brazilian author. For many years resident in Paris. Now dead.' Silveira's novella, you proceeded to explain, was the subject of your 'senior thesis' at University in the U.S.

'*Senior thesis.*' I can still hear the slow Latino burn of your studiously acquired American accent caramelize those words, so that

they conjure up some cultivated elderly gent with perfect manners and Quixoteish compulsions. How can I forget the perfect complement it provided to the high-density wines we drank that night?

‘Some people know of it. You might. But the translation is not perhaps entirely satisfactory.’ (Was it here that I caught some hint that the generalised ‘you’ was somehow, implicitly, given a gentle inflection in my direction? That even then you were singling me out of the surrounding group. A group obliged to take interest in you, but already restless, pairing off to crumb at little titbits of gossip or peck over the seating arrangements at other tables.)

You hoped one day, you continued, to produce a new translation of *Endless Winter*—‘a good modern one.’ The old one, done for Penguin in London in the late Fifties by an expatriate American from the deep-fried south preposterously named Ethelred-May Summers (a friend, you explained, of the Brazilian based American poet Elizabeth Bishop) was out of print. However, your husband’s work—the constant and tedious travel that multi-national business interests demanded—did not provide a useful base for such aspirations.

(You put this last point rather more tactfully, with half an eye on the blandly handsome, youthfully middle-aged-man in expensively casual clothing who held confident court amidst a gaggle of executive aspirants at the other end of the room. This was the real meat of the party. You were merely the garnish.)

‘I wish I spoke Spanish?’

‘Yes, we’d love to do the *Carnivale* in Rio.’

This from a conscientiously conspicuous couple, something in advertising no doubt. The man with subtly manicured short dark hair that crested as if alert to praise or prey, the woman superficially blonde, with bright LCD display eyes briskly tabulating the market value of this hook into the conversation. Theirs was the South America of Carmen Miranda and of the Macarena, or of Ricky Martin (whose incessant *Vida Loca*, had seemed, that year, to infest the airwaves with a simulacra of virile spontaneity). It did not extend to include Lispector or Borges or the Allendes.

‘No.’ I interjected (I, the blow-in, the nobody who somehow succeeded in passing at this party in your honour). ‘No. Surely the translation would be from the Portuguese?’

The inquiring couple raised a collective eyebrow, turned partially in my direction with sudden apprehension of my potential significance (there’s one—or in this case two—born every minute) and then, as if synchronised in flight, returned their eyes hungrily for confirmation to you, to complete their routine.

You threw a smile to them; to me you nodded a diplomatic appreciation. Said softly, ‘Yes, we speak Portuguese. But it is a common misunderstanding.’

Was your father a diplomat? I can’t remember if anything was said to this effect but for some reason I have come to visualise you accordingly as a child: a serious, precociously beautiful outsider—a mantle of shiny black hair, framing delicate grey eyes. I see you chauffeured behind a bullet-proof veil of smoky glass to attend a succession of clinically cosmopolitan schoolrooms. You may have started with some enthusiasm for others but soon you were politely distancing yourself for fear of the impossibility (resulting from some early, heart-wrenching experience of schoolgirl loss) of forming enduring friendships. So you developed the stoicism, the inner stillness of the political or religious prisoner. Your manifesto? Your bible? A cover torn book by some bespectacled writerly hero; his picture on the back flap in sepia tones. An ideal for whom you ruefully knew (being prematurely wise in the matter of romance) there would be no ‘real life’ equivalent.

But for all your composure, your spectacular *gravitas*, you never became completely acclimatised to the isolation. So it transpired, many years later, you were still—although others could not guess it—lonely at that table. A loneliness that intensified the chill already in the air, so that—like a barely perceptible ripple in dark water—you shivered. You were leaning forward and I began to place a flame-coloured shawl, draped on the back of your chair, around your shoulders. You glanced quickly, appreciatively, at me, but with the



diplomatist's grace, you proffered an explanation: You had been led to believe Australia a hot country, but this was a freezing night. 'I really would not have thought this possible.' But then, in a breath-taking moment of perverse intimacy shared between strangers bonded by an instinctive mutual recognition of alienation in a crowd, you leant back again slightly into the crook of my arm and let me wrap you up.

And then, as if it had never happened, you leant forward once more and began to engage the table with an account of the *Carnivale*.



I am such a liar.

I should have confessed from the start. My knowledge that Portuguese is the principal language of Brazil was pure luck. I had, a few days before, come across the information while absently watching a TV quiz show. You mistook the spoils of my idleness for cultural sophistication. My defence of your native language in the face of customary Spanish hegemony became a form of solidarity. So too, later, my help with the menu—perceived as sensitivity and sure taste—was evidence of my one true skill in those days: a series of casual jobs waiting tables.

The truth was that the 'real' me should have been taking the orders; the ritual pre-vocation of many a perennially near-graduated arts student. The truth was I was only present by chance, having been offered an expensive meal free in exchange for accompanying an old friend with a newly shod toe on the corporate ladder whose firm was sponsoring your husband's visit and who needed a 'date' for the event. Yet, you saw in me that night, in my spotless, brushed and borrowed formal attire, the significant centre of the group; cast me as your lifeguard for the evening.

In reality you were the one throwing me a line.



Later, when the evening allowed us a pocket to retreat into, you began to explain to me the plot of *Endless Winter*.

‘The book,’ you said, ‘is about a young couple who fall in love immediately after the Second World War in one of the disintegrating cities of middle Europe. The city is never named and this device may serve’ (and you quoted some critic of whom I had never heard) ‘to mask a certain resemblance to real life events that the author may have felt it judicious to leave sketchy.’

Silveira, it transpired, was a newspaper correspondent in Vienna, Berlin and Paris between 1945–50. In this capacity he had witnessed the rough street justice meted out to those tainted with the brush of collaboration, along with the more measured retribution of Nuremberg. He was a man, you suggested, ‘who knew where the bodies—literal and metaphorical—were buried.’

‘However,’ you added, ‘there are other possible reasons for the ambiguity of place in the text.’ (And here you brushed a strand of hair behind your ear, as if adjusting, slightly, the wayward arm of a pair of invisible glasses.) ‘It may also arise because, like those who teemed upon its open sores’ (and here you noted a Professor so-and-so, who talked of the text’s ‘semiotic density’) ‘the city itself was, at this point in its slow resurrection, bereft of the clarity of conscience necessary for full identification.’

What else was it that you told me?

That the borders of this nameless city shifted like wild hands receiving (or purporting to receive) the suggestions of spirits at a séance. (Or perhaps this shifting was, in reality, more like the super confident shuffling of card sharks?) That fortune came and went in quick succession in these mad, hopeful, ironic, dirt cold years of early peace. That Stephan, fighting in the hills with the partisans, survived the War, but returned to his city to find his home decimated, his family disappeared.

‘*Not*,’ and this I remember that you asserted firmly, ‘*Not* that they had *disappeared*, but that they had *been* ‘disappeared’, a peculiarly 20th century inflection of the verb that, perhaps, only certain nationalities can fully grasp.’

‘For Francisco...,’ and your choice of the writer’s first name was doubly laced with intimacy by the way you caressed it into life, ‘Francisco was no doubt operating also under a certain pressure towards discretion. Perhaps, in this nameless city he is also commenting...? How shall I say? *Obliquely*? On certain disreputable tendencies...’ (and here, am I right in recollecting, your eyes flicked slightly in the direction of you husband?) ‘... on certain unfortunate events closer to home, of which he could not speak openly. A necessary pressure towards fabulation. Poor Stephan’ (and you skated so smoothly from writer to character that momentarily I took Stephan’s fate as a continuation of his creator’s)...‘Poor Stephan. Shifting about on the streets he meets Isabel, this emaciated dark-haired girl whose beauty remains perceptible even as an etching of its former self. She claims to have hidden for over two years in the bowels of the city, a grotesque maze of drains and sewers, thus escaping the fate of relatives sent to a camp. She now lives with an Uncle—so-called—a disreputable dealer in black market wares.’

You sipped a little red wine.

‘The couple’s love blossoms during what seems to be the endless winter after the war, but ironically it disintegrates as some small measure of prosperity begins its slow re-growth—melts away in a miasma of suspicion, of claims and counter claims, of anecdotal evidence and paranoid projection. This leads, inevitably...’

You paused. For almost a minute there was a silence so distinct that others around us, who had long ago become absorbed in more pressing matters, flickered—or so it seemed to me—with a slight, instinctual curiosity.

‘This was a time of collaborators and of patriots, but the lines were blurred,’ you said, finally.

You did not tell me the ending, leaving me abruptly as your husband caught your eye with a slight, yet brisk gesture indicating that your work now lay in the game of musical chairs that accompanied the serving of coffee. Yet as you rose you did stress to me that the narrative’s plot was less important than its tone.

What was it you said?

‘*Endless Winter* is one of those black and white books. It is impossible to visualise in colour as it is saturated with desires that find their source in the sheerest of deprivations. *Endless Winter* is the hard won and bitter splash of coffee you muffle in your hands like a beggar’s bowl. The divinity of a scraping of butter on an emaciated crust. The surreptitious sipping of a purloined cigarette curled in your hand and squeezed between thumb and forefinger for the maximum hit.’

How could you know these feelings? You had never starved, I am sure. So what was it inside you that yearned, that wasted away?

‘*Endless Winter*’ you continued softly, leaning forward with practised nonchalance, as if to retrieve some item forgotten from the table, ‘*Endless Winter* is the warmth of waking to a lover’s gentle breathing after habitual nightmares spent in a field of corpses. When I think of this book, I think of its world as contained within one of those glass domes, all filled with water and a-swirl with flecks of fake snow. And—don’t laugh,’ you said, over your shoulder as you began to drift away, laughing a little, as if to pre-empt me from doing so—‘don’t laugh, but within this dome-world I see two tiny figures, curled close together in the shadows of a dark wood.’

‘Hansel and Gretel?’ I offered, attempting a light tone, yet beneath this seeking the magic words that might make you stay, might freeze us together in time.

But you had already moved on.



After our strange, almost covert conversation (as if, somehow, I had stolen into a Harem and momentarily charmed forbidden confidences from a favoured mistress immured in purdah) I immediately sought out a copy of *Endless Winter*, ready to sacrifice some of my limited cash for the chance to—perhaps- re-enter the world your words had promised me.

But...it was out print. The public library system did not list it. Booksellers of varying competency bustled confidently amidst their catalogues or hovered over newly emerging quick find Internet sites before looking up puzzled. One of the ‘arty’ second-hand dealers, a horn-rimmed Scot with an almost parodic stutter, nodded knowledgeably as I explained the book’s provenance.

‘Ssssss-Silveira’ he affirmed painfully, ‘was, unfortunately, one of the least appreciated Ssssss-South American authors of his era. Ssssss-Stronger, in many regards, than his better known compatriot, Jorge Amado and a precursor, in an odd way, of magic realism. A more documentary ssssss-style, of course, but... I’m ssssss-sure we can find the Penguin transsssss-slation, the Ssssss-summers, but it may take a while.’

Heartened by this promise I imagined the book with such concretion that I was sure I *must* have seen it somewhere. An old paperback. An orange and white cover. Pages that had warped a little, become stained, brownish, most noticeably around the very edges. A sweetish musky smell; a little like port. The original price, 2/6, stamped on the bottom edge. A passport sized portrait of Silveira in profile on the back: sombre, soft-eyed, angular. Framed by prematurely steel grey hair (silvery Silveira, I punned stupidly to myself) and a white open-neck shirt inside the collar of a check jacket.

But of course you know the truth.

**‘This book and this author do NOT exist!’**

So insisted the responses of various specialists on South American literature and international dealers I finally sought out when my local sources gave up in perplexity.

There is no *Endless Winter*. There is no Francisco Silveira.

This is end of the story. *Your story*. A ruse, a game? An act of gentle lunacy, of mildly lyric boredom and desperation?

Where are you now? A quick Google search? A flick through one of the smart phones I occasionally confiscate from the trigger happy fingers of one or other of the smart arse Year 9s to whose company, in perpetuity, my mediocrity has now condemned me? But no... I’d rather rest in my small, soft pocket of illusion than succumb to the bare light-bulb knowledge of new technologies’ relentless, searching revelations. For then, when I unfold—as I do now—the white linen napkin I souvenired from our evening and scan my eyes across the delicately wrought black letters that seem almost sown into it, I still find myself believing...

And I think now and always (for these memories never cease to encircle me) of that seemingly endless winter before you left...

*Julie Watts has been published in a range of literary journals, and she recently published her first collection of poetry, Honey & Hemlock (Sunline Press).*

## The Queue

### Julie Watts

Across pale water—  
the stained glass windows  
of a dragonfly's reach

glint in a diamond cut  
of sun edges slumped  
in saline

a quivering cathedral  
prostrated and resigned  
to its last evensong.

My palm moves  
to alter its caught history  
but nearby in panic

the knobbly black ant  
is grim and valiant  
and a striped bee hums

in rudderless circles.  
I move towards—  
but entering my eye

the bright beads  
of a ladybird flotilla.

Even in the pool  
there is politics

and beauty and fragility  
are powerful  
have industry of their own.



*Miriam Wei Wei Lo is a poet and practitioner of  
traditional women's work who lives in Margaret River, WA.  
Her most recent publication is No Pretty Words and  
Other Poems (Picaro Press 2010).*

## If I Want to Keep Beauty

### Miriam Wei Wei Lo

Standing in front of the mirror,  
combing my daughter's hair—  
glossy dark chestnut softness,  
the silver comb.

Watching my son run forward  
into the pack, to take the mark—  
the arc of the football,  
collision of ball and body.

Stopping on a walk,  
looking up: all the leaves  
green and grey-green,  
the wild symmetry of branches.

Scrambling over rubble  
in that now-long-ago Singapore,  
*kang kong* and mimosa spreading their green  
over the broken concrete.

Sitting with my pregnant friend  
as she weeps, her toddler frantic in front of the TV,  
and prays for the man  
who has just walked out of their marriage.

Kneeling beside my bed,  
recalling the cross and its broken body.  
If I want to keep beauty,  
I have to become like it.

But how? I cycle down to the river.  
After a winter of heavy rain,  
the weir splits the water:  
one side a raging torrent  
foaming to the bend;

the other side a mirror  
shiny with grief.

Between the two,  
open as mercy,  
the narrow path.

## Make It New?

### Dennis Haskell

*There is a long history in the modernist tradition of assuming the beautiful must be a lie and that ugliness must be evidence of truth.*

Christopher Allen

Listening to modern or Post-modern  
or Post-post-modern  
music is like  
having your teeth pulled out  
through your ears. Painters now routinely  
put two eyes on one side  
of an agonizing, savage  
face. Dance's awkward  
angular, half-sexy gestures  
would flummox any swan.  
What planet are we on?

If Beauty walked in  
we'd wonder who the hell she was  
and why she thought she belonged.  
Down in literature's dingy  
dungeon of words  
writers circle round and round  
a riotous, diminishing plain  
all too aware  
that all their realities

are empty, I'll-control-you  
words. Sit other art beside

a collage of sculpted scraps  
curvaceous as only collected junk  
can be, or mere  
blank holes in blank blocks  
and it all fits. On the stage  
garbage characters speak from garbage bins  
or attention shines on a spotlighted  
head for a meagre minute.  
The theatre of the absurd  
has achieved its aim  
everywhere, and it's called "art".

Art hacking at  
the undulations of experience  
and unrelated to ordinary life  
except in some version of misery.  
When did the new  
become so essential  
that art is only  
for the few?  
Make it new?  
Make it make sense. Make it so  
you don't need an MA  
to avoid making a fool  
of yourself. Make it so  
art's pros and cons  
aren't full of cons.

By now  
the most bold, inventive act  
would be  
to make it  
immediately meaningful,  
and old.



REMINISCENCE

*John Barnes is Emeritus Professor of English at La Trobe University.  
This is an edited version of an essay to appear in Partial Portraits:  
Essays in Remembering, a work in progress.*

## A Marriage of True Minds: Leonard and Elizabeth Jolley

John Barnes

### I

One of the most unsettling experiences in old age is the discovery, after the death of friends whom you thought that you knew well, that you had been unaware of what had been most central to their lives. We live in an age of revelation, when it is easier than it has ever been before to dig up the past; and the public's 'right to know' is freely invoked to justify intrusions into the private lives of the living. The dead, especially celebrities, have always been fair game: 'uncovering the past', 'telling the true story', and 'exposing the lies and deception' are fairly common claims made by biographers. Less common, perhaps, is the claim to have seen someone's life in its true proportions and to have seen it whole, though that is probably the claim that most justifies the work of a biographer.

We are now at the beginning of what looks like being an Elizabeth Jolley industry, which will come into full production when her papers in the Mitchell Library eventually become available to the public. In 2008 readers might have thought that in Brian Dibble's biography of Elizabeth they had the full story of her partnership with Leonard; but

in 2012 a memoir, *The House of Fiction*, written by Leonard's daughter of his first marriage, Susan Swingler (who, ironically, is likely to be remembered as 'Elizabeth Jolley's step-daughter'), has revealed for the first time what the publishers call 'an ethically complex story' involving not only Leonard's tangled sexual relationships but his deliberate deception of his family, with the aid of Elizabeth. Because Elizabeth is a writer, and the relationship between biography and art is a real and legitimate area of discussion, in the media coverage of this book more attention has focused on her than on Leonard. The sentimental image of Elizabeth as (in Andrew Riemer's phrase) the 'Grandma Moses of Australian letters'—a guileless and seemingly unsophisticated housewife who surprisingly discovered an ability to write fiction late in life—is now being undermined by an antithetical image of a calculating and heartless writer, whose life was one long deception. One reviewer of the book even goes so far as to call her 'ruthless'. Neither of these interpretations comes near the Elizabeth that I knew: a sensitive and caring woman, for whom it was easy to feel affection. Nor do I feel comfortable with the summing-up by Brian Dibble that Leonard was 'egocentric and arrogant'. I can claim no particular insight into their lives and the motives that determined their actions, but because they were two people who mattered so much in my life and have remained so vividly present in my memory, I want to put on record my version of them. It may be that my impressions of Elizabeth and Leonard as I knew them in Perth in the 1960s have been corrupted, in some measure, by my awareness of her later career as a writer and by the recent revelations; but nothing has weakened the feeling for them formed during those years, when my wife and I came to think of them as 'family'.

## II

The Jolleys arrived in Perth in November 1959, shortly before I returned to Melbourne, having been a temporary Lecturer in English at the University of Western Australia for two years. I did not meet



Leonard, who had been appointed University Librarian, until I went back to Perth in 1963, by which time the fruits of his work were already becoming apparent. His deservedly high standing in his profession had been enhanced at UWA where he had successfully fought the battle to get greater library resources. Among the significant events in what was the University's jubilee year was the opening of the library building—the first time that the library had its own building.

On campus Leonard was an easily recognizable figure, and in memory he was always hurrying along, with the aid of a walking stick. Despite the rheumatoid arthritis that had afflicted him early in adult life, causing swollen joints that must often have been very painful, I never heard him complain. On one occasion when he needed physiotherapy for his hand, he entertained us with accounts of the pretty young female physiotherapist who gave him her hand and exhorted: 'Squeeze it harder, Mr Jolley, squeeze it harder'. I was fascinated at the first graduation ceremony that I attended to see him clambering on to the Winthrop Hall stage in full academic dress and sandals, the sandals which he always wore presumably being easier than shoes on his feet, deformed by arthritis.

By the time that I came to know him, Leonard had become an influential participant in university affairs. He did not hold back in debate, his opinion carried weight, and his capacity for ridicule made some administrators and academics reluctant to tangle with him. I soon heard stories of his scathing criticism of Academic Board proposals that he did not like. As University Librarian Leonard was entitled to attend meetings of the various faculties. He was probably most at home in the Arts Faculty, where his erudite and ironic contributions to discussion were generally received sympathetically; and some time in the sixties there was a move to put him up for the deanship, a move that was thwarted when someone in administration read the university statute carefully, and pointed out that the dean had to be an academic. He was in the tradition of the scholar librarian, and it often seemed to us in the English Department that, for all intents and purposes, he was an academic colleague. He had a scholarly interest in literature,

had always read the latest *Times Literary Supplement* before we had, was always ready with a literary allusion and would slyly test our knowledge of works that he was most familiar with. So close did he become to the English Department that he did some tutoring (without payment) in an English course that included eighteenth-century authors, in whom he had a special interest. Late in the 1960s, when we invited him to join the small committee that edited *Westerly*, I don't think that we knew that he had founded a journal, *The Bibliothek*, when he was a librarian at the University of Glasgow.

For someone with his disabilities, Leonard was surprisingly gregarious, and had a wide acquaintance across the university. A criticism that has often been voiced about him is that he 'did not suffer fools gladly'. Should that be a criticism? Should one suffer fools gladly? I have often wondered how those who so freely make that criticism see themselves. Leonard could produce withering phrases when he felt strongly, and in arguments about university administration he may have 'tossed and gored several persons' (as Boswell once told Johnson that he had done). For my part, I always enjoyed talking with him and never felt that he was out to wound, though he was frequently acerbic in his judgments. A *Time* journalist once wrote of student life at Oxford as 'jousting with England's finest minds'; and the word 'jousting' seems to me to be exactly right to describe Leonard's way of conducting a conversation. His face lighted up as he greeted you and produced one of his elegantly turned observations and waited for your reply. He gave the impression of being stimulated by contact with other minds, and he was undoubtedly pleased to display his learning. I had taken it for granted that—unlike myself—Leonard was from a well-educated family; but Susan Swingler reports being told by his sister 'how ill-educated his family had been and how driven he was' [p.132]. Knowing now that his grandfather had been illiterate, and his father an autodidact determined that his children should have the best education, I find myself thinking that what some have may have regarded as Leonard's pedantry or showing-off was a form of self-affirmation.

I quickly got to know Leonard at the university but it was a couple of years before I could say that I knew Elizabeth. The first occasion on which I went to their home was memorable for personal reasons. A few days beforehand, I met Leonard on the campus and told him that I would withdraw from the dinner party to which I had previously accepted an invitation, as Josephine and I had decided to announce our engagement that day. He urged that I should bring Josephine, whom he had never met, and so our first outing as an engaged couple was at the Jolley house in Claremont. It was a very happy occasion, with Leonard toasting us with a shy smile and Elizabeth making us feel that we were old friends of hers. After our marriage at the end of 1965 we lived only a few streets away and saw them often. There was a generational difference, but when we moved to Melbourne in 1970 they were among the Perth friends whom we knew we would miss most.

### III

‘My mother is a very strange person’, remarked Sarah, Elizabeth’s eldest daughter, one day while standing in our garden at Warrandyte. She and her husband Brian were visiting Australia from Cambridge where they lived, and in September 1984 Hannah Levey, a close friend of the family in Perth when they first arrived who was now in Melbourne, had brought them up to spend an afternoon with us. Looking at my rosemary hedge Hannah remembered that Elizabeth had insisted upon making her a present because, so Elizabeth said, she had got the idea for her story, ‘A Hedge of Rosemary’, from seeing Hannah’s hedge of rosemary. Sarah then remembered that her mother had once done the same thing to her, saying that something Sarah had said had given her an idea for a story. Hence Sarah’s wry comment on Elizabeth’s unexpected way of acknowledging what she considered were literary debts.

Elizabeth’s ‘strangeness’, unconventionality, idiosyncrasy, playfulness, call it what you will, was refreshing, but could be disconcerting. At dinner parties her talk about her experiences as a nurse or cleaning lady or door-to-door saleswoman was very different

from the usual university gossip. She could be very amusing in describing what she had observed or what had happened to her, usually turning her sense of the absurd against herself. Her self-presentation was hardly what status-conscious university wives expected of the wife of the University Librarian. Years later, when visiting Melbourne, she told me that some of them had given her 'a hard time' in the beginning. I think that they probably thought of her simply as 'eccentric'. Although Elizabeth's shrewdly satirical flights made for laughter, what most struck me about her anecdotes was the compassion she always showed for the vulnerable and disadvantaged. I have never forgotten how feelingly she spoke of some of her women customers—women who were poor and too unsure of themselves to venture into the cosmetics section of a big store and face a smartly turned out sales assistant, but comfortable in buying cosmetics from the kindly 'Watkins lady' who came to their door. Elizabeth's empathy for people and her keen eye and ear made her a good storyteller in company. She was someone on whom nothing was lost, precisely as Henry James thought a writer should be; but until her work began appearing in local publications I doubt that any of us who enjoyed hearing her talk about her experiences and the books she had been reading realized that she had serious literary ambitions.

'A Hedge of Rosemary', the first story that Elizabeth wrote in Australia, was published in *Westerly* (no. 2 of 1967), then being edited by a small committee headed by Peter Cowan, an established short story writer. He chose the stories for the journal, and had earlier rejected a story by Elizabeth, but had apparently sent her some advice that I did not see. When she sent in 'A Hedge of Rosemary' he asked my opinion of it (I chose the poetry, but we consulted among each other, as you would expect). Although I favoured publication, I had no sense of 'discovering an author'.

Nor would I have guessed what lay ahead when some time later Elizabeth asked me to read a manuscript. A novel about a nurse in an old people's home, it described in detail the work of caring for the patients; but what remains most clearly in my memory is an

extraordinarily vivid account of the nurse struggling her way through a hedge. (Perhaps a clever student has already written an essay on the significance of hedges in Elizabeth Jolley's fiction!) I did not think the novel publishable as it stood, and must have made some suggestions about the handling of the narrative. All this is so long ago that it is not surprising that I don't remember what I said. However, looking up old letters I find Elizabeth writing to my wife who was ill in hospital, explaining that she would not come to see her because she had a cold, and saying:

John has been so kind over my book, he asked such searching questions and I was quite inarticulate as if in an exam. I realize how unconscious one is when trying to write, even the *theme* seems to come as a surprise. ['Easter Sunday', 1967?]

Then she adds a comment, a characteristically joking comment that is at the same time serious: 'I have written 2 awkward sentences so far, it took me all of yesterday while peeling potatoes etc and the evening.' At that time I had no idea of how much writing that she was managing to do, despite looking after a family and taking on part-time jobs. In late 1966 she had written from England where they had gone on study leave that Leonard 'has been away in America and other places for most of the year and I have had the usual sort of domestic life at a strange sink—this should be said in domestic accents'. But even at the strange sink her thoughts were running on writing: 'This morning in *The Listener* is a short thing by Arthur Marshall on letter writing and some of his examples are so good (and funny) I feel self conscious now writing a letter, because so many of his *examples* seem to occur in my letters!'

Years later Elizabeth told me what she had got from our conversations:

Do you remember giving me the advice about making a little material go a long way? I have always remembered this and always

keep it in mind. I can remember the exact spot in Bayview Terrace in Claremont where you said it. That bit of street is unchanged in a greatly changed 'village'. Thank you for the advice—it leads one in writing to *dwell* in the novel/in the character or the incident, not to pad with extra material, but to enlarge on the feelings and the landscape to what I hope is advantage. [22 December 1983]

I did not recall the moment, but I was flattered when she wrote this in a letter. In 1997, at a dinner to mark my retirement from La Trobe University Elizabeth was the guest speaker, and again recalled my talking with her about the early manuscript:

John asked me a lot of questions about a particular character. How old was he? Where did he live? What was his occupation? And so on. Afterwards (I did not answer the questions well) afterwards I asked L. why John would have asked all those questions and L. explained that John was suggesting that I needed to examine and *know* my characters and to have them really well imagined in my mind, far more than was put on the pages. This was a tremendous help to me [...]. [20 June 1997]

Now I am old enough to know that writers take what they want and what they need from conversations all the time, rather than necessarily listening to 'advice'. And I know also that Elizabeth was utterly genuine in talking about her lack of confidence in those early years in Perth. What I certainly didn't know at the time, though, was how much she had written and how many rejections she had had.

As a writer she got her 'break' in 1975 when the Fremantle Arts Centre was established, with Ian Templeman as its Director. Ian is a most talented man, combining artistic gifts—he is both a painter and a poet—with administrative ability. He asked Elizabeth to take some literature and writing classes at the Centre and some country workshops. She proved to be a very popular teacher, and soon the West Australian Institute of Technology (later Curtin

University) offered her an appointment as a part-time lecturer in creative writing.

The establishment of the Fremantle Arts Centre Press the following year, with Ray Coffey as publisher, proved to be a most important event in the cultural history of the West, giving a great stimulus to local writers. Although no longer in Perth I was asked to be consultant editor for the prose in a series, *West Coast Writing*. That year I was on study leave in Cambridge, enjoying an uncharacteristically hot summer during which the fields turned brown and made me feel quite at home. I sat in the garden of a house on the Grantchester Road reading manuscripts of short stories by Elizabeth and by Tom Hungerford, who were to be the first prose writers in the series. About the same time Nicholas Hasluck sent me the manuscript of his extremely good first novel, *Quarantine*, so that I was mentally, as it were, back in Perth.

*Five Acre Virgin* (1976) was very well received—I think that it was the most popular of the titles in the series—and Elizabeth’s career was launched. When I was asked to make a second selection of her stories three years later, I was impressed by the marked advance in her writing: in the first selection there had been nothing to compare with the best stories in the second selection, which we called *The Travelling Entertainer* (1979). This volume revealed a writer moving beyond the farcical comedy of the first selection to a deeper and more complex fiction, a direction that was confirmed by the appearance of her first (underrated) novel, *Palomino*, in 1980.

On the two occasions that I had an editorial role, Elizabeth was very appreciative, and never complained about my decisions, whether or not she agreed with them. Unfortunately, a letter she wrote to me in Cambridge after I had made the first selection has not survived; but one written after the second (‘I was afraid I should not write to the *Consultant Editor* but now feel that enough time has gone to make the act of writing to him fairly decent’) surprised me by saying that before the selection was made she had suffered a loss of confidence: ‘The confidence was only timid in any case’ [26 November 1979]. This was unexpected, as *Five Acre Virgin* had been such a success.

Elizabeth could no longer claim to be 'timid' by the time I visited her and Leonard in Perth in 1983. It was the year in which *Mr Scobie's Riddle* won the *Age* Book of the Year Award as well as other prizes ('quite beyond anything I ever thought of', she wrote on 22 December), she went to her first overseas literary conference, and she was awarded a Literature Board Senior Fellowship. During the years that I had known them in Perth, Leonard had been the public figure and Elizabeth was simply 'Mrs Jolley', the markedly unconventional wife of the University Librarian who wrote in her spare time. In the intervening years she had become 'Elizabeth Jolley, the novelist', her reputation rising with each new volume.

#### IV

Leonard had retired in 1979, and by the time I was in Perth for the ASAL conference in August 1983 he was almost a complete invalid. 'His illness has progressed badly and he is often low spirited', Elizabeth warned me beforehand, adding: 'He needs to see people' [10 March 1983]. I spent two evenings with Leonard and Elizabeth, on the first occasion with them alone, the second in the company of my La Trobe colleague, Lucy Frost, who had written discerningly about Elizabeth's work, and the then editor of *The Australian Book Review*, John McLaren, and his wife Shirley. It was the first time I had seen Leonard since 1970; I had known that he had had a second hip replacement earlier in the year but had not been prepared for the extent of his frailty. His hands were so twisted that the ceremony of shaking hands was impossible, and his food had to be cut up for him. He was still able to hold a pen, though, and shortly before had written to me when I asked if he would review the *Cambridge Guide to English Literature* for *Meridian*, a journal we had started at La Trobe University the previous year. (A personal letter from Leonard was a fairly rare event, and over the years Elizabeth passed on messages from him.) In his letter, which had two references to Horace, he said that he was 'flattered', but although he did not think his mind was



‘particularly arthritic’ his movements were ‘very restricted’, and so he had to decline: ‘To review a book of this kind it is necessary to keep checking and referring especially when you think the author is wrong—even when you *know* he is wrong’ [12 August 1983]. For this reason he had given up writing a book on the social and intellectual history of printing, although it was nearly finished.

To add to Leonard’s difficulties his eyesight had deteriorated and he was often unable to read. This was especially hard for a man who loved books, and Elizabeth sometimes read aloud to him. During the evening that I spent with them, he was animated and ready to talk, and there was much to talk about. Husband and wife—passing the ball back and forth, as husbands and wives often do—told me of the unsuccessful defamation case against him ten years earlier, which I had not known about. ‘I was so proud of Leonard’, declared Elizabeth, describing how he had behaved in the witness box. In the course of the evening I got the impression that he was so proud of Elizabeth. As usual, he did not say a great deal, but what he did say showed how thoroughly familiar he was with what she was doing, and for the first time I had some inkling of what her writing owed to Leonard. As his health had worsened, and his intellectual horizons closed in, it was not surprising that Elizabeth’s writing had become his major interest.

I did not see Leonard again, but over the next few years met Elizabeth on several occasions when she came East. By this time Leonard was so dependent upon her care that he had to go into a hospital if she went away. For that reason she was reluctant to leave Perth for an extended period as writer-in-residence. However, in 1986 she said that Leonard, out of good-will towards me, was prepared to go into the hospital for a long enough period to make a residency at La Trobe University possible. Monash University was keen to have her on campus, and we arranged to share. By the time of her visit, which took place in July 1987, popular interest in Elizabeth and her writing had reached new heights, her most recent novel, *The Well* (1986), having won the prestigious Miles Franklin Award in May that year.

Elizabeth's status as a leading Australian writer now seemed to be beyond question, and she had become a celebrity, adept in handling audiences, shrewdly aware of her public persona and how to exploit it. I suppose that her literary reputation may have subtly affected our relationship—when she came to La Trobe in 1987 I discovered just how much in demand she was—but to Josephine and me she was the same sympathetic, delightful, and warmly affectionate friend we had known in Perth. There was one amusing little episode that threw a light on the way that Elizabeth could suddenly move from large conceptions to domestic practicalities. Talking with her during an evening at our house our daughter Kate, who was studying Euripedes's *Medea* at school, was surprised by Elizabeth's saying: 'Don't you think that the cloak Medea gives Jason was made of something like nylon which sticks to the skin when it's near heat?' Ten years later when she met Kate again, her first words were: 'I can't believe I said that stupid thing about *Medea*'. Of course, her reading of the Greek tragedians was at a much deeper level than this might imply, and they became increasingly important in her thinking about her own life.

Success did not lead Elizabeth to slow down. It is extraordinary that she was able to write so much—between 1983 and 1993 she had ten novels published, as well as stories and articles—while making frequent public appearances and continuing to teach and to care for Leonard. 'I have nursed him for the last 10 years doing *everything* for him', she wrote in 1991, when she was no longer able to meet the physical demands upon her, and he had gone into a nursing home. Elizabeth told me: 'It is an awful thought that he is not able to live his last years in his own house and I am worn down rather with wondering if I should have tried to do something different like having the house altered and trying to find suitable people to live in etc.' [17 July 1991]. Even then, she was still caring for Leonard: the nursing home was nearby, and she visited him every day, bringing him home for some hours in a wheelchair or driving him to their country cottage in the car.

It is perhaps even more extraordinary that, as Leonard was becoming more and more helpless and starting to become confused about the world around him, Elizabeth was writing the Vera Wright (a name to reflect upon) trilogy. These three novels, the closest she ever came to dealing directly with the central drama of her life, constitute her finest achievement. They were the product of a time when she and Leonard, who had had such a close relationship in every way, were being separated by the inexorable fact of mortality, and a few years before his death she was no longer able to discuss her writing with him. A La Trobe colleague who met Elizabeth at a writer's week in Melbourne in 1991 told me that she had sadly confided that Leonard had wept because for the first time he could not understand what she was attempting in her latest novel. 'Imagination springs from real experience', Elizabeth said in an address to psychiatrists in 1990 ['Strange regions There Are']. These three novels (*My Father's Moon*, 1989; *Cabin Fever*, 1990; *The Georges' Wife*, 1993), all dedicated to Leonard like so many of her titles, were not literal autobiography, but they were deeply personal. In 1994, on hearing of Leonard's death, Josephine wrote to Elizabeth, and in the course of her reply Elizabeth, expressing appreciation of her 'remarkable insight about the last 3 novels', wrote:

You are right in seeing the autobiographical side to these writings, the homage to my father and to my mother and to my husband. I like to think of your idea of the memorial to Leonard and I have, at times, tried to reach a transfiguration state in fiction. [3 August 1994]

## V

'I do not maintain that a writer should conceal her private life', says Elizabeth in an essay published in 1990 ['What Sins to Me Unknown Dipped Me in Ink?']. That was a year after Susan Swingler had

visited Perth, and twice lunched with Leonard and Elizabeth, a visit described in compelling detail in *The House of Fiction* twenty-two years later. Leonard's daughter by his first wife had not seen her father since 1950 when she was four; and she had many questions, both about his apparent rejection of her and his deception of his family, from whom he hid the facts of his divorce and remarriage. The sense of hurt experienced when Leonard left her and her mother had not disappeared over the years. She had wanted to meet him while he was in England in 1973; depressed after an operation, he had chosen not to see her ('I have just learned what breaking old physical scars can mean. Emotional scars may perhaps contain just as much a threat if disturbed.') but had sent 'very much real, if distant, love'. When at last she saw him, old and debilitated, she could not confront him with the hard questions to which she wanted answers. Leonard was taciturn, livening up only when the education of Susan's daughter was the subject, and she thought that Elizabeth was controlling the situation, despite her having said on the telephone that Susan should say whatever was in her mind.

*The House of Fiction* begins with a quotation from Elizabeth's 'The Goose Path: A Meditation': 'Everything should not be told, it is better to keep some things to yourself'. Out of context it gives an impression that is certainly at odds with my recollection of Elizabeth's openness. I don't think that Leonard ever referred to his own family in conversation, but she often talked and wrote about hers. Perhaps some of their closest friends in Australia knew about the distressing situation that had occurred when Leonard and Elizabeth became lovers, while he was still married to Joyce; but I'm fairly sure that most, probably all, of those who worked with him were unaware even of the fact of Leonard's previous marriage. At drinks before one dinner party at their house the talk was of hymns we had known in childhood, and Leonard seemed to know more than anyone else. As Elizabeth started to shepherd us to the dining table, Leonard made a satirical comment about religion which I did not quite catch; and Elizabeth, laughing, said: 'Your first wife wouldn't have let you get

away with that'. That was the first time I had any idea that Leonard had been married before. I thought that, maybe, Elizabeth was joking, but if she wasn't then Leonard's first wife must have had strict religious views. (Susan reveals that her mother had been brought up in the Exclusive Brethren sect.) In later years Elizabeth mentioned very matter-of-factly in conversation that she and Leonard had not been married when she had her first child, and her attitude was that 'these things don't matter now'.

Elizabeth may have given the impression of being unrestrained, even a bit reckless at times, in her conversation, but she was always concerned not to hurt. Typical of her was a remark in a letter: 'In fact when I was with you and perhaps could have spoken or given you a chance to speak, if you had wanted to, I felt shy about it in case I annoyed you' [20 July 1987]. Commenting on Susan Swingler's account of her visit, Andrew Riemer decides that 'Elizabeth Jolley's actions were both admirable and calculating, protective but perhaps a bit heartless too'. Elizabeth was undoubtedly protective of Leonard, but I cannot accept that she was calculating or heartless. Susan's daughter, who was present at the second lunch, was probably nearer the mark when she said that Elizabeth 'seemed a bit nervous'.

Although Susan appears to have had a fulfilling life and is now herself a grandmother, the hurt and sense of betrayal remains with her. Her need to try to understand even led her recently to read some of the intimate letters exchanged between Leonard and Elizabeth, held in the Mitchell Library. Now that her book has appeared there is bound to be speculation, and condemnation of Leonard and Elizabeth for their deception. But the story, as it has been made public so far, is not complete. I should think that future readers will want to know more about Leonard's relationships with members of his family and their attitudes towards marriage and divorce. Perhaps there are letters and diaries in the Mitchell Library that will illuminate the circumstances, especially Leonard's feelings about the family from whom he cut himself off. Any man who had grown up in a deeply religious family, as Leonard did, would have found it painful to tell

of his divorce, let alone the fact that he had fathered two children by the two women about the same time; but few would have gone to the lengths that he did to conceal the situation for so long. His great distress over the situation he had created appears to explain the unusual fact that the woman whom he divorced was willing to promise not to contact his family after the divorce. In a letter to Susan Leonard told her that he could not see what good would come of going over the events of forty years earlier: 'Indeed I do not think it right to accuse or justify. It could only hurt' [p. 128.]. At the same time Elizabeth forthrightly told Susan:

If Leonard was unable to tell his family about his divorce it is not really for us to be critical. We cannot possibly understand what it was about his upbringing that made this so difficult for him. I simply accepted that he could not speak about it. The situation as it was then all those years ago was an intolerable one and he faced the pain in the only way he could. If I seem to excuse him it is only that I love him very dearly and have loved him for a very long time.

Reading those words reproduced by Susan I remembered what Elizabeth had said in a Perth symposium ['A Timid Confidence'] in 1978: 'If we love, there is nothing we cannot face about the terrible things human beings do to each other either on purpose or because they can't help it'. Out of love she had, with Leonard, fabricated a story that, as Susan concludes, 'ran out of control', not only robbing Susan of her identity but also denying both Susan and her own children contact with Leonard's family.

## VI

'The past is indeed a most strange country', Leonard told Susan when resisting her desire for explanation. Even in the same family the notions of what is acceptable behaviour change from one generation

to the next, and children puzzle over the state of mind of their parents and grandparents. Yet, emotional needs and capacities remain, however much mores may change. In one of her most interesting essays ['Strange Regions There Are'] Elizabeth suggests that Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* shows that 'when the consolation of illusion is removed it has to be replaced by something else', and adds: 'This is true in real life'. In the play Hjalmar Ekdal and his father live in a state of illusion, 'something more than the ordinary *Life lie* by which most of us live', and Gregers Werle 'tries, as he thinks, to save them from their illusions'. The tragedy that results from Gregers' pursuit of truth was in Elizabeth's mind when she responded to Susan's distress at discovering the deception. 'Perhaps the truth by itself is not enough', Elizabeth had written to Susan, who does not seem to have recognized the implications of the reference in Elizabeth's letter to Gregers [*House of Fiction*, p. 132.].

The theme of human need for the saving illusion, the 'life lie', runs through Elizabeth's fiction. *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1983) is the most straightforward instance of a life-giving illusion, but the idea of weak and wounded people needing the 'life lie' (the phrase surfaces more than once) recurs. It is hardly fanciful to see this preoccupation as growing out of her own experience.

*The House of Fiction* will probably set some readers trawling through Elizabeth's fiction to find correspondences with actual situations and people, but they would be better employed pondering the literary pointers that she gives, beginning with the quotation from Flaubert ('Fiction is ... the response to a deep and hidden wound'), which she uses as an epigraph to *Lovesong* (1997). All writers make use of details taken from their own lives and those of people they know: what is significant is the use they make of them. It seems to me that Elizabeth's ventures into 'strange regions' in her fictions were ways of exploring the emotions she had experienced in those painful early years, hidden until recently,

In their own lives Elizabeth and Leonard exemplified 'the inexplicable attraction of human individuals' (her phrase describing

the theme of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*), with its consequences, both positive and negative, that they could not have foreseen. Once in a conversation she spoke about how she had met him in hospital where he was a patient and she was a nurse: she had thought him the most wonderful man, so educated, so knowledgeable. In his biography Brian Dibble quotes an entry that Leonard made in his diary at the time, describing her as 'the only person in the ward who understands me in the least' [p. 69]. By the time they met Leonard had already formed a relationship with a fellow-student from London University, apparently with the approval of his parents. He was married when the nurse who understood him came back into his life, and this was to lead to the conflict, 'the *central mischief*, in their lives. (The quoted phrase is translated from Goethe's novel, which she knew so well.)

Towards the end of her life, Elizabeth was inclined to see what had happened in terms of the notion of destiny, which she found in the Greek tragedians. 'I have been reading about the Greeks' (Ancient) mixture of refusal and acceptance towards fate or destiny', she wrote in a letter to us following Leonard's death. Shortly after I had read *The House of Fiction*, I re-read an article by Peter Craven in *The Age*, 2 October 1993, in which he quoted Elizabeth's sad reflection on her having committed herself to a man already married to another woman: 'It was like a kind of destiny and somehow it comes to me in my old age that having to follow my destiny, I seem to have ruined the lives of a lot of people inadvertently.'

## VII

In life and in her fiction Elizabeth was responsive to the suffering of those who are 'wounded' emotionally. 'You really do have the kind of wound that never really heals but at the same time you have to go on with everything', she wrote to us after we had suffered a family bereavement [17 July 1991]. It is risky attributing to an author words spoken by one of her characters, but a speech in *Palomino* seems



to me to sum up how she saw her own situation: 'There are times when we simply have no choice; we must go on and make the best of what we have to do' [p.201]. After near-tragedy that could easily have spoiled the rest of their lives, she and Leonard made the best of what they had to do. That they were able to go on to live such interesting and productive lives reflects the strength of their relationship.

Although no outsider can fully understand what goes on inside a marriage, I have no doubt that Leonard and Elizabeth were devoted to each other. They may have disagreed in public, argued over things, but theirs was a marriage of true minds, a complete partnership. Elizabeth publicly acknowledged her debt by dedicating seven of her books to him, beginning with *The Travelling Entertainer*. There are two quotations on the dedication page of that book, the first of which reads:

'You seem to have two answers to everything.'

'I have no answers at all'

In one of her essays Elizabeth quotes Ibsen's statement that it is the role of the poet to question, not to give answers. The two lines quoted above read like an exchange (between husband and wife?) that dramatizes her approach to fiction. The second quotation, which is from Adelbert von Chamisso, is in German with a translation below:

You have first taught me,  
 You have opened my eyes  
 To the unending value of life.

It is a touching acknowledgement of how her relationship with Leonard had transformed her life.

Susan's attempts to connect with her father and to uncover the truth of the past led Elizabeth to acknowledge the hurt that they had inflicted upon her. 'It is your tears we think of so much', Elizabeth wrote to her, saying that 'we are inadequate'. Elizabeth was able to

confront the past in letters to Susan, and in a very real sense she confronted it in various ways in her fiction. Leonard's inability to respond to the approaches of his daughter made me think of lines in a poem by Mary Gilmore: 'Never admit the pain./Bury it deep'. Leonard was, as Elizabeth said so often, reserved; he retreated into silence, but the inability to speak of one's feelings does not betoken a lack of feelings, and the pain may be the greater because it cannot be voiced.

For me the most poignant moment in Susan's narrative is when she describes how, as she was leaving her father after the unsatisfactory visit in Perth, 'he looked up and gave an unexpectedly sweet smile'. That called up for me happy occasions when Josephine and I had enjoyed Leonard's company, and I could only reflect how very sad it was that his daughter had been denied the opportunity to know him as we had.

As Josephine is no longer alive, I cannot talk over *The House of Fiction* with her. In her role as a counsellor, she dealt with complex relationships of couples, and I am sure that she would have taken a deeply sympathetic view of the situation of Leonard and Elizabeth. I am equally sure that her affection for them both would, like mine, have been undiminished.





STORIES

*Lachlan Prior is a short story writer  
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## Let's Dance

### Lachlan Prior

On the morning that Luis Roberto Gonzalez was to take Maria de Santis on his delivery run for the first time, he woke to find his foot covered in dried blood. It was hard and black on the sheet, the fabric tight around the stain. He turned on the bedside lamp but with the blood it was difficult to tell where the cut was. He stood and turned on the main light, limping painfully. He hadn't felt the cut but the flesh had puffed up around the wound and it stung when he put his weight on it. He stripped the topsheet back from the bed and lowered his head to the mattress, running his hand over the fitted sheet lightly, fingers spread wide, caressing it until he encountered the culprit: a small shard of glass, the length and breadth of a toothpick.

He must have picked it up on the walk from the shower to the bedroom, for this was the only time he was barefoot in his house. He couldn't remember having broken a glass recently, but that meant little. Things got lost here with his wife gone. Crumbs, buttons, shards of glass; he tried so hard to keep the place clean, but certain things escaped. Under the fridge, beneath the couch; grown old and squishy under the old hardwood set of drawers in his bedroom. They rolled into that terrifying no man's land between bench and stove;

they gathered and conspired among the cockroach carcasses at the back of the water heater under the sink. In his little house he felt like the master of a land in revolt.

He washed his foot in the shower and examined it. The cut was perhaps an inch wide, and it had stopped bleeding some hours earlier. He applied some iodine and then put his socks and shoes on and limped out into the pre-dawn darkness.

It was the middle of winter in Griffith. His breath spilled out before him in cascades of white. He opened the door of the truck, pulled himself in. Turned the keys, already in the ignition. The truck growled encouragingly, then spluttered and fell silent. He tried again, placing his left hand on the dashboard and cooing in a low voice.

El sueño más feliz moría en el adiós, he sang. Y el cielo para mí se obscureció.

A tango from his childhood. One of Ignacio Corsini's, a song his father would croon as they pushed their horses out through the fields of Luján and Mercedes on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. But that was long ago. Before his exile into this wide brown land bereft of music. Before Luz had gone to heaven in that creaking hospital chair waiting for the nurse to answer the buzzer, while he danced in his girlfriend's apartment.

He sang the line a second time. It was the only line he remembered. The truck conceded, and lurched backward onto the dirt road. There was a low grey light to the east, but he still could not see outside; his headlights illuminated the road that had been scratched from the dust.

After a couple of minutes he sang the line again a third time, booming it out in his low voice across the vineyards that he knew were lurking in the gloom. It had been fifteen years since the truck's radio had stuttered and died. In that time the fields had listened only to his songs, the crops fertilized with the sound of another country's soul. Old tangos from his childhood, from his drunken adolescence—Corsini, Gardel, Larroca, Ruiz, Vargas. Sometimes arriving whole, but more often just a fragment. A phrase or two that

he would sing over and over—Bailemos como antes, cariñito—his voice deep and sonorous. And in his head swelled the strings of the record; the piano plinked and clomped, stuttering about drunkenly; the accordion peeked in, danced to and fro, and left the room. He would sing it again—Bailemos como antes, cariñito—and again, over and over, until the melody mutated, the pauses rearranged themselves, the syllables re-stressed.

Each song would become an intonation, and in that intonation were several dozen melodies but no final flourish of strings. He sang them out all day, driving his truck through these empty towns with their impossibly ugly names—Carrathool, Groongal, Bringagee—like the evil sprites of fairy tales. Names that served as a premonition for this country without music, without any sound but for the wind howling through the grass or the crackle of the fire across it. Each day he returned home convinced that the song had sent him insane, convinced that those two lines were the only two things left in his mind, now and forever—and he woke the next morning to another song, dredged from what pit of memory he did not know. He would get into the truck, allow the engine to clear its throat, pat the dashboard idly and sing, *Yo he sufrido, tú sabes lo mucho...*

He loaded the truck at the storeroom, giving Albert the couple of words in English that he had given him every day of the winter—‘Oh is cold. Is so cold.’ Hugged his shoulders for effect. Albert nodded, as he always nodded, looking over the top of yesterday’s newspaper at Luis Roberto struggling to lift the pallet into the back of the truck.

By the time he reached Maria’s house the sun was threatening below the horizon. Maria opened the door of the truck clumsily, letting it fall open as she lifted herself in, sleepy-eyed and groaning. Her mother, Beatriz, stood framed by the electric light of the doorway and waved her off. Luis Roberto raised his hand and smiled.

Where’s your father? he asked Maria as the truck rumbled forward. Alfonso? He’s gone to work, she said in English.

Speak in Spanish, said Luis Roberto, although he’d understood perfectly.

He's gone to work, said Maria.

Luis Roberto grunted.

Why'd he go so early? he asked after a moment.

Can't we speak Italian? she asked.

As you wish, he said. But slowly.

They sat in silence as the truck rumbled along the main street of Griffith, dead in the early morning but for a couple of trucks heading west. Maria absently fingered the figurine of Santa Teresa de Avila who stood atop the dash, floating piously above a blanket of dust, until a glare from Luis Roberto sent her hand out the window, where she spread her fingers and let the breeze swing her hand this way and that.

This truck smells, she said in English. He said nothing.

The early sunlight threw the shadow of the water tower across the truck as they passed it. It was the biggest structure for miles, and its shadow stretching out over the fields in the early morning always made some part of Luis Roberto feel ill at ease. He sang absently.

El sueño más feliz—he began, until a sharp look from the girl made him remember himself.

You have a nice voice, she said in Spanish.

The clouds rippled tight across the hard sky, every colour of a bruise.

It's the milk, he said. The smell. The bottles crack sometimes. These roads, you see, they're awful. The truck's got no suspension. And the sun.

He gestured vaguely toward the eastern horizon.

I clean out the back every single day, he said. With the big hose—you know the one? In my driveway. But the smell, it sticks around. It's not nice, is it?

Like vomit, said Maria, curling up her nose.





Once they had passed out of the town's outskirts onto the sand of Murrumbidgee Road he showed her how to drive the truck. She already drove her father's station wagon, but the truck was old and the gears sticky, so he took her through the motions, placed his hand on top of hers on the gear stick. He pushed it this way and that, silently, staring straight ahead but aware of her eyes on him. The gearstick clunked at each stop. Maria giggled. The road stretched out, scorched into the earth's skin like a brand.

You're so hairy! she squealed, stroking his arm playfully with her free arm. She withdrew her hand from under his and held her forearm up for comparison.

At the contact of their skin Luis Roberto jerked his arm away and then, having nothing to do with the hand, stroked the hard black bristles of his mustache absently. He gave her a sidelong glance, watching her grin and look casually out the side window, her hair wrapped about her face in ribbons. Outside, the burnt-gold fields surged and rippled in the breeze that was not a breeze but a scythe without weight. Twenty years ago. But of course. Fifteen, even. In those days he had no issue with cracking a girl, throwing her to the floor and watching her splinter into a million shards that scattered across the fields.

Here is the list, he said. The number next to the name is how many litres they've ordered.

She cocked her head at him.

You drive, he said, and I'll sit on the back.



The plumes of dust coughed up by the truck collected in the crags and crevasses of his face as he clung to the rail at the top of the fridge. Still, it made him feel young, as wind in the hair will unfailingly do. He raised one hand, then the other, whooping at the sun appearing through the trees and landing on his face.

He sang and, for a time, he forgot where he was. He forgot his exile, forgot the squat lonely house and the parade of nights spent with Beatriz and Alfonse, their exhausting melange of Spanish and Italian, the endless laments for things left behind, the carefully picked bottles of mediocre wine. Alfonse, after five or six glasses, invariably dragging Dante from his grave—

We were sullen in the sweet air that rejoices in the sun—thundering theatrically, standing and raising his glass. Now we are sullen in the mire.

The man and his exaggerated sense of tragedy. Luis Roberto never believed him. They—Alfonse and Beatriz—they did not have it so bad. The Italians stood by one another, and though Beatriz was not Italian—she was a rich farmer's daughter from Seville—still they stood by her as one of their own. But Luis Roberto was not one of their own.

He would play Alfonse the tango records that had survived his boyhood, holding the needle aloft until he found the tune he was searching for. The lyrics flooding back, he would dance with Beatriz for the length of a song until Alfonse pushed him away and made of the tango a parody. He contorted his face into a grim scowl and flung his wife about playfully. Fingers splayed. Hips thrusting. The great satirist.

As a young girl, watching at the table in her pyjamas, Maria would giggle and laugh at her father, but later she gave him a polite smile before looking away. Later still, she left the house entirely to smoke cigarettes on the front lawn. When the record finished Beatriz would look up at Luis Roberto sympathetically and say, That's a nice record, or even, That was beautiful, but it only made him resent them. He wanted to be rebuked. He wanted to play Gardel and have the other person sneer—Gardel was a hack! Put on Ruiz—he wanted to be pushed, and to push back. This polite unstruggling equilibrium was stillness, and stillness was best left to the dead.



The truck lurched to a stop at Bringagee outside the Browns' property, launching Luis Roberto's body into the metal body of the truck. He swore.

Be careful, he yelled. Jesus Christ.

Three litres, cried Maria from the driver's seat. Luis Roberto pulled open the door and reached right in to grab three bottles. They clinked in his hands as he walked to the door and placed them on the mat. He limped as he went. His foot was starting to swell around the cut. From inside, Bonnie Brown waved at him. He waved back. He stood back on his platform, gripped on with his right hand and gave two sharp slaps onto the metal of the roof. The truck swung around and rumbled back up the driveway. Luis Roberto watched the house recede, obscured by dust.

At the Crowell property Maria braked suddenly, and again Luis Roberto crashed into the back of the truck. He swore loudly toward her window.

Sorry, she called. I was just trying to—

How many? he shouted angrily at her.

Six litres.

He reached into the back and grabbed four. The sun was up now; he was running later than usual. The house would be empty until the workers came in for a break at nine, so he placed the milk in the coolest bit of shade he could find, beneath a couple of ferns in a large ceramic pot.

He walked back to grab the last two bottles. As he reached in he heard the clunk of the gear stick. He had time to shout, No, before the truck rolled back a foot. It knocked him back but his hands had already closed around a couple of bottles and they were wrenched out with him. One got caught in the plastic tray and dragged it along the shelf; the tray tipped and threw three other bottles onto the floor of the fridge. The second bottle shattered against the lip of the roof and sent milk spraying across him. He fell back onto his heel and the pain of the cut made him roll the foot. He collapsed sideways, his ass hitting the ground and sending up dust.

The truck pulled forward for a couple of metres and stopped. Luis Roberto heard the engine turn off, but the doors remained closed. He sat upright for a second and grunted. Then he stood, cast aside the broken pieces of glass he was holding and strode past the back of the truck. The milk dripped and left grey circles under the door of the fridge. Luis Roberto wrenched open the driver's door. Maria cowered in her seat, holding her hands up weakly.

Luis Roberto grabbed her by the shoulders of her t-shirt and tried to pull her from the truck. She shouted and grabbed at the steering wheel with her right hand. Her left pushed against the milk-soaked wool of his sweater. Luis Roberto grappled with her and grunted words that were not words but exhalations of breath. He worked the fingers of her right hand free of the steering wheel and pulled her hard. She tumbled out.

From the ground, Maria looked up at him. Her face revealed nothing. She did not make a sound. She held up her hands defensively but she knew that the battle was lost.

Luis Roberto leaned against the cabin and the truck and wiped the sweat from his brow.

There, he said for no reason.

Maria was only a teenager yet, but she knew how quickly a man's rage could turn. She had seen it in her father, home from a bad day at work. Had seen it in all the boys calling out to her from their cars as she stood on her front lawn smoking cigarettes.

He looked down at the girl. His shadow fell across her legs and out along the driveway toward the road. In her face, he searched for a tell-tale glimmer of desire. An invitation. A green light.

Twenty years ago. Fifteen, even.

But twenty years ago he had a wife. A country. A brand new record player. A cold beer in his hand. A Quilmes. He still remembered. It had tasted like dirt. Twenty years ago, but he still recalled the sweat pulsing under Rosaria's dress as he held her in the dance. And Luz sat in a creaking hospital chair waiting for the nurse to answer the buzzer.

He turned away, climbed into the driver's seat and slammed the door shut. He waited until he heard the passenger door swing open and shut and he put the truck in gear and pulled away. He did not look at her. He did not need to. She was like anybody else. Her giggle, her eyes, her neat hairless arms would fade or rot or snap. But he would always have this. These burnt-gold fields, the smell of milk going sour in puddles collecting in the back of the truck, this cloudless merciless sky—this would be here forever. The piano that plinked and clomped in the back of his head, the strings that swelled and blossomed. This could not be taken away from him.

Let her fracture slowly. Let the cracks radiate out over the glass like the roads through the fields. Be patient, and hear the slow whispered ping of the glass as it ruptured from the flurry of tiny blows. They would come from all over and drum at the glass, tapping constantly. Day after day, hour after hour, tap tap tap tap tap—and though barely as powerful as raindrops they would not stop with the change in seasons. The sight of a fracture would excite them tap tap tap and they would drum with renewed fervour tap tap tap until the glass fell away in one great slide and shattered upon the earth.

Not to get involved, that was the important thing. Keep a safe distance and allow it to happen naturally, slowly and gracefully, so that when the glass crashed to the ground it would be in the one place, and she wouldn't have to search the fields to find all the pieces.

*Fikret Pajalic came to Melbourne as a refugee, learnt English in his mid-twenties and started writing years later. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous anthologies and literary magazines.*

## Dinosaur

### Fikret Pajalic

Sam pissed on the horse sculpture I made out of a block of ice. He took the sculpture out of the warehouse, put it on the drainage gutters in the loading dock, fished out his prick, letting his nutsack hang out, and let it spray. The blokes in the cold storage cackled like a bunch of witches. Sam's been a bastard from day dot. Every place has one.

A month ago I got the forklift job in this warehouse joint, Carl's Cash'n'Carry, a wholesale business where everything is sold in bulk. You can buy thousands of this and five tons of that. Crap like three kilo cans of pineapple rings or HB-grade lead pencils in boxes of a hundred. All shrink wrapped and sold on pallets. I don't know of anyone out there who could carry a loaded pallet. I haven't seen the Hulk doing his shopping here. You had to come with a truck.

It was mid-December, hot and slimy, and the condenser pump in one of the walk-in freezers conked out. It happened right after Friday morning's group meeting. Carl, the owner, addressed the anxious, short-tempered mob of about fifty workers.

He held meetings on Friday morning because Thursday afternoon is payday and this gave him a chance to start every meeting with the line, 'I hear it took a little longer for you fellows to get home last

night.’ At this point he always stopped, grinned like a capuchin with a hard-on, and then he’d say, ‘carrying all that cash in your pockets.’ He referred to our pay that is handed to us in sealed envelopes and to the name of his company. A nice *double entendre*, though I doubt it was intentional. But, what do I know? Carl’s loaded and driving a Mercedes and I still live at home with my parents and ride to work on a bicycle.

Carl always delivered the same speech with a frothed mouth. Even priests these days made an effort to vary their sermons, but not Carl. No one else talked except Carl. Sometimes Penny said something about our pay, overtime or allowances.

This morning I heard someone behind me say, ‘She really let herself go.’

‘Can you blame her?’ the other voice replied.

Then Carl said something about the work culture at triple C—that’s what he called his company—how he expected this and that, and he wouldn’t stand for this and the other thing.

Evidently, Carl expected things like stocking the freezer to the brim, making sure there’s no airflow. Our supervisor told us to stock the cool rooms to the ceiling. So the combination of stupidity, disregard for regulations and heat nearly brought down the whole warehouse. We moved as much as we could into the second freezer room but still had heaps of stuff left. Carl, a tight-arse through and through, bought a truck load of ice bags and two dozen large ice blocks instead of hiring a portable cool room, while electricians tried to fix the pump.

His managerial genius was on full display at my work place. I wondered what Carl’s next move would be. Joining together in prayer for a cool change in the weather?

We covered the goods with ice and had one ice block left that we couldn’t fit inside. During my lunch break I got a Stanley knife, size 18 flat head screwdriver and a hammer and created my masterpiece. It took me about half an hour.

‘This isn’t your night school mate,’ Sam groaned while I worked.

I'd told one person I was doing a short course in sculpting and overnight I became something different from the rest of them. That wouldn't be too bad, but I'd told Penny, the pay girl from the office. Everyone calls her fat Penny because there is another Penny in the office. Also, fat Penny is fat.

Blokes in the warehouse say things about Penny. She'd arrive at work in her little Corolla around eight and park at the side of the warehouse. Blokes made fun of how her car was lopsided on the driver's seat, how when she got out, the car sprang up like it was able to breathe again or how the wooden steps leading up to the office above the warehouse sagged under her.

'Imagine that fat arse sitting on your face,' Sam said one morning while a bunch of them watched her go upstairs.

'At least she's got tits to go with the bum,' another bloke said. 'I wouldn't mind diving in there face first.'

They talked right under the stairs as she went up, sucking on their cigarettes and drinking their sodas. Penny never said anything. Neither did I.

When I was done with my ice horse, people crowded around me, and I saw flickers of admiration in their eyes. The horse had turned out beautifully. I even chiselled out the mane and a flowing tail.

Our supervisor broke through the crowd.

'All right Michelangelo, nice job destroying company property,' he said. 'Out in the sun it goes.'

Sam volunteered his muscles and urine. After this the supervisor sent me to the non-perishable area for the rest of the day. There wasn't much for me to do, except find ways to avoid the supervisor, so I snuck out to the office to check if my safety boots had arrived. Uniform orders went through Penny.

I'd ordered a pair of steel caps a month ago when I started. The money for the boots had been deducted from my pay already. I was still without them and my supervisor was riding me real hard like it was my bloody fault. He was going to be an even bigger prick now that I'd made an ice horse.



I was eager to get the boots. I worked in regular work boots, no steel caps, and was scared a pallet or a forklift would crush my foot. I'd seen it happen. You would think in a warehouse like this, where there are dozens of pallets with safety boots sitting on the racks, you'd be able to get a pair without any dramas, but no. The boots had to be ordered from some other joint like triple C. I didn't know what kind of a scam Carl was running, but I was sure he was pocketing some of my money somewhere along the way. You didn't get rich like him by being straight.

'Leading up to Christmas everything slows down. Deliveries, post, everything,' Penny told me.

She pulled a few tissues from the box on her desk and wiped her forehead, face and behind her ears.

'And this heat doesn't help.' I saw sweat marks under her arms on the blouse that stretched nearly down to her hips. The fabric was caught between the rolls of fat on her stomach and it was wet too.

'I heard about the ice horse,' she said and I shrugged. Then she asked me for a favour.

From under her desk she pulled out a box of plasticine. She asked me if I could make a dinosaur for her son. She said he liked making things out of modelling clay, but that it didn't weather well so she bought him plasticine. She said he would love it and that dinosaurs were his favourite.

I took a green block and modelled a long necked dinosaur with spikes along the back and tail and drew the eyes and mouth with a pencil.

'So plasticine doesn't dry out like modelling clay?' Penny asked.

'No, it's oil based.'

'It can stay outside?'

'Sure, just make sure it's not in direct sunlight.'

She got a clear plastic zip lock bag and carefully put in the dinosaur.

'I'll get one of those clear plastic boxes when I get home. It'll look nice. My son will love it. It was his favourite thing to play with.' Penny looked me straight in the eyes as if I knew something.

At that moment I heard my supervisor, ‘Get back to the warehouse and no more bludging.’

I wanted to ask Penny what she meant but the supervisor took my shoulders, turned me around toward the exit and said, ‘And stay away from that arse-licker Sam.’

I left, wondering about what Penny said. When I returned to the warehouse Sam stopped me.

‘Been a while since you had a root, mate?’

‘Bugger off,’ I snapped.

‘You wanna get yourself some of that warm chunkiness, I reckon.’

I kept walking.

‘She’s been on the lookout for someone to deposit a baby in her fat gut,’ he yelled after me, ‘She needs to move on, be a mommy again.’

Like two and two are four, things became clear in my head.

I walked back. A roar came out of my chest. My fist connected with Sam’s jaw. He fell face down.

Blood spatter dotted the concrete close together almost melting into a puddle. Sam’s feet twitched and his steel caps made a tapping noise on the concrete like someone using Morse code.

Gabriel Don received her MFA in Fiction at The New School. Her work, including visual poetry, has appeared in a range of international journals, newspapers and online venues. She started several reading-soiree series in New York City and is editorial staff at LIT.

## Somewhere Else

### Gabriel Don

Two sisters plunked down their school bags and scuttled into the kitchen where they climbed on stools, hands creeping into cupboards, fidgeting through the fridge, finding ingredients. Big spoon next to big glass, the youngest one, Elizabeth, dolloped greedy superfluous mountains of yoghurt into it. She struggled with the stiff orange lid of the sugar jar. Her sister, Delilah, always accommodating the baby first, assisted her by running the jar under warm water, banging its head on the countertop and squeezing it tight with a dishcloth, trying to turn. The circle budged. Baby clapped her hands in delight. *Quick before mum awakes from her nap* they both agreed with their eyes. Baby though not a baby but always the baby, even at forty she would still be the baby, scooped towering piles from the sugar jar into her yoghurt to make an exuberantly sweet lassi. Mama would never allow them sugar at home. One, two then three and four then five spoonfuls of sugar. She stirred them in and then added three more. Stirring the fine white powder in the creamy white yoghurt, globs of diamonds and crusty sparkling circles formed inwardly spiralling. The elder stoic one waited as her little sister mixed it all in fastidiously. Saccharine

delectation awaited. Both their taste buds tingled, mustered more by rebellion.

The heavy cup cradled with her two hands, Elizabeth pushed it up to her lips and took a giant gulp. Instead of the sweetness she expected, her mouth tasted like the ocean after a violent tumble taken in a horizontal water tornado at the beach. She gagged and spat out what felt like crabs and sand and seaweed into the sink. The sisters laughed, small stomachs held in hands, convulsing in amusement. The door to their mother's den rumbled and the metal handle bickered back and forth. Click, flick, clink, crick rickety racket. The girls turned the tap on and watched the salty yoghurt gobble down the pipe's mouth. Glass now rinsed, salt back up on the high shelf—out of reach, away from curious children's crab-like clenches—Mama demurred into the room. She kissed both her children and squeezed them to her, one on either side, a child under each arm. 'My darlings,' she sighed long and loud. Her eyes still half closed, she asked how their day at school was but before they had a chance to answer, energised and excited about everything they learnt that day, she saw her two daughters, both not double digits yet—Delilah two years off ten—and she noticed their attire.

'Why are you still in your school uniforms? Go and have a bath and get changed.'

Mama yawned and retied her floral sarong around her neck.

In the bathroom, the sisters unbuttoned their British-flag-red striped uniforms. The eldest turned on the tap. Soon she would be too old to want to bathe with her sister and it would break baby's heart but for now they giggled, in warm water, over their failed lassi. They always ordered sweet lassis from the Indian stall at the hawkers near their apartment. They had gone last night when their father had come home, after a month away doing taxes in Beijing. The lassi man had offered them four choices: sweet, salty, mango or rose. Mama liked rose flavoured things. Whenever she was hungover or having a spell in bed, she'd send the girls around the corner to the store with a few dollars to buy her rose water ice lollies. Papa got a coconut

and the man cut it open in front of them with a machete. When he'd finished drinking the coconut water, the two girls spooned out the white coconut core. They ate satay chicken and beef, skewering cucumber and sticky rice on the end, dipped in spicy peanut sauce, each bite accompanied by a mouthful of humidity. Thick dense warm air. After dinner the girls played by the dirty water, barely a beach, murky sea, dark polluted stained sand, reclaimed land, as the sun set on the small island of Singapore.

The petite island could be circumnavigated in under a day. A country city state. Singapura. Lion City. Founded by a prince, who first observed it from a nearby island when he was hunting and spotted a stag which he started to pursue up a hill but when he reached the top the stag had disappeared. The prince rambled up rocks, from the summit he saw a dot of land, surrounded by sea, winds blowing bleached sands across the beach, billowing like a white sheet of cloth. Sailing the seas towards the unknown island, the prince capsized and was saved by a turtle who delivered him to safety by the mouth of the river. Or when the water became rough he saved himself and his crew by throwing all his possessions overboard, even his crown. The things vanished into the water and the boat arrived safely at the mouth of the now-named Singapore river. On the new island he saw a lion, though most believe his blundering eyes mistook a tiger for a lion. Delilah and Elizabeth loved the sculpture of the Merlion, half lion half mermaid, which stood where river met sea. Their mother, on a good day, would take them there to admire its magic as they ate ice kachangs. Mounds of shaved ice dripped in sweetness: jelly-like things, palm seeds, red beans, condensed milk and colourful syrups. A local neighbour had informed their mother that the Merlion was not based on any actual Singaporean or Malaysian mythology and was a complete construct by the Singapore Tourist Board. A skeptical view never shared with her daughters. Encouraging their fancy, she told them several sagas of the Merlion and legends of its benevolence, especially when the mermaid lion encountered little girls.

Satay stick fortress, the girls were mermaids looking for a castle, sticky fingers burrowing moats and drawbridges. Though darkness was almost upon them, the hawkers hummed. Their dad's dulled in-the-distance dialogue with their mother: 'I'm not worried about that. I'm worried about a lot of things but that's not one of them.' Their mother's eyes hidden behind sunglasses though the light had mellowed into dusky pinks and oranges. Hidden haggard eyes drained from gins and wines the night before, hidden homesickness, hidden hollow holes where her big brown eyes should be. Papa was mostly away on business and mama was prone to play. Infinite summer spent dancing, drowned in alcohol. The only thing that changed, it seemed to her, was the rain. Rain so weighty it was like walking underneath the water; air the sparse element she gasped for on her way out in shoulderless dresses and hats made from itchy straw. Her little girls, she loved, could only bring her tea, toast in bed, small butterflies flapping on china, kindness so delicate and trusting and full of love. They were hers. She pulled the shutters closed tight and wrapped herself in thin white light linen. Room wrapped in darkness, she attempted to sleep away sorrow. All kindness could do was serve her tea. Some weeks she never left her room. Their Sri Lankan housemaid saw to the girls.

Though Delilah was only twenty-two months older than Elizabeth she took care of her like a mother, *like a mother is supposed to*, their mother thought regretfully. In protest mama's train of thought responded, *I can't even take care of myself. I never left my own parent's nest flying. Flapping one broken wing I emerged and fell straight into his basket where he carried me. Carried me around where he could, when his hands were free or I wasn't too heavy. Poor thing*, she thought. *I look so light and fluffy, that's what he thought I was but I am dark and complicated.* Silence could make her snap. Sanity a fragile client. The day could be delicious but anxieties tied her to her bedpost. When her husband was at home, the rare occasions, she tried to at least fill the shadow of what a wife was. Wobbling in her ways, wishing that what seemed to come easily to others, at least came to

her. Washing her hair was worrisome. Now she had two other heads of hair to tend to, two heads of hair that were not her own. They had their father's thick curls, her hair thin flat: drowned rat. Sometimes her focus became so unhinged she couldn't even read. Words became arbitrary, unassociated and detached from meaning. She heard them, she saw them but did not connect. A barrier between her and the world had grown, solid and stout. Drinking filled her crawling skin. A puppet of a person preened and pranced past people. Without this filler, her insides were querulous.

Sitting on the damp plastic chair, peering at her husband, she sipped her Tiger beer from an oversized bottle. He watched his two darling daughters. His wife's mania so far removed from his comprehension. He felt safe everywhere. Water, land or sky. He was content in his uncomplicated mind. Things were what they were. His head was occupied with order. The rational route he sailed. The sum of his love for her sat in front of him and he was satisfied. His landscape flat-woven to his spouse's jagged sands. He rubbed her unoccupied hand back and forth. Her ferret mind darted. She tried not to let her mind move away from the present like loose logs floating flotsam from the land.

'G'day mate,' a hand slapped down on her husband's shoulder. 'How ya going?' The hand belonged to a man in high-waisted jeans on a body with little flesh on it, though his face swelled like turgid balloons before they burst. His hair was gelled into a peak of a wave above his forehead. The smile on his face widened white as he picked up a wet plastic chair and shook the residue of rain off before sitting down next to Penelope. She pretended to be preoccupied with watching her children carve corners and contend with castles. Sean leaned into her personal space with whisky-soiled breath, 'How are ya love?' His wife egressed a hawker's stall carrying four tall Tigers. Her long iron-straight hair framing her face flopped side to side in a duo of dangling triangles. She loitered a moment lolling over bright-coloured umbrellas on display. Her eyes fluttered and dimples deepened and she procured six of them from their owner without

buying anything from him, not even a coconut. She flit between Delilah, Elizabeth, Penelope, David and Sean, handing each umbrella out with a chuckle. Jo placed the remaining sea-green umbrella in her hair, tucked behind her ear. Sean stood up and dusted dew off another seat for her and she sat down, quickly standing up again, 'Awww! My bum's all wet.' Her white loose cotton pants were now see-through and clung to her skin dampened.

'Hold on a tick, love,' Sean ran around in search of a serviette. He wiped the seat and proclaimed, 'Your throne, madame.'

'Dawl, you look so gorgeous. Penelope, I don't know how you do it. You're so tiny,' Jo said settling into her seat.

'Isn't your wife a stunner,' She continued, turning her attention to Dave. He nodded in agreement, eyes like laser beams on his wife Penelope. 'Sure got lucky, didn't I?'

Elizabeth brushed the taste of salt out of her mouth, still amused by the afternoon adventure of salt mistaken for sugar. Her mother's beautiful reflection approached her in the mirror. 'Darling daddy and I are going to a party. Delilah is having her dinner next door at Sarah's, doing their homework together...but Chandra is here. Okay? Be a good girl.' Penelope patted her daughter's shoulder twice and kissed the crown of her head.

'What will I have for dinner?' Elizabeth whined. Penelope felt that since getting married and having children the only thing she was spoken to about was food.

'Chandra made your favourite chicken curry.'

Elizabeth's face sulked in the glass image.

'You love her curry.'

Silence followed. Elizabeth had decided to protest without words. The bathroom door closed and she was alone in the mirror again.

Dave walked towards his waiting wife. She was seated next to the mountain range in their apartment. A volcano erupting in the Philippines had sent ash that covered the clean city and tremors that caused their living room to buckle. Their apartment building had wiggled momentarily. The two lines of record-cover-sized white



tiles down the middle of the room raised to meet each other in a peak. She had her hand on her cheek, leaning against herself. Her legs crossed closed. He hated leaving her: waking up in a bed that was not his own, TV on for light so he would not get lost on the way to a foreign toilet in the dark, in an alien room, where his body had not memorised the contours. When he was home with her in bed, they turned around all night taking turns cuddling the other from behind, reversing spoons. He felt like he had tergiversated his family. Abandoning them, like an Apostle denying knowledge of Jesus Christ, he felt like he had changed his loyalties. For what? Scratchy lounge chairs in airports and mini bottles of liquor on planes. Meetings, presentations and money. Watching new places through the windows of empty cars, being driven to empty hotel rooms, thinking of his wife. Watching her sit there, not knowing she was not alone, he thought about how he wanted to listen to music with her. Every day. He wanted to eat with her. Every meal. He wanted to hold her. He wanted her to hold him. He wanted to read books with her in bed. She sparkled. He'd once walked in on her taking a shit on the toilet and he saw her sitting there and was overwhelmed and said, 'You're so beautiful.' Since the day they met, he wanted her around. Before she appeared, he preferred being alone or with his male friends. He always had more when she was around—the world through her eyes—everything illuminated, everything heightened. The bad, the good. Drastic. Mediocre or moderation were not her middle name. For her he strived. Her and his two precious girls: their needs the most important imperative. Since he wasn't apt emotionally, needs manifested themselves mostly as monetary. His main prerogative, purpose—provide. Success came with sacrifice, travelling on and off planes, always lonely, being moved not moving, in new empty spaces.

Her parents gone, Elizabeth sat up on the kitchen bench chatting to Chandra while she cooked a chicken curry. Chandra was a Buddhist and every Saturday she took Elizabeth with her to temple, where they sang and listened to stories and ate lots of food and put flowers

in water where they floated and they prayed. Elizabeth considered herself a Buddhist, though her mother said she couldn't be one if she kept hitting her sister. She collected cards with pictures of the gods and had a giant poster of Ghanesh next to one of Buddha on her wall. Her tiny tanned wrist had tons of prayers strings tied around it. Stirring the curry, smells of coriander, cumin, fennel and mustard seeds, cardamom pods, curry leaves, cloves, onion, garlic and black peppercorns, turmeric powder, cinnamon and chillies steaming, Chandra told her a tale.

*There was once a very beautiful princess called Sita who was married to a very strong man named Rama. They lived in a kingdom in India with their family where Rama's father was the king. Rama, the eldest of the four sons, was next in line for the throne. His father had several wives and one of them, not Rama's mother, had saved the King's life once during a battle by sticking her finger in the spoke of a broken chariot wheel, to stop it falling off. So the King owed her a favour. The favour she asked, after being tricked by an ugly old lady, when the King was too old to rule his empire and it was time for Rama to take over, was that her son, not Rama, become King and that the King banish Rama from the Kingdom for fourteen years. Sita loved Rama so much she went into exile with him. Rama's younger brother also decided to join them and they all lived in a dangerous forest together. When the two men left Sita alone in the forest they would draw a safety circle around her with a stick, within the circle she was safe from all harm, inside the line, where she was, no evil could penetrate.*

Chandra was from Kandy. The name of the city was a great source of amusement to the little girls she cared for. A city made of candy! If communication was a currency, something produced in order to facilitate, a medium of exchange, Elizabeth always took things as printed on the coin, stamp or bill itself by the minting authority or speaker. She would assume what you said was what you meant. Her sister often made her cry with what mama referred to as *sarcasm*. Where was her yo yo she'd asked Delilah. 'Up your nose,' her sister

would whine. The true value can be largely symbolic. She understood value as presented. A word a coin, stamp a verbal exteriorisation of thought or paper money worth the number depicted on it. Her father had explained to her that gold wasn't always worth its weight in gold. *Why was she a millionaire in Bali?* Weaving her across the motorbike jammed Indonesian roads ('Don't ever do this without me') his hand (still greasy from their lunch of nasi goreng) tightly holding the nape of her neck—where a mother cat bites her young—or balancing, a perching monkey, on his shoulders, he explained exchange rates. She listened carefully attempting comprehension and asked many questions. 'I don't believe in it,' she concluded eventually toward the end of their vacation pulling a case turgid with clothes covered in pictures of frogs and pirated music CDs towards the check out. Her dad dealing with the concierge, 'No I didn't drink anything from the fridge.' (A lie he had but he had made sure to replace whatever they consumed, cold coke cans, candy and crunchy cashews, purchased for a far more reasonable price from a local supermarket or vendor who set up a cart near the beach beside a music box booming Bob Marley and a box of Bintang.)

'What do you mean you don't believe in it? It's economics,' he said signing forms on the counter top.

'I don't believe in economics,' she reiterated and specified. His rationalisation of the relative worth of currency seemed arbitrary like silly games she played with intricate rules, complex and convoluted but none the less based on random choice or personal whim. Perturbed at her dad's dismissive tone (Grown ups aren't always correct. What ageism!) she walked towards her sister sitting at the cusp of a feng shui fountain with a waterfall and joined her in making faces at the orange dragon carp. A plaque affixed on the water fixture informed the two curious little girls that Koi or Carp fish represented wealth and prosperity and the word in Chinese for the fish (between red and yellow like the fruit and colour) translated to abundance. Their mother appeared like a wizard and the three females gaped and smacked their lips at the lucky Koi, they thought looked like a giant

goldfish. 'The car is here,' papa professed and led his ladies to the vehicle. On her big sister's suggestion Elizabeth separated from the clan and took to the trolleys, racing past strangers checking in and out (but not before placing her empty aluminium chip packet in her sister's hand, Delilah oblivious to the garbage now in her possession, taking it off the baby instinctively). Their mother surely would put a stop to such antics once they reached the airport. A porthole to elsewhere. Some other place.

*One day, Sita saw a stunning golden deer and asked Rama to catch it for her. Just looking at the deer filled her heart with cheer. She didn't know they were actually being misled by a ten-headed evil king who lived in Sri Lanka. He had fallen in love with Sita and wanted her for himself. While Rama was out hunting the golden deer Sita and Rama's brother heard Rama screaming, also a deception. His brother drew a safety circle around Sita with a stick in the earth and ran out to help Rama. While they were away the ten-headed evil king approached Sita disguised as a poor beggar. He talked to her and asked her for food. Befriending her he manipulated Sita into leaving her safety circle. As soon as she crossed the line, he kidnapped her and took her back to his giant palace in Sri Lanka.*

*Meanwhile, Rama chased the glorious golden deer. The deer was nimble and Rama grew tired during the long and difficult pursuit. Pushing low leaves and branches away from his head, Rama walked through the dark forest, trying not to make a sound. He spotted the golden deer shyly loping between logs and facades of sagging vines and shadows. The deer had long lustrous antlers and bright yellow hooves. The animal that had entranced Sita with its beauty had long eyelashes like sunbeams. Little shiny spots, like nuggets, decorating its coat of thick fluorescent fur reflected the moonlight as though it were day. It was so striking, it wasn't normal. A deer like this, Rama considered, was as unnatural as lead looking like gold. He took a step back, moving away from the deer and then leaped towards it, shooting it with an arrow. The golden deer fell and in its death turned into a man.*

Continuous chatter and murmuring music swelled out the front door when Jo opened it in a hot pink cocktail dress. 'Dave! Penelope! Welcome! Come in. Let me get you a drink,' she said dancing off to the drinks table. Standing next to it, Sean, the birthday boy, had a big bright silly hat on his head and was drinking out of a bucket with a straw. He was turning his head around, smiling at everyone at the party, seemingly not listening to the squat man talking to him. Sean nodded occasionally, though eyes elsewhere, to not discourage his guest's monologue. Penelope and Dave approached Sean with presents and wishes. They handed him a bottle of champagne, the game Twister and a bottle of baby oil wrapped in tinsel and translucent wrapping paper. Sean reacquainted them with Ed, his loquacious companion. They knew him from the Newton Circus, the hawkers where they all liked to drink and eat greasy chicken rice or kway teow late at night. They joined in the listening.

Ed was complaining about immigration to his hometown of Perth.

'All the black South Africans are taking over. Coming in by the boatload. Lazy and dishonest they are. Taking jobs from hardworking locals. Stealing benefits from tax paying Australians.'

Pausing, Penelope dug her nails into her hand, trying to remain silent. Seen not heard. She held her breath, trying not to talk, thinking about Marquise de Merteuil, her sad demise and how she practised detachment, learning to look cheerful while under the table she stuck a fork into the back of her hand. Listen and observe. Let the men talk. Keep quiet. She couldn't.

Ed reiterated, 'Black South Africans taking over Perth. They just waltz in and have a free ride, on the backs of people like us. Bludgers. Come just for the welfare. Go on the dole. Stealing benefits off the government, from tax-paying Australians.'

He didn't stop the flow of his words for one second, Penelope downed her glass of vodka soda and interrupted, 'You pay taxes in Australia do you then Ed? Your kids go school there, no? Free education. They get health care too, no? You own land there. Strange. When did your family emigrate there Ed? You're first generation

Australian? I'd say the Aboriginals feel like you stole their land. Or were you a convict? Come from convicts? Still under 200 years ago. That's fairly recent. Brought you over on a boat after your great great grandparents stole bread to try and feed their children. You don't pay to the Australian government do you now Ed? You live and work in Singapore. Still receiving benefits, health care and education you know, though I imagine.'

Sheets pulled up her nose, toes tucked in, wrapped up like a cocoon in blankets, Elizabeth couldn't sleep. Her head was awash with monkey gods, eagles, giants and cities lit up with lanterns. She could hear her older sister breathing in a constant rhythm, a slight snore, beneath her in the bottom bunk. Elizabeth rolled back and forth, onto her stomach, into a foetal shape on her side, on her back, she closed her eyes but unconscious dreams didn't come. She climbed down the ladder. Her art box was pushed up against the wall, she lifted the buckle lock and opened the pink container covered in stickers and glitter. Art was her favourite subject at kindergarten. Once for an assignment their teacher had asked them to assemble faces with cut outs of eyes, lips, noses and ears. The teacher called her mother in to discuss the face Elizabeth had constructed. According to the educator Elizabeth had a learning disorder because she had placed the nose where the eyes ought to be, lips in the nose's place, an ear for a mouth and eyes for ears. Penelope tried to hide her irritation and keep an unaffected face as she listened to these *serious* concerns. Elizabeth had come home, after this class project, elated, verbose and giddy, gushing about how today at school she had made a Picasso face. Shadows looming, Elizabeth took a piece of chalk out of her art box. She sketched a circle, crawling along the floor, not lifting the piece of chalk, a continuous line she drew until a circle surrounded the bunk bed in which she and her sister slept.

Scrunched in on the sofa, Penelope drank between two intoxicated women. They were talking across and through her. Penelope sank back into the soft cushion, sinking, sinking, she couldn't hold herself up. The woman to her left was from Holland and was telling the

other lady, from India, about her broken heart. The Dutch dame was now thirty-two and the man she loved at nineteen still hadn't left her. He'd made his mark and lingered though he'd never cared about her. She hadn't seen him, in his physical incarnation, since their brief uneventful fling thirteen years ago, yet he consumed her thoughts, present in her consciousness he paralysed her mind. She was obsessed. Stagnant. Still she tried to move away from him, as if grappling with a river bank she jumped rock to rock, trying to get to the other side. Her friend, leaning liquored mouth in, hand on Penelope's knee, listened with emphatic eyes before telling her she used men and hurt people, unintentionally, since she wasn't open to love since that one. A plate passed by them all. Rich dark gooey brownies speckled with hazelnuts. Wanting to fill her mouth with things other than words, Penelope picked up three big pieces. She didn't know they were pot brownies, laced with marijuana. Weed and Penelope did not mesh. She ate all three big chunks of chocolate cake containing cannabis. Continuing to sit sunken, her heart began to race. Her thoughts scattered themselves like spilled sand. A siren went off. The police were coming. A man across the room had a motorcycle helmet in hand. She grabbed it and told him they'd better run. Downstairs they went. The back on his bike, she mounted. Wind trickled and rain blew. Her eyes on the road, they moved.

Elizabeth, who always rose the earliest, mostly for morning mischief, nagged the door, 'Mummy? Mummy! Mummy. Muuuuuuum. MUUUUUUUUUUM.' Delilah came and took her by the hand and said, 'Come on Lizzy. Let's paint.'

Taking her hand back, Elizabeth beat the door pathetically.

'Come on Lizzy I'll teach you how to draw a butterfly. You know the swirly one you like?'

Reluctant eyes replied.

'I'll let you use my pink marker.'

Delilah sacrificed all her favourite things to please the baby. When they played with Barbies, Elizabeth always got the cooler chair to use as her mansion, always the best clothes. Concerned with bad body

image, Penelope banned Barbies but her mother in-law gave the girls Barbies galore, along with all their boxed accessories, swimming pools and camper vans. Before Delilah inhabited the role of martyr older sister, before she carried her around in a laundry basket, tying her shoelaces, running her bath, taming her tears throughout a tantrum in a toy store, Delilah wanted to be a big sister. Obsessed with dolls that peed and pooped she was determined to get her parents to make a real live one, just for her. She didn't expect to be so lonely. From the day Lizzy was born, from the day her grandparents had taunted her at the hospital with, 'Kiss the baby! Kiss the baby!' Delilah felt excluded and scared. Everything was always about someone else. She was never the centre of attention. She had to sit on the tire swing, just to hold Lizzy up. Spin round and round. She hated it. Going round and round. It made her nauseous. She wanted it to stop. Stuck on the rotating tire, she wanted to be sick. She couldn't leave Lizzy alone though. Annoyed that Lizzy was always hurting herself, Delilah bossed her around, trying to teach her the way things ought to be. The little one the more gregarious in a group, Delilah often stood behind her in public. Her tongue digging into her teeth, she shyly stumbled through social situations. Her friends were mean and all her best friends had other best friends.

The pink marker caught Lizzy's attention. Delilah had only bought it last week and she used it to write the titles on her sticker collection books. They sat at the kitchen bench, in matching blue and white pyjamas covered in stars, eating olives and drawing swirls and flowers. Their foreheads creased and noses scrunched in concentration. Delilah showed Lizzy the proper way to use colouring pens. How to draw in one direction and not get the bad effect of moving the pens back and forth, leaving an undesirable mark. By late afternoon their mother had still not emerged. They asked Chandra to call their father at work. He didn't answer. They put on their new Cats CD and danced around to Mungojerrie and Rumpelteazer, stretching and tumbling like kittens. The moon now up in the sky, they sat on the balcony waiting for their mother and father to come home. Lizzy sleeping,



head on Delilah's lap, daddy came through the door alone. He carried Lizzy into her bed, her head flopping, an unconscious weight.

'Where's *Muuuum*?' Delilah asked.

'You should be in bed, it's past 12 o'clock.'

He took a beer out of the fridge and told Delilah what he had said many times before, when Penelope disappeared for three days at a time, 'She's gone walkabout.'



POEMS

*Jennifer Compton lives in Melbourne and is a poet  
and playwright who also writes prose.*

## Like A Butterfly

### Jennifer Compton

The half a walnut  
in the bowl of mixed nuts  
is exactly—*like a butterfly*.

A moth flies in the open door  
alights and palpates  
to the right of the screen.

The wings beat— yes yes yes.  
That is what you said.  
*Like a butterfly*. Like.

So  
now you are privy to  
a thousand thousand things.

You have found the door  
into the intricate labyrinth  
where the olds live.

Welcome. Oh welcome.  
To where everything is  
like something else.

Not that we didn't want you  
to find us out  
but ...

no pressure, just be  
for a little longer  
innocent.

John Kinsella is an award-winning Australian poet, novelist, critic, essayist and editor. He is a Professorial Research Fellow at UWA.

## Overtures of Travel and Home

### John Kinsella

*'Dust is the Taoist symbol for noise and fuss of everyday life.'*

Arthur Waley

*'She spurned her broom and took a train.'*

Randolph Stow

1.

Grandfather died of dust on the lungs:  
silver lining of the gold-rush.

2.

Grandmother whitewashed hessian walls  
and entombed herself in the desert.

3.

The last wagon to roll into town  
carried barrels of salty water.

4.

The fancy women left the hotels  
to dead bottles and chandeliers.

5.

The last wagon to leave the ghost town  
carried a dressmaker's dummy.

6.

Judy was well-formed but only a torso.  
She wasn't looking for James and feared the city.

7.

From the railhead, a narrow-gauge bargain  
with landscape: squeezing the life out of her.

8.

In a dry place she dreamt alluvial, and coughed  
dust into her black, lace handkerchief.

9.

She said: this is the way out of a funeral. Surface stains: gimlet and  
haze.  
I never went down the mineshaft but I shook its yield out into heat.

10.

Her clothes would remain the colour of the mines;  
In their seams the streets colluded with wide-open spaces.

11.

Her relatives barely recognised her. She sailed on a ship to China. Back in the 1840s an ancestor had profited from sandalwood.

12.

On this entire spread there are maybe half-a-dozen sandalwoods. They were wiped out. They feed on other trees' root systems.

13.

The horticulturist says 'plant jam tree and sandalwood together. It's a fantasy of abundance.' The veritable cornucopia.

14.

We removed the horns from the gates when we took over the place. Steer's horns and ram's horns and the horn of a malformed beast.

15.

Unravelling her diary (did she keep a diary?) we find exotica in the backstory: from mining town to jewellery.

16.

The carved horns in the glass cabinet you vaguely remember. An inheritance you wouldn't touch. Where did they end up?

17.

To point the way  
Is not to say  
Celebration  
Or seduction

Or the scopic  
Biologic  
Cornucopi-  
An-haired plenty

Of keratin  
To shield red bone  
Heart, that marrow-  
Fed tomorrow

Where no giraffe  
Offers but half  
Its ossicones,  
Moss pheromones

Hallelujah  
Your savannah.  
And so the Gods'  
Steer-horns gilded

As they grow large  
With persiflage  
While you offer  
Horn for coffers:



Your verity,  
Sincerity,  
Some poor creature's  
'Radiator'

Or protection:  
Those erections,  
Rutting season's  
Proclamation.

Avoid cullers  
Of ripe antlers'  
Bloody velvet.  
Never covet

Inkhorn, Shoehorn  
Hornpipe, Foghorn,  
Firethorn, greenhorn  
Or the bighorn.

18.

Horns aren't antlers. The dressmaker's dummy showed up  
in a garden shed. It was dusty almost beyond recognition.

19.

When the red cloud came and swallowed the house,  
a memory of tornado sirens in the American midwest.

20.

We buried the horns. Trees planted to keep the dust down.  
Halfway between city and goldfields where wheat grows.

21.

Pushkin in exile. Locking horns. All that dust  
enveloping Russian estates. Trans-Siberian. Home.

*George Gott is a retired teacher from the University of Wisconsin-Superior. His poetry has been widely published and he is expecting a new book of poems out soon.*

## I Was a Boy

### George Gott

I had discovered  
Missouri trees.

And birds.

And mice.

How I loved  
the sunshine.

And the raindrops.

How I enjoyed  
the shadows  
beneath  
the trees.

And the pretty girls  
that were like  
the shadows too.

Shadows  
of the apple  
tree.

Shadows  
of the pear tree.

Sometimes  
smiling.

Sometimes laughing.

Anna Ryan-Punch is a Melbourne poet and critic.  
Her previous publications include poetry in a range  
of literary journals and newspapers.

## Treasure maps

### Anna Ryan-Punch

We lit the edges, but they didn't pirate curl.  
Our tiger map pictured the hunt for shadow stripes,  
I rubbed illicit coffee into the cream sheaf  
perforated from your mother's sketchbook.  
A shoe puppet on each rubbery hand  
to thump out forbidden glow. We craned  
for parents, the fire danger they sired.  
Tamped down in tobacco evening light,  
smooth Crayola roads showed where we  
could not reach in an hour from Bendigo.  
Two index fingers traced up a grey creature.  
We wrote: *There are no elephants in Kangaroo Flat.*  
I noticed her curly missing head: *Where's your new sister?*  
You shrugged: *Her birth mother wanted her back.*  
I wrestled two mothers into one small girl,  
my mouth quiet on her already fading face.  
Her gap hovered between us, daughter-shaped.  
You blew a fat-lipped trumpeting that  
drew our heads down mapward, big game  
treasure hunters smelling a burnt trail.

*Miro Sandev is a poet, short fiction writer and  
essayist based in Sydney. His poems and essays  
have been published in numerous journals and he  
reviews theatre and literature for ArtsHub.*

the obsolete is a rose

(after William Carlos Williams)

## Miro Sandev

uneasily it grows  
in the hull  
of my throat—rose

between the image  
& the sound there  
cleaves a hesitant space  
wide enough to slip  
through but too barren  
for shelter it seems

yet dead wood ripens  
    as kindling, here  
a few old rocks can  
    jostle into a spark  
    & frayed petals  
make the best winter mulch

I spot these things  
only as a map-reader spots  
places by ink  
while swerving  
eddies elude all charts—  
still one must plot

the obsolete  
is a rose in a bed  
of worms

*Michael Farrell lives in Melbourne. He has a PhD in Australian literature, and his latest book is open sesame (Giramondo).*

## A Title Is A Promise

### Michael Farrell

A poem is a seduction. This poem's title doesn't seem to promise much but poems—like their readers—have secrets. This poem has a secret title: it's 'Firemen'. A gambit that will please most readers I think. Already some of you

are being seduced. A fireman represents protection, a person of any age gender or love direction could use a fireman's protection. I don't pretend though that what I've promised is a desire that's universal, that's 100%.

There are some people who have firemen already, I can hear them saying I don't need this potent ordinary thing. But listen to your partner: firemen themselves are saying I need someone to take up some of the care. They sometimes come home empty.

The secret title is deceptive too and one that has already delivered in a sense. The word 'firemen'



gives you firemen. The word 'firewomen'  
gives you firewomen. Yet by deceptive  
I only mean the plurality: each

reader will receive only one. Here they  
are. This person. They are not red though their  
name means 'of fire' (you choose the language). They  
have come to you of their own free will to  
assist you in the burning of your life.  
A fireperson does not just prevent fire

but guides it; their role is to prevent harm.  
The two of you will change each other. Though  
you may have a house full of such guides you  
will only see your own. You lie down in  
your bed alone or with a lover who  
seems quieter than before. You say to

your muscled sentinel 'tell me a story'.  
But people of the fire know no stories.  
They know image and sound and terror and  
exhaustion. They have a high tolerance  
for boredom, and as suggested above  
sometimes they too need care. Or would if they

were real. They become assimilated  
into the texture of your life. These  
textual firemen or some variation  
on a fireman. Their yellow safety gear  
becomes a taken-for-granted gold lining  
to your life. The progress of this poem

reimagines your life as a poem.  
It could be a major encounter; it  
will not provide a scene with a modern  
rock soundtrack with you being carried from  
a smoking building. Perhaps you would  
sacrifice a lot for that scene. Instead

you dream. A campfire: boiling water, gum  
leaves. A tree is speaking to you. Part of  
you wants to put out the fire. The tree speaks  
to you about 'being' and you somehow  
understand even though it's not speaking  
your language. If you are Christian you might

perceive the tree as an arboreal  
John the Baptist that lets you know someone  
is coming. As if on another track  
you hear a rich voice intoning Dylan  
Thomas's 'The Force That Through The Green Fuse  
Drives The Flower' that you learned at school.

The campfire burns green, there's a wall of fire  
the tree is a fountain ... you wake up. Sweating.  
Your fireman's asleep standing up like  
Michelangelo's David (if you like)  
with artfully arranged braces. You go  
through his Crumpler bag but there's nothing in

there but a singed doll's head, a Matchbox fire  
truck and a citation. You hear a rustle  
of braces; perhaps you ask your voice sounding  
guiltily polite 'What's it for?' You  
resent the fire being (there's no need for  
a fireman to actually be a man

but equally why must a being of  
fire be human?) for your own furtive  
behaviour. For those of you who have come  
this far, you are now ready to receive  
the fireman in a new way. You know  
the answer to your own question is

‘Whatever you want it to say’. You notice  
that the fireman isn’t wearing braces  
after all but a sash. The sash too of  
course may say whatever you want: it might  
for instance say ‘World’s No.1 Lover’.  
He, she, they, it—whatever you prefer—

then says ‘Hush, I tested your smoke alarm’  
or ‘I created a windbreak in your  
backyard’. Though of fire they smell a little  
like eucalyptus and speak to you with  
the sexiest trace of it in their voice.

A title’s a possessing.

*Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems  
have appeared in Partisan Review, The  
Nation, The New Yorker, and elsewhere.*

✱

## Simon Perchik

Though she is covered with glass  
there is no wind—it's her sleeve  
waving across the way an alpine stream

is pulled from a cemetery stone  
for the unending free fall  
over where a hole should be

—you never see the nail  
now that the water in the photograph  
has darkened, begun to drain

make room inside the cold wood frame  
for grass, give up, disappear  
and under the dust her arm.

*Rachael Petridis is a West Australian poet whose work has been widely published. Her first collection, Sundecked (Australian Poetry Centre, 2010) was commended in the Anne Elder Award.*

## Rufous Night Heron

### Rachael Petridis

you don't see him up there  
                                  in the scrawling branches  
of a blue wash sky  
                                  you can't hear him plot  
the shimmering river  
                                  as he peers down at fish  
manoeuvring in their naïve dances  
                                  or glimpse his body  
as he leans into the wind  
                                  fathoms the water's offerings

if you approach with stealth  
                                  at that time of day  
when sun melts into a grey-white light  
                                  children gone from the river beach  
you might look up quietly  
                                  catch sight of him  
in the russet forest of his roost  
                                  in the crook of the old Peppermint  
his compass plume lifting  
                                  its needle his yellow eye

*Rebecca Kylie Law is an Australian poet whose work has been published in literary journals both nationally and internationally. Offset (2012) and Lilies and Stars (2012) were both published by Picaro Press.*

## Impartations

### Rebecca Law

My thongs,  
although a different shade of pink,  
helped me forget my dress,  
their plastic opacity  
like a new breed  
of glow worms,

my feet  
almost throbbing  
with specious possession.

I say nothing  
in the kitchen  
to my lover,  
wanting the worms  
to beam him up -

*Duncan Richardson is a writer of haiku, fiction, poetry  
radio drama and educational texts. He teaches English  
as a Second Language part-time in a primary school.*

under a fresh sky

## Duncan Richardson

My daughter has made a universe.  
It spins slowly around us  
as we lie in the dark room.  
By pricking holes in cardboard  
she has created a star scape.  
A small fierce light burns through,  
her hand turns it and we try  
to name the constellations;  
Orion, Scorpio, Great Bear,  
our walls disappear  
become deep space  
where worlds unknown  
are roaming.

Now she offers the dome to me  
my fingers tremble as I push it  
                                  slowly at first  
then narrowing my eyes  
twist the stars  
                  into a whirlpool  
                  of light.

In the morning  
she brings it to me.  
'Dad, can you fix this?'  
All night she's left the suns shining  
and the cosmos has burned out.

I can do nothing

but that night  
the bulb recovers  
and I wonder if

out there

an alien child

is spinning us too



*Adelaide-based poet Jeff Guess has published ten collections of poetry, the most recent being Autumn in Cantabile (2011).*

## When I Was Young

### Jeff Guess

When I was young and soft tones were in all  
the colours of my scarves and jumpers  
my mother worked a rickety loom of whirl  
and whiz, shuttle and bob—of sew and pull

the knitted skeins of morning through the fall  
of afternoon I sat beside her  
watching the slide and the pedal to the care  
she took with buttonhole and bands until

she cast it from the myriad hooks and keys  
and watched it slip in silence from the din  
of hours through the reek of machine oil

and naphthalene all piled in perfectly  
sorted soft layers of yellow, brown and green  
and put on autumn that she wove—for school.

Andy Kissane is the 2013 Coriole National Wine Poet with six of his poems featuring on the back label of their cabernet shiraz. His most recent publication is a book of short stories, *The Swarm* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2012).

## Dylan Thomas incontrovertible

### Andy Kissane

After a can of beer and a cigarette for breakfast,  
Dylan Thomas leaves the house, his jacket  
flung over his left shoulder. Only six days

until the first performance of *Under Milk Wood*,  
which is a long way from being finished,  
though Dylan hopes that the play will write itself,

and anyway, an ash-blonde college girl sits  
behind the wheel of a yellow convertible,  
waiting to take him for a spin. A poet

should experience the lush comfort of expensive leather,  
the roar of the engine, the wind rushing through  
his soft curls and the scent of her perfume

drifting over the gear stick and reminding him  
of a shaded lane in an apple orchard. The sky today  
is a lovely Californian blue, a shade that mirrors

her sparkling eyes, hidden, an irritating fact,  
behind dark sunglasses. 'Where do you want to go?'  
she asks Dylan, but he shrugs his shoulders

as if to say, 'Just drive, the destination is never  
as important as it seems.' Twenty minutes later,  
out in the country, they stop at a building

perched on a hill above a golden wheat field.  
A landmark for miles around, a giant neon beer glass  
salutes all who pass with an evangelical light. Dylan

is out of the car before it stops. 'One quick drink,'  
he says, without looking back or waiting for the girl,  
whose name he can't quite remember, though

he has heard she will inherit a few carefree millions  
when she turns twenty-one, and might then  
be partial to marrying a poet, especially a famous one.

Dylan is already married, a slight, but not  
insurmountable hitch he'd prefer not to think about  
while he drinks his beer. American girls have perfected

the charm of casually flicking their dishevelled hair  
as they cultivate geranium-red cheeks and smiles  
that shimmer in the stale air of the smoky bar

with enough enthusiasm to make one feel young  
again. Dylan complains about today's hangover  
while diligently preparing for tomorrow's, but even

when he mopes and whinges, you can hear in his deep,  
sonorous voice, the timbers rattling in a clifftop house,  
the roar of waves breaking on a jagged rock shelf,

the squalling of a seabird as it sings of the urges  
to create and destroy in a salty, unforgettable riff  
that is snatched up by the wind and carried out to sea.

*Mags Webster is a British-born writer, with homes in Western Australia and Hong Kong. Her book The Weather of Tongues (Sunline Press) won the 2011 Anne Elder Award for best debut collection of poetry.*

## Plot

### Mags Webster

Once, he needed  
the soil, felt it  
thicken through  
his palms,  
darken in lines  
as if learned by heart—

furrow by furrow,  
the struggle of root.

Year on year  
all he gleaned  
was seasonal aporia.

In the absence  
of any narrative,  
he tried to predict  
the twist, his head

cocked skywards,  
lips moving as if  
memorising clouds—

now his back  
has cramped  
from double-digging,  
the shunt and heave

of clods on spade,  
rhyming the flare  
of breath to kick  
of fork.

He's done with planting  
seeds, turning  
soil like pages

coaxing the green  
from sullen tilth,  
shoots emerging  
like bookmarks—

he's back  
to the shift  
and stack of logs,

pretends they  
are chapters  
of a book,

packed down  
tight with story—

only this time,  
he's in charge  
of the plot.

*Dick Alderson lives near Fremantle and has been writing poetry since 1994. His poems have been published in a range of journals and anthologies.*

## Listening in Bed

### Dick Alderson

He would stand at the end of the bed  
and tell us stories, the single globe  
in the bed lamp making a shadow behind him

his face so at home and so right with us,  
and there was a moment, over and over  
the same moment, when the room pulsed

as if the walls made a sound,  
the corners magnified then receding, his face  
the only constant and you let it happen

and he must have seen it, for you were left  
with no words, just the sound of the room

then it was morning, and the outline of a tree  
through the glass: the bird in the bough.

*Bev Braune is the author of poems, drawings and essays  
in poetics. Her recent poetry collection is Camouflage  
on the search for beauty in the modern world.*

no longer a lonely place

## Bev Braune

On the radio, buzzing and crackling sounds,  
as if it's all coming from that ex-planet  
beyond Neptune (the one that the Monk said  
well over a century ago would soon be found.)  
I think I've already travelled there. I am  
laid out in somnolence on a large blue bed  
covered with dresses, smocks or sleeping gowns.  
The air cannot be bluer or icier, yet it's not cold,  
it's cold-looking. Soon it's no longer a lonely place.  
A group of travellers—a large man  
learning to love his body and his wife,  
and a retinue of women  
looking for some meeting place—  
wave at me from their floating satellite.



*Mark O'Flynn has published four collections of poetry as well as three novels, most recently The Forgotten World (2013). His most recent book is a collection of short stories White Light (Spineless Wonders).*

## Big Edna

### Mark O'Flynn

[after the painting *Woman in a Landscape* by Russell Drysdale, 1949]

No, it's not Hazel, it's Hazel's sister Edna,  
and she's all woman, the way the landscape is all  
landscape. What's she hiding in her right hand?  
Knowing Edna it's an Apprehended Violence Order  
or a piece of her mind in the shape of a rolling pin.  
In the little house behind her there's no smoke  
from the chimney. (There's no chimney). That leafless  
tree is nothing but a scar. Judging by her shoes  
Edna has just finished a vigorous game of tennis,  
except she has no laces. There's only a woman who's all  
woman looking how far she's whacked the ball over  
the horizon's rusty wire. Her double chin hasn't changed,  
her muscles look like she's been helping  
out with the landscape, or its capitulation.

*Matthew Rodgers is an emerging poet living in San Francisco. He is a MFA graduate from the New School University for Poetry and writes novels, plays and poems.*

## Hands

### Matthew Rodgers

The man next to me has the most beautiful hands, hands like my own but more refined, more in size, everything of my hands but more. They look like the hands of Michelangelo's *David* vaguely holding the sling that he had used to slay the giant monster threatening civilization, a hand that could hold a heart in its palm and not let it fall out as it beats, a hand that could carry great burdens and save you from falling. I see his hands as they rest on his knees and then on his arms and then on his neck. These are hands I could fall in love with, that I would never tire of seeing or ever tire of holding.

*Originally named Huang Jiangpin, An Qi is a woman poet from Zhangzhou, Fujian. Her poetry has been widely published in China. Ouyang Yu has published seventy-one books of poetry, fiction, non-fiction, literary translation and literary criticism in the English and Chinese languages.*

## Leaves in Beijing

### An Qi

Translated from Chinese by Ouyang Yu

leaves in beijing, clean and clean through  
a tiny, tiny blade  
unentangled  
leaves in Beijing  
all fallen in winter  
the spring green, like jade, chilling  
the autumn, flash after flash, shaking you  
summer  
i've forgotten how the leaves looked in summer  
summer's Beijing  
i didn't take note of them  
i was busy living a life without love

## Beginning with July

### An Qi

Translated from Chinese by Ouyang Yu

Already July, when you were texting, you were missing me  
In a July that began again, you were in the close village texting  
Missing me, the cool bamboo mat printed with you and your  
shadow  
Over the close desk the florescent light ready to explode  
You were texting, missing me, like the landlord, missing her rent

*Geoff Page is based in Canberra and has published twenty collections of poetry, five novels and five verse novels. Improving the News (Pitt Street Poetry) and New Selected Poems (Puncher & Wattmann) are due out late in 2013.*

## The Exhalations

### Geoff Page

I have the gift—so far, it seems—  
of not quite being at the death:  
three parents of my parents

stopped breathing in my absence;  
a fourth, out playing doubles,  
gave up before my birth.

My father took his final breath  
as I drove north towards him.  
A heart attack at 92

destroyed the lung-pulse of my mother  
that first night in a 'home'.  
Were they small asphyxiations,

a fading out, a fading down,  
then nothing on the mirror?  
One of them I know at least

was far from undramatic.  
In addition, I've been spared  
so far, though not without a scare,

the expiration of my son.  
I've never seen a corpse up close—  
only textured through the news

or pixelled on a screen.  
How easily I've been let through.  
Even the timing of my wars

was cleverly arranged to suit—  
too young, too old—and no one  
breathing up his blood beside me.

It's only now, at four or dawn,  
I hear the shadow of a sound  
to which I'll—briefly—have to listen.

*William Byrne is an emerging South Australian poet who has always lived in rural and coastal townships, excluding an urban interlude for university study for degrees in architecture and design. His work has been published in literary journals.*

## Perfume Letter

### William Byrne

Like accents acquired  
before television  
I hear when reading  
the inside of drawers  
lined with creased newspapers,

I can hear the difference  
in tone on the radio  
when your body  
is not in the room.

On the bench  
is your collection  
of perfumes  
empty and ready.

They are heavy to lift  
individually,  
lighter in a card  
box. I never knew,

with your paper-thin skin,  
how you could have lifted them  
from underneath the mirror.

I glance up,  
and see some of you there,

only some.  
*Truly*, as different  
as a perfume  
on another face.



*After many years in Europe, Graeme Hetherington now lives back in his native Tasmania where he was formerly a lecturer in the Classics Department at the university there. He is the author of four books of poetry.*

## Hotel Terminus, Vienna

### Graeme Hetherington

Unspeakable's the word for it,  
The noise at dawn each time I stay  
At Hotel Terminus, right in

The city's heart. This mix of moan,  
Roar whimper scream and sigh gulped down,  
The manager is sure, as though

I'm half-witted for having asked,  
Is nothing more than pigeons round  
The trash bins in the kitchen yard.

But even so, from the eighth floor,  
That otherwise is perfect for  
A good night's sleep, this sound, which as

It startles me awake and has  
Me fighting to set my thoughts straight,  
Can only come from souls in hell,

And is the same that I have heard  
Underpinning Beethoven's work  
and Mozart's music for the dead.

*Karen Throssell is a Melbourne writer whose work has appeared in various journals and anthologies. She has published three books of poetry and one book of non-fiction (on Australian foreign policy in the 1980's).*

## A Truffula Tree? (apologies to Doctor Seuss)

### Karen Throssell

Pere Charles Plumier looking for quinine  
must have been startled when he first saw them.

Naturally, it had to be somewhere steamy,  
monkeys swinging in a tangle of vines,

giant spiders scuttling, then a flash—  
*Violet/Majenta*—a mass of tiny bells.

They could have been Plumiers,  
but being a modest monk he named them

for a famous man with a memorable monika:  
Leonhart Fuchs—(so fuchsias they became.)

Soon to spread from South America  
*Crimson/Lavender, Orchid/Indigo.*

Startling colours, different but close.  
Outer petals—pert like skirts or fluffed with ruffles

Doubles and flouncing triples  
and always the bell, the dangling stamens

coy and lascivious at the same time, except one—  
she could only be virginal

(lace curtains and lawn petticoats) *Snow/Blush, Ghost/white.*  
But all those bouncing frills ...

Don't let the demure bell deceive you,  
the original is the strumpet, swishing her skirts, flashing her legs...

“In the handkerchief code  
of the gay leather subculture

a fuchsia bandana means a fetish for spanking”...  
*Hotpink/Darkpurple.*

My first encounter was not steamy Haiti  
it could have been, it seemed so alien—

It was a Canberra quarter acre, with its tiny new trees,  
bald lawns and hopeful rope fences.

A student postie, where often  
for stuck housewives, my visit was an Event.

Then one magic day, my turn to be startled—  
a splash of Haiti:

*Violet/ Majenta* a profusion of bells,  
in a tub on the verandah. Transfixed!

It looked luminous, magical, like something invented  
by the good Doctor Seuss—a *Truffula* tree?

Who else could dream up such colours  
Exquisite, unlikely, inspiring of wonder

Divine Creation?

*(Seashell/ Plum, Thistle /Old Lace)*

But not me—for me it was magic, daily magic  
and perfectly down to earth.

*Ted Mc Carthy lives and teaches in Clones, Ireland. He has published two collections of poetry and his work has appeared in numerous international magazines. He is currently working on a number of filmscripts.*

## Stroke

### Ted Mc Carthy

Twisted, those lines of Marvell  
lodged in his mind,  
stuck like the immovable ticking  
of a broken second hand,  
the seen and remembered melted like time's  
dribble on his chin

until grasses' pins and needles  
across ear and neck  
and the fall of the topmost apple, from which  
there was no drawing back,  
were for the moment a drunken comfort,  
adrenalin's freak.

Not since a child had he seen the heart  
of a living wall  
or peered from ground level into  
an aphid world,  
or later, a fixed flattened fragment  
of that great black bowl

under which they found him, blank and rigid.  
Dark greyed to a mist  
as he knew someone had lifted him,  
earth's smell lost,  
the hedge moved to a pin of light, his eyes  
locked on the east.

*Rose Lucas is a Melbourne poet, critic and freelance academic.  
Her first poetry collection is Even in the Dark (UWAP, 2013).  
She is currently teaching Poetics at Victoria University and Chairs  
the West Australian Premier's Book Awards judging panel.*

## Under the Wave

### Rose Lucas

Slipping under the wave—  
that space where even sand  
might settle,  
    unswirled, where  
the turbulence that rakes at the roots of your hair  
    filling it with grit,  
        yanking it back toward the wildness of the surface,  
a kind of reverse gravity,  
might yet, like the hand of god, pass over you—

slip under the wave,  
you know its towering confluence of tide and wind,  
the crushing hammer of its foamy fist;  
watch, where the form of your flailing, human body,  
with all its intricacies of angle and organ,  
might turn its fins in this mottled light,  
negotiating an ancient element—

slip under the wave,  
make for the sky.





i stood with every precious second of you  
pressed firmly against my heart

for hours and hours

they brought you back a bald old man sunk in white linen  
tubes drips oxygen

the shock of ad hoc medical remedies

the kindness of nurses

midnight ticked into the deepest dark

then

as if through the chill of snow

you spoke like the first purple crocus of spring

*Sami Rafiq is Associate Professor of English at Aligarh  
Muslim University, Aligarh. She translates prose and  
poetry from Urdu, and loves writing humorous verse.  
The Small Town Woman is her first e-novel.*

## Lessons For a Muslim Girl

### Sami Rafiq

A girl must feed on tear-soaked bread  
Relish the saltiness  
Make it sweeten her cornflakes.  
A girl must learn calendars by heart  
Leaving oily fingers on circled dates  
And tear out the pictures  
Of smiles in hats and leggy jeans  
Or blue skirts that show her hairless legs  
Or of pointed pumps that have bled her heart.  
A girl must learn restraint in matters of love  
Let filter the songs through old moth eaten doors  
Till they are heard no more.  
Girls must learn  
To gently dust the seal of broken pride  
That calligraphers, fundamentalists,  
Care givers, lovers and husbands  
So judiciously emboss on their garments.  
And from torn, stained and ripped parcel wrappings  
A girl must steal girlhood  
And learn womanhood  
from scribbles in the dust of childhood.  
Above all  
A girl needs  
Only her bruised heart,  
To collect ashes from yesterdays cinders.



once,                      after a considerate interval,  
again                      with only slightly more vibrato.

You exclaim

‘But what is best, is the blue light!’

‘Blue’ we say,                      smiling to ourselves  
and in unison                      breastfeathers  
of the Superb Blue Wren                      blue  
the sea and the sky,

even at night.

But it’s you alone we’re both picturing,  
holding before you the clock’s blue dial  
silent past the room where Michael  
occupies his sleep circling the harbour,  
each revolution  
a gentle winding up of the anchor,  
a loosening of the ropes  
from each of the four directions.

You discover the door  
that hides from you                      at nightfall,  
was never closed, but waiting to give you  
the blue gift

of sunrise

all over again, the infinite sea

and the sky.

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